Female Heroes in Myths and Fairy Tales

Myths and fairy tales express among other things what it means to be an ideal woman and man. Both genres have gone through various permutations over time, and fullfilled different cultural needs. This is certainly the case with female heroism in myths and fairy tales, which is the subject of my presentation. But before looking into these “permutations” and what they might have to say about changing views of what it means to be heroic and the role of women and men, I am going to qualify and define the terms I am using.

The word “heroine” has become outdated. When it is used today, it usually refers to passive Snow Whites and suffering Cinderellas. “Heroine” does not sit well with the Joan of Arcs of history or the Vampire slayers and Warrior princesses of Television and film. One sign of this is the emergence of the word “sheroes” in print and on the internet and in academia. The first time I came across the word was probably 15 years ago in a seminar in Lund; one of the doctoral students used it in a feminist reading of the science fiction stories by J. J. Cherryh. A couple of years later there were sheroes in print: “bold, brash (and absolutely unabashed) superwomen” they are called in the blurb on Varla Ventura’s book Sheroes (1998). The books consists of minibiographies of sheroes arranged under headings like “Warriorsheroes”, EcoSheroes, SportsSheroes, Celluloid Sheroes, Pen and Camera-wielding Sheroes” etc.

On the internet about the same time one could read: “sheroes is about female heroes, ‘Sheroes,’ of every age, race, and country. Here, we discuss women and girls who get out there and do it, females who kick butt and take no prisoners, role models who inspire women and men, girls and boys.” This quotation is from the policy statement at sheroescentral http://www.sheroescentral.com/ The founder of this internet site, Tamora Pierce, is also a YA author of note, who in her literary output regularly features young sheroes (The Song of the Lioness quartet, including The Woman who Rides Like a Man, 1986).

But although this usage reflects the need for a new vocabulary, the term shero is not altogether satisfactory. If heroine is narrow, so is shero. For a male hero can be self-sacrificing and humble and wise, as well as intrepid and brawny, but in a desperate bid to acquire the overtly masculine traits of “hero,” the more humane qualities are lost in translation. That is why I prefer to use the term hero indiscriminately of both women and
men, and only add gendered qualifiers when necessary (as in the title of this paper). There is much to be said of the hero as an incarnation of the ideal woman or man of any given culture and society. Such rounded or “full” heroes are the protagonists of both myths and fairy tales.

This brings me to “myth” and “fairy tale.” This is not the place and time to offer a lengthy discussion here of these two notoriously tricky terms, suffice it to say why I talk about the two genres in the same breath, as it were. Well, first of all because they are in a sense of the same breath; both myths and fairy tales are originally oral, traditional folk narratives, although today we frequently encounter them in print or in other media. Nevertheless, the radical of presentation, the roots of the story (fairy tale or myth) are in the oral. Fairy tales are, moreover, non-realistic genres, frequently concerned with man’s interaction with or relationship to the supernatural. Admittedly, there are differences as well; most importantly myths are about sacred matters, fairy tales are secular. But with the widened concept of myth today, both in psychoanalytic and social semiotic theory this distinction has become rather meaningless. According to psychoanalytic critics like von Franz or Estes both myths and fairy tales mirror, produce or interact with inner psychic conditions and realities, and of course postmodern thought insists that all narratives produce the myths by which we live (see Sellar 8-11 for a longer discussion).

More importantly perhaps, for our discussion here, is the gendered tradition of fairy tales (as feminine) and myths (as masculine). Thus, the canonical western fairy tale has been described as an essentially feminine genre where women protagonists predominate, feminine (circular) plot structure is the rule, and implied female narrators are conventional, as in references to “Old Wives Tales” and “Mother Goose” (Warner). Even so, it is a genre that has been abducted over the last two hundred years.

