



UNIVERSIDADE DA CORUÑA

Facultade de Filoloxía

Mestrado Interuniversitario en Estudos Ingleses Avanzados e as
súas Aplicacións

**Sue the Patriarchy: Analysing the “Mary Sue” Trope and Its Many
Problems**

2023

Student: Alexia Souto Castro

Supervisor: David Clark Mitchell

CLARK
MITCHELL
DAVID



I hereby confirm that this master's dissertation is my own work.

Signed in A Coruña on July 4 2023

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Souto Castro', written in a cursive style.

Alexia Souto Castro

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Origin and meaning.....	7
2.1. The birth of Mary Sue.....	7
2.2. The semantics of Mary Sue.....	9
3. Mary Sue and misogyny.....	14
3.1. Women written by women — the need for Mary Sues	14
3.2. Women written by men — the “angel” against the “Mary Sue”	17
3.3. Men written by whoever — the Gary Stu.....	21
4. Case study: Hermione Granger and Captain Marvel	23
4.1. Hermione Granger from <i>Harry Potter</i>	24
4.2. Captain Marvel from Marvel Cinematic Universe’s <i>Captain Marvel</i>	30
5. Conclusions.....	34
Works Cited.....	37
Appendices	42
Appendix 1: Summary of MCU’s <i>Captain Marvel</i>	42
Appendix 2: Internet opinions on other Mary Sues.....	43
Appendix 3: Internet opinions in favour of Captain Marvel as a Mary Sue.....	44
Appendix 4: Internet opinions against Captain Marvel as a Mary Sue	45

Abstract

As women have slowly but surely inserted themselves within traditionally male fields, problems regarding their contributions have repeatedly arisen in patriarchal attempts to boycott their efforts. The literary world is not an exception, since women writers continue to face endless criticism whose sole function is to undermine not only their works but their very will to produce. Such is the case of the Mary Sue, who was born as a character pertaining to the fan fiction realm but expanded past its beginnings and permeated the literary field as a trope. The original Mary Sue was created by a woman and propagated into original works of fiction by other women because of her success; nonetheless, the patriarchy condemned the trope of the Mary Sue and ultimately thwarted it so that it became yet another instrument of misogynistic criticism. For that reason, this paper intends to highlight the feminism behind the original Mary Sue and to prevent its bigoted use by exploring its history and illustrating how the patriarchy is at fault for its demise.

Key words: Mary Sue, women writers, feminism, fan fiction, patriarchy, literature.

1. Introduction

That women can write women seems like a truth that should be universally acknowledged, and yet it is constantly put to question because of misogyny. There is always those who believe they can write better women—or can write better overall—, or those who are displeased with the way a specific fictional female character is depicted, or those who would plainly not let women write women. Hélène Cixous believed that writing is “the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879), and that is surely what the patriarchy is so afraid of—writing can bring about change, and once women realised their own agency over fictional portrayals of other women, misogynists lost a means of patriarchal propaganda. By producing female characters, we can finally promulgate our insight on female experiences; we can become avatars and depict our struggles, or we can simply take up space in literature—we can do all of it our own way.

Nonetheless, the patriarchy will always antagonise whatever it is in disagreement with. Sometimes women conceive something without its supervision, and it will ultimately try to steal their creations in order to distort them into weapons that perpetuate patriarchal ideals. This is precisely what this thesis wants to address by studying the woman-made Mary Sue, whose impact was great enough to become the name by which any female character who displays outstanding qualities is known. Her beginnings in the 20th century as a fan-made character could not be further from her current state—a label that is unsystematically attributed to any female character who diverges from misogynistic standards. She was birthed in the 70s by Paula Smith, who inserted Mary Sue into the *Star Trek* universe. Her impeccability was striking enough to ensure that any excelling female character would eventually be deemed a ‘Mary Sue’.

Such name seemingly bears no malice with it—pointing out that a character is the ‘Mary Sue’ of their story ought to be similar to claiming a character as the ‘hero’, ‘mentor’ or so on. Conversely, ‘Mary Sue’ entails negative connotations, which would not really be an issue if the term conveyed mere criticism *and* if its male equivalent—‘Gary Stu’—was equally employed. Unfortunately enough, the Mary Sue is certainly a victim of the patriarchal antagonisation that was mentioned above; as such, it has been stripped of any worthwhile purposes it might have once had the potential to fulfil.

Approaching the subject with a feminist viewpoint in mind, this paper intends to both legitimise the Mary Sue trope and argue against its use while blaming the patriarchy for its mutation into a sexist label. The methodology applied consists in firstly providing a theoretical framework that tackles the topic at hand and secondly executing close readings of such research. In this way, the first chapter will attest to the origin of Mary Sue as a character on her own and debate the cause for her conception; afterwards, the second half of the chapter will deal with the ramifications of Mary Sue, whose continuous and similar iterations transformed her *self* as a particular character into an archetype. The second chapter will be separated in three sections, the first of which will determine the need for the Mary Sue in relation to its practicality as a trope through the different stages of its existence. The second section will compare the Mary Sue to the angel in the house so as to expose the hypocrisy of a patriarchy that wants to impose its own ideals but scoffs when women strive towards such ideals out of their own volition. The third and final section will briefly acknowledge the existence of the Gary Stu and subsequently examine it as proof that perfection is only controversial—or mandatory—when women display—or lack—it. The third and final chapter will be a practical example of two female characters that have been mistakenly labelled as Mary Sues, namely Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* saga and Captain Marvel from Marvel Cinematic Universe’s

Captain Marvel. Its purpose as a case study is to demonstrate that the term ‘Mary Sue’ has been warped into obsolescence, and that it currently has no other use besides discrediting both women writers and female characters. This will be achieved by providing relevant excerpts taken from the *Harry Potter* novels and the *Captain Marvel* film and analysing them according to the theory discussed on the previous chapters. Finally, the conclusions will find that, while the Mary Sue is of interest for literary studies, the use of the term should be discouraged, because it has indeed become a patriarchal tool which slanders female characters in hopes to dishearten women writers.

2. Origin and meaning

Where Mary Sue comes from and what Mary Sue means are labyrinthine questions whose answers are entangled. Completely removing one explanation from the other is a demanding task that has been executed for the sake of clarity. Thus, this chapter offers disclosure on the first appearance of Mary Sue and subsequently provides insight on her alter egos.

2.1. The birth of Mary Sue

The existence of Mary Sue can be ascribed to a variety of circumstances. Whether Mary Sue is an entity—a *she*—rather than a concept—an *it*—must be kept in mind while considering the context of her, or *its*, creation. Mary Sue as a *she* sprung into existence in the 20th century: her conception happened due to a mixture of feminism and love for an acclaimed franchise. She is the protagonist of “A Trekkie’s Tale”, a *Star Trek* fan fiction written by Paula Smith and published in 1974 (Chander and Sunder 598).

While Karen Walsh cites Mary Sue as a “satirical character” (11) and deems “A Trekkie’s Tale” a “parody story” (142) in her *Geek Heroines* compendium, other scholars

seem to think differently. Coombe brings forward that women writers of *Star Trek* fan fiction produced their own “Mary Sue stories” (119) as a means of examining and expressing “their own subordinate status, voice frustration and anger with existing social conditions” (118) as well as creating and exchanging “alternatives, ... new understandings and utopian aspirations” (118). McCardle supports the argument that Mary Sue fan fiction serves the purpose of not only reworking stories but also allowing women “to explore their place in a male-dominated society” (442). Additionally, Chander and Sunder dare to venture their own theory regarding Paula Smith’s motives for devising Mary Sue:

By 1974, no woman had commanded the Enterprise bridge, according to the official *Star Trek* fantasy. Indeed, it would take another two decades before a woman would command the principal starship in a later *Star Trek* series. Trekkie Paula Smith, however, was impatient. So she inserted the young Lieutenant Mary Sue into the *Star Trek* universe, not as communications officer, nurse, the voice of the onboard computer, or passing Kirk love interest, but as commander. 598.

