Female Leads and their Heroic Representation:

Case Study of Homer's Penelope and MCU's Black Widow

Contribution to the *Map Your Hero(ine)* Research Project Conducted by Roselinde Supheert

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27 June 2022

5667 Words

Abstract

The present study contributes to Roselinde Supheert's *Map Your Hero(ine)* research project. This study explores how modern-day heroine Black Widow and ancient Classical heroine Penelope are represented. The concept of their heroism and their heroic qualities are analysed to establish how they are represented. The method for the analysis was close reading, with digital text mining through Voyant Tools for further evidence. The research focuses primarily on the terms: *heroism, heroes, heroic, heroine, hero,* and *glory* for the text mining. This study focuses, furthermore, on Homer's text, the *Odyssey* and MCU's films *Iron Man 2* (2010)*, The Avengers* (2012)*,* and *Black Widow* (2021), where only relevant scenes to the heroines were analysed. The close-reading results indicate that Penelope's heroic self in the *Odyssey* is represented through her loyal and faithful character and her continuous acts of portrayed intelligence, to which the Voyant results did not contribute. Black Widow's heroic self is primarily represented through her physical attributes, fighting skills and repeated deeds of intellect, to which Voyant Tools slightly contributed. The *Map Your Hero(ine)* project provides a clear idea of how hero(ine)s can be mapped but text mining is only relevant for certain types of texts.

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1. Introduction

Heroism among heroines is a topic that receives more attention every day, and deservedly so. Goethals and Allison state that "in the last decade, an exciting new field of study has emerged. Its subject is heroes and heroism. It is fast growing, multidisciplinary, and international" (1). The present BA thesis will contribute to this recent topic of heroics, hero(ine)s, and heroism, specifically the portrayal of MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) and Homer's heroism. Fictional heroines are often placed in a different category than heroes, particularly as they are still considered to be a rare occurrence (Brown 10). Therefore, the primary focus tends to be on gender rather than on heroism and its portrayal.

This BA thesis will add to the *Map Your Hero(ine)* research project conducted by Roselinde Supheert. The website mapyourhero.com focuses on how hero(ine)s are represented across different mediums. It uses two different methods to visualize their representation: a questionnaire and text mining, which will be further explained in chapter 3. The present paper shows how a hero(ine) can be mapped using the second method. It will push the limits of heroic representation as the heroines have never been compared, and are from different genres and mediums. It will provide the website with an example and suggests other uses of how digital text mining could be helpful for the *Map Your Hero(ine)* project.

Additionally, understanding the term heroism and its origin explains why the case studies were chosen. Heroism is derived from *hero*, which stems from the Greek word *hẽrõs*, "meaning protector or defender" (Kinsella et al. 20). Zimbardo states, regarding real heroes, that "historically, most examples of heroism have emphasized acts of courage that involved bravery, gallantry, and risk of serious physical injury or death" (461). A definition of the hero-deed will be further discussed in the Literature Review. As the term is derived from Greek, it only seems fitting to focus on one of the best-known ancient Greek literary heroines (Schein 4): Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*. Penelope is one of the essential characters in the epic. She

is said to be "the source of suspense in the *Odyssey*" (Felson-Rubin 67). She is known primarily for her roles as "wife and mother" (Felson-Rubin vii) and for displaying the same heroic qualities as her husband, Odysseus, the hero of the Odyssey. However, the meaning of the term hero, and thus heroism, has changed over time and cultures (Zimbardo 460). Schein, furthermore, claimed that "for the Greeks and later Western readers alike, it [the *Odyssey*] has served as a model and a mirror of both individual and cultural self-definition" (3). Thus, as cultural heroic views change over time, the representation of Penelope's heroism will be different from that of a modern-day heroine.

Black Widow[1] was chosen as the modern-day heroine. In the heroic cinematic world, two companies have dominated the depiction of hero(ine)s for cinematic adaptation: DC (Detective Comics) and MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). Considering the limits of this BA thesis, it was decided to focus on the latter of the two as the MCU has been described "as the template for the contemporary blockbuster movie" (McEniry et al. 1). Additionally, the MCU has been claimed as "modern-day mythology" with references to Greek, Germanic, and American mythologies, recalling "universal heroic archetypes" (McEniry et al. 11). The MCU launched its first film in 2008 (*Iron Man*), after which it quickly became a tremendous success, followed by a series of films. Since then, the MCU has focused on adapting the heroic comic books created by Stan Lee. However, this BA thesis will not focus on the comic books as that universe differs from the MCU. It has been suggested that "Marvel has created a cinematic universe with its own continuity, one that stands apart from the continuity of comics" (McEniry et al. 12). In the time between the first film and the last one of phase three,[2] the development of

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[1] Black Widow is her heroine's name, her real name is Natascha Romanoff. She was trained by General Drakov at an early age in the Red Room (which is an intense Russian training programme) to be an indestructible spy and assassin. All the girls there were called Black Widows, and as Natasha was the first to use the name for good instead of bad once she started working for the Strategic Homeland Intervention and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D., which is a government spy organisation), she became known as Black Widow.

[2] The MCU works with specific phases for their films, often around 3/4/5 years for each phase. Phase one includes all the films between 2008-2012, phase two from 2013-2015, phase three from 2016-2019, and phase four

one particular heroine is prominent. Black Widow's heroic journey seems strikingly similar to that of Penelope as they both discover their heroic-self after they are released from their male counterparts. Penelope steps into her heroism after Odysseus leaves, and Black Widow after she escapes from General Drakov.

The present analysis of the portrayal of Homer's heroine Penelope and MCU's heroine Black Widow will reveal to what extent their heroic attributes can be discovered through text mining. The analysis will include digital text mining via Voyant Tools to test the limits of its method. The present BA thesis will therefore answer the following research question:

How does the Map Your Hero(ine) project assist the comparison of the heroic representation of MCU's heroine Black Widow and Homer's heroine Penelope and what improvements can be suggested?

The following sub-questions have been created to help with answering this research question:

1. How does the term heroism represent Penelope in the *Odyssey* and Black Widow in *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, and *Black Widow*?

2. How does Voyant Tools (text mining) support the mapping of the heroines?

This thesis consists of six chapters in total. The second chapter will be a literature review on heroism. Chapter three will detail an explanation of the chosen method. Chapters four and five will consist of the analysis of the heroines Penelope and Black Widow, first with close reading, and secondly with text mining. Lastly, in the conclusion the research question is answered, results are discussed, limitations of the study are mentioned, and further research suggestions are proposed.

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started in 2021 and is still in production. The time between the first film and the last one from phase three would be between 2008 and 2019. It typically ranges from the last Avenger movie to the next Avenger movie. So, *The Avengers* marks the end of phase one and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* marks the end of phase two. Important to note is that the release date is not bound to its chronological order. While *Black Widow* is technically part of phase four, chronologically it would be part of phase three. See for more information on the phases and the chronological order at marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Movies.

2. Literature Review

The topic of heroism is vast and diverse. Among present audiences, the term hero has been reported as "radically ambiguous" (Gill 98), and Zimbardo claims that "heroism often requires social support [and that the] definitions of heroism are always culture-bound and time-bound" (164; 460). Because of that, this chapter is divided into specific sections to establish how heroism is defined.

2.1 Heroism in the 20th Century: the real world

Heroism in real life is always influenced by how it is defined in the fictional world and vice versa. May argues that heroes are needed for people to find their identity and their selves in society (53). He likewise stated that stories almost always carry "the values of society" (26). Wecter furthermore claims that an American hero's "sense of duty [is] alert to the best among the stirring impulses of their time, and able to make that impulse effective. They translate the dream into act" (487). The time in which the hero(ine)s live decides what it is that can turn them into a hero(ine), focusing on what it needs. Moreover, after becoming a hero, they present as an exemplar of proper behaviour (Wecter 488; Pretzinger 36; Klapp 211). Likewise, the heroic qualities that define the hero(ine)s besides their hero-deed are also varied through time. Wecter claims that "bravery, honesty, strength of character are the stuff for hero-worship" (486), indicating that those three qualities are what construes a hero in the eyes of the beholders. All in all, these scholars indicate that they are focusing on heroes when analysing these attributes and do not mention specifically anything particular about heroines.

2.2 Heroism in the 21st Century: the real world

Sullivan and Venter claim that "'heroes' primarily have been defined in one of two ways: because of some outstanding act they perform or because of their relevance to individuals" (101). Zimbardo adds that the hero-deed is often achieved through a well-intended sacrificial attribute (460), and Allison and Goethals claim that the hero-deed is often accomplished on the

heroic journey (104). Zimbardo, furthermore, states that heroes represent and reflect societal morals and that which is right in human nature (461). Additionally, they act courageously regardless of their physical exposure (Zimbardo 460; Becker and Eagly 343) and act as people who display constructive wisdom while always exhibiting the devotion to do the right thing for others and in specific circumstances (Schwartz 126). Zimbardo claims that there are

> six major categories of virtuous behavior that enjoy almost universal recognition across cultures. The classification includes: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, ternperance, and transcendence. Of these, courage, justice, and transcendence are the central characteristics of heroism. Transcendence includes beliefs and actions that go beyond the limits of self. (460-1)

Goethals and Allison state that heroes[3] are "almost always highly moral, and they are generally very competent and effective" (2). They continue to state that heroism often comes with eight "great traits of heroism … smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring" (2). An important note, however, is that they do not want to specify the defining qualities of heroes, as they believe that heroism is defined through "the eye of the beholder" (2). Nevertheless, these eight traits are still relevant for the current heroic representation as they have been recognised as heroic attributes. According to these scholars, in the 21st Century people think that these attributes are what defines a hero(ine)'s heroism.

