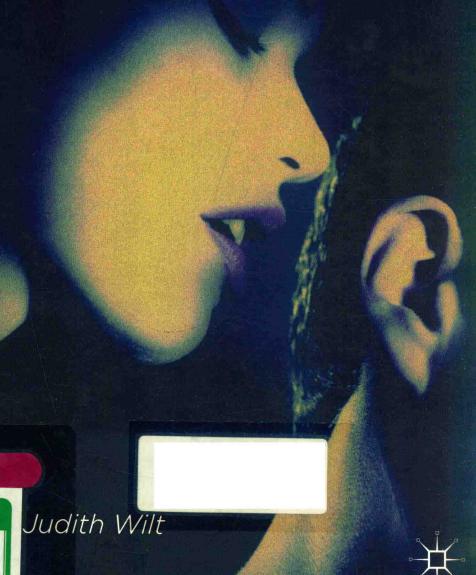
WOMEN WRITERS and the HERO of ROMANCE



Women Writers and the Hero of Romance

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Also by Judith Wilt

BEHIND HER TIMES: Transition England in the Novels of Mary Arnold Ward (2005)

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GHOSTS OF THE GOTHIC: Austen, Eliot, & Lawrence (1980)

THE READABLE PEOPLE OF GEORGE MEREDITH (1975)

Acknowledgements

For several years I taught a course on "Romance" to first-year students. We considered three definitions of the term – 1) a story foregrounding inventiveness, fabulation, "the marvelous"; 2) a story about a quest for the ideal or the heroic; 3) a story of lovers – and we tried to figure out together how these three might be linked. This book continues that effort. I owe thanks to generations of students who in this course and others read and discussed with me the Arthurian tales and Wuthering Heights and Middlemarch and The Scarlet Pimpernel and The Fountainhead and many other romances.

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Introduction: In the Place of a Hero

The leading characters of romances ... are usually 99% compounded of artifice – an assembly of heroic virtues and physical attributes based more on legends, poetry, other novels than on real men and women. Heroic characters, therefore, may be assembled from reading. But real characters – there is a different thing. If we are writers, we must all mix with people – on the street, in the bus, at work, in sport, on holiday ... For there is no crash laboratory course on people. Understanding of humankind is something that must be accumulated and stored as life goes on.

Dorothy Dunnett¹

Today (whichever today we are in) we are empty of heroes and skeptical of the very idea. Yesterday (recent or ancient yesterday) we discerned heroes, and our worshipful admiration was their reward; and ours. This sense of loss is the condition of modernity, and "modernity" goes back to forever.

This was Thomas Carlyle's analysis in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). And in the years since the New York City firefighters went up the down staircases in the Twin Towers, the cycle of hero creation and deletion has picked up speed. Heroes are so fragile and fleeting, Carlyle said throughout his analysis, that he would have thought all were lost, if not for the fact that the instinct of "hero-worship" survives the death, and commands the birth, of the hero. More skeptically, Amy Lowell's 1912 poem "Hero-Worship" commends the "Brave idolatry/ which can conceive a hero," adding "No deceit,/ No knowledge taught by unrelenting years/ Can quench this fierce, untamable desire" (1912: 91).

