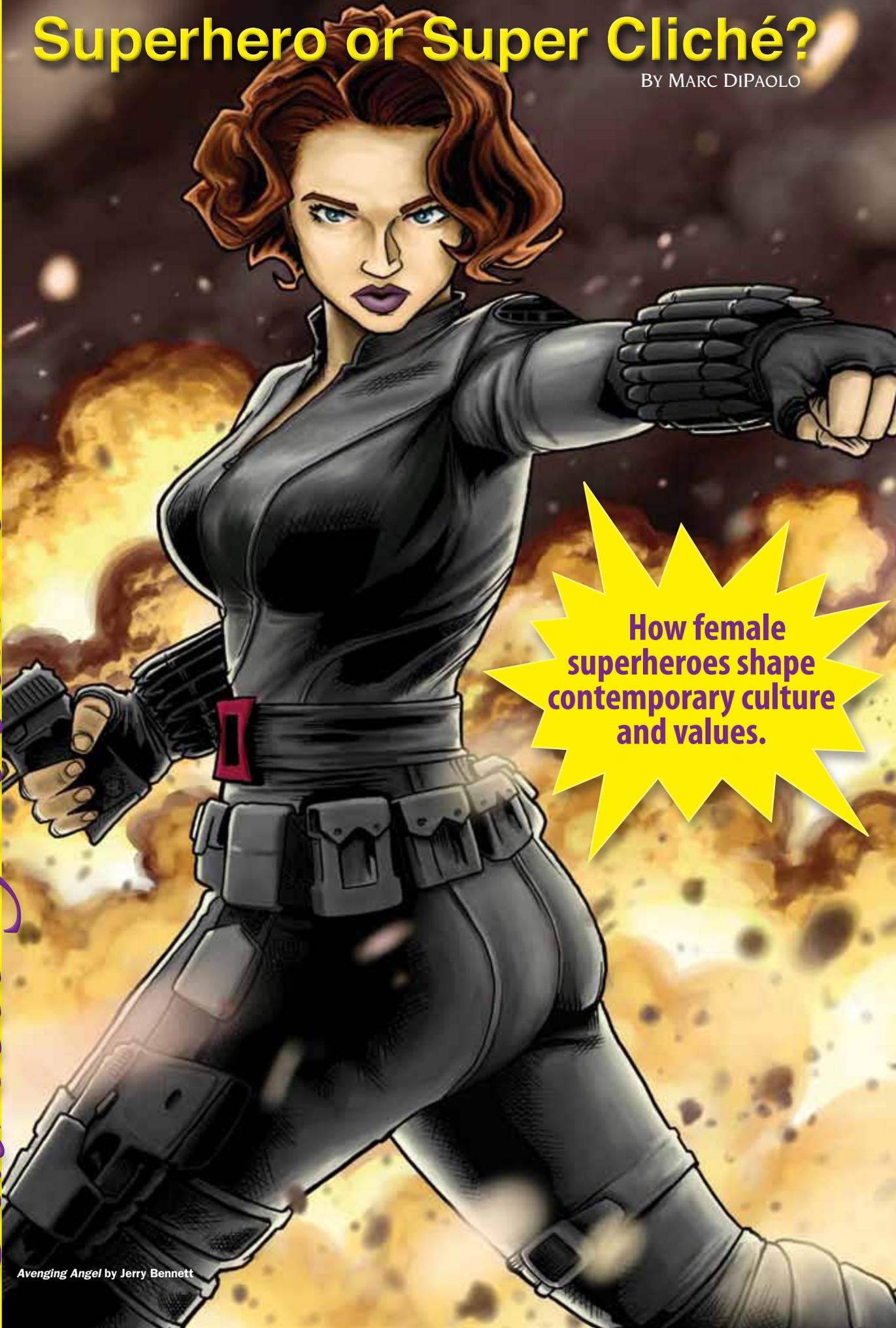


*Scarlett Johansson in a Catsuit*

# Superhero or Super Cliché?

BY MARC DIPALO



How female superheroes shape contemporary culture and values.



Even before *The Avengers* film was released in summer 2012 to become one of the most profitable and popular films ever made, there was discussion of what role Scarlett Johansson's backside would play in the film. The early promotional posters featured the male heroes standing heroically on a Manhattan street, ready to face down an army of invading aliens. In contrast, Johansson, one of the biggest stars in the film, occupied the rear of the battle formation and stood showing off her perfect posterior. There was some question, based on images such as these, whether the film would deal fairly with her character, Black Widow, or if she would be overshadowed by the charisma, heroism, and runaway popularity of the Hulk, Captain America, Iron Man, Hawkeye, Thor, and Nick Fury.