2.3 Heroism in the 20th Century: the fictional world

Campbell states that fictional heroes also represent and reflect societal morals (383). He further claims that heroism frequently involves a hero-deed that defines them as a hero(ine) (388) Additionally, Campbell argues that "the hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo. Where then there was darkness, now there is light; but also, where light was,

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[3] Note that they specifically state that they mean heroes and not heroines.

there now is darkness. The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul"[4] (388). Even though he speaks of the time of Galileo, it also means that in the time of Homer (which was far before him), the hero-deed differed as well, as the remaining mystery in one's society differs with time. Campbell's monomyth[5] shows that "the hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms … he has been reborn" (19-20). Time is bound to the definition of heroism. Campbell states here that the hero-deed gained on the heroic journey remains most important to its definition.

2.4 Heroism in the 21st Century: the fictional world

Goethals and Allison's research focuses on heroes through "the eye of the beholder" which causes plenty of fictional heroes to arise as well. The previously mentioned attributes[6] are thus also focused on fictional heroes. They, moreover, state that "the only way most of us undergo transformation is to travel the hero's journey" (104). In the 21st Century, the noble hero-deed is still accomplished on the heroic journey (Bajac-Carter et al. 11). They furthermore claim that "initially, heroines tended to be innocent and weak, but their journeys taught them strategies, patience, networking, resilience, and wisdom" (11). These attributes show how the heroic journey can transform the hero(ine). They furthermore state that women can gain their heroism "through the pursuit of truth," and they focus on self-transformation and changing how women are perceived in society (11-3). Regarding fictional heroes, the heroic journey is still significant for their heroism as they gain attributes that help them obtain it.

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[4] Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* describes in detail what a typical hero's journey condones and what the role of myths has in it. Here, he is stating that the function of myths in current times no longer exists due to patriotism, politics, religion, capitalism, etc. These subjects also cannot fill the void that myth has left behind so we must look to ourselves to replace that void. He states, moreover, that in the 20th Century, the largest remaining mystery is human existence and that it is up to the modern hero to solve this mystery, thereby saving their society of this left emptiness.

[5] A monomyth is referred to a hero's journey and everything that it entails.

[6] "smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring" (Goethals and Allison 2).

2.5 Homer's Heroism

Hero(ine)s in Homer's time were defined differently than in the 21st century. In Homer, Lefkowitz claims, "Odysseus cannot complete his return until, like Penelope, he relies on intelligence and patience more than on traditional masculine virtues of brute force and anger" (1). She states that Odysseus needs to use the same qualities with which Penelope is often associated, and implies that these qualities go against Homer's typical "masculine virtues of brute force and anger," thus indicating that "brute force and anger" are male heroic qualities. Physical strength is often linked with a quality that the typical Homeric hero possesses (Monsacré 60-1). Then, according to Lefkowitz, Penelope does not belong to a distinct Homeric hero category. Aside from the heroic quality of intelligence, Lefkowitz argues that heroines should be capable of understanding and forgiving individuals (10), of which Penelope is an excellent example. Moreover, Hughes-Hallet states that Homeric heroic rage "is associated with courage and integrity" (1). According to these scholars, a typical Homeric hero(ine) should portray strength, courage, integrity, intelligence, understanding, and forgiveness.

2.6 MCU's Heroism

In the MCU, Kent recently investigated how a typical heroine is represented. She comments that most of "these narratives[7] mark a favouring of chivalry as a trait of masculine heroism, as well as presenting women who actively receive these acts of chivalry" (44). This can be seen through the use of the hero's love interest, which is often a damsel in distress. However, where this is notable in *Iron Man* (2008), this view does shift over time as hero(ine)s display the quality of chivalry. Kent moreover states that

> Many representations of filmic Marvel women reach to frustration tactics brought on by anxieties[8] regarding female empowerment in patriarchal culture.

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[7] Narrative from the films.
[8] Anxieties brought on by society.

> Notably these Marvel films offer a vision of feminine heroism infused with sexualisation, frustration and irony[9], which takes the shape of a distinctively white, heterosexual female subjectivity[10] apparently liberated from political struggles or the need to consider the social ramifications of her actions. (68)

An example of sexualisation is the uniforms the hero(ine)s wear in the films, as they are all skin-tight and designed to show off gendered physical attributes like "muscles or breasts" (69). An important note here is that in the 21st century, hero(ine) costumes are nearly always similarly made: the male hero is also often skin-tight.[11] However, "a crucial distinction lies in the differences between the sexualisation of male and female bodies and what kinds of sexualisation are considered culturally acceptable in different contexts" (Kent 69). Most of the time, a hero(ine) costume is designed to radiate power and to hide the hero(ine)'s identity, but also for the sex appeal (Kent 69; 95). Kent claims that Black Widow is part of "the highly complex presentations of feminine heroism in Marvel films" (98) as she is represented as having masculine heroic traits of violence combined with being sexualised, which will be further discussed in chapter five. Therefore, according to Kent, the typical MCU hero(ine) displays the main quality of chivalry and strength while being sexually represented.

3. Method

At first, the idea was only to use text mining for the analysis, but it was quickly discovered that the interpretation would not be complete without close reading. The digital text mining on the website of the *Map Your Hero(ine)* project refers to quantitative research using tools such as

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[9] Kent means here white male irony.

[10] Thus not inclusive and not entirely female.

[11] A good example would be Captain America, Steve Rogers, as he is also part of The Avengers, and his uniform always focuses on his muscles.

Voyant, which is what the present study will apply. Close reading is the more traditional method for text analyses, and Jockers explains the difference between the two as follows:

> It would be wasteful and futile to debate the value of interpretation, but interpretation is fuelled by observation, and as a method of evidence gathering, observation – both in the sciences and in the humanities – is flawed. Despite all their efforts to repress them, researchers will have irrepressible biases. Even scientists will 'interpret' their evidence through a lens of subjectivity … so the observed results are likewise imperfect. (6)

This is not to say that close reading is not a valuable tool for analysing texts. Jockers states that digital text mining is more reliable than close reading. He argues that "the sheer quantity of available data makes the traditional practice of close reading untenable as an exhaustive or definitive method of evidence gathering. Something important will inevitable be missed" (9). Jockers continues to state that the evidence from text mining

> is different from what is derived through close reading, but it is evidence, important evidence. At times the new evidence will confirm what we have already gathered through anecdotal study. At other times, the evidence will alter our sense of what we thought we knew. Either way the result is a more accurate picture of our subject. (48)

Hence, according to Jockers, the result of text mining will be more accurate, objective and create a more substantial idea of the analysis of the texts. Moreover, Piper states that "paying attention to quantity reveals the grooves and channels of cultural expression, the deep connections among words, ideas, and forms" (3). While these deep connections could be missed with close reading, text mining can demonstrate it more meticulously. He further claims that text mining is vital in

the sense that "a deeper immersion in the literature and methods that these fields[12] have to offer [and] to better understand the limitations of transferring one discipline's methodological apparatus onto another, and in the process improve both" (5). While mining is often considered not a viable method for literature fields, Piper argues the opposite as it has the means to improve the interpretation in multiple fields. Text mining is thus relevant as an interdisciplinary tool.

3.1 Procedure

For the present study, the heroines' heroism will first be close read and then analysed via Voyant Tools, which is an online resource that is readily accessible and available. It is also possible on Voyant to highlight certain words, contexts, or characters to access a more detailed search of the term that one wishes to focus on, for example, *heroism*. Figure 1 illustrates what Voyant looks like at first glance.
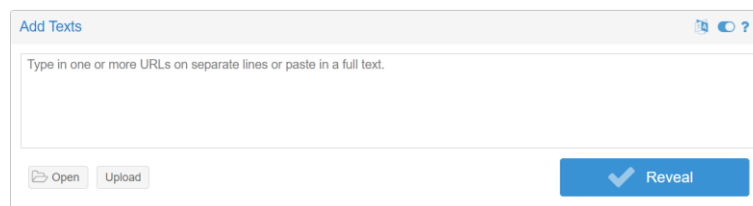
Figure 1.