We inherit this process as a gendered one, but it is deceptively complex. The roles of hero and worshipper seem gendered male and female respectively, but what if the worshipper "conceives" the hero? The 1982 television show Remington Steele featured a canny female detectiveentrepreneur creating an illusory male as (the head of) her agency in a patriarchal world: a nameless man stepped into the empty office of the hero and there began a struggle – is there enough "agency" in the agency for two? The young Pierce Brosnan made a wonderfully wayward child to the sexily mature young Stepfanie Zimbalist, but the imbalance tilted almost immediately out of family romance to popular romance, where the premise always is that Love Changes Everything, making magically illimitable what we fear is the zero-sum game of power. "I'm holding out for a hero," sang Bonnie Tyler in the 1984 film Footloose, "he's gotta be strong and he's gotta be fast ... and he's gotta be larger than life." The drumbeat of the song calls up subtle mockery as well as "wildest fantasy," but the lyrics by Jim Steinman and Dean Pitchford go on to locate the hero in the invisible place-between, "where the mountains meet the heavens," where the "larger" is a mirror for what should/could be "life," and the worshipper can feel the approach of the hero-god "like a fire in my blood." For Emily Brontë, poet and storyteller, "a flood of strange sensations" internal to the worshipper blurs the distinction between the emphatically bodily imagination and its external trigger and object, the god, the hero, the power.² In cultures shaped by western Christianity, whose "sacraments" insist on a mystic relationship between an external sign and an inward transformation, the hero seems a kind of sacrament.

We can think about "the hero" anthropologically, psychologically, in cultural and literary representation. It is a well-traveled theme, and I want to travel it again, an avid reader and later teacher and critic, a bodily imagination gendered female, a professional specialist in Victorian fiction with a consciousness deeply structured by twentiethcentury popular culture genres - fantasy, mystery, history, and the mother of them all, romance. Out of that experience I ask myself: How do the shapes of hero and hero worshipper wrestle each other in the stories of culture, and what does the rise of women storytellers bring to that encounter? Are the hero and hero worshipper an eternal dyad? Striving for incorporation? Separation? Both? Is one the instrument or prosthesis of the other? The hero emerges in culture as a pedagogical example for, but also from, the worshipper. "Conceiving the hero," the worshipper romances her/himself. The last lines of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" ask the question whether the worshipper might actually have "put on his knowledge with his power, before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" Perhaps the worshipper deliberately seeks the fiery embrace of the swan-god with this strategy in mind? Perhaps, as Charlotte Brontë notes of her sister's monumental Heathcliff in her 1850 Preface to the novel, the artist creates a hybrid figure "half statue, half rock" (23), half power, half human, in an experimental (dis)obedience to chthonic persuasion? And perhaps, as in some outliers of Jewish and Christian theology, the beak is not in fact indifferent: perhaps the gods-heroes-angels actually envy the embodied and agonistic and conceptually fertile mortality of the human?

The hero: an invented/invested space "between." As humanity's thinkers began to classify the work of the human imagination, in its structure and historicity, "heroes" occupied a middle ground, a mediating/mystifying function both generative and occult, in philosophy, in sociopolitics, in aesthetic desire. Like the middle term of a syllogism, which frees "reason" to juxtapose categories and makes static binaries yield new possibilities, the hero forces space between the "all" and the "none," opening the profound and variable territory of the "some": men are not gods, but some are heroes. As cultural critic Andrew Von Hendy outlines the process in *The Modern Construction of Myth* (2002), the seventeenth-century philosopher Vico quotes "the Egyptians" as the source for a worldwide myth system originating the spectrum – gods, heroes, and men; the nineteenth-century philosopher Nietzsche quotes Plato on this. It appears that the middle term, the hero, is how we gained purchase on our individual and species history, as that other middle term between gods and men, "aristocracy," spoke to our sociopolitical passion for the "some" – some are "naturally" lords, by blood, deed, virtue. An entanglement of real and/or utopian sociopolitics with individual and heterosexual desire was a part of European thinking during the transition from "feudal" to modern times, reflected, as literary historian Michael McKeon (1987) suggests, in the transition from romance to romantic fiction. Such a view draws attention to the erotics of politics available in such terms as "subject" and "subjection" as argued by Renaissance critic Melissa Sanchez (2011), an erotics elaborated especially effectively, I shall propose, by historical novelist Dorothy Dunnett's handling of the concept of "gouvernance."³

Andrew Von Hendy tracks from Vico to Carlyle and beyond the philosophies of language and genre, the effort at representation, through which we humans staged those intuitions of magnitude and mobility emerging from the collision of our consciousness with the dire facts and fragilities of our material situation. First in pictures and then in sound and then in the unpredictable three-dimensionality of story, representation stages in an "epoch" of gods the silent gianthood of origins and ends, of "all" and "none." There follows an epoch of striving heroes outlined in song and in the changeless structures of allegorical narrative, and then an epoch of men, characterized by narratives informed by historical and eventually psychological change. In this analysis representation, art, improves in complexity but suffers a kind of declension in simplicity, stature, and vision, compensated for, early nineteenth-century thinkers hoped, by the new sciences of reason and politics and especially by the god-like gift, or re-forged tool, of the symbol.

