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Archetypes, Stereotypes, and The Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract
Points out deficiencies of traditional mythic and psychological archetypes in encompassing females. Considers some heroes and heroines of modern fantasy who demonstrate a new paradigm of archetypes not tied to gender.

Additional Keywords
Archetypes, female; Feminist criticism; Heroines; Heroine's journey; Sex roles in literature
Regardless of its medium or message, fantasy has always relied heavily on mythology and archetypes, and on the figure of the hero most of all. Whether incarnated as a woolly-toed Hobbit from “once upon a time,” or as an embittered male leper from the late 20th century, or as a telekinetic and telepathic female “Prime Talent” from distant reaches of time and space, the hero and his or her quest have been the stuff of fiction since time out of mind. On the contemporary scene, however, the confluence of popular literature, popularized mythography, and archetypal psychology has produced new insights into the heroic paradigm, and what it means to modern culture.

In the western tradition, this paradigm has been founded on one basic form of doing and being. As Carol S. Pearson observes, “What we imagine immediately when we think of the hero really is only one heroic archetype: the Warrior.” This bias, the cumulative result of a long and selective cultural process, is still alive and well, even in the broad, “universalizing” approach of such a masterful mythographer as Joseph Campbell. In fact, in his introduction to Campbell’s thought, Robert A. Segal unequivocally states that, at least initially, “Like Hahn, Tylor, Propp, Rank, and Raglan, Campbell ignores heroines.” Segal also goes on to point out that, although Campbell may occasionally cite female heroes as examples, his paradigmatic pattern of the monomyth presupposes exclusively male heroes (54).

While Pearson views this curious conceptual “oversight” as a natural result of Campbell’s assumption “either that the hero was male or that male heroism and female heroism were essentially the same” (xx), the mythographer himself provides us with a slightly different, though clearly related, perspective on the matter. For example, when Bill Moyers asks, “Then heroes are not all men?,” Campbell replies:

Oh, no. The male usually has the more conspicuous role, just because of the conditions of life. He is out there in the world, and the woman is in the home.... Giving birth is definitely a heroic deed, in that it is the giving over of oneself to the life of another.

Clearly, Campbell’s operative archetypal paradigm of the female hero is none other than the primordial image of woman as “the Mother.” This is unfortunate, for, although the idea of “the mother as hero” conveys a truth basic to female experience and to cultural values, it nonetheless imprisons women in an all-too-familiar conceptual and representational “box.” The equivalency of motherhood and heroism may be a move in the right direction as far as recognition of female achievement goes, but in reality it only affirms a very general and simplistic truth. Furthermore, this heroic image may ultimately work more harm than good, for it is yet another manifestation—a profoundly potent and evocative one—of woman’s old nemesis, biological determinism.

Obviously, biological determinism does not inform the “Mother” archetype alone. Virtually all of the traditional archetypes applied to women—“the virgin,” “the wife,” “the lover or seductress,” “the muse,”—have as their basis sexual roles and expectations. That is, they are always defined in terms of their relationship to men. In Psyche as Hero, Lee R. Edwards observes that even when a woman is depicted as heroic, she is inescapably presented as “different from the male—her sex [is] her sign.”

Heroes, relationships, sex, power, and difference have provided the deepest wellsprings for all of literature. Like other genres, fantasy has utilized these to create some unforgettable representations of women heroes. J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, successfully summarizes the image of the female “Warrior” or Amazon archetype in his brief unveiling of Eowyn/Dernhelm: “maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible.”

He is more fulsome in his depiction of Galadriel, that sublime incarnation of the “eternal feminine” in the archetypal aspects of “Wise Woman”/“Awful Lady.” Accompanied by Frodo the Ring-Bearer, she divines in the “Mirror of Galadriel” a potential alternate fate and consequence of the Ring Quest:

“...And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!”

She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful.

Indelible archetypal images such as these, however, also face the same diminishment Galadriel perceives for herself. Partly because of their over-familiarity, partly because of their basis in gender roles, profound and resonant archetypes often degenerate into sexual stereotypes. As Pearson observes, “[Limiting] stereotypes are laundered,
domesticated versions of the archetypes from which they derive their power. The shallow stereotype seems controll­able and safe, but it brings then less, not more, life” (xix-xx).