Here, it can be seen where the text can be pasted or downloaded into it. After the chosen text, in this case, book 2 of the *Odyssey*, has been submitted, the following image appears:
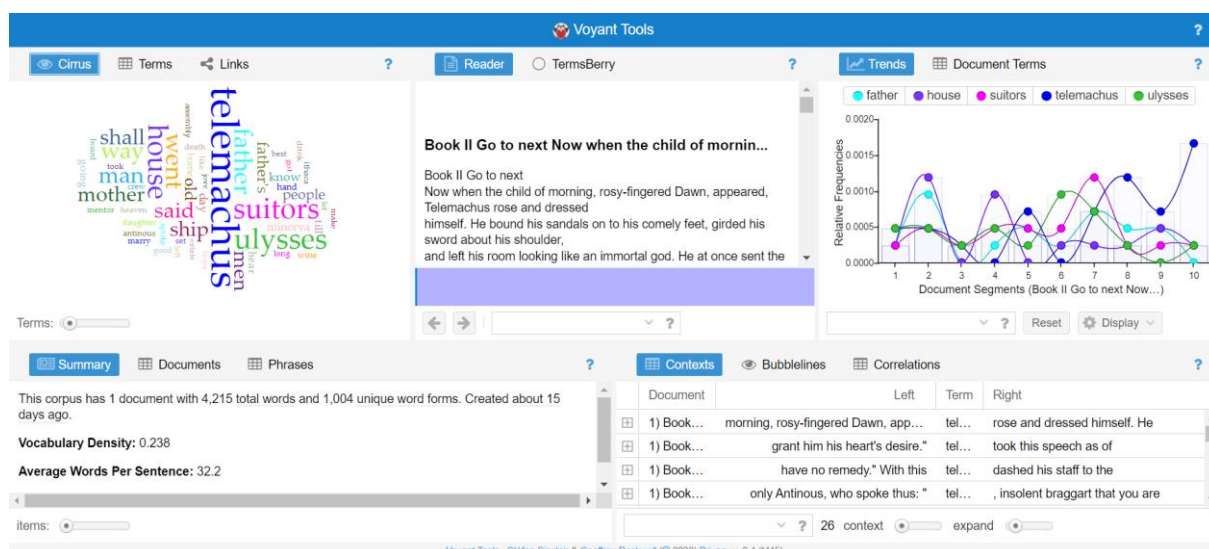
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[12] Literature fields.

Figure 2.

The collection of words on the left side highlights the ones that appear most in the text. On the right side of figure 2, there is a graph that can be influenced by the white bar underneath it. Users may consider the white bar a search bar as it is used in a similar manner. Once the desired word has been written in the white bar, another graph emerges. There, it can be seen how often the term appears in the chosen text. For more details, the user clicks on the coloured line to show where the word appears in the text. For more detail, the short sentence can be clicked, which will direct the focus to a yellow highlighted word in the middle of figure 4.

Scenes, where Penelope and Black Widow appear the most, will be inspected, analysed, and filtered in Voyant by the following terms: *heroism*, *heroes*, *heroic*, *heroine*, *hero*, and *glory*. In ancient Greek times, heroism was often referred to as *kleos*[13] (which usually means glory). The terms *heroes*, *hero*, *heroine*, and *heroics* were chosen as they all have connotations with *heroism* and could give a brother overview of where and how *heroism* was indicated in the texts.

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[13] Further detailed explanation of *kleos* see Garcia Jr. in works cited.

3.2 Materials

The main materials for this study consist of Homer's text, the *Odyssey* (approximately 800 BC.), and the films *Iron Man 2* (2010)*, The Avengers* (2012)*,* and *Black Widow* (2021). The original posters for each of the films are displayed below, see figure 3.

       Iron Man 2   *The Avengers*   *Black Widow*

Figure 3.

Several scenes from these three films will be analysed, see table 1 below:

Table 1 Selected scenes from the three chosen films

Films	Selected scenes	Air date
Iron Man 2	(00:22:58-00:25:48) (01:01:41-01:05:56) (01:41:36-01:43:22)	29 April 2010
The Avengers	(00:12:03-00:15:00) (01:03:34-01:07:06) (01:23:21-01:25:15) (02:01:01-02:04:50)	25 April 2012
Black Widow	(00:16:30-00:18:41) (00:44:49-00:50:42) (00:58:17-01:05:40) (01:18:42-01:21:07)	9 July 2021

The scenes include several appearances, her first heroic action (*Iron Man 2*), her first heroic group action (*The Avengers*), and the understanding of her heroic qualities (*Black Widow*). Furthermore, there are several books in the *Odyssey* where Penelope appears or is mentioned: books 1, 2, 4, 5, 11, 13-24, of which books 2, 4, 21, and 23 are the most relevant. For this reason, only the latter-mentioned books will be analysed regarding Penelope's heroism.

The digital version of the *Odyssey* can be found on The Internet Archive (Stevenson). It is an English translation by Samuel Butler. Unfortunately for the digital script versions, there is an issue. Jockers states, "the fact of the matter is that text miners need digital texts to mine" (173), and copyright laws considerably complicate the (legal) distributions of texts. The present study faces this complication as finding digital film scripts is challenging. The film script for *Iron Man 2* (2010) could only be obtained from the fandom website (movies.fandom.com/wiki/Iron_Man_2/Transcript), of which the legality is questionable. *The Avengers* (2012) script could be found in the IMSDb (The Internet Movies Script Database), and *Black Widow*'s (2021) script could be located at Scraps from the Loft-website (scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/black-widow-2021-transcript) of which the legality is also questionable.

4. The Heroic Representation of Penelope

4.1 Close Reading Analysis

Through close reading, Penelope's heroic self comes forth in her clever and faithful character. Penelope has been described as "the perfect wife," "model woman," "paragon of patience," and "a saint of faithfulness" (Heitman 2). Katz argues that "she [Penelope] provides an advertisement, as it were, of her *kleos*, at the very moment when she appears to repudiate it.

Thus, even when she addresses it[14], Penelope's *kleos* comprises both constancy and cleverness"
(5). Lyons claims that Penelope's cleverness and wisdom are recognised among many scholars
(37). Heitman, furthermore, argues that

> The trouble with accepting that Penelope's power is restricted to the sexual realm
> is that it affords her little claim to exceptionality. Instead of turning the eyes of
> the suitors, which she does reluctantly and with the occasional aid of Athene,
> Penelope prefers solitude and a chance to grieve for her lost husband. (8)

While Penelope was grieving, she remained composed and fulfilled her duty as queen while
still evading the suitors. To accomplish this, she had to be clever. Homer describes Penelope as
an "artful woman" (*Odyssey* book 2 par 4), "clever" (book 2 par 6), "wise Penelope" (book 20
par 34), and "queen Penelope" (book 15 par 28; book 16 par 40). In book 2, one of the suitors,
Antinous, speaks to Telemachus about how Penelope has been tricking them for nearly four
years and that her cleverness by doing so seems to have no equal:

> For I do not know what will happen if she goes on plaguing us much longer with
> the airs she gives herself on the score of the accomplishments Minerva has taught
> her, and because she is so clever. We never yet heard of such a woman; we know
> all about Tyro, Alcmena, Mycene, and the famous women of old, but they were
> nothing to your mother, any of them. (Book 2 par 6)

Antinous further comments on Penelope's glory, he states, "and I do not see why she should
change, for she gets all the honour and glory" (book 2 par 7). Antinous admits that Penelope's
clever tricks of evading him and the other suitors have brought her glory. Besides Penelope's
cleverness when avoiding the suitors for nearly four years, in book 21, she constructs the bow

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[14] Katz refers here to the weaving trick. One of the main ways that Penelope was evading the suitors was by
pretending to weave a burial shroud for Odysseus's father while stating that she would choose a suitor once she
would be done weaving.

test to see the worth of the suitors, all the while still evading their approaches. Moreover, in book 23, she tests her returned husband to see if it is him by commenting on the bed he built as only he knew that the bed could not be moved. In both scenarios, Penelope had to act ingenious and displays intelligence, which contributes to a hero(ine)'s heroism (Schwartz 126). Penelope has, additionally, never considered marrying someone else and remained faithful to her supposedly dead husband. Katz states that Penelope's *kleos* is often linked to her loyal nature and "faithfulness" (5) towards Odysseus. The evading of the suitors could only have happened through Penelope's courage and intelligence, as without her courage she would not have dared it and without her intelligence, she would not have accomplished it.

4.2 Voyant Analysis

Through Voyant Tools, Penelope's heroic attributes are difficult to detect, as it adds nothing new. In book 2, the term *glory* only appears when Antinous says it, see figure 4 below:
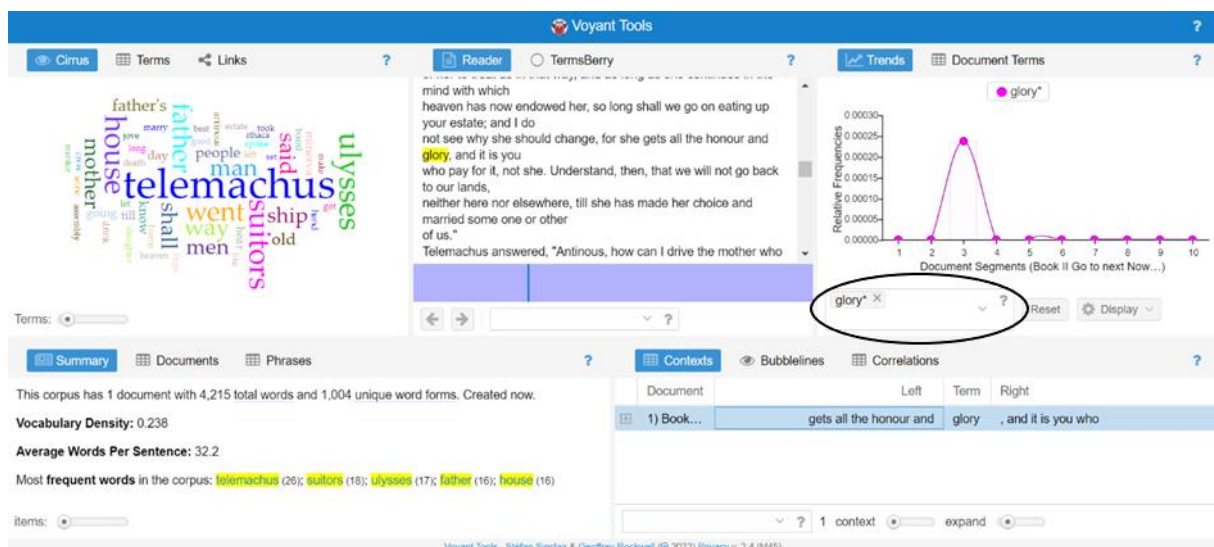

Figure 4.