Print is partly to blame, because print as a technology of communication has favoured men. And in the case when women actively did take part in the literarization of the fairy tale, as in 18th c France, with Mme de Barbauld, Mme de Genlis etc, the values and views represented were those of the French court at the time. In this most cynical and literate of environments the fairy tale was cherished for its naïvete and freshness, an attitude that paves the way for the idea that the fairy tale is children’s genre. A partly overlapping development led in a somewhat different direction. According to the romantics folk fairy tales spoke of the soul and “genius” of a nation and a people (Grimms), or about the supernatural and the workings of the
psyche (Hoffman, Novalis, Keats’s poetry and Yeats’s early collections). National collections of folk and fairy tales were gathered. But folklore studies and philology soon showed that fairy tales, even the same tales, are known among all of the world’s peoples. The idea that the fairy tale is a kind of universal ur-narrative took root. With Andrew Lang’s colour fairy books (1889-1910) the notion that fairy tales indeed are universal but essentially for children (or childlike, primitive people) became received wisdom. Although folklorists maintained all along that the fairy tale is an adult genre, and although writers frequently made use of the German idealist/Romantic platform for their literary (or musical, operatic) reworkings, the view of fairy tales as a children’s genre persists. Bettelheim’s enormously influential psychoanalytical analysis of a number of canonical fairy tales The Uses of Enchantment posits a child addressee. Likewise, the culture industry headed by the Disney corporation traditionally (if somewhat more ambiguously today) mainly targets a child audience.

However, the re-evaluation of the fairy tale as a “useful” genre (at least in terms of psychological well-being) has also led to a growing awareness that the genre may have something to say to grown-ups as well, either because we are living in an infantile society where people do not grow up, or because there is no essential difference between the needs of children and adults (von Franz, Estes, Fromm). One could say that like the Romantics before them, psychoanalytic interpreters use these seemingly simple narratives (or “dreams,” as both Romantics and psychoanalysts sometimes call them) in order to glean deeper individual and societal meanings. Moreover, today’s market-oriented fairy tale, be it literary (fantasy, magic realism etc) as well as multimodal, is gaining acceptance as a genre that (again) bridges generations.

Now, after this backward glance at “the abduction” – or should I say development? – of the fairy tale, it is time to look more closely at how female heroism is caught up in these changes. First of all: the feminine heroism filtered down to present day readers and viewers of fairy tale anthologies is passive and suffering, hardly ever the active heroism that is the stuff of myth and legend (as in sheroes). This does not mean that there are no such tales – stories like Kate Crackernuts and Molly Whuppie present another picture. But editors, anthologists and folklorists – mostly men – have consistently and successfully favoured the Cinderellas over the Whuppies. This has been an ongoing process from Basile’s Pentamerone, Perrault’s “Contes”, the Kinder und Hausmärchen of the Brothers Grimm, Andersen’s Folkeeventyr and
to most of the storytellers of the English Golden Age (Thackeray, Ruskin, Kingsley and MacDonald), and so on.

The situation is even worse when it comes to myth. Although the mythic hero has “a thousand faces,” to borrow Joseph Campbell’s phrase, the feminine is doubly featureless in the index to, for example, Campbell’s classic work of comparative religion – not heroic, not present. In Campbell mythic heroism is a male reserve. This is perhaps not surprising: in patriarchal societies (and almost all traditional societies are patriarchal), the given culture hero must, almost by definition be male.

However, one could also argue that even in the most macho of societies there ought to be a need for a corresponding female capacity for heroism. Maybe we must look beyond Campbell’s index – to related genres, as the fairy tale, and to ritual, which is the practical, embodied response to myth (Segal 1-12), or vice versa: myths may create rituals just as rituals create myths; they are two sides of the same coin.

Although rituals are expressive of all aspects of human experience, they are perhaps used most significantly in connection with rites of passage, that is, rituals concerned with changes in the human life-cycle (birth, puberty, marriage, death), in the community (war), or in the environment (harvest, seasons). A common denominator of these ritual manifestations is “liminality,” that is, “a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action” (Turner 167). Liminality can be seen as “a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs” (167).

Van Gennep, the father of processual analysis, distinguishes between two kinds of liminality – the ritual passages of status elevation on the one hand and of status reversal on the other. Status reversal is often present in cyclical/calendrical rites. The carnival – in which king and beggar may switch roles for a day – is a good example of temporary status reversal. Initiation rites (birth, puberty, marriage and death) are concerned with status elevation. They correspond to Campbell’s “monomyth” (the word gleaned from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*) which, in a nutshell, presents us with “the structure of the ideal success story in a culture” (Dundes, “Introduction” xv). The initiation pattern is a realization of the most central and widespread of all myths: that of growing up. The “monomyth,” “the process of individuation,” and “the heroic pattern” are simply other words for it.
Early research on fairy tales was often directed towards finding vestiges of seasonal myths and rituals (see Holbek 235-42). Later approaches have focused on the rites of initiation. The purpose of the latter is to make it known that an individual has entered a new phase of life. In the rites of puberty, for example, boys and girls become men and women. The expression of these rites can be both verbal and non-verbal. Evidently, openly religious narratives or rituals belong in this category; but ritual content can be traced in other genres as well. Mircea Eliade has, for instance, pointed out that folktales repeat “the exemplary initiation scenario [and that] the tale takes up and continues ‘initiation’ on the level of the imaginary” (Myth 202). Eliade even asserts that the initiation scenario is discernible in modern (literate) culture, and maintains that it still plays an important role: “. . . if it represents an amusement or an escape, it does so only for banalized consciousness, and particularly that of modern man; in the deep psyche initiation scenarios preserve their seriousness and continue to transmit their message” (202).