Not only does this paragraph conflict with Karen Walsh’s claim about Mary Sue’s satirical nature—it is a perfect opposite of Walsh’s view on “A Trekkie’s Tale”, which, according to her, depicts Mary Sue as “a teenager whose perfect intelligence, beauty, and kindness led Kirk to love her and Spock to respect her” (142).

Rather than falling into the trap of intentional fallacy, it is far more interesting to take into consideration the fact that such dissimilar interpretations coexist. On the one hand, Walsh proposes nothing that may legitimate the idea that the tale of Mary Sue is a parody. Conversely, both Coombe and McCardle refer to social context as a determining factor in regard to the reasons why Mary Sue was born, something that Walsh disregards

and Chander and Sunder merely hint at. The latter put the blame on the lack of a female commander, therefore implying that the aim of Mary Sue's presence was to fulfil a role that the *Star Trek* franchise had yet to envision. This complies with what Coombe and McCardle argue: Mary Sue was birthed to navigate a world in which women did not partake.

In spite of this disagreement, nonetheless, these scholars concur in what is arguably the most important aspect of Smith's Mary Sue: regardless of her predestination, she has been introduced into an already-existing story. "A Trekkie's Tale" pioneered inserting new female characters into established works of fiction, and Mary Sue slowly but surely became a recurring presence in fan fiction. As Biniek puts it, Paula Smith "named the girl Mary Sue and portrayed her as exceedingly perfect, which started a trend applied later in numerous contemporary publications" (36). Mary Sue was gradually stripped of her origins and her character was reduced into a trope, hence her transformation into an *it*.

2.2. The semantics of Mary Sue

Besides her irrefutable *trekkie* origin, there is no consensus on the definition of Mary Sue. The first Mary Sue is seldom the topic when people refer to a specific character as such; as was previously mentioned, Mary Sue has been distorted into a trope. A fictional person is deemed a Mary Sue not because of her—or his, as will be explored in the following chapter—association with the *Star Trek* universe, but because of her traits.

Most studies on the Mary Sue link this character archetype to fan fiction, usually describing a Mary Sue as an original character within a pre-existing universe (Basu 4; Chander and Sunder 598; Mackey and McClay 139; McCardle 436); that is, as was stated above, a Mary Sue can be described as a new addition to the cast of a story. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. As this thesis will explore later on, many established fictional

characters are, in fact, acknowledged as Mary Sues, such as Rey Skywalker from the *Star Wars* latest trilogy, Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, and so on.

Whether they already belong to a fictional universe or only inhabit the realm of fan fiction, a Mary Sue is hard to miss when you are searching for one. Identifying them is arguably easy, since according to many scholars, they display a series of ‘trademark’ features. McCardle, for instance, claims that “a ‘Mary Sue’ ... is typically perfect in nearly every way imaginable. Beautiful, intelligent and quick-witted, these characters usually come equipped with a certain disregard for rules and normally wind up stealing the heart of a main canon character” (436-437). Chaney and Liebler add to this statement by affirming that a Mary Sue is not simply portrayed in a positive light but rather embodies “the exaggeration of those [positive] traits to an unattainable ideal” (54). According to them, a Mary Sue is not “just smart, kind, quirky, or pretty, she's smarter, nicer, quirkiest, and prettier than any other female around-and her creator will allow no one to forget it” (54).

A Mary Sue is “chamaleonesque” (54) and is more often than not bestowed with the gift of proficiency in anything they set their mind to. This does not mean, however, that Mary Sues—as perceived by their analysts—do not experience hardships. On the contrary; as opposed to a less perfect—i.e. more ‘human’—character, Mary Sues stand out due to their ability to overcome adversity. As shown by Biniek, even Paula Smith’s Mary Sue “...did experience moments of vulnerability, just as any other self-aware being, [but] she recovered quickly. Not only did she manage to overcome her oppressive secrets, she was also able to save everyone by using a simple hairpin” (42). Furthermore, Biniek seconds the idea that “typical characters are usually constructed in a way which incapacitates them to do so. On the other hand, Mary Sue’s exaggerated exceptionalism enables her to achieve uncommon goals” (42).

A Mary Sue is not a “passive peripheral character” (Chander and Sunder 609). They are the protagonists of the stories into which they sneak, and, as such, the plot revolves around them. In a conference held in San Diego in 1999, Pat Pflieger stated that a Mary Sue “...*does*, not just simply *exists*. She slays, she runs a starship, the types, she wields a sword.” Instead of focusing on her efficiency or lack thereof, Pflieger, Chander and Sunder believe that what is most relevant towards the diagnose of ‘Mary Sueness’ from the 20th century onwards is the active involvement of the alleged Mary Sue within the story.

Alternatively, Sophie Collins proposes two constants in regard to Mary Sues, asserting that “the only characteristics that are definite while describing such characters are: female gender and lack of depth in the process of developing her character” (qtd. in Biniek 43). While the existence of male Mary Sues has already been acknowledged and will be examined promptly, lack of character development is an interesting point—one whose veracity will also be put to test in the coming case study. Crafting a character whose main purpose consists in either—in the case of official Mary Sues like Rey, Katniss or Hermione—‘being exceptional but boring’ or—in the case of fan-made Mary Sues—‘stealing the spotlight by being better’ seems pointless. It should be noted that this is a very simplistic outlook on Mary Sues, and a rather biased perspective, since it does not take into account the purpose of creating such characters. Thus, precluding the accuracy of Collins’s allegations for now, the plainness of Mary Sues raises the question of function.

Walsh poses that fan fiction writers that produce fan-made Mary Sues are unhappy with portrayals of specific pieces of a fictional universe, hence why they create new characters that can influence said universe in whichever way their authors want (13). This idea mirrors McCardle’s belief that the original Mary Sue was Smith’s tool for

rediscovering *Star Trek* (442). Nevertheless, together with Coombe, McCardle added that Smith tried to explore the role of women both *in* the fictional world and *through* its fictional society, which would then become a reflection of Smith's reality (118; 442). Chander and Sunder agree with this line of thought and pose that "Mary Sues help the writer claim agency against a popular culture that denies it" (609). Thus, in an inherently feminist strategy, female authors use Mary Sues in an attempt to reinvent stories in a way that is inclusive for women.

An equally widespread *raison d'être* for the fan-made Mary Sue trope is suggested by Bonnstetter and Ott: a Mary Sue is "the central focus of the stories she inhabits and, thus, a means by which to confront the challenges [her author] face[s] in [her] own life ... Mary Sue is usually an intensely personal, if public, performance for/of her individual author" (344-346). In this case, authors take a fictional universe in which they introduce themselves and disguise or emulate their real life issues as a means of dealing with them. In other words—Mary Sues are the authors' avatars in an unreal simulation, which they use to navigate through real life. This partially coincides with yet another viewpoint on fan-made Mary Sues, who are regularly labelled as 'self-inserts'. Basu explains that "writing fanfiction enables the writers to inhabit the world that the source author had built, or they take turns to build for themselves, through characters known as author-inserts, or stand-ins for the authors. A female character thus produced would be Mary Sue" (4). Instead of bringing actual problems into imaginary worlds, Basu says that some authors choose to interact *as themselves* with the fictional universe. In a more judgemental analysis, Mackey and McClay belittle this approach to fiction, calling it a "particular kind of weak writing" (139) and minimising a Mary Sue to "a character who is a bit too obviously a stand-in for an author eager to immerse herself or himself in a favourite fictional universe and to interact, perhaps romantically, with the characters of that

universe” (139). Chander and Sunder concur with this notion, professing that “Smith began the modern incarnation of an old and often celebrated phenomenon—retelling a canonical story to better represent oneself ... The name of her character, Mary Sue, has come to stand for all such characters in the universe of fan fiction” (598). Jamison plainly defines Mary Sue as “a self-insertion into the world of [the] source material” (219); Fathallah, while emphasising that ‘Mary Sue’ is a “disparaging” (187) term, also depicts Mary Sues as “original characters that are or read like idealized self-insertion” (187).