The white search bar has the term *glory* in it, which has displayed a graph with information on the frequency of the word. After clicking the pink dot in the chart, the attention shifts to the circled part in the figure below:
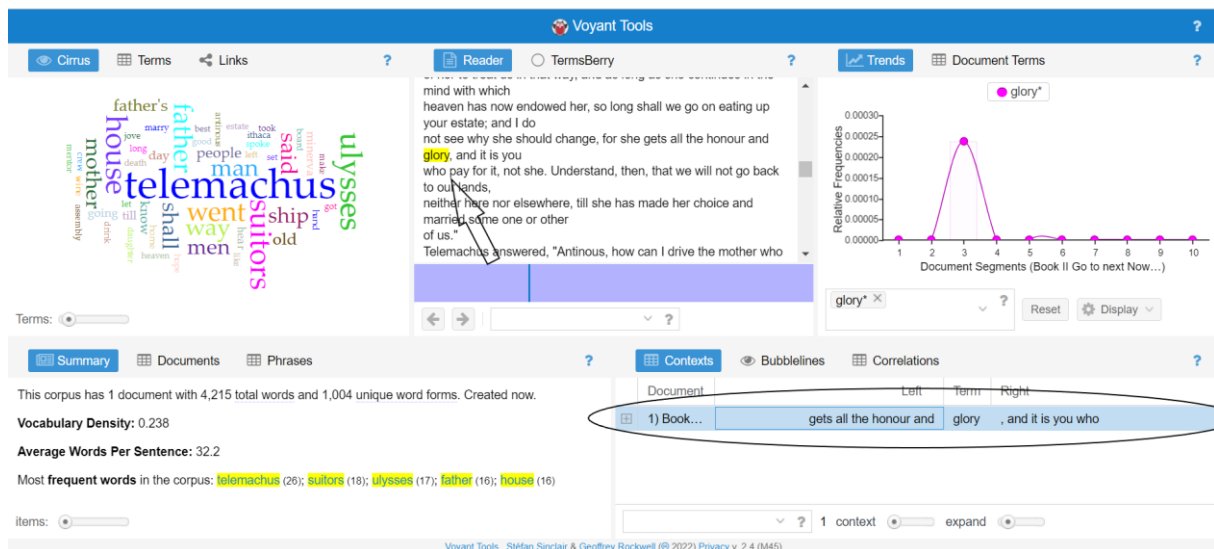
Figure 5.

After the circled sentence is clicked on, Voyant will direct the focus to the yellow highlighted term, where further context surrounding the term can be discovered. In this case, it could have provided additional evidence of how other characters in the story perceived Penelope. However, as this was already observed through close reading it revealed nothing new. Furthermore, what cannot be analysed is all the other ways that glory could have been portrayed without the word itself. As stated previously, the hero-deed is of great significance to what it means to be a hero(ine) (Campbell 388; Sullivan and Venter 101; Zimbardo 164), and an act cannot solely by analysed via specific terms.

In book 4 of the *Odyssey*, *heroes* was the only term that appeared, with connotations to Odysseus and not Penelope, and therefore did not contribute anything to the analysis. The terms *heroism*, *heroes*, *heroic*, *heroine*, and *hero* were not mentioned or indicated. Figure 6 below shows that the term *heroes* is the only one that appears:
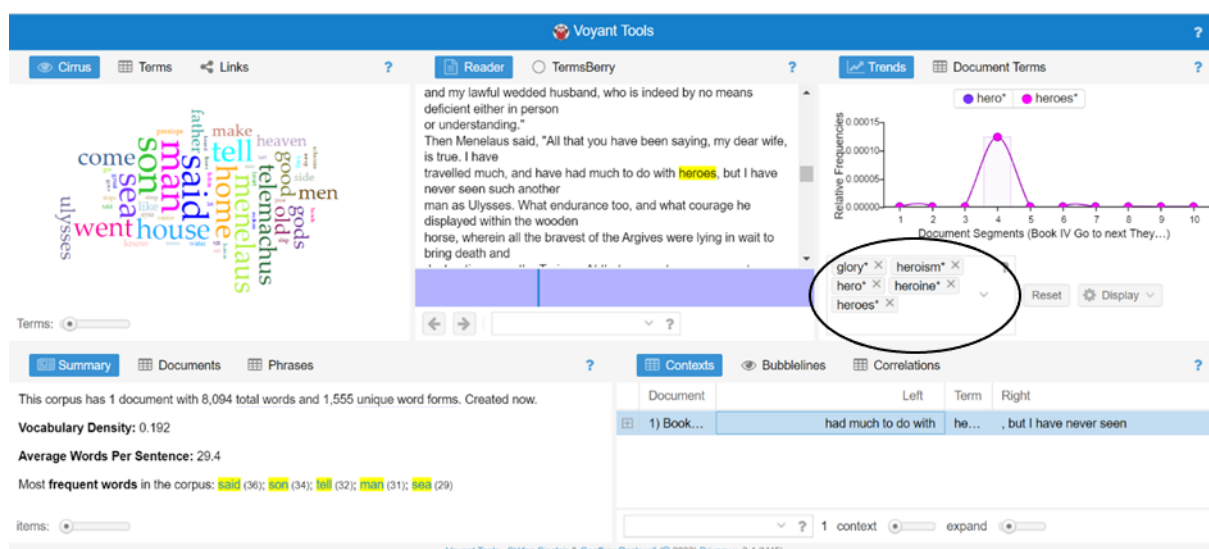
Figure 6.

Here it can be observed that all the terms were put into the search bar. *Heroes* is referred to Odysseus. In paragraph 23, it says:

> Then Menelaus said, … 'I have travelled much, and have had much to do with heroes, but I have never seen such another man as Ulysses. What endurance o, and what courage he displayed within the wooden horse, wherein all the bravest of the Argives were lying in wait to bring death and destruction upon the Trojans. At the moment you came up to us; … Ulysses held us all in check.' (Book 4)

As noted previously, in a typical hero from Homer courage is often detected (Hughes-Hallet 1). However, the term *heroes* here has nothing to do with Penelope, nor does Odysseus's courageous behaviour. As the desired terms did not indicate any relevance to Penelope, her name was typed instead, which revealed more information on the use of Voyant.
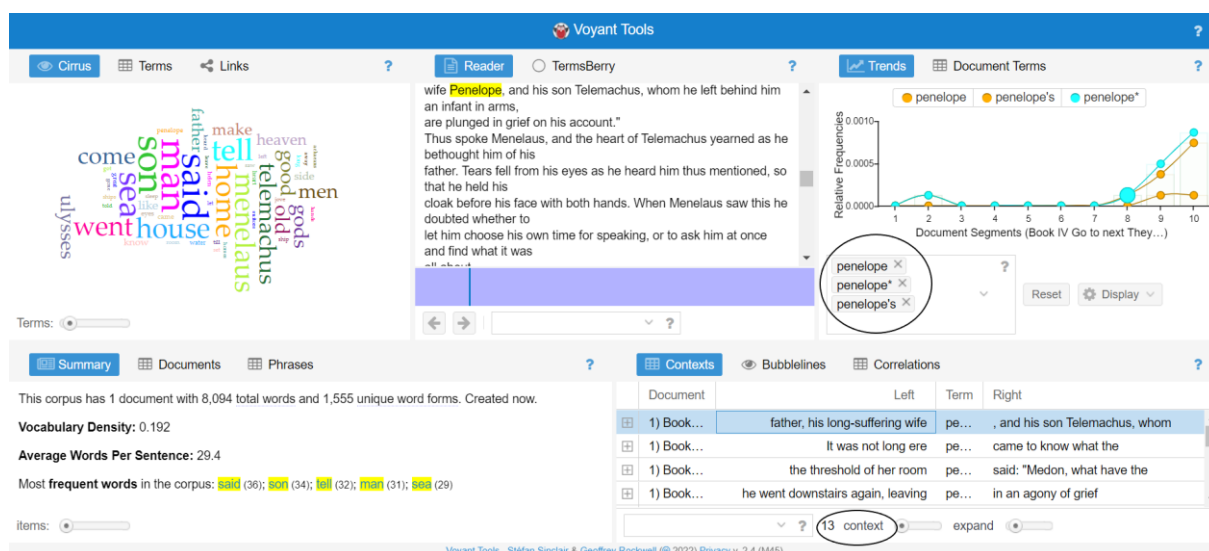
Figure 7.