Sifting and classifying floods of new information, Enlightenment and Romantic philosophers confirmed and indeed hero-worshipped the symbol, which is first embodied, literally, as the gift of the hero. The hero and/as the symbol bridges the gap between our intuited at-homeness with the gods and our wounded lostness in mortal time. However, as picture and song generated for themselves more complicated forms of narrative, the imagination faced a conceptual difficulty, says Von Hendy, the gap between symbol as sublimely arresting presence, "as apprehended in the flick of an eye," and symbol's distribution over the complicating plots of narrative, "between symbol's immediate presentability and myth's narrative dimension" (2002: 43). It is a form of the gap between overmastering insight and mastering intellect, a gap that Carlyle argues is bridged explicitly in the English tradition by that "poet as hero," Shakespeare. For his is simultaneously "a calmly seeing eye; a great intellect, in short. How a man, of some wide thing that he has witnessed, will construct a narrative ... is the best measure you could get of what intellect is in the man" (1841: 104). A wide thing (re)constructed as narrative, the gap (almost) erased by that "in short."

Writing in the next century, in the age of Marshall McLuhan and Harvey Cox, critic Marshal Fishwick offered the quintessential American hero symbol for the dilemma: "History is meaningless without heroes: there is no score before they come to bat" (1969: 1). But the batter got processed into celebrity narratives when he laid down his bat, and myth's narrative dimension splits him into absence and presence both: "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?" asks the Simon and Garfunkel song of 1968's *The Graduate*, "A nation turns its lonely eyes to you." On September 11, 2001, a group of Islamic young men, all products of middle-class aspirant parents turned heroes of an alien aristocracy of grace, wrote their message in the sky: on September 12, reports Lucy Hughes-Hallett in *Heroes: A History of Hero Worship*, "a group of people were photographed near the ruins of the World Trade Center holding up a banner reading "WE NEED HEROES NOW" (2006: 14).

"Heroism" is a lot of weight for flesh and bones and nerves to carry, and not only physically: the task of signification pushes the executant past comedy into farce. Ask Atlas, ask Hercules. Just one tilt of the wrestle between hero and worshipper and you are the farce instead of the force: standing up you are being set up. Ask Oliver Cromwell, ask Napoleon. Ask Colin Powell. Ask Barack Obama.

Ask Richardson's Lovelace, Dickens's Steerforth, Lawrence's Gerald Crich. Storytelling speaks the hero in ways that faithfully register the mind's experience of life's awesome presence and its awful contingency. Northrup Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) gave the nod to romance as the oldest form of storytelling and mapped its contours, its counterforms and hybrid returns, around the hero's "power of action" in a spectrum of imagined environments from the bitterly resistant to the yieldingly reconstructable or reconcilable. Frye's "literature" is a wheel of eternal returns, storytelling supplying what each age requires in a "half-conscious imitation of organic rhythms or processes"; the humanities that study each culture's progressive understanding of storytelling's contribution, Frye claims, in a familiar mid-twentietieth-century gesture, are "quite as pregnant with new developments as the sciences" (1957: 33, 334). In the next decade Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) summarized a generation of new-formalist literary and philosophical criticism about the literary and cultural hero journey from antiquity to modernity, focusing first on the frantic impulse to storytelling compelled in western culture by the failure of the year 1000 to produce the Christian Parousia. Myths compel/express absolute beliefs; they are avatars of abidingness. But fictions are a call not merely to emulation but also to scrutiny, says Kermode: "fictions are for finding things out," even about heroes and hero worship (1968: 39).