The cardboard figures resulting from such stereotypes especially abound in imaginative literature. For example, in Roger Zelazny’s best-selling Amber series, there is not only a dearth of articulated female characters, but also a tendency to have those which are present function either as incidental decoration or as “femme fatale” stereotypes out to waylay or destroy the hero. While female presence is much stronger in Stephen R. Donaldson’s two Chronicles of Thomas Covenant trilogies, the author nonetheless relies on the stereotypes of the victimized “virgin” (Lena) and the “sorceress” (Elena), to inform two of his three principal female characters. Although his heroine, former High Lord Elena, attains heroic stature, unlike Galadriel she becomes tainted by the evil she seeks to overcome.

Linden Avery, Donaldson’s heroine of the second set of Chronicles, is a more convincing heroic figure, for she manages to move out of the realm of sexual stereotype altogether. Although she acts out the opposing roles of the two archetypes normally adopted to express female heroism — the “masculine” “Warrior” and the “feminine” “Martyr” — she effectively transcends these traditional heroic paradigms by the end of The One Tree, the second book of the Second Chronicles. The means and nature of this transcendence are clear in her ruminations, which serve to close the book:

This was her life after all — as true to herself, to what she was and what she wanted to become, as the existence she had left behind on Haven Farm. The old man whose life she had saved there had said to her, "You will not fail, however he may assail you." The choices she had made could not be taken from her.

We may recall that Campbell also emphasizes the role of choice in the heroic paradigm, especially when he interprets the hero’s journey in a psychological manner. As Segal points out, ‘Campbell’s hero discovers, not creates, a deeper side to his, and others’, personality. He discovers the unconscious. The quest for identity is therefore a quest for a place less in society than within oneself’ (34).

This vision of an “everyman’s” heroism which consists of an “inner journey” or “quest for identity” comes into conflict, however, with Campbell’s positing of “the Mother” as the female heroic paradigm. By emphasizing woman’s biological “natural place,” he necessarily limits her potential for heroism. In fact, in the chapter titled “The Hero’s Adventure” in The Power of Myth, Campbell remarks that

The rituals of primitive initiation ceremonies are all mythologically grounded and have to do with killing the infantile ego and bringing forth an adult, whether it’s the girl or the boy. It’s harder for the boy than for the girl, because life overtakes the girl. She becomes a woman whether she intends it or not, but the little boy has to intend to be a man. At the first menstruation, the girl is a woman. The next thing she knows, she’s pregnant, she’s a mother (138).

Campbell’s elision of the totality of female human experience represented in the rapid progression of girl­woman-mother comes as a profound shock. But perhaps the most glaring negation of individual female identity and personhood is the statement that a girl “becomes a woman whether she intends it or not.” Without intentionality, without consciousness and choice, there cannot be the attainment of an adulthood based on psychological, emotional, and spiritual maturity, rather than on mere physiological age and functions. Only in this truer human sense can adulthood be considered as independent person­hood.

In Campbell’s pattern, becoming a “man” involves not only descriptive elements concerning biological maturity, but prescriptive ones about what “being a man” entails as well. His perception of a girl’s becoming a woman, on the other hand, involves none of these prescriptive implications, no distinction based on the successful negotiation of a cultural rite of passage into maturity. The actual possibility of the hero’s journey, and therefore of heroism, is thus implicitly denied women, for they have supposedly reached their maturity, their developmental being, through the advent of normal reproductive functions. If there is no separation and journey, no choices to be made and trials to face, no revelation and acquired boon to bestow upon the return, then there can be no heroine.

Also, since there is no journey, there is no real identity quest either: biology has already provided the ready-made answer to a woman’s identity. Coming from the mother and soon becoming the mother, her identity described and inscribed in a closed loop, she does not need to “start forth” to find her “father,” her own character and destiny, for these are already predetermined by biology: girl-woman-mother.