In figure 7, there are several things to be noted. This time in the white bar, three different versions of Penelope's name can be observed. "Penelope*" means everything that has something to do with her name, including her possessions. "Penelope's" only shows Penelope's possessions, and "Penelope" only shows everything to do with her name, excluding her possessions. It is, therefore, most relevant to use the term with a star next to it when available. Furthermore, at the bottom of figure 6, "13 context" can be found; this means that Penelope has been mentioned 13 times in total, including her possessions. Although, while her name appears often in book 4, none of the terms corresponds with her. However, there is no direct benefit for using Penelope as a search term, as close reading would still be needed to analyse further how she is portrayed. Penelope can, therefore, not fully be analysed without including close reading.

In book 21, the terms *glory* and *heroes* come forth once. Penelope is the one mentioning *glory*, but only regarding the stringing of the bow. After Odysseus appears in disguise, he is undermined by one of the suitors. Penelope then states that

> This stranger is strong and well-built, he says moreover that he is of noble birth.
> Give him the bow, and let us see whether he can string it or not. I say – and it

> shall surely be – that if Apollo vouchsafes him the glory of stringing it, I will give him a cloak and shirt of good wear, with a javelin to keep off dogs and robbers, and a sharp sword. I will also give him sandals, and will see him sent safely wherever he wants to go. (Book 21 par 30)

In Ancient Greek times, the Gods decided how and if glory shall be gained; even kings and queens were under their spell. So, the fact that Penelope can distribute these rewards could mean that the Gods have given her the rights to do so as she has already gained the favour of the Gods. However, there is no further evidence of this statement and, therefore, did not add anything to Penelope's heroic representation. Moreover, the term *heroes* as it appears in book 21 is irrelevant to Penelope as it is mentioned in a short tale which functions to dispose of Odysseus's request to string the bow. Voyant does nothing to further contribute to Penelope's heroic representation in book 21. In book 23, none of the terms resurfaces, thus not adding anything new.

4.3 Conclusion

Through close reading, Penelope's loyalty, faithfulness, and cleverness contributed to her *kleos* and courageous character and, thus, to her heroic self. Her loyal and faithful character towards Odysseus made her evade the suitors in the first place. Without her loyalty, her cleverness would have never shown itself.

In all four books (2, 4, 21, and 23), the results through Voyant revealed nothing new. There was no direct connection between the terms above and Penelope. Only through other descriptions and characteristics, as seen in close reading, does Penelope's heroic self emerges. Penelope can, therefore, not fully be analysed without including close reading. Voyant did not contribute to Penelope's heroic representation.

5. The Heroic Representation of Black Widow

As this analysis is conducted through the close reading of films instead of a text, several things need to be noted, mainly the difference with images and sounds. To make it somewhat easier, sounds will not be analysed as not only is the script not able to convey them but also because the comparison in Voyant results with Penelope will no longer be as candid. Images, however, are very important for the analysis of Black Widow's heroic representation. Additionally, "a film has to convey its message by image and relatively few words" (North qtd. in Hutcheon 2). The description of Penelope's character can be conveyed, as seen in the previous chapter. Therefore, Black widow's appearance will be included.

5.1 Close Reading Analysis

From a close reading of the films, Black Widow's heroic appearance in the MCU is objectified and sexualised, while her heroic character shows intelligence and strength. Black Widow, portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, first appears in *Iron Man 2* (2010) disguised as a notary, see figure 8 below:
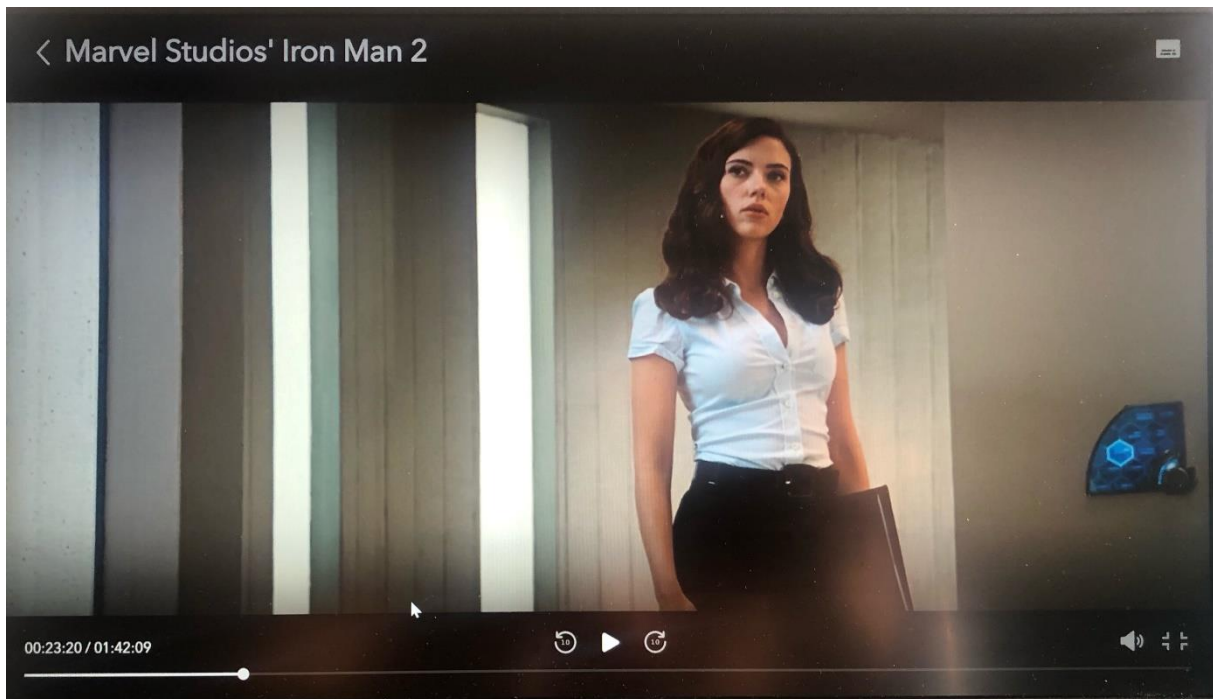

Figure 8. (00:23:20)

In this scene, Tony Stark[15] and Happy[16] are having a sparring session and stop to watch her entrance. The first words Tony says to her are, "what's your name, lady?" while that still sounds civilised, he points at her as if he is highlighting an object, see figure 9 below:

Figure 9. (*Iron Man 2* 00:23:36)

This is further proven after she leaves the room, to which Tony Stark says, "I want one" (00:25:52). Moreover, her clothes are not as professional as a notary's clothing usually is, considering the three upper buttons of her blouse are unbuttoned, see figure 8. Natalie Rushman[17] reappears several times while wearing clothing that highlights her body. When Natasha shows her true identity for the first time, her suit is exactly as described in Kent: "notably these Marvel films offer a vision of feminine heroism infused with sexualisation" (68). This is highlighted further because the first shot in this scene is focused on her backside, see figure 10 below:

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[15] Also known as Iron Man.
[16] Tony Stark's bodyguard and security personnel.
[17] Her undercover alias at that time.
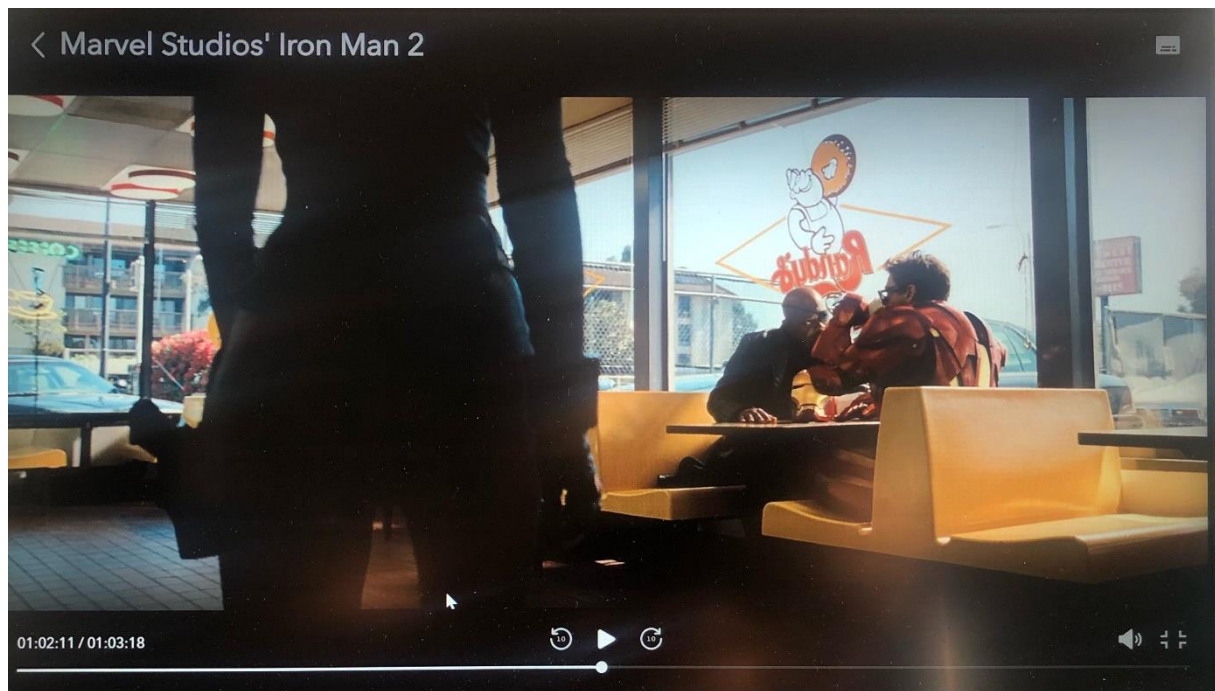
Figure 10. (*Iron Man 2* 01:02:11)