Initiation rites follow a tripartite division into a “separation of the candidate from the community, a period of ordeals and instruction, and reincorporation into the community under a new identity” (Attebery 91). “Displacement,” “transformation,” and “return” are key words that are often used to delineate this process (as in Propp’s Morphology of the folktale, for example), and these concepts seem broad enough to cover most gender differences. For the purpose of describing a fairy tale with a female hero, however, the complementary terms used by Brian Attebery seem more apposite. In his description of female patterns of initiation, he discards the terms “displacement,” “transformation” and “return,” and justifies his new vocabulary anthropologically:

I would suggest three others: enclosure, metamorphosis (or magnification), and emergence. Characteristically, the adolescent girls is secluded within her own home, often in an inner room, at or before her first menstruation. There she is considered to take on the identity of a culture heroine or goddess, like the Navajo Changing Woman; often the incarnation is marked by special costume. When she emerges into society, she renews the gifts of fertility and order originally brought by the mythic figure she represents. (91)

*Alice in Wonderland* is a prime example of an early literary narrative that takes on the form that Attebery extrapolates, that is, an initiation rite consisting of the components “metamorphosis” (or “magnification”), “enclosure,” and “emergence.” If anything,
Wonderland shows a preoccupation with metamorphoses: Alice grows and diminishes a number of times. The contents of the bottle labelled “drink me” make her grow, as does the Rabbit’s fan; the cake with the words “eat me” reduces her size; the Caterpillar’s mushroom works both ways, depending on which side she eats; finally, her concluding act of rebellion makes her grow.

Her size-shifting is a trial in itself, as it affects her thinking: “being so many sizes in a day is very confusing,” Alice says to the Caterpillar. When the Caterpillar challenges her opinion, she insists that changing into a chrysalis would make her feel “very queer.” A dozen lines later he asks her: “So you think you're changed do you?” ’I’m afraid I am, Sir,” said Alice. “I can’t remember things as I used-and I don’t keep the same size for ten minutes together!” (35-36). So, Alice is dearly in a stage of change-not only of size but of mind; and she is associated with a Caterpillar, the epitome of metamorphosis.

The episode where Alice, in an elongated and snakelike state, encounters a Pigeon is also interesting from the point of view of metamorphosis. When the Pigeon calls her a Serpent she protests that she is “a little girl.” But she does it “rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through, that day.” Alice questions her own identity—a necessary step when one is on the verge of assuming a new identity. And the Pigeon answers, “in a tone of deepest contempt.” To its mind “little girl” is a bad joke (“a likely story indeed!”). Girls are serpents since they eat eggs. The discussion focuses not on Alice's appearance but on her snakelike quality.

Most of the situations in which Alice is subject to change are perilous: the pool of tears (drowning), the Rabbit's house (being stoned), and her violent encounter with the Pigeon, to name but a few of the more important situations. This is not surprising: liminal status is frequently associated with danger; conversely, danger itself regularly produces liminality. Wonderland also contains instances of “enclosure” Alice goes down a rabbit-hole and ends up under ground. The underground is associated with burial, death, the cramped space of coffins, dirt and the physical; whereas Wonderland is dream, vision and colourful fairies. Many rites of initiation involve a staged death and burial so that the old person can die and be resurrected as a new being. Alice is enclosed in her underground wonderland and emerges, as from a chrysalis. The rabbit-hole becomes a “well” that terminates in a long dark passage that leads to a “long, low hall. . . lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof.” The doors around the
hall are allocked. In her magnified form she fills the entire halllying down. She is endosed. Another scene of enclosure occurs when she is trapp ed in the White Rabbit's house.