While generally agreeing with the previous claims, Biniiek strips this process of intent, portraying it almost as an accident: “as a Mary Sue character goes through various adventures, writers subconsciously incorporate their biggest fantasises into the texts and attempt to represent themselves as someone more exceptional than they are in real life” (36). She delves into how an original character may grow into the reflection of its maker’s “inner fictional” (40) and consequently “symbolize their unrealistic expectations” (40). In her opinion, Mary Sues allow their writers to achieve all that is virtually impossible for them (45)—they are something authors indulge in. Walsh directly accuses Mary Sues of coming into existence for “authorial wish fulfillment” (11). She proposes the existence of a gender bias within the creators of Mary Sues, maintaining that “because the majority of fan fiction writers are women, the self-insertion is often a woman creating herself as a character she wants to see” (142). Furthermore, she specifically insists in the idea of wish fulfilment in what reads as an attempt to shame authors for creating “a fictional perfect, smart, beautiful, strong, and capable version of themselves” (330). Nonetheless, she goes on to provide examples of Mary Sues, among which she cites Rey Skywalker (142), who was written exclusively by men. This by itself is not enough to disprove her suggestion on the reality of a gender bias, but as will be tackled in the following chapter, speculating that women are the main writers of Mary Sues is both biased and inaccurate.

3. Mary Sue and misogyny

As something arguably born out of feminism, it seems ironic that sexism is what has kept the concept of Mary Sue alive until now. The longevity of such trope, specifically of its pejorative use, stems directly from misogyny. Nowadays, Mary Sue is a categorisation usually applied to female characters who are over-scrutinised and criticised due to their—alleged—flawlessness. When male characters present similarly impeccable characteristics, however, they rarely go through such harsh judgement. This section focuses on three main points: questioning the need for Mary Sues, understanding the negative connotations behind the current use of the term “Mary Sue”, and comparing its prevalence among female and male characters.

3.1. Women written by women — the need for Mary Sues

Hélène Cixous put it best by preaching that

...it is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. 881.

Cixous firmly believed in the indispensability of women writing about women, which is precisely how Mary Sues came to be. In the case of fan-made Mary Sues, and as discussed above, fiction serves as a refuge for women—it is where they can safely be themselves, whether their self-expression entails daily trivialities or statements denouncing their place in society. Walsh accuses Mary Sues of having no other purpose than planting a woman

within a story (11), and while such viewpoint might be a solid criticism in regard to their quality as characters, it does not decrease their overall value. On the contrary, because they are women written by women, fan-made Mary Sues contribute to the *écriture féminine* that Cixous demanded. They conform “an artistic mode that permits its authors and audiences to explore interests, questions, and desires that have historically been denied women in a society dominated by masculine voices, literature, and artistic practices” (Bonnstetter and Ott 346). Mary Sues are valuable because they “challenge a patriarchal ... cultural landscape” (Chander and Sunder 601) by simply allowing women to pervade spaces where they have not been included before.

Historically, “female creativity has had to express itself within the confines of domesticity” (Gubar 249). Subdued to a rather inflexible role in which they were to partake only in domestic affairs and be the perfect traditional wife, women still were able to fight for their voice. In the 19th century, they seized the novel (Spencer 214-215), a genre for which they did not “need to be formally educated” (Donovan 442) in spite of the ruling belief that women “[had] no place in writing” (160). Not only did they conquer the novel and made it “a female thing” (Donovan 441) right after it was born, but they also gained agency over the literary world, which in turn meant challenging the social authority of the time (Armstrong 129). Clearly, women writers have withstood the patriarchy questioning their right to be a part of literature, both as authors and as self-made characters. Even when their only function in a story is being there, Mary Sues are nothing if not a continuation of such a battle. At least in the beginning, the Mary Sue was a powerful asset for female authors.

Still, the trope of Mary Sue is not foolproof. The portrayal of this type of fictional female character has the potential to be problematic. Chaney and Sunder, for instance, state that Mary Sues become an actual problem when “female characters already extant

in mass media are morphed into Mary Suedom because they are not ‘good enough’ as they are” (57). Additionally, these scholars argue that instead of existing as a manifestation of what their authors long to be, the perfection of Mary Sues may be a reflection of what is expected of women (57). Hodges agrees that because the novel is “in the service of social and material reality, [it] necessarily recreates patriarchal culture and ideology” (155). Therefore, and regardless of whether they exist as authorial wish-fulfilment or as a reflection of the societal pressure on women, Mary Sues can be seen as a perpetuation of the patriarchal idea that women must strive for perfection. Character tropes entail a set of fixed traits, and Mary Sue’s qualities amount to an overwhelmingly majority of her overall characteristics; thus, Chaney and Liebler are right in emphasising the damage that Mary Sues can do.

Nonetheless, as is the case for any archetype, Mary Sues are only harmful if they comprise all the women within a story; in other words, they do not pose a threat as long as they are accompanied by an assortment of different female characters. Chaney and Liebler feel that Mary Sues are currently pointless, since it is alright for women to be “strong, independent and imperfect” (57), but that is simply not a good argument. On the one hand, eradicating Mary Sues because ‘imperfect women’ are accepted nowadays leads to doing literary diversity a disservice. On the other hand, while it is evident that most women—and humans—are flawed, splendid women can exist in real life as well. Erasing Mary Sues by deeming them farfetched implies some level of disbelief when confronted with the possibility of an actual, real-life woman being as accomplished as a Mary Sue.

Funnily enough, such line of thought is the logic used by those who complain about official Mary Sues. Official Mary Sues, or original female characters that are deemed Mary Sues, exist thanks to the previously mentioned campaign on inserting

women—i.e. fan-made Mary Sues—within predominantly male spheres. However, when these original characters are too close to perfection in the eyes of the critics, they are automatically branded as Mary Sues: “If a female character’s capabilities [are] even slightly more extraordinary than readers deemed appropriate, the character [is] still considered a Mary Sue. This [results] in misogynistic tendencies towards female characters and those authors who [try] to stand by their creations” (Biniek 43).

It is interesting to note that women have been historically ‘encouraged’ to aim towards what Biniek calls extraordinary capabilities, with the Virgin Mary and the Victorian ideal of the angel in the house as the most illustrative examples of this patriarchal phenomenon. To frown upon official Mary Sues and associate them with patriarchal ideals may appear as ideological progress, because women most definitely should not be forced to seek perfection. Nevertheless, male critics are generally the ones who are quick to deem any original female character written by a woman a Mary Sue regardless of her actual capabilities. Such critics are quite inclined to voice their disapproval of faultless female characters; sadly, their arguments usually fail to oppose patriarchal ideas and instead reproduce them, as will be explored in the case study. Before that, however, the following section intends to highlight the hypocrisy of the patriarchy by examining how what—patriarchal—literature has demanded from women coincides with what—patriarchal—criticism towards Mary Sues claims is a misrepresentation of real women.

3.2. Women written by men — the “angel” against the “Mary Sue”

Literature is, unfortunately, a double-edged sword. It has served as a platform through which women started publicly articulating their thoughts and making a statement on their position in society. Conversely, it has also been weaponised by the patriarchy in

order to impose ideals with which those of different races, sexualities and genders hardly agree. In regard to women, and particularly in Christian cultures, this has been true for centuries, since the Virgin Mary was one of the first female stereotypes of this sort. Depicted as “pure and good, willing to sacrifice and to be made an instrument of God...” (Kühl 171), Mary embodies one of the “two core qualities that have traditionally been assigned to women” (171-72). Another notable instance of such propaganda in Western society took place in the 19th century, when

...creating categories and propagating certain stereotypes was a way of reacting to all of these new developments and also, feminists would argue, a way for men to try and regain control over women, who suddenly challenged their assigned roles and tried to break free of the restrictions that society imposed on them. Kühl 172.