However, even though that could be because of suspense, as the camera slowly works its way up to her face revealing her true identity, it starts at her backside and not at her feet. Black Widow's appearance in *The Avengers* (2012) and *Black Widow* (2021) is similar as her heroic costume focuses on her physical gender attributes, see figures 11 till 16 below, played by Johansson throughout.
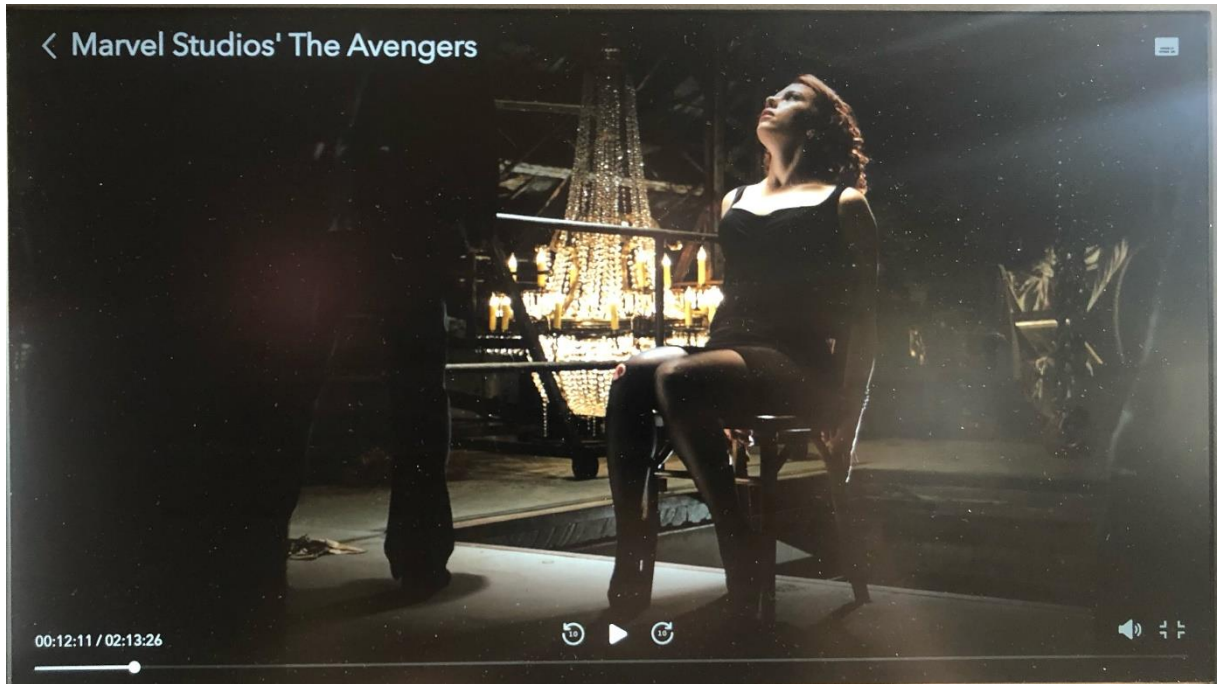
Figure 11. (*The Avengers* 00:12:11)
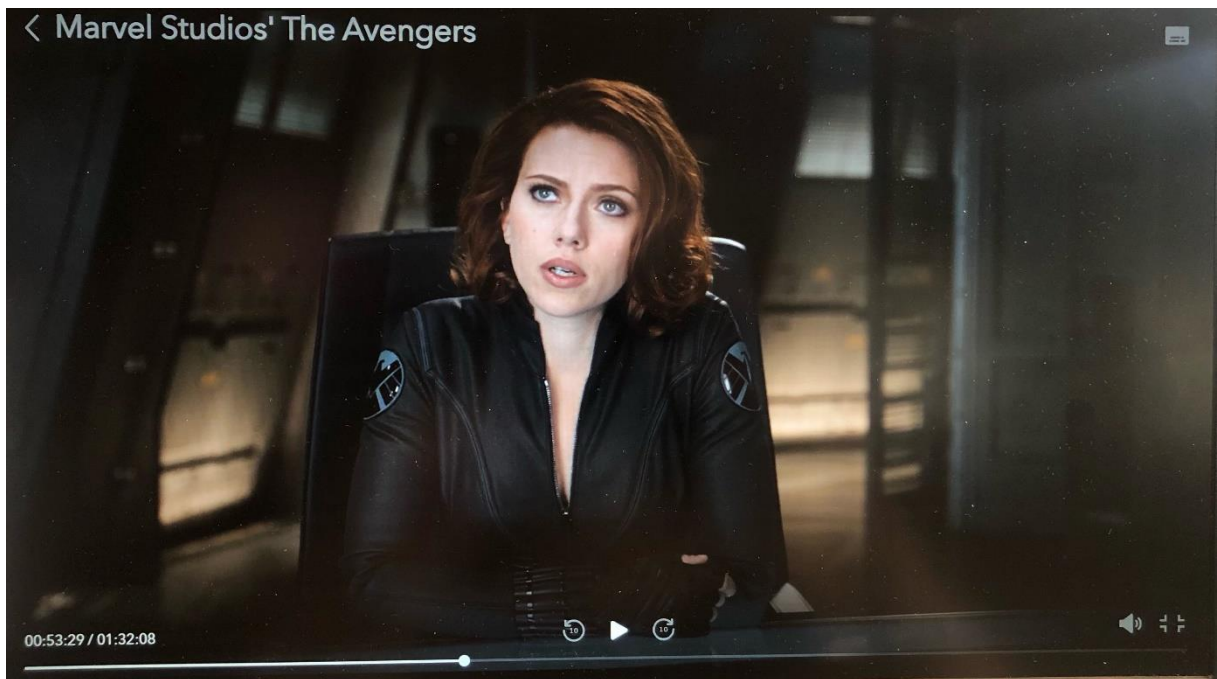
Figure 12. (*The Avengers* 00:53:29)
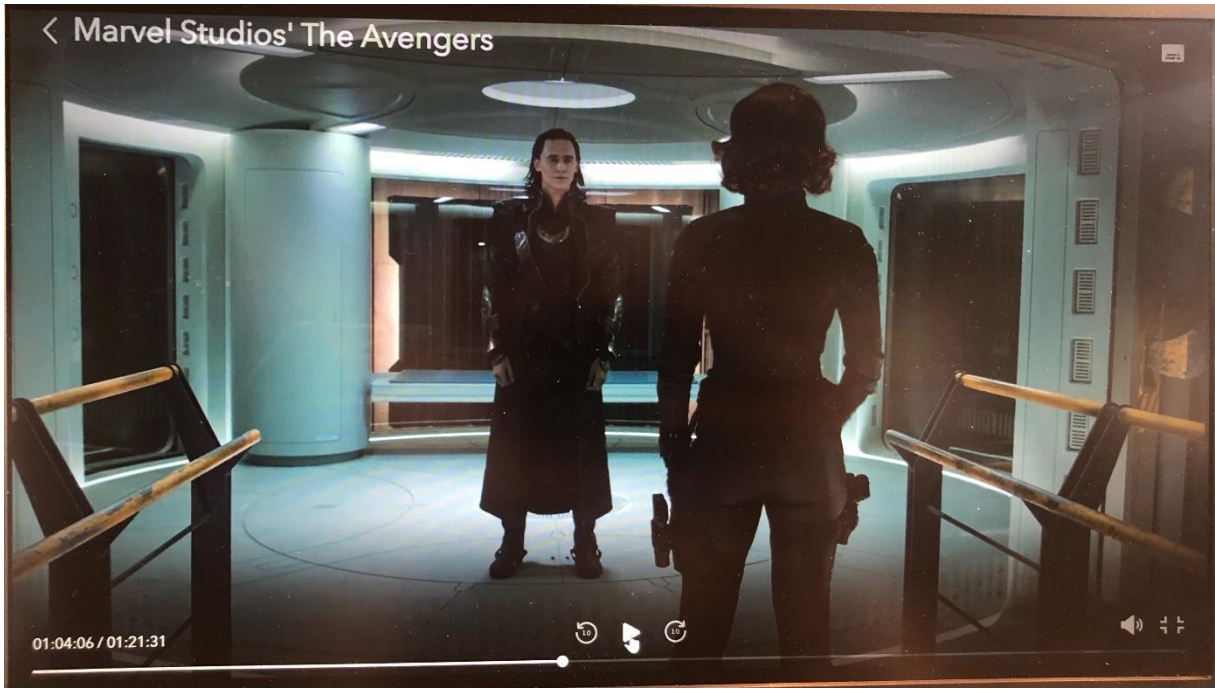
Figure 13. (*The Avengers* 01:04:06)
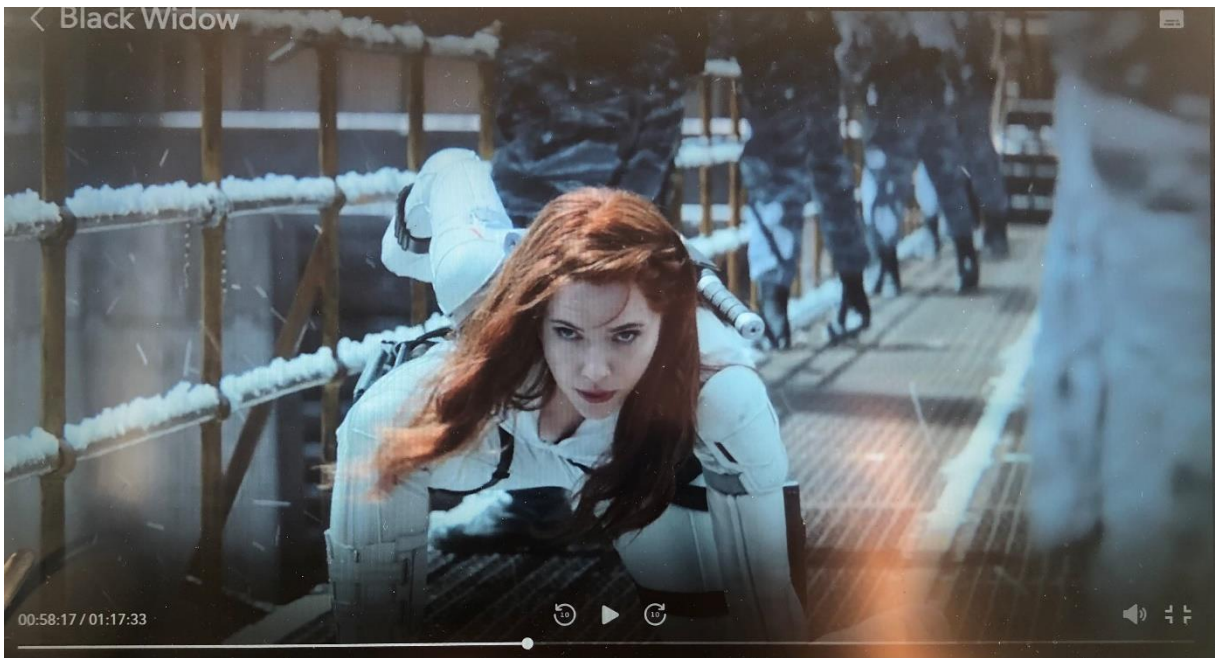
Figure 14. (*Black Widow* 00:58:17)
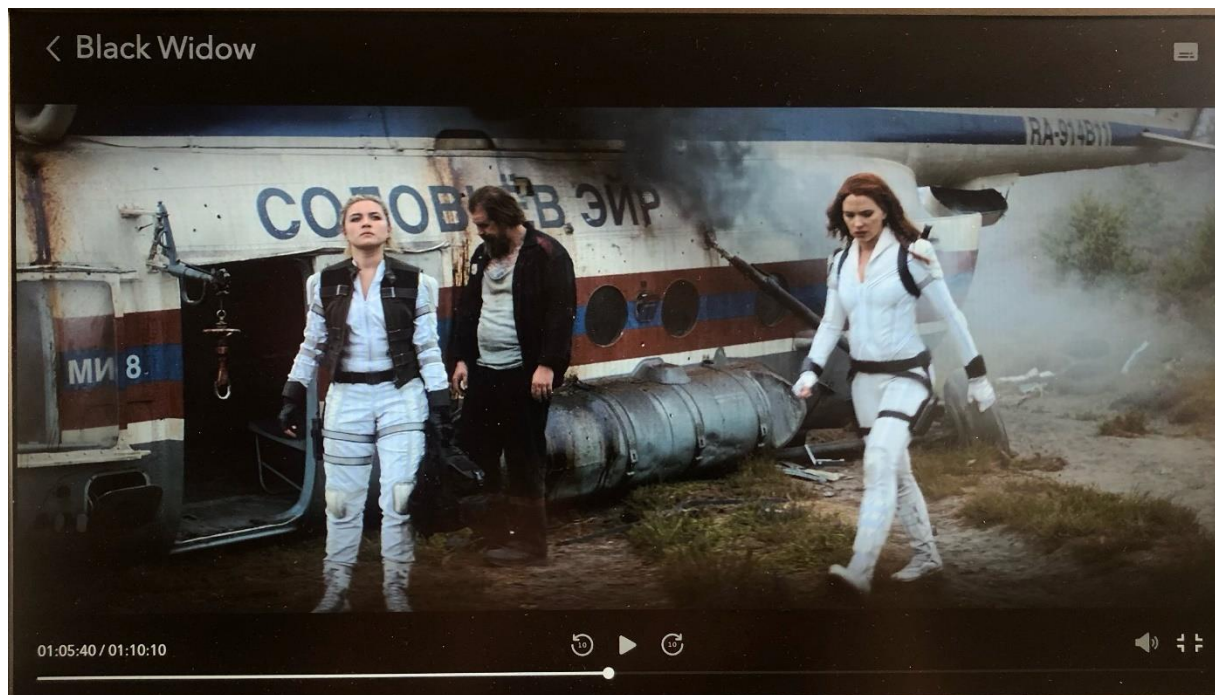
Figure 15. (*Black Widow* 01:05:40)