Alice in the house of the Rabbit serves as a warning example, but this is also a scene of humiliation. In rites of initiation, humiliation is part of the game. The old self must be seen as worthless before a new identity can take its place. Both the exclamations of the Pigeon – “a likely story indeed” – and the Caterpillar – “who are you?” – are depreciating. And most of the Creatures, and the narrator too, assume the role of denigrators. The narrator's ridiculing comments are frequent in the beginning, disappear in the mid-section of the tale, and return at the end. As Fjellestad has pointed out, "the narrator establishes his attitude towards Alice and then lets the creatures of Wonderland exhibit the same attitude towards the heroine" (41).

The last of the three major functions is, according to Attebery, “emergence.” The initiate, the female hero, shall "emerge into society” and “renew the gifts of fertility and order.” As I have pointed out elsewhere, Alice returns home, emerging from Wonderland. She brings with her a chthonic, unconscious treasure: the tale, described as “a pilgrim's wither’d wreath of flowers I Pluck'd in far-off land” (4). At the same time she has asserted order over chaos.

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It should be pointed out, too, that the initiation scenario is by no means the only possible ritual code that may find expression in fairy tales and related genres. Status reversal is very much the issue in, for example, AT 900 (“King Thrushbeard”), in which the temporary degradation of a proud and disdainful princess is described. At the other end of the social spectrum we find the poor fisherman of AT 555 (“The Fisher and his Wife”), in which the fisherman's demands on a wish-fulfilling fish become increasingly extravagant (for his wife to become king, pope, God), until in the end all is lost and status quo is reasserted. In each of the two cases outlined, only one party is subject to status reversal—one negative (the princess is brought low), one positive (the fisherman’s wife is exalted). A more complete, complement- tary, status reversal (both negative and positive) is displayed in AT 533 (“The Speaking Horsehead”), in which a princess who is on the way to her own wedding is forced to change places and clothes with her maid-in-waiting; in the end, however, the impostor is found out and punished, and the princess can reassume her royal station. To sum up: temporary,
humbled experiences that do not permanently alter the status of the protagonist are exemplary of ritual status reversal.

On a profound level I believe that ritual/mythic patterns can be described in gender-neutral terms. However, there is sometimes a structural difference between male and female heroic quests, at least on a more superficial level, which needs to be discussed. In the monomythic male quest, the boy or the young man is often, in a crude sense, heroic from the start. He is bold and resourceful, independent and commanding; he slays dragons and rescues damsels wherever he goes. His problem, if any, is that he is lacking in empathy and imagination. Gawain/Perceval, on seeing the sick Fisher King (Amfortas), fails to ask what ails him; getting a second chance he helps the King by giving him a jug of water (Brunel 488-499).

Gawain is not a perfect knight, until he possesses the faculty hitherto missing in his mental make-up: that of compassion. It is a worn-out cliché that the hero should be magnanimous in victory, giving the villain a second chance. And it is only because the villain is unwilling to be forgiven, and because he has no sense at all of fair play, that the hero finally kills him. If the hero were not absurdly generous he would be an ordinary killer, just as his opponent. On the less exalted level on which the fairy tale usually operates, the simple lack of feelings can play the same role as that of compassion or sense of fair play, as in the fairy tale “The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is” (AT 326), in which the protagonist is emotionally undeveloped (and hence an incomplete human being) until he learns what it is to be afraid.

Women heroes are different in traditional fairy tales. Ideally, they already have the qualities missing in male heroes-to-be. They must acquire something else. Attebery writes:

Although women in fantasies are represented as possessing this intuitive understanding, to rely entirely on such knowledge would leave them reproducing the lives of their mothers. Some additional knowledge is required if the cycle is to be broken, and, since men have always had to break away from the maternal world, the female heroes of fantasy borrow knowledge from them. Already knowing of continuity, duty, and the submersion of the self, they must learn of individuality and rebellion. (100)

In “The Frog King” by the Brothers Grimm, a princess promises a frog that he may eat and sleep with her if he would only get her a precious jewel that she has dropped in the water. He dives in and secures it for her. But when he actually follows her home and insists (as does her father, the king) that she must fulfil her promise, she is exasperated and dashes the frog
against the wall. The frog is immediately transformed into a handsome prince. They then marry and live happily ever after. In countless rewritings, editors (and cartoonists) have tried to soften the act of the princess by depicting her as transforming the frog by a kiss, not by smashing it against a stone wall. The moral, that one should always keep one’s promise, is stressed by the king. But the point here is that good comes out of this situation because the princess does not keep the promise, because she rebels against the frog (and her moralizing father). By the brutal act she asserts her integrity and dignity. Thus when a victimized heroine strikes back she does not have to be generous (as her male counterpart); her good qualities are taken for granted, but she has to unleash her destructive side, and defeat the opponent.