Kühl is referring to the concept of the angel in the house, which was significantly widespread in the Victorian era. The angel in the house was applauded and promulgated by a patriarchal society that wanted its women to behave in a very specific way. As angels, women should be “meekly self-sacrificial by nature” (Auerbach 7), as well as “charming, graceful, gentle, ... pious, and above all—pure” (Ren 2061)¹. As female characters within a story, they are bounded by their passiveness, and so “completely void of generative power that they become numinous to male artist” (Gilbert & Gubar 815). An ideal woman was required to be like an angel; that is, “a not quite earthly being that knows no selfishness or anger, always good, always anxious to help the husband to be his best self” (Kühl 173)—perhaps that last part is what was most emphasised, since real-life women were expected to act in a way that benefitted men, becoming their “subordinate or victim”

¹ It should be noted that angels were not portrayed as feminine figures (Auerbach 70-71) until doing so proved to be a convenient strategy with which women could be manipulated.

(Ren 2061) and subjugating themselves to them. Besides their assumed flawlessness, angel characters have to serve as support for the male character: “she has no story of her own but gives ‘advice and consolation’ to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes” (Gilbert & Gubar 815).

Despite conforming a two-century-old trope, the ‘man-dependent’ side of the angel in the house persists. It was present in the 20th century, as documented by Devon Hodges in 1983: she stated that a woman in a patriarchal society “is allowed to be a presence only so that she can be defined as a lack, a mutilated body that must be repressed to enable men to join the symbolic order and maintain their mastery” (162). It is also the basis of what Laura Mulvey named the male gaze—i.e. the idea that women are depicted in accordance with the desires of man (6-7)—, through which women exist *for* men. Furthermore, the angel in the house is also present in how film director Budd Boetticher once described the heroine, who “is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does” (qtd. in Mulvey 11). Again, the relevance of the woman entirely depends on how much the man cares about her. A female muse is valuable because she allows the man to create something out of her existence; a good wife is important because she is a source of wellness for her husband; women are important *or not* depending on their influence *or lack thereof* on men.

The ghost of the angel in the house has also reached the 21st century; in Kühl’s words, this stereotype “haunts us to this day” (171). According to Clute & Grant’s *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, it has been difficult to find female characters who overcome “the self-sacrificing, supportive heroine or the man-manqué” (395) type of heroine. However, the very same entry of “heroine” also argues that women are “depicted in more egalitarian terms, and given more to do” (395) in more recent works of literature. Whether

‘angel-coded’ or not, female characters that attract thorough scrutiny. They are either misunderstood and consequently mislabelled as Mary Sues *or* rightly labelled as Mary Sues and consequently scorned. At times, critics somehow manage to combine the two options: they provide weak, unconvincing arguments concerning the Mary Sueness of a character and proceed to criticise such nonexistent Mary Sueness. The common ground of those fictional women is always related to their dexterity. As mentioned previously, male—patriarchal—critics will question the plausibility of women who exhibit extraordinary qualities, even though male—patriarchal—authors were once so keen on demanding those same extraordinary qualities from women. The flawless Mary Sue is eerily reminiscent of the angel in the house², yet she is rejected by the angel’s devotees. Perhaps it is not Mary Sue’s intelligence, beauty, kindness or competence that evoke patriarchy’s contempt; perhaps it is the fact that such virtues no longer exist for the sake of men that irks the patriarchy.

This also explains why the patriarchy is not as merciless with Gary Stus—or rather, why flawless male characters go unnoticed: unlike women, who are expected to be of use for them, men do not need a reason to be perfect. Additionally, and naturally, male critics will neither discredit the flawlessness of a male character nor doubt the credibility of his excellence. While defending Rey Skywalker from the Mary Sue allegations, Nico Lang argues that “no one should be distracted by the sight of a strong, capable woman who is too good at what she does, like men have [been] allowed to be for decades”. By tackling the Gary Stu, the next section will demonstrate how, in fact, men are still allowed to be perfect.

² Similarly to the angel in the house, the Mary Sue “mirrors the very real pressure placed on real-life women to be the prettiest, the smartest, the most sexually desirable, the most traditionally feminine—or risk being supplanted or ignored” (Chaney and Liebler 57).

3.3. Men written by whoever — the Gary Stu

Most of the scholars who delve into the trope of Mary Sue acknowledge the existence of its male counterpart. Mackey and McClay address him as the “male equivalent [of the Mary Sue], who goes by several names” (139); Biryukova and Katermina talk about “‘Marty Stu’ (or ‘Gary Stu’) – [a] seemingly perfect character with no flaws, or who always overpowers other characters” (48); finally, Bonnstetter and Ott point out that “although scholars agree that the vast majority of fan fiction is authored by women, male versions of Mary Sue characters do exist, including ‘Gary Stu,’ ‘Marty Stu,’ ‘Maurice Stu,’ ‘Murry Sue,’ and the like” (364-365). Clearly, there exists discordance concerning the name of the counterpart of ‘Mary Sue’, who possesses one single name. Pflieger attributes the lack of such consensus to the disinterest towards the Gary Stu, which “hints that more attention has been made to the female character than to the male, perhaps because male characters are *expected* to embody the ideals of perfection associated with the character, so the fact that they do isn’t noteworthy.” Since the verisimilitude of perfect male characters is ‘not debatable’, their presence is inconsequential, which in turn leads to few critics contemplating the possibility that those male characters may be personifying a stereotype or trope.

Despite concurring that Gary Stus are in fact real, scholars scarcely provide any sort of information in relation to the trope beyond vaguely referring to it as the male version of the Mary Sue. The only distinction between Mary Sue and Gary Stu has been offered by Biryukova and Katermina, who state that,

...if Marty (Gary) Stu is the embodiment of masculinity – he is stronger, faster, more charming than everyone, then with Mary Sue the situation is somewhat more complicated. Mary Sue is usually smarter and more attractive than other characters, but many

negatively perceive this hero, considering such impeccability to be unrealistic and insulting the feelings of women who are not without flaws. 48.

This showcases an evident gender bias—where the trope for the ideal male character places more importance on physical ability, its female equivalent focuses on intelligence and beauty. Both of these traits have been traditionally associated with women; contrarily, traditional masculine perfection is related to strength. Nonetheless, among the reduced number of male characters who have been the object of discussion in regard to their ‘Gary Stueness’, none has been labelled as such due to his strength. Therefore, and because Biryukova and Katermina are the only scholars who have separated Mary Sue characteristics from those pertaining to Gary Stu, it can be surmised that depictions like McCardle’s are most accurate: “a ‘Mary Sue,’ or ‘Gary Stu’ if the character is a man, is typically perfect in nearly every way imaginable” (436)—the previously discussed considerations with regard to Mary Sues are also true for Gary Stus.

Because masculine perfection does not spur debate, it is quite challenging to find actual examples of Gary Stus. Even if the research carried out by this paper were to include ‘unofficial’ opinions taken from social media or the Internet, complaints about Gary Stus are rare. Shweta Basu cites Dante as a Gary Stu: “we can look at Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*, where he traverses hell and meets the people and characters that he has admired. Here we have an example of RPF (real people fiction, Virgil being an example) and of course Dante himself (classic Gary Stu)” (4). This case illustrates a fan-made Gary Stu, and rather than depict an accomplished male character, it serves as an instance of a self-insert. Caroline Schon presents another self-insert in real-life Donald, who, while re-imagining himself as a fictional character, “meticulously designed his imaginary persona to be ideal in many respects, but also to carry selective flaws, such as a disfigured face, a violent temper, or an uninhibited sex life” (142). As

disclosed by Sehon, Donald embedded these faults into his own character because he was “annoyed by the perfect ‘Gary Stu’ characters online” (142) and thus “transformed a typically idealised Gary Stu figure into his very own fictive personality that had extraordinary abilities along with basic human needs, desires, and foibles” (142). Discussion on Gary Stus is uncommon, with the only potential exception being Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* saga: “‘but gary stu-’ the only time i’ve [sic] seen this used is talking about like, Edward Cullen maybe” (@wndupazem).