Carlyle's On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History attributes to a semi-mythical Frenchman, that nation of modern rationalists, the recognition that no man can be a hero to his all-seeing valet (1996: 183), and calls on the German romantic poet Goethe and the Scots man of letters Burns to blow the spark of English hero worship into an invigorating flame. A nation of "valets," he sneers, merely wants to report on the hero's accidental micro-doings to the TMZs of celebrity culture, but a nation of hero worshippers, cherishing mystery, or at least enigma, will make a place for the hero.

And the Scottish popular historian and novelist Dorothy Dunnett, who is the subject of this book's last chapter, reaches back like Kermode to the turn of the second millennium to allow a boldly re-historicized Macbeth to understand his unexpected heroism through a wry and one might say Derridean reflection originating in an early Irish Chronicle comment on the leader Brian Boru: "he was not a stone in the place of an egg, and he was not a wisp in the place of a club, but he was a hero in [the] place of a hero."4 Like the imaginable Leda of Yeats's poem, Dunnett's Macbeth "takes on" the power of the mythic hero, incorporates into his human stone and wisp something of the egg's potency, and the club's: the hero is always/only the hero when he is in the place of a hero.

Fiction needs heroes even more than life does. Storytelling "goes" because of the "agon": the hero, protagonist and/or antagonist, is the one who goes through it. He goes and he undergoes; he dares and he is destined; he is (in) the place where the divine inevitable, and the human/random this-and-that, manifest simultaneously. Thomas Carlyle wrote and delivered On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History as a series of six lectures on the parlous state of a British nation addicted to such puny modern values as "happiness" and "personal freedom," countering with storytelling about the moments in human history where the right action of the "great man" and the reciprocally active gaze of the community created a "force" that released into the human world the social energies that mastered the most usable energies of light, wind, and water.

For Carlyle, the hero as we have him in representation is a mixed godman: his light-bringing lies in the vivid eye flicks of symbol, and when we stoop to diffuse him in the narrative of his doings and his times we find him clouded. In the great myths Odin and Thor appear to desert their worshippers, but the fact is the other way around: it is the worshipper who subjects these figures to "the law of mutation" (1996: 39). Heroes are actually humanity's tools of its own evolution; here Carlyle is sharpening a modification to Virgil's original version of the hero. A decade later in his *Past and Present* (1843), "the proper Epic of this world is not now 'Arms and the Man' ... it is now 'Tools and the Man'" (2000: 208). Confusions and ambitions aside, Carlyle argues in the earlier work, Cromwell was the necessary "third act" of English Protestantism (1996: 237): overtaken by "charlatanism" as he was, Napoleon put the necessary stamp of "form" on the idea of Revolution: "a great implement too soon wasted" (1996: 243).

For some nineteenth-century thinkers these heroes are instruments in the hands of a transcendental God, working in counterpoint and synthesis toward an imaginable harmony of freedom and order. However for others, like Marx and Hegel, it is the community and more specifically the nation that makes (and unmakes) the hero, and the moral as well as political future. Carlyle may not really be "the father of hero-theory," as Bruce Meyer proposes in *Heroes: The Champions of Our Literary Imagination* (2007: 7), but Carlyle does establish history as the place of (waiting for) the hero. And the hero in history as well as the hero in pan-cultural myth suffers what Joseph Campbell calls the double focus in the role of the hero, through whom we experimentally make both what we (need to) believe - myths - and what we (need to) find out - fictions. From the hero we want a story of linear action/achievement – a fiction of exploration – which really amounts to a remembering - a myth of unveiling. The doing shows what already is. The hero journeys and quests, becoming what we make him to have been. The obscure peasant is actually the lord's son; the dubious or impossible deed is already written; the talent discovered is the one we always had (Campbell 1968: 39).