Noticing the absurdity of the promotional images, artist Kevin Bolk drew a spoof poster on deviantART.com, comically showing all the male heroes pointing their backsides suggestively outward while only Black Widow faced forward, striking a combat pose. The picture demonstrated that turnabout is fair play, while underscoring just how much cheesecake Johansson was expected to offer up to the movie-going public. Handsome and sculpted as her male co-stars were, they were allowed to be attractive while behaving as their characters naturally would. She was not. Admittedly, the comic book version of Black Widow is only an occasional member of *The Avengers* and a supporting character in *Daredevil* and *Iron Man*, but she tends to be a beautiful, tough, heroic, morally complex character.

When *The Avengers* was released, some fans and critics were surprised that Johansson's character had the third most screen time of any Avenger, following Captain America and Iron Man. She beat handily the total screen time of Hulk and Thor. Black Widow was also a far more complex personality than she was

in her previous, thankless femme fatale appearance in *Iron Man 2*. She was, in many ways, a strong and likeable character despite being in a male-dominated ensemble action film. Her dialogue hints at emotional depth, a tragic past, and offers viewers hope that she will grow still more interesting and centrally important in sequels. Fans of the character argued that feminists could thank writer-director Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for offering up an interesting female character in an action movie.

Most female characters in Marvel/DC movies are dull damsels in distress, rescued by the superheroes multiple times in the same film. The few superheroines featured in these films tend to be emotionless fighting machines in sexy catsuits who are equally frustrating and hard to relate to because they are such one-dimensional characters—even if they impress audiences with dramatic karate fights and gun battles with supervillains. Indeed, Whedon's Black Widow is a better heroic character than the film incarnations of Invisible Woman in *Fantastic Four* and Elektra in *Daredevil*, and she demands more respect than civilian characters like Mary Jane Watson in *Spider-Man*, Rachel Dawes in *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, and pretty much all of the James Bond girls (yes, the film franchise inspired *James Bond* comic books, too).

But even with Black Widow's new depth of character, Johansson's derriere was indeed on prominent display in at least one scene. The other two women in the film were also costumed provocatively. Agent Maria Hill (Cobie Smulders), like Black Widow, spent her film time slinking about in a skin-tight catsuit, while Oscar-winner Gwyneth Paltrow as Pepper Potts was relegated to a few brief scenes bouncing around in Daisy Duke shorts.

Like a classic Gothic damsel in distress, Black Widow is backhanded by the Hulk and spends an extended amount of time cowering and running from him. The villain, Loki, verbally abuses her.

Neither of these portrayals commands the character respect.

Why is any of this important?

It is important because a popular film has the potential to shape the opinions and emotions of millions of people, including their perceptions of women as human beings, as heroes, and as sexually autonomous individuals. A lot of online discussion and gossip magazine ink around this film was dedicated to describing Johansson's crash vegan diet, which enabled her to sculpt her body to the form-fitting black catsuit. If one of the biggest stars in the world is featured in a film this popular—primarily as a damsel in distress, a sex object, and a victim of physical and verbal abuse—then one must consider the consequences of the portrayal, especially if the film seems to validate this deplorable treatment of the character.

Now, to be fair, one might argue that the Hulk is out of control when he hits Black Widow, and Loki is the villain, so Whedon is making a potentially instructive statement about the dangers of male rage and the horrors of male-on-female violence. But male fans of superhero narratives often rant in online chat rooms about "political correctness run amok." Their standard line for critics—other than "It is just entertainment; take a chill pill!"—is that superheroes, male and female, are idealized as physically perfect specimens and should have athletic, powerful, sexy bodies.

Significantly, superheroes are extraordinarily popular role models—perhaps more so than ever—and they can mean many different things to different people. Children often see superheroes as the adults they hope to grow up to be. Some people see superheroes as replacements for gods and angels. Still others look to superheroes as moral and/or physical paradigms. Some enjoy the romanticism of superhero adventures and wish they themselves could perform feats of heroism. Superheroes can take on all these meanings, and more. But there are, arguably, more ways they can inspire and intrigue male fans than female fans because there are far fewer female

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superheroes, and the ones we do have tend to be problematic portrayals or merely supporting characters. One defender of female superheroes is Gerard Jones, who wrote in his book *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence* (2003):

The current generation of adolescent boys love active, powerful, threatening female figures—often as protagonists and often ... as a heroic surrogate for the boy himself.... Girls have long been known to identify with male fantasy figures. Now it looks as though young boys are finally learning the same art.... By combining the “frailties” normally allowed to women in commercial entertainment with the power and anger allowed men, [female superheroes] become much more complete characters.