In order to present her own interpretation of female identity and heroism, Jungian psychologist Jean Shinoda Bolen employs the familiar archetypes derived from Greek mythology. Although, like Campbell, she selects traditional archetypes based on specific gender roles, in her conception of female being and doing these models mean much more than their sexual implications. For example, Athena, Demeter and Aphrodite are all distinctive expressions of the diverse aspects — such as “independent,” “vulnerable,” and “alchemical” — which can be found in any individual woman. The realities of woman’s nature and life are thus more comprehensively represented than in Campbell. Furthermore, Bolen repeatedly asserts in Goddesses in Everywoman that

There is a potential heroine in everywoman. She is the leading lady in her own life story on a journey that begins at her birth and continues through her lifetime.... A woman heroine is [a choicemaker,] one who loves or learns to love.
With Bolen's recognition of a multi-faceted female self which has the need and desire to make choices rather than simply be "overtaken" by life, there is now conceded the possibility of a "heroine's journey," in which the individual "confronts tasks, obstacles, and dangers. How she responds and what she does will change her" (283). Both the journey and the concomitant change are what make of the heroine's trip, like the hero's, a "journey of discovery and development, of integrating aspects of herself into a whole, yet complex personality" (283). Like Campbell's heroic male boon-bringer, the heroine also returns with both knowledge and power, as well as with a new sense of personal strength and authority.

This integrated vision of the female hero provides the major impetus behind Marion Zimmer Bradley's depiction of Kassandra in The Firebrand. As a priestess, one of the manifestations of the "Wise Woman" archetype, Kassandra must, as the Colchian Queen and Priestess Imandra describes it, "stand between men and Immortals, to explain the ways of the one to the other."12 As a princess living in a particular moment of history, she must also mediate between two cultural systems: the soon-to-be-superseded matriarchy, represented above all by the multi-form Great Goddess, and the successfully encroaching patriarchy, represented by the Sun-God Apollo. Finally, as an individual and a woman, she must understand and moderate her own personal loyalties, desires, and choices.

Even in this private realm Kassandra must "stand between" two worlds, two visions of womanhood. One world is represented by Andromache, who reveals her own character through her questions about her future husband, Hector.

"He is a bully," Kassandra said forthrightly. "You must be very firm with him or he will treat you like a rug and walk all over you, and you will be no more than a timid little thing perpetually yessing him, as my mother does my father."

"But that is suitable for a husband and wife," said Andromache. "How would you have a man behave?" (99)

Archetypal wife, willing and obedient helpmeet of a patriarchal system and its values, Andromache represents our own culture's traditional view of the feminine.

Significantly, she stands in direct opposition to her own name and heritage:

"It's horrible," Andromache said. "My name means 'Who fights like a man' — and who would want to?"

"I would," said Penthesilea, "and I do" (99).

Penthesilea, of course, is the Queen of the Amazons, the classical embodiment of the female "Warrior" archetype. Like Imandra of Colchis, Penthesilea represents a matriarchal society which both encourages and demands female independence, self-assertion, and personal achievement. Andromache, the "feminine" female, feels out of place in this environment: "My mother can't forgive me that I was not born to be a warrior like her, to bring her all kinds of honor at arms" (99). Her vision of womanhood, of heroism, is not theirs.

Quite understandably, Andromache's desire and willingness to subject herself to men is as alien to them as their "pretending to be warriors" (100) is to her. Neither cultural vision provides space for the other, for each has such divergent expectations of the female. Although Imandra responds to Andromache with the assertion that "I am a warrior, and no less a woman for that!", Andromache reads her mother's own self-definition as a masking of inherent deficiencies, for she responds with the comment: "Men say that women who take up weapons are pretending to be warriors only because they are unable to spin and weave and make tapestries and bear children —" (100).

The dualism of their definition of woman, and therefore of female heroism — either "masculine" warrior or "feminine" wife/martyr — ultimately becomes synthesized into an "and/or" vision through the character of Kassandra; that is, through the choices she makes and lives. By the end of her own story, Kassandra has become a thoroughly human woman and heroine, for she is an individual who has made choices and taken on any and all of the roles required of her by circumstance and character.

Like the mythological heroine Psyche, another mediator between the human and the supernatural, the old order and the new, Bradley's Kassandra demonstrates a kind of heroism which closely integrates both doing and knowing. Listening to the voices of the Gods and to her own experience, Kassandra finally moves beyond her traditionally scripted role as victim, first of a sexually frustrated Apollo, then of an insanely jealous or power-hungry Klytemnestra. The now-triumphant writer of her own life story, neither Kassandra's life nor her tale end in Mycenae; now, fittingly, both continue with another journey, another quest.