In the "monomyth" behind Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) the hero goes out to come home, withdraws in order to be brought to light/enlightenment. He expends/empties his force to accomplish "the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world" (1968: 36); it is that energy that puts the man in the hero's place. And as his very example hardens into habit, or tyranny, as the ancient legend said of Minos (1968: 14), the hero disappears, so that the vacant place of the hero incites worshippers to test out a new condidate at first substitute. hero incites worshippers to test out a new candidate, at first substitute or sham, for the role of the real thing.

In this deliberately occulted representational process, the burden of "modern" consciousness is severe. The inciting symbols emerge from fertile darkness and command an entry into darkness; the hero's work cannot be consciously done. With all his emphasis on song and speech, the Carlyle of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* above all worships silence, recognizes the hero's rugged, or inept, or even abashed, silences, and valorizes them. What the hero cannot articulate he cannot falsify; what he cannot or will not reason to we can trust as the most authentic and sincere of visions. Worshipper and hero unite in

half-understanding, evading, for a time, the corrosion of consciousness.

A century later the dilemma worsens. With so many of the "great co-ordinating mythologies branded as lies," with every individual called to hyper-consciousness of "meaninglessness" outside himself, Campbell ends his book, the hero's work can happen not in the mode of action or reason but rather "in the silences of his personal despair" (1968: 388, 391). His stories are told, Kermode comments a generation later, in the novels of Sartre and Camus and Iris Murdoch, fictions where personal despair in a wrestle with pure "contingency" nevertheless evokes at least an approach to the shapeliness of coordinating mythologies of freedom.

or love (1968: 135-143). Writing in 2004 but with an emphatically twentieth-century perspective, Theodore Ziolkowski finds examples of his Hesitant Heroes as far back as Orestes and Aeneas, but contends that modernity (our own modernity, not that of Euripides or Virgil) introduces a new dimension figured in the name of Walter Scott's first novel hero, "Waverley," for now the hero's uncertainties "do not stem, as earlier, from the simple conflict of two opposing ideologies but from the perceived frangibility of existence itself and the ethical consciousness of universal guilt" (2004: 139).

It is the new (old) modern discovery. The hero will always waver in and out of "place," mobile as symbol is mobile, in an eye flick first there and then not-there. For the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, Frye and the other defenders of romance and its hero make a good case for the form's "vitality," even for its temporary utility as "the place of narrative heterogeneity and freedom" when late capitalist "realism" becomes ossified. But for Jameson the hero is really not-there; the aweful presence of individual identity itself is altogether too theological and bourgeois a concept. Heathcliff, for instance, is really, in distancing quotation marks, "Heathcliff." That is, history (see The Political Unconscious [1981]: 105, 125, 131, 128).

As if the narrator of Vanity Fair had not already written "a novel without a hero." As if the 700 plus pages of David Copperfield had ever really answered its opening question: "whether I am the hero of my own life."

Well, actually, the last page of Dickens's novel does suppose an answer, imaged in a female face both shining on him from Heaven and "serene" at his side. Actually, Thackeray's novel does have a hero. His name is Becky Sharpe.

What about women in all this? Can a woman be a hero? "Hero theorists" of the past, Carlyle and Nietzsche, Bentley and Kermode, conduct their surveys, inquiries, and evaluations of heroes and hero worship with men in the title role and both men and women in the place of the worshipper. Joseph Campbell's chapters on female figures in the great old stories outline woman's functionality, and fungibility, as the "all/ world" from which the hero comes and which he must master: she is present as mother, sister, mistress, bride, goddess, but also as the "other" part of the hero himself, the other of his own self that he must quest to incorporate, as the symbol of Adam's Rib suggests (1968: 111, 342). Writing A History of Hero Worship, Lucy Hughes-Hallett chooses eight heroes, all male; in European tradition, she admits, the heroes generate one another, and not even Joan of Arc, dressing for her hero's task as a