Some of the best of these female protagonists include Kitty Pryde of the *X-Men* and *Excalibur*, Psi-Division Judge Cassandra Anderson from *Judge Dredd*, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Xena: Warrior Princess. It should be noted, however, that the Invisible Woman, Lois Lane, Batgirl, Catwoman, and Rogue from the *X-Men* can be excellent or dreadful comic book characters depending on how they are written and how they are drawn. Usually these women are rescued more often than they should be and are sometimes depicted as being annoying, unintelligent, or over-emotional. Many of them have been killed off, married off, or prematurely written out of their respective serial narratives. They are among the few classic characters we have to work with, though, and are sometimes truly excellent characters. But when these characters are, functionally, men in women’s clothing or objectified fantasies, then they are no longer worthy of being role models for (or fictional surrogates of) real-world women.

Part of the problem is, as much as one may celebrate, say, the acting ability of Anne Hathaway or Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* or *Batman Returns*, Catwoman is *not* the

*main character*. Batman is. As morally ambiguous and fascinating as Catwoman is, she is often portrayed as either mentally unhinged or evil, and Batman is the “good guy.” He’s the one with all the action figures and posters, and he has eight monthly comic books to Catwoman’s one. This begs the question: Can a woman of any age, let alone an impressionable young girl looking for a role model, find anything worthwhile to relate to? Is there a lesson other than female superheroes have perfect physiques? That superheroines are sometimes victims and sometimes powerful—and sometimes evil or dangerous?



**Wonder Woman had her heyday during World War II, when Rosie the Riveter showed women that strength and fortitude were virtues for women as well as men.**

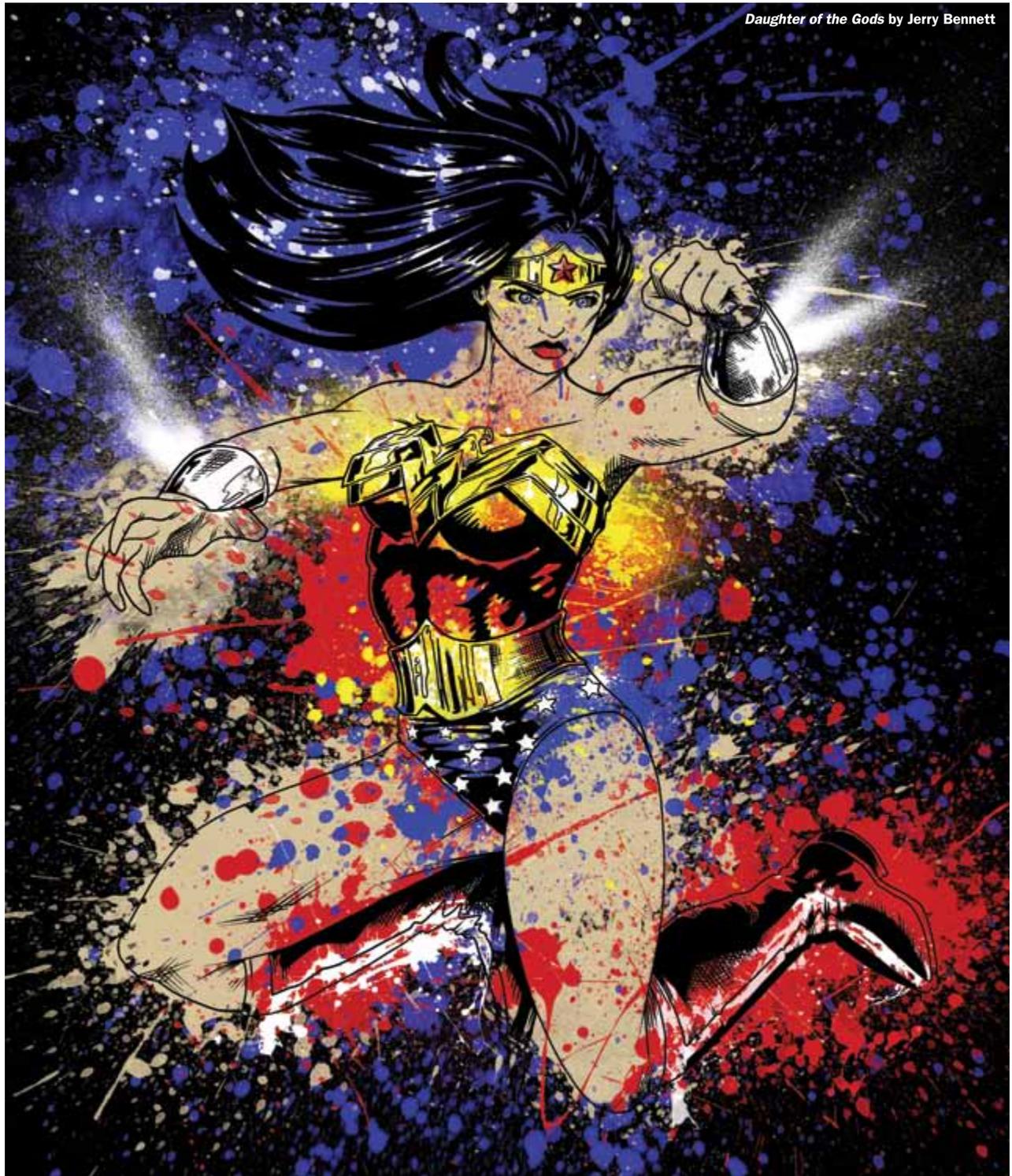
Perhaps the antithesis to these caricatures is Wonder Woman. The first and best of the female superheroes, she has been largely absent from television and film since the late-1970s Lynda Carter series went off the air. She has also been mischaracterized as a bitter, vengeful harpy in cartoons and comic books, literally, for decades. The original Wonder Woman is a daring feminist. She is, first-and-foremost, a pacifist who tries to negotiate with her enemies and find common ground. When she is forced into combat, she captures her vanquished opponents instead of killing them and she uses her lasso of truth to teach them to see the world in less black-and-white terms. She is gorgeous and sexy, but her beauty does not threaten other women and she is surrounded by female friends. Indeed, female friendship is one of the core values of the *Wonder Woman* comic, a positive counter-balance to the negative