Delimiting the meaning of ‘Mary Sue’ might have been useful for literary purposes, because as an arguably widespread literary phenomenon its documentation is convenient. Mary Sues were once stock characters; that is, “one-dimensional characters in literature, theater, and film who are constructed based on archetypal or stereotypical representations that inform their speech, mannerisms, style of dress, personality traits, or behavioral patterns, which are easily identifiable to a particular audience” (Jackson II 791). ‘Mary Sue’ was merely the name given to a trope; nevertheless, it has been proven that such term is now mostly used with malicious intent. If its function was that of criticising poorly written characters, then Gary Stus would not be overlooked—sadly, ‘Mary Sue’ is currently nothing more than a patriarchal weapon with which misogynists belittle the products of women’s writing.

4. Case study: Hermione Granger and Captain Marvel

The aim of this chapter is, first and foremost, to support the theoretical research on Mary Sue by supplying actual instances of Mary Sues in mainstream media. Moreover, these characters have not been chosen haphazardly, which leads to the second point the case study intends to prove: contrary to popular belief, none of these characters are Mary

Sues. Finally, and particularly in Captain Marvel's section, misogyny will be found guilty of distorting and perpetuating the defamatory acceptance of 'Mary Sue'.

4.1. Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter*

Every so often, an Internet user will share their thoughts on Hermione Granger's Mary Sueness; for instance, an anonymous comment in a fan-voted Mary Sue ranking complains that "[Hermione is] always right, always the voice of reason, always the smartest, and she's loved by everyone despite being a rude snob all the time" ("Top 10"). Some of the scholars who have contributed to the previous sections are also partial to this opinion. When listing examples of Mary Sues, Biryukova and Katermina mention Hermione (48); Walsh asserts that some critics indeed consider Hermione a Mary Sue (142), and Chander and Sunder state that fanfiction on Hermione seems unnecessary because "the Harry Potter books already depict Hermione with extraordinary, positive characteristics" (610).

Nevertheless, the very first book is enough to disprove at least half of such claims. When Hermione is first introduced, the third-person narrator, which aligns with Harry Potter's point of view, says that "she [has] a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth" (Rowling: *HPI* 79). After leaving, and while discussing in which house he and Harry will get sorted into, Ron Weasley states: "whatever house I'm in, I hope she's not in it" (80). Her first impression on her soon-to-be best friends is not positive at all; conversely, she lacks any qualities. Whenever she demonstrates rationality unbecoming of an eleven-year-old, she is said to do so in "a sniffy voice" (82), or looking "desperate to start proving that she [isn't] a dunderhead" (102). She is generally described as a bad-tempered child (120) and, more importantly, as a "bossy know-it-all" (121). Harry and Ron express their dislike of Hermione explicitly:

‘It’s no wonder no one can stand her,’ he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor. ‘She’s a nightmare, honestly.’

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face – and was startled to see that she was in tears.

‘I think she heard you.’

‘So?’ said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable. ‘She must’ve noticed she’s got no friends.’ 127.

Despite the fact that he did not mean to hurt her feelings, Ron does not esteem Hermione enough to apologise; he regrets upsetting her but believes that what he said was true. Evidently, accountability should not be expected of children in the same way one would expect it from an adult; however, if Hermione were meant to be a Mary Sue, Ron’s actions would be portrayed in a rather bad light, and he would admit to being wrong. Instead, this situation is resolved by Harry and Ron saving Hermione from a troll and, later on, Hermione lying to a professor for the sake of her classmates.

Indeed, Hermione could not defeat the troll—rather than springing into action and saving the day in true Mary Sue fashion, she “she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror” (130). At one point, the narrator names chess as “the only thing Hermione ever [loses] at” (159); nonetheless, it is not the only field in which she does not excel. Even though she profusely studied for it, she could not manage to make her broomstick work accordingly in their first flying lesson. In the seventh book it is revealed that she has not learnt how to do it properly, because she still “[lacks] confidence on a broomstick” (Rowling: *HP7* 50). Furthermore, she wrongly accuses Snape of trying to curse Harry, attempting to legitimate her own opinion by exhorting that she “has read all about them [jinxes]” (Rowling: *HP1* 141). Her only quality is being proficient at studying,

and her prudence is disliked by other students, who practically see her as a grouch. When Draco Malfoy curses Neville Longbottom and everyone laughs, Hermione is the only student who does not find it funny and hurriedly “[performs] the counter-curse” (159). Because she is not a Mary Sue, what makes this event relevant is not her exceptional kindness; instead, she is in the spotlight for being a killjoy of the sorts.

Another comment on the Mary Sue ranking points out that she only was called out for her rude behaviour in the first book, affirming that the “author always writes her as being in the right” (“Top 10”). The change in her portrayal can be ascribed to the fact that, from the second book onwards, she is friends with Ron and Harry, with the latter being in charge of the narrator’s viewpoint. *The Chamber of Secrets* inserts racism to the wizarding world, and Hermione, whose parents cannot use magic, is a victim of such oppression. She garners the sympathy of those who are not racist, but that is the extent of the newfound kindness she receives. She still acts “disapproving” (Rowling: *HP2* 68) and speaks “bossily” (100); she fails to notice Gilderoy Lockhart’s disingenuous schemes because he is good-looking; she laughs at Ron’s fear of spiders, and, finally, she is unable to accompany Ron and Harry in their quest to open the chamber of secrets because one of her potions was a disaster. Once again, all she is appraised for is her skill in school-related competencies, and even in that regard she does not achieve perfection.

The third *Harry Potter* entry showcases a similar depiction. The very beginning commends her for being “the cleverest witch in Harry’s year” (Rowling: *HP3* 9), but her friends are still usually dismissive of her judgment: when she starts quoting a textbook, Ron “[is] plainly not listening to a word Hermione [is] saying” (61). She continually demonstrates that her knowledgeability is her greatest asset, yet this is not meant to be interpreted as something particularly positive. For example, after she correctly answers a question and Snape calls her an “insufferable know-it-all” (129) in front of her classmates,

their reaction is as follows: “it was a mark of how much the class loathed Snape that they were all glaring at him, because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once” (129). Rather than the fact that answering the professor’s query accordingly did not make Hermione a know-it-all, her fellow students clash with Snape because they hate him. Not only is her brainpower downplayed as a defect—she is not beloved enough for other characters to act for her sake. Additionally, her other qualities are rarely highlighted: when she is kind or considerate, nothing in the text remarks her being so. When Harry is mysteriously gifted with a new broom, Hermione acts against Harry’s wishes and tells professor McGonnagall so that the item is checked for Harry’s safety. However, the fact that her actions were out of concern “didn’t stop him being angry with her” (173). When Lavender Brown’s rabbit dies, Hermione is the only one to say she is sorry for Lavender’s loss, and Harry and Ron’s lack of empathy for not caring is not acknowledged. Nevertheless, Hermione’s kind gesture is immediately overshadowed by her arguing that Lavender was wrong about the incident being predicted by heir Divination professor, at which point she is portrayed as insensitive. She physically assaults Draco Malfoy for unfairly belittling Hagrid, but the book refuses to emphasise her caring side or praise her courage, simply acknowledging her actions by having Ron be “impressed” (217).

What is most appalling in her Mary Sueness or lack thereof is her quest against elf slavery. She is rightfully livid when she learns that house elves work for free:

‘But they get paid?’ she said. ‘They get holidays, don’t they? And – and sick leave, and pensions and everything?’

...

‘Sick leave and pensions?’ he said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. ‘House-elves don’t want sick leave and pensions!’

Hermione looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

‘Oh, c’mon, ’Er-my-knee,’ said Ron ... ‘You won’t get them sick leave by starving yourself!’

‘Slave labour,’ said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. ‘That’s what made this dinner. Slave labour.’

And she refused to eat another bite. Rowling: *HP4* 161-162

She is the only character in the entirety of the *Harry Potter* saga that cares about house elves. If she were a Mary Sue, she would be applauded for being the only person speaking in favour of a mistreated minority. What actually happens—and this might say more about the *Harry Potter* author than it does about Hermione’s character—is that her concerns are disregarded, and she is usually mocked for caring about the wellbeing of house elves. The last mention of her campaign takes place in the fifth book:

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry.