Figure 16. (*Black Widow* 02:03:33)

Black Widow's physical appearance is exploited throughout these films, and her skin-tight uniforms suggest that a woman at work of any kind exposes herself to being objectified. It can therefore be stated that Black Widow is firstly represented as objectified and sexualised.

Black Widow's intelligence, strength, loyalty, selflessness and heroic sacrificial qualities are shown beneath her skin-tight uniform. In the first scene where Black Widow appears in *Iron Man 2* (2010), it is already discovered that she possesses enhanced fighting skills (00:25:07). In Black Widow's last battle in *Iron Man 2* (2010), her efficiency and remarkable fighting skills present themselves to the fullest. She manages to defeat approximately ten male opponents, while Happy only manages to defeat one opposing guard (01:43:22). In *The Avengers* (2012), she appears again as a spy for S.H.I.E.L.D., portrayed as an oblivious woman interrogated by three Russian males (00:12:07), see figure 10. She lets him think he has the advantage: "the famous Black Widow and she turns out to be simply another pretty face" (00:12:56), says the Russian male leader. Indicating that he is indeed underestimating her due to her appearance. The scene quickly changes when she gets a phone call asking for her help, and to get out of her interrogation she quickly defeats the men holding her (00:14:58), displaying her exceptional fighting skills. In the rest of *The Avengers* (2012), it is clear that Black Widow supports, assists, and contributes to the defeat of Loki[18] using her fighting skills and intelligence (00:41:41; 00:53:28; 01:48:10; 01:52:15), specifically when she is the one that discovers his initial play using her interrogation skills (01:03:45-01:07:08). In *Black Widow* (2021), her intelligence also shows itself, as can be seen when she evades the U.S. government (00:18:31). In the last battle of *The Avengers* (2012), it is through the actions of Black Widow that they can truly win the fight, as she is the one resourceful enough to close the gate, which causes the Avengers[19] to be able to save the city (02:04:50). All the while, she is fully aware of the danger she puts herself in to save the city, thus behaving like a true heroine: acting courageously regardless of her physical exposure (Becker and Eagly 343; Zimbardo 460). Her admirably loyal character is seen in the scene where she has to fight her best friend

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[18] The main Villain in the film, is also known as Thor's brother and as God of Mischief. For a more detailed explanation of the character see www.marvel.com/characters/loki/on-screen.

[19] Superhero(ine) group that exists out of The Hulk, Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hawkeye, and Black Widow (as the only female).

and rescue him from the mind control Loki has put him under (01:25:15). However, in *Black Widow* (2021), Yelena[20] rightly points out that "we [Black Widow and she] are both still a trained killer. Except I'm not the one on the cover of a magazine. I'm not the killer that little girls call their hero" (00:46:51). MCU indicates here that there is always more happening behind the scenes of the covers that are portrayed to the media. This is furthermore shown when Black Widow is conversing with her adoptive mother, Melina, who wonders, "How did you keep your heart?" (01:21:07) indicating Black Widow's selfless quality, to which she replies: "Pain only makes us stronger. Didn't you tell us that?" (01:21:19). Indicating that Black Widow's sufferings in the past have made her the hero that she is today. While Melina does not specifically state that she considers Black Widow to be a hero(ine), it is shown through her actions as Melina ends up betraying the Red Room for Black Widow (01:30:00). Besides her physical appearance, Black Widow shows courage, selflessness, and willingness to sacrifice herself

5.2 Voyant Analysis

Voyant Tools is less reliable than close reading for analysing scripts but does contribute to the heroic representation of Black Widow, as one script had more text than in the film. In *Iron Man 2*, the first notable feature in Voyant is that the names "Natalie" and "Natasha" are among the most mentioned words in the script. However, considering that Voyant is analysing a digital version of a film script, names are far more in the foreground than with a prose text and thus not a reliable source. This is a major downside with analysing scripts, even though it is technically possible to create a list that will not be displayed in the most mentioned term, it is still not a relevant feature as it can then not be known how many times someone is being mentioned or referred to. From all the terms,[21] *hero* is the only one that had a result. Tony asks

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[20] Black Widow's adopted sister, see for more detail marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Yelena_Belova
[21] *Heroism*, *heroes*, *heroics*, *heroine*, *hero*, and *glory*.