view of female friendships found in films like *Mean Girls*.

Wonder Woman is a legitimate role model for women, not merely an underwear model who knows karate. And she has had a direct effect on the real world. Feminist activist Gloria Steinem grew up reading *Wonder Woman* comic books and learned from the fictional woman’s example how to change the world. Steinem wasn’t alone in responding to the character in such an important, fundamental way. As *Wonder Woman* comic book writer Gail Simone revealed in an interview:

[People tell me that] having Wonder Woman as a role model helped them get out of an abusive relationship, or that it got them to keep going to the gym and take care of themselves.... I’ve had young girls tell me that she helped them stand up to bullies at school. I’ve even had people go as far as to say it stopped them from committing suicide because that’s not something that she would do. People relate to her in a really emotionally deep way that I had no idea about before I started writing comics about her.

A statement like this underscores the value of Wonder Woman being made more available to the public through a new film or television series in which she is portrayed heroically and faithfully to the original character. She had her heyday in comic books during World War II, when Rosie the Riveter showed the women of America that strength and fortitude were virtues for women as well as men. Her TV series was another renaissance that occurred, unsurprisingly, during the 1970s’ second-wave feminism. Today, Wonder Woman appears as a supporting player in the video game *Justice League Heroes*. Unsurprisingly, players of the game use her to dismantle armies of robots in battle. This is the *Call of Duty*-approved Wonder Woman, not the humanitarian and progressive heroine of years past, who avoided violent confrontations whenever a peaceful solution could be found.



**Extra!** For more on superheroines, check our webpage: [okhumanities.org/extra](http://okhumanities.org/extra)

When DC Comics launched “The New 52” digital comic book initiative in 2011, an effort to bring in new readers, the executives were widely criticized for hiring too few women writers and artists, and for over-sexualizing female characters such as Harley Quinn and Voodoo. Feminist critics were disappointed that the *Wonder Woman* comic was more

violent and macho than ever and that Lois Lane had been effectively written out of the *Superman* comic books.

The good news is that critical consensus proclaims the *Batwoman* comic, featuring stunning artwork and compelling protagonist Kate Kane, as one of the best comic books being published today. Recently, Marvel Comics tried to

one-up DC by making a bold move—promoting female character Ms. Marvel to *Captain* Marvel and reviving her solo comic book with writer Kelly Sue DeConnick at the helm.

Okay.

That’s a start.

But is it enough? ■