‘Hermione still hasn’t given up on SPEW.’

‘It’s not SPEW!’ said Hermione heatedly. ‘It’s the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.’ ...

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Ron. ‘C’mon, I’m starving.’

For someone who is allegedly written as always being in the right, her beliefs are often invalidated by the reactions of her fellow cast.

Hermione constantly shows thoughtfulness and displays her goodhearted nature, but the books make light of these qualities in order to accentuate her cleverness, which in turn is converted into a flaw that annoys her peers more often than not. As of the sixth book, Hermione is frequently depicted as looking “angry and disapproving” (Rowling: *HP6* 208). She is judgmental of her friends whenever they refuse to act appropriately, and she is made fun of for her ‘bookwormness’, for which her friends consider her “weird” (223). Being the closure to the saga, the seventh and final book does not dwell on her know-it-all ‘gag’ as much, although her “complacency” (Rowling: *HP7* 46) is still accounted for.

Lastly, regarding her physical characteristics, Hermione has “very bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth” (Rowling: *HP4* 51). It is not until the fourth book that others notice her beauty, and ‘beauty’ is not precisely the word that is used to describe her. When she dresses up for a ball, everyone is shocked at her appearance, and the narrator says: “it was Hermione. But she didn’t look like Hermione at all” (360)—thus implying that the usual Hermione does not look as beautiful. She is not remarkably gorgeous the way a Mary Sue would be, neither does she ‘steal the hearts’ of the most relevant characters. The saga ends with her and Ron falling in love and forming a family, but Hermione is not loved because of her “extraordinary, positive characteristics” (Chander and Sunder 610)—which are not regarded as such in the books—. Hermione Granger has proven to be far from being a Mary Sue: she is loved by her friends *despite* their perception of her as a flawed individual, which, at the same time, is what her character should be appreciated for.

4.2. Captain Marvel from Marvel Cinematic Universe's *Captain Marvel*

Unlike in the case of Hermione Granger, the small number of researchers who account for Captain Marvel's Mary Sueness actually support their claims with concrete arguments. Podoshen and Ekpo, for instance, note that "many in online communities view Captain Marvel, in both the comics and the film, as a Mary Sue because she has the same powers as male characters but without many of the vulnerabilities and flaws the male characters often possess" (7). The 'power issue' is also brought up by Pratiwi and Primasita, who explain that characters such as Rey Skywalker and Captain Marvel possess "abilities that are above human reach" (188). They ascertain that Captain Marvel falls within the category of Mary Sue (188), although they make no further comment regarding this claim, probably implying that it is related to the character's outstanding skills.

Internet reviews are also more exhaustive in terms of analysing Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel. In an article entitled "Captain Mary Sue", Kyle Smith made sure to convey his disappointment concerning the character. In the opening lines, he deems Captain Marvel "charmless, humorless, a character so without texture that she might as well be made out of aluminum" ("Captain Mary Sue"). He goes on to ridicule Captain Marvel's traits with sarcastic remarks: "give Carol Danvers a love interest? Eek! No, women can't be defined by the men in their lives! Make her vulnerable? OMG, no, that's crazy. Feminine? What *century* are you from if you think females should be feminine?" ("Captain Mary Sue"). Smith chooses to criticise the non-existence of a romantic partner for Danvers, and complains about a lack of vulnerability and femininity as well. The first point will be dismissed because romance should never be considered vital to the development of a character, and the implication that the quality of a female character relies on her love interests is a misogynistic notion that does not deserve to be

entertained. Secondly, suggesting that femininity is somehow compulsory when writing female characters will be equally disregarded for similar reasons. However, claiming that a character should be vulnerable to some extent has the potential to be a fair assessment, since vulnerability usually lays the foundation for character growth. The only issue with this statement is that Carol Danvers does show vulnerability throughout the entirety of the film.

At the beginning of *Captain Marvel*, rather than Carol Danvers, the viewers meet Vers, who has no recollection of her past and is very clearly distraught by it. In the very first scene, she asks Yon-Rogg—her Kree³ mentor—to sprawl so that she can escape sleep and therefore avoid dreaming of memories she does not understand. She fights sloppily because she is concerned about her amnesia, expressing her agitated state by saying “it’s all blank. My life” (*Captain Marvel* 06:00). When she is kidnapped by the Skrulls, an enemy race of Hala, they dive into her mind and force her to remember excerpts of her past. Once she regains control and defeats them, she accuses the Skrulls of implanting false images in her brain and distrusts them when they assure that what she saw was her own past, clamouring “those aren’t my memories” (19:23). After accidentally destroying the enemy spacecraft and landing on Earth, she realises that she used to live there, and her first move upon this discovery is confiding in Yon-Rogg in search for comfort. Later on, it is revealed that the Kree brainwashed her in order to use her powers against the Skrulls, whom they were unjustly persecuting. Thus, she learns that everything in which she believed, including Yon-Rogg—in whom she had blind faith—had been a lie. This leads to Carol Danvers questioning herself, and at some point she is distressed enough to yell “I don’t even know who I am!” (1:13:29). She needs

³ The Kree are the people who reside in planet Hala, which Vers had been inhabiting for six years prior to the events of *Captain Marvel*.

reassurance from her past friend Monica Rambeau in order to regain some confidence and ultimately face both Yon-Rogg and the Kree.

Smith believes that “superheroes are defined by their limitations—Superman’s Kryptonite, Batman’s mortality—but Captain Marvel is just an invincible bore” (“Captain Mary Sue”). Seemingly unbeknownst to him, Captain Marvel is a human and therefore as mortal as Batman; aside from that, however, she is unequivocally defined by her limitations. As has been examined in the previous paragraph, Carol Danvers’s main struggle is salvaging her identity. Recovering her memories entailed recognising the betrayal of the people she had trusted for years, and only after discerning the truth about herself does she find the power to right her wrongs. She confronts her former Kree allies in favour of helping the Skrulls, and her newfound determination is what allows her to fight nonchalantly. It is true that she easily overpowers her opponents, but considering their treachery and despotic intentions, it is only fair that Captain Marvel—who is both the *protagonist* of the film and a victim of their schemes—succeeds in defeating them.

In terms of personality, Carol Danvers is neither charmless nor humourless. She spends most of the film playfully bantering with other characters, who either welcome her quips with laughter or tease her back. In a very Marvel-esque gimmick, she asks her captors how to uncuff herself: “You guys wouldn’t happen to know how these things come off, would you?” (*Captain Marvel* 20:18). While infiltrating one of NASA’s facilities, Nick Fury asks her to wear a cap with his agency’s logo because her outfit made her look “like somebody’s disaffected niece” (43:15), prompting the following exchange:

DANVERS: does, uh, announcing your identity on clothing help with the covert part of your job?

FURY: Said the space soldier who was wearing a rubber suit. 43:25.

Her taunts are always good-natured rather than blunt and are usually accompanied by a smile. Funnily enough, the film itself provides an explanation for her alleged emotionlessness: Yon-Rogg repeatedly encourages her to forsake her feelings, which she attempts before her trust in him is broken. She is actually scolded multiple times because she fails at this task, a fact that Kyle Smith's review has apparently overlooked.

Pratiwi and Primasita argue that Captain Marvel's personality resembles that of Tony Stark/Iron Man (181), who has never dealt with Gary Stu accusations; likewise, O'hara claims that "her powers and flaws are almost directly comparable to Thor and no one has a problem with him" ("Why Are (Some) Men"). They are right in highlighting the sexism that compels critics to complain about Captain Marvel while ignoring her similarities with other male characters, but this paper argues that that is not the only issue—as a character, Captain Marvel has been severely misread by the public, most of which has somehow managed to disregard her development throughout the film. Van Sciver, for example, affirms that

...there's no story arc for Captain Marvel because that would imply that women have problems and that is not the purpose of this character. The purpose of this character, the purpose of this movie is to show that women are totally awesome, totally badass, and can kick butt like men can. That is what a Mary Sue is. "Captain Marvel is Yet Another" 4:05.