This quest — to found a culture firmly rooted in the idea of men and women working together and giving their best, not as men and women, but as human beings — is also expressed in much broader conceptual terms by Lee Edwards in her study of female heroism in fiction. Her understanding of the female hero focuses on the same central forces which help to make of Kassandra the remarkable heroine she is. As Edwards observes:

Insofar as she resembles the male hero, [the female hero] questions the conventional associations of gender and behavior.... And where she differs from the male hero, she denies the link between heroism and either gender or behavior. Permitted, like others of her sex, to love and nurture, to comfort, and to please, the heroic woman specifies these impulses as human, not just female, and endows them with a value that counters their usual debasement (5).

The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You,13 a visionary novel which has been described as "love story, science fiction, Jungian myth and utopian allegory," is author Dorothy
Bryant’s vision of just this kind of non-gender based heroic paradigm. In the self-regulating and self-realizing community of the Kin of Ata, while gender and individuality have their own unique place and function, it is the aspiration towards a total state of human being and community which informs heroic action. This humanistic notion of heroism does not rely so much on doing, on specific “larger than life” actions, but rather on achieving minor triumphs in daily life, on listening to and trusting one’s own sense of “nagdeo,” of what is right and good, and building upon those.

Bryant, however, does not leave Atan society in a Platonic realm of ideals, a narcissistic entity unto itself. She also presents Ata as a world not merely in contact with our own, but also in profound symbiotic relationship. For example, the nameless male narrator is one who has entered their world from the “outside.” Irreversibly transformed by his brief residence in Ata, he achieves his own enlightenment and becomes the hero of his own life. In addition, some of the Kin, like the narrator’s lover, Augustine, are “sacrificial exiles,” those “strong dreamer[s] sent back to live briefly among the millions lost to Ata” (145). As the narrator from our world observes, “It was the closest thing I ever saw to hero worship among Atans. And, of course, a few of the heroes and heroines were startlingly familiar to me” (145). Closest to our own traditional perception of the hero, especially in the archetypical mode of “Martyr,” this Atan form of heroism becomes the easiest for the narrator from our own world recognize and understand.

It is hardly a coincidence that psychologists, scholars, and creative authors like Pearson, Bolen, Edwards, Bradley, and Bryant, have come to fundamentally the same conclusions about the heroic paradigm, even though they all had different departure points and diverse final goals. Realizing that the models proposed by myth and traditional archetypes severely limit our understanding and recognition not only of our own heroic potential but of our human reality as well, they propose alternate models for expression and emulation. Instead of accepting culture’s expectation that gender define the differences between male and female heroism, they affirm the judgment that it is the role, not the sex, which divides the two. As Edwards summarizes,

A primary character, the hero inspires and requires followers; the heroine obeys, falls into line, takes second place. Although a hero can theoretically exist in a narrative without a heroine, the reverse is not the case… Role, not sex, divides the two (5).

Once heroism is recognized as an aspect not only of action but of knowledge and understanding as well, then, as Edwards observes,

any action — fighting dragons, seeking grails, stealing fleece, reforming love — is potentially heroic. Heroism thus read and understood is a human necessity, capable of being represented equally by either sex” (11).

Traditionally biased heroic paradigms like “the Amazon,” “the Martyr,” and “the Mother,” can now be replaced by non-gender based archetypes like “the Orphan,” “the Wanderer,” and “the Magician,” such as those proposed by Pearson.

The heroes proposed by recent imaginative fiction — from Bradley’s Firebrand to Anne McCaffrey’s The Rowan, from Bruce Sterling’s Islands in the Net to Lew Shiner’s Deserted Cities of the Heart — illustrate the profound shift in the heroic paradigm currently underway. With a new conception of the hero based on human needs, abilities, and achievements, the heroic journey need no longer be emphasized as a singular or atypical event, but may now more significantly take its place as an aspect inherent in the larger journey of life itself. Shedding the restrictions traditionally posed by gender and by cultural expectation, heroic being and heroic action may finally and more readily express not only the integration of the individual’s self, but also the unique contributions of that self to the larger community of humanity. And this, surely, constitutes the very essence of heroic endeavor.

### Notes

1. The heroic characters referred to are Bilbo Baggins and Frodo Baggins of J.R.R. Tolkien’s masterpieces, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings (a trilogy), respectively; Thomas Covenant of Stephen R. Donaldson’s First and Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant (two trilogies); and the Rowan of Anne McCaffrey’s novel by that same name.
9. Dara of Chaos and Julia of Shadow are the primary manifestations of this stereotype, although Julia breaks from the simplistic mold of “the lover” into that of (evil) “sorceress.”