Rhodey, "you want to be a hero?"[22] It has no relation to Black Widow. In *The Avengers* (2012),

however, the terms *heroism*, *heroes*, *heroics*, *heroine*, *hero*, and *glory* all arise, see figure 17:

Figure 17.

The opening of the script starts with

> And there came a day, a day unlike any other, when Earth's mightiest heroes and
> heroines found themselves united against a common threat. On that day, the
> Avengers were born – to fight the foes no single superhero could withstand!
> Through the years, their roster has prospered, changing many times, but their
> glory has never been denied! Heed the call, then – for now, the Avengers
> Assemble! (Whedon par 1)

These lines are not mentioned in the film, only slightly indicated through the active assembling

of the Avenger Initiative. Here, the script gives a better understanding of the Avenger Initiative

and what it should represent. This is the first time the MCU gives any direct link that Black

Widow falls under the term *heroine*, considering she is the only female in the Avengers.

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[22] No page or scene numbers provided: it was said in the last scene at Hammers industries, so relatively at the end of the script.

Furthermore, in one scene where Loki thinks he has the upper hand, he says, "your heroes are scattered, your floating fortress [the helicarier[23]] falls from the sky, where is my disadvantage?" Again, this indicates that he means Thor, Captain America, Hulk, Iron Man, and Black Widow under heroes. The script, moreover, keeps referring to the Avengers in the New York battle[24] as "earth's Mightiest Heroes." In *Black Widow* (2021) *hero* and *glory* appear but only twice, see figure 18:
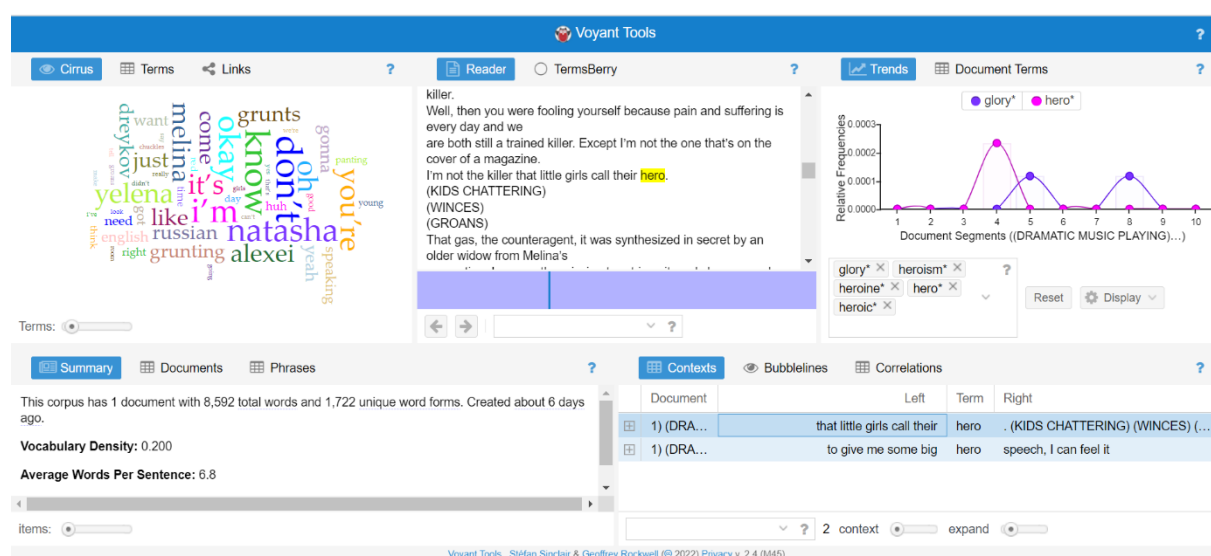

Figure 18.

In both circumstances for *hero*, it was mentioned by Yelena. The first time has already been previously discussed with the close reading analysis ("I'm not the killer that little girls call their hero"[25]). The second time that the term *hero* appears is when Yelena and Black Widow are conversing about a plan to rescue everyone in the Red Room, and she wonders if Black Widow is going to give her a "hero speech," to which she replies, "speeches aren't really my thing." So, even though Black Widow refrains from giving "hero" speeches, the fact that Yelena expected her to give one suggests that Black Widow indeed is considered a hero(ine). The term

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[23] A large, ship like helicopter that acts as the main base for the Avengers in the film.
[24] For more explanation on the plot of the film see www.imdb.com/title/tt0848228/plotsummary.
[25] The script has no page, paragraph, or line numbers.

glory is only mentioned when referring to certain males in the film: the Red Guardian[26] and General Drakov. Both cases have no further relevant connotation to Black Widow.

5.3 Conclusion

Through close reading, it was discovered that Black Widow's physical appearance is highlighted through her clothing, but also that she displays several heroic attributes: courage, caring, selflessness, and willingness to sacrifice herself.

The script analyses via Voyant Tools show several relevant new aspects that would otherwise have been missed and further reliable evidence but mainly only in *The Avengers* as the script had more lines than the film. Voyant did contribute to Black Widow's heroic representation.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to discover how Penelope and Black Widow's heroism were represented and what the *Map Your Hero(ine)* project could contribute. The method, materials, and procedure were used to answer the following question:

How does the Map Your Hero(ine) project assist the comparison of the heroic representation of MCU's heroine Black Widow and Homer's heroine Penelope and what improvements can be suggested?

The findings indicate that Penelope's heroic self in the *Odyssey* is represented through her loyal and faithful character and her continuous acts of portrayed intelligence. However, these heroic acts and qualities were discovered during the close reading analyses and not through the digital text mining. Through text mining, it was discovered that analysing Penelope with specific chosen terms proved inadequate as nearly all of the results pointed towards Homer's male

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[26] Also known as Black Widow's adoptive father.

heroes in the story. Only by reading the context of her actions, and through analysing the perspective of other characters did it become clear how Penelope's heroic self is represented by Homer.

The research has shown that Black Widow's heroic self is primarily represented through her physical attributes, fighting skills, courage, selflessness, and repeated deeds of intellect. Whereas the heroic representation of Penelope through Voyant Tools was deficient, for Black Widow, it contributed insight into her heroic portrayal. This could be because of several reasons: differences in mediums, genre, and time of texts' development. Voyant featured further indication and understanding of Black Widow's heroic portrayal as the digitally analysed text included more heroic contributions. However, that was only the case for *The Avengers* (2012), not the other two films. *Iron Man 2* (2010) focused heavily on representing Black Widow through her physical attributes, *The Avengers* (2012) provided Black Widow's portrayal with an enhanced understanding of her fighting skills, and *Black Widow* (2021) gave a clear overview and history of her gained intellect.

The objective of the present study was to investigate how heroines were represented and how text mining could contribute. With careful consideration, specific terms were chosen to help the analysis through Voyant. It was discovered that analysing where and how these terms were used was inadequate to complete an overview of the heroines' representation. Furthermore, Voyant has several other features irrelevant to this study: the number of words, average words per sentence, vocabulary density, specific phrases, most frequent words in the corpus, and relevant frequencies. There are, however, several other suggestions on how Voyant could be useful for further literature analysis. If the focus of the research is on gender pronouns, for example, then knowing how often those words appear in the corpus is relevant, specifically if these pronouns can then be further explored in more detail. Thus, if one wanted to know the

differences between how many times *heroes* is used instead *heroines* then Voyant would be incredibly useful.

The present study provides the first comprehensive assessment of how hero(ine)s could be mapped. However, the use of Voyant is only relevant for further evidence and not as a replacement for close reading. Terms alone cannot prove how a hero(ine) is represented: context and close reading of that context is far more applicable for analysing the mapping of the hero(ine)s. Where Voyant assisted in finding where terms were placed in the text, it did not contribute enough to the heroic actions of the heroines as the terms did not allude to that.

6.1 Limitations

Several limitations were found in this study. The first one is the chosen terms. Digital text mining is only relevant with carefully considered terms. Text mining for the literature field needs to have a specific focus on what is being analysed, the decision of the search terms is crucial for this method. Particularly, as a set of other terms in the same texts could have different results.

Another limitation is that in one of the scripts there were lines added that do not appear in the film itself, which complicates the use of text mining. The results from those added lines contributed significantly to the heroic representation of Black Widow, as it was discovered that the MCU state that they think of her as a heroine in *The Avengers*, as well as several other male perspectives. Without those added lines, the result of Voyant would have been different.

6.2 Recommendations

A further study suggestion could be regarding the other method within the *Map Your Hero(ine)* project: the detailed questionnaire. This could determine if the project is beneficial in the profiled representation of the hero(ine)s as then both methods will have been researched.

Another recommendation for a future study would be with different terms but still with Voyant. Researchers might decide to implement additional terms. Other terms that could have been focused on might be specific attributes of hero(ine)s, for example, courage or bravery. In particular, it would be helpful to use the same method as the results could explore the potential contribution of Voyant for the *Map Your Hero(ine)* project in the representation of hero(ine)s.

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