He is utterly wrong—Captain Marvel could not be further from the Mary Sue trope. *Vers* starts off as a soldier that is desperate to prove herself, yet her vulnerability stops her from achieving any of her goals. She is kidnapped because she falls into a trap the Skrulls set for her, and she lands on Earth because her lack of control over her powers leads to the destruction of the spaceship where she was being kept. She finds out the truth about her

past while disobeying orders and researching the enemy's objective on her own. Finally as *Carol Danvers*, her strength of character is justified by her self-discovery, which also provides her with the confidence she needs to control her powers.

Captain Marvel's story arc could not be more flagrant; it is precisely what allows her to finally be "totally awesome [and] totally badass" (4:17). She is the embodiment of a flawed character, and those who are unable to see her blatant humanity should strive to remove the patriarchal blindfold that is deceiving them.

5. Conclusions

Mary Sue must be disavowed. She has existed for barely fifty years, and she may be too young to die, but her downfall into bigotry has expedited her demise. This does not mean that she should be disregarded in terms of literary research, where objectiveness resolves that it is beneficial to account for any trope that comes into existence. Indeed, Mary Sue's relevance in the literature produced during the late 20th century and the early 21st century is undeniable, and such knowledge should be treasured. Mary Sue is also invaluable for feminist studies, as she has conveyed the social reality that literature has been—and continues to be—indispensable in the fight against patriarchal ideas.

However, using her as a means of criticising the writing of a character is an exceedingly obsolete methodology. Very rarely will an objective review of a work of literature use the term 'Mary Sue' to describe any of the story's cast. Instead, 'Mary Sue' is currently a misogynistic strategy to dismiss female characters. It is a scheme through which Mary Sue becomes a tool for patriarchal *subjects* to consciously undermine the value of a woman while excusing their sexism by claiming that it is merely a trope. Its application has become indiscriminate; the traits, the development or the actions of the female character are irrelevant—what matters is whether misogynists like her or not.

Borne by Paula Smith in the 70s, Mary Sue was meant to commandeer the main starship of *Star Trek*. She became the first woman to do so via fan fiction, which ultimately became a platform where women could create fictional societies in which they were able express their concerns and aspirations and freely navigate their world. Mary Sue was one of the many self-inserts that allowed women to take the reins; she helped them advocate for their rights through literature. Due to her impact, Mary Sue developed from a *she* to an *it*—she became a hypernym for any female self-insert or original character who displayed several exceptional qualities. This evolution can be attributed to an assortment of reasons: women writers handle real-life challenges through fictional universes; they are dissatisfied with the portrayal of a specific character and want to adjust them according to their own vision; they condemn patriarchal views by projecting them onto their characters, or they simply submerge their own, improved self in universes they love.

Despite being practical, the Mary Sue quickly became problematic. As was the case of the angel in the house, some scholars consider that the popularity of the Mary Sue trope has the potential of being harmful. The presence of *only* perfect women in literary works serves as propaganda that unintentionally forces real women to seek perfection—but this would only be a problem if all the female characters within a story were Mary Sues, and no writer creates a story composed of *only* one character archetype. Patriarchal critics scorn the Mary Sue for different reasons, arguing that flawless women do not exist and Mary Sues are therefore unrealistic. Ironically, the same patriarchy that created and favoured tropes depicting perfect women—i.e. the angel in the house—actively rejects the Mary Sue—a trope that was conceived by and for women—. When women strive for their own betterment, one that is not male-approved, the patriarchy seethes; contrarily, it

turns a blind eye when it sees a male character that seemingly embodies all that is good, which explains why Gary Stus are not chastised with such intransigence.

All in all, practically any female character can be arbitrarily deemed a Mary Sue. This paper has compiled two examples of infamous Mary Sues: Hermione Granger, whose sins comprised an outstanding brain, and Captain Marvel, who dared be stronger than her antagonists. None of them are faultless, yet they have been labelled as Mary Sues, which are supposedly perfect—a paradox that proves how distorted the use of the term has come to be. Mary Sue has been stolen from the hands of women writers in order to belittle their magnum opus: wielding the power of fiction to take a stance on their own portrayal.

Works Cited

- @wndupazem. “‘but gary stu-’ the only time i’ve seen this used is talking about like, Edward Cullen maybe.” *Twitter*, 3 Aug. 2019, 11:01 p.m., <https://twitter.com/wndupazem/status/1157758380863131648?s=20>
- Armstrong, Nancy. “The Rise of Feminine Authority in the Novel.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1982, pp. 127–45.
- Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon. The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Basu, Shweta. “James Joyce's Ulysses As A Work Of Fanfiction: Relating To The Cognitive Turn.” *Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-24.
- Biniek, Patrycja. “Evolution of the Mary Sue character in works by Wattpad social platform users.” *Polish journal of English studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 35-55.
- Biryukova, Polina S., and Veronika V. Katermina. “Gender-Colored English Neologisms in Cinematic Discourse”, *Current Issues in Philology and Pedagogical Linguistics*, 2020, vol. 1, no. 2 pp. 44-52.
- Bonnstetter, Beth E., and Brian L. Ott. “(Re)Writing Mary Sue: Écriture Féminine and the Performance of Subjectivity.” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2011, pp. 342-67.
- Chander, and Madhavi Sunder. “Everyone’s a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of ‘Mary Sue’ Fan Fiction as Fair Use.” *California Law Review*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2007, pp. 597–626.

- Chaney, Keidra, and Raizel Liebler. "Me, Myself & I—Fan Fiction and the Art of Self-Insertion." *Bitch*, vol. 1, no. 31, 2006, pp. 52-57.
- Cixous, Hélène, et al. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93.
- Clute, John, and John Grant. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Orbit Books, 1997.
- Coombe, Rosemary J. *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties*. Duke University Press, 1998.
- Donovan, Josephine. "Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory." *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1991, pp. 441–62.
- Fathallah, Judith. "'I'm a God': The Author and the Writing Fan in Supernatural." *Fanfiction and the Author: How fanfic changes popular cultural texts*, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, pp. 157–98.
- Fleck, Ryan, and Anna Boden. *Captain Marvel*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. "The Madwoman in the Attic." *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 812-25.
- Gubar, Susan. "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1981, pp. 243–63.
- Hodges, Devon. "Frankenstein and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1983, pp. 155–64.
- Jackson II, Ronald L. *Encyclopedia of Identity*. SAGE Publications, 2010.

- Jamison, Anne. *Fic. Why fanfiction is taking over the world*. BenBella Books, 2013.
- Kühl, Sarah. "The angel in the house and fallen women: Assigning women their places in Victorian society." *Open Educational Resources, University of Oxford*, vol. 4, 2016, pp. 171-78.
- Lang, Nico. "'Star Wars' Doesn't Have a Heroine Problem: Arguing over Whether Rey's a 'Mary Sue' Is Missing the Point." *Salon*, 23 Dec. 2015, www.salon.com/2015/12/23/star_wars_doesnt_have_a_heroine_problem_arguing_over_whether_reys_a_mary_sue_is_missing_the_point/.
- Mackey, Margaret, and Jill Kedersha McClay. "Pirates and poachers: Fan fiction and the conventions of reading and writing." *English in Education*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2008, pp. 131-47.
- McCardle, Meredith. "Fan Fiction, Fandom, and Fanfare: What's All the Fuss." *Boston University Journal of Science & Technology Law*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, pp. 433-70.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, 16, no. 4, 1975, pp. 6-18.
- O'Hara, Helen. "Why Are (Some) Men So Angry About Captain Marvel?" *Grazia*, 9 March 2019, <https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/tv-and-film/captain-marvel-brie-larson-trolls/>.
- Pflieger, Pat. "Too Good to be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue." Presented at the American Culture Association conference, San Diego, 31 March 1999. *Merrycoz*, www.merrycoz.org/papers/MARYSUE.shtml. Accessed 2 August 2022.

Podoshen, Jeffrey S., and Akon E. Ekpo. "Diversity, tokenism, and comic books: Crafting better strategies." *Business Horizons*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2021, pp. 131-40.

Pratiwi, Winda Nur, and Fitria Akhmerti Primasita. "Female Action Hero's Superpower Representation: Audience Reception on Twitter in Disney's *Mulan* (2020)." *Rubikon: Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2022, pp. 180-93.

Ren, Aihong. "A Fantasy Subverting the Woman's Image as 'The Angel in the House'". *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 4, no. 10, 2014, pp. 2061-65.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Bloomsbury, 1997.

---*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Bloomsbury, 1998.

---*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Bloomsbury, 1999.

---*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Bloomsbury, 2000.

---*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Bloomsbury, 2005.

---*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Bloomsbury, 2007.

Sehon, Caroline M. "The screen as catalyst for psychic transformation." *Psychoanalysis online*, edited by Jill Savege Scharff, Karnac, 2013, pp. 137-47.

Smith, Kyle. "Captain Mary Sue." *National Review*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/03/captain-marvel-movie-review-dull-directionless/>.

Spencer, Jane. "Women writers and the eighteenth-century novel". *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, edited by John Richetti, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

"Top 10 Most Annoying Mary Sues and Gary Stus." *The Top Tens*, <https://www.thetoptens.com/characters/annoying-mary-sues/>. Accessed 8 June 2023.

Van Sciver, Ethan. "CAPTAIN MARVEL IS YET ANOTHER SJW DISGRACE!! Here's why these NPCs keep losing!" YouTube, uploaded by ComicArtistPro Secrets, 6 March 2019, <https://youtu.be/hlNXnoJWiIw>.

Walsh, Karen M. *Geek Heroines. An Encyclopedia of Female Heroes in Popular Culture*. ABC-CLIO, 2019.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary of MCU's *Captain Marvel*

Accompanying Wendy Lawson in her mission to find an artifact that can be weaponised against the Skrulls, Carol Danvers encounters the Kree Yon-Rogg, who then proceeds to murder Dr. Lawson due to her refusing to reveal the location of the weapon. Following the orders of the deceased Lawson, Danvers destroys the artifact, thus obtaining her superpowers and consequently fainting. Realising her value as an alternative for the weapon he was searching for, Yon-Rogg takes her to Hala, where she is brainwashed and trained as a fellow Kree. She is made to believe that the Skrulls actively seek war against the Kree, and thus acts against them following Yon-Rogg's and her other superiors' orders. Unbeknownst to Vers, the Skrulls lure her into a trap so that they can inspect her memories and find the coordinates of Lawson's artifact, which could help them escape the tyranny of the Kree. After escaping their kidnap attempt, she lands on Earth, where she meets Nick Fury and tells him about the dangers of the Skrulls. Fury agrees to help her on her quest to research Lawson, which Vers undertakes so as to better understand what it is exactly that the Skrulls are after.

She ignores Yon-Rogg's orders to wait for him before carrying out any sort of investigation, which results in her discovering that she once knew the Dr. Lawson the Skrulls were interested in. She contacts Yon-Rogg and tells him that she had a past on Earth, but he tries to convince her that the Skrulls have brainwashed her, of which she seems unsure despite verbally agreeing. Upon furthering her inspection, she meets Monica Rambeau, her past best friend. Rambeau reveals Vers's identity as Carol Danvers, a pilot of the Air Force who was at the service of Dr. Lawson. Fury, Rambeau and Danvers encounter two Skrulls, who tell them the truth about the Kree-Skrull conflict and explain

that they only want Lawson's artifact to escape the Kree. Danvers then breaks down, expressing her insecurity regarding herself, and Rambeau reassures her. After finding herself and learning that Yon-Rogg and the Kree were merely using her, she confronts Yon-Rogg and his team, defeating them and subsequently scaring the rest of the Kree army away. She ultimately leaves the Earth in favour of helping the Skrulls search for a place where they are not threatened by the Kree.

Appendix 2: Internet opinions on other Mary Sues

[All entries comprise anonymous comments taken from "Top 10 Most Annoying Mary Sues and Gary Stus." *The Top Tens*, <https://www.thetoptens.com/characters/annoying-mary-sues/>. Accessed 8 June 2023].

- [On Rey Skywalker from *Star Wars*'s latest trilogy]. "Rey is totally the most Mary Sue of all the Mary Sues. She instantly gets to know how to repair anything, fly anything, be liked by everyone (even the bad guy has the hots for her), and instantly learns how to do everything having to do with the Force in an instant. She has no training, yet beats a Sith Lord who's trained his whole life in a lightsaber duel, instantly learns a Jedi Mind Trick that took Luke 3 movies to learn, gets a hug when Solo dies instead of Chewbacca because, for plot reasons, Rey's feelings for a man she knew for less than a day are more important and developed than a being who had been with him for years, raises tons of boulders with the force (all of her Force tricks are done with no training whatsoever, even Anakin the frickening Chosen One had to be taught how to use the force and use a lightsaber). The only reasons for all of her skills is 'she's the best ever!'"
- [On Bella Swan from Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*]. "It says a lot that the most interesting thing to happen to vampires (the selling point) is bland teenage girl

with no aspirations in life. Either vampires are just that boring or your character is unnecessarily the center of the universe with no explanation as to why and I think we all know what the answer is.”

- [On Katniss Everdeen from Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*] “Emo, whiny, and horrible. So emotionless. The complete definition of a Mary Sue. She can do no wrong and is more powerful than anyone else.”

Appendix 3: Internet opinions in favour of Captain Marvel as a Mary Sue

- “There are endless videos and texts analysing why captain marvel fails to achieve what it set out to do, so I'll get straight to the point. Captain Marvel exists purely as a symbol of feminist empowerment, but she's portrayed so badly that she comes off as just being a self absorbed, god like being that is impossible for anyone to relate to. I hope they improve on her nonexistent personality movies to come so that she is at least tolerable” [Anonymous comment taken from “Top 10 Most Annoying Mary Sues and Gary Stus.” *The Top Tens*, <https://www.thetoptens.com/characters/annoying-mary-sues/>. Accessed 8 June 2023].
- Captain Marvel was a Mary Sue who had no right to be that cocky. She was literally at God-mode from day one - no training, no power transfer, no responsibility. She just was awesome and you had to deal with it.” [@MilkMan903. *Twitter*, 20 Aug. 2022, 9:13 p.m., <https://twitter.com/MilkMan903/status/1561068888993021957?s=20>].

Appendix 4: Internet opinions against Captain Marvel as a Mary Sue

- “People really watch Batman with a straight face and then call Captain Marvel a Mary Sue” [@bennjoon. *Twitter*, 12 July 2020, 2:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Bennjoon/status/1282109268741824514?s=20>]
- “If Captain Marvel was a Mary Sue, then so was Tony, Rhodey, Steve, Peter, as they all had no training and were able to use their technology, Powers, etc with little to no training.” [@Chadmw10. *Twitter*, 20 Aug. 2022, 10:21 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Chadmw10/status/1561085954328338432?s=20>].
- “Iron Man: *Punches Thanos*
Middle Aged Dudes: ‘YEAH THAT WAS AWESOME!’
Captain Marvel: *Punches Thanos*
Middle Aged Dudes: I can’t believe these sjws are pushing an agenda what a mary sue women can’t be cool.” [@jtimsuggs. *Twitter*, 30 April 2019, 7:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jtimsuggs/status/1123090082964099074?s=20>].
- “Yep, just like "neoliberal" and "woke," the internet has drained the term of any meaning it may have once had and it is now just "thing I don't like”
[@VGCatano. *Twitter*, 18 May 2023, 5:37 p.m., <https://twitter.com/VGCatano/status/1659221765627731970?s=20>].
- “Men: Naru in Prey is a Mary Sue. Just like Captain Marvel, and Rey in Star Wars.
Women: What do you think a Mary Sue is?
Men: A woman in a movie who’s uh... well it’s when she’s like... you know... does that thing where she’s... a woman?” [@OhNoSheTwitnt. *Twitter*, 8 Aug. 2022, 2:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/OhNoSheTwitnt/status/1556614741585547264?s=20>].