According to this approach, even a literary fairy tale like Alice in Wonderland can be read as a heroic quest with feminine overtones. Alice is patient and humble in the face of provocation and impertinence. She struggles to be a good girl, “swallowing down her anger,” even though she has never been “so ordered about” in her life. However, in the end she too asserts herself. Her defiant outburst at the end, “stuff and nonsense” followed by “who cares for you . . . you’re nothing but a pack of cards!,” shows her as independent, rebellious, destructive-and heroic.

One can speculate about the consequences if Carroll had told the tale to a group of boys (“Allen’s Adventures,” perhaps). Maybe we would then have had a tale where a fearless urchin sets fire to the White Rabbit’s House, tricks the Duchess into giving him food, and fights most of the other creatures, but who in the end acts in a charitable way (perhaps to the Queen) and thus brings the fairy tale to a heroic conclusion.

Male and female heroes incorporate the same constructive and destructive qualities. What differs is their way to apotheosis, to fulfilment. Traditionally they start at different ends of the scale and move in opposite directions, towards each other. This qualitative difference in the male and female heroic code may not be generic or archetypal in the sense that it is true for all cultures in all times, but it is certainly valid for a great deal of the oral (and literary) narratives in European and Western tradition.

So, what is the situation today? There is certainly no dearth of female heroes in fairy tales and related genres (regardless of age group). Ann Halam’s Siberia, Joyce Carol Oates’s Big Mouth, Ugly Girl and After the Wreck etc, Deborah Ellis’s The Breadwinner and Parvana’s
Journey, Meg Rosoff’s How I Live Now – provide some recent examples of heroic women/girls. Terry Pratchett’s Monstrous Regiment parodies gender roles and heroism in the context of warfare and the military. A more traditional and subtle exploration of the monomyth is explored in Ursula Le Guin’s Gifts and Voices.

At the same time there are other texts that convey either the shero-ethos discussed earlier, or a more conservative view of gender roles, where the ideal still seems to be the passive heroine. Maria Nikolajeva noted with some asperity in a recent article in Dagens Nyheter that the books and films that get the prizes and are promoted by critics are not the ones that are necessarily read or viewed by people in general. It is uphill work. In schools boys “Superbarbie” and “Superman” still reigns when children make their own pictures and stories. “Beauty and the Beast” (passive heroine) and “Dragon-slayer” (active hero) are, in other words, still the strongest role models. Very little has really changed since Tabbert & Wardetzky’s examination of preferred fairy tales among East German children, or, for that matter, since the middle ages. What does that mean? That human nature is unchanging? I think not. For a long time active female heroism in fairy tales was obscured, but that did not mean that it had not been there all along.

It rather points to different needs in different situations and ages. We need both the superman fantasy, the vulnerable or flawed human hero, and the parodic hero. And we need them regardless of their gender. Then, sometimes it does matter. And sometimes the gendered, qualitative difference matters. These types are all expressive of our human condition and they take turns with our imagination.

The monomyth posits the fully realized heroic human being. In traditional, patriarchal societies women and men may have the same heroic qualities – something that the “abduction of the fairy tale” has obscured for some time – but the order in which these qualities are assumed is frequently different. As my Alice analysis shows, one and the same protagonist can be heroic and embody specifically gendered qualities at the same time. In a democratic, egalitarian and gender-blind society I would expect that the monomyth would run its course in the same grooves for both women and men, but still find expressions for specifically gendered experiences. Maybe that is what we are seeing today. The protagonists of most of the modern stories mentioned above have gender neutral character traits, but their experiences are at the same time coloured by the fact that they are girls/women.
Today we see a resuscitation of female heroes through the rediscovery of “forgotten” fairy tales, non-western fairy tales and myths, and through popular, multimodal retellings. Does this automatically bring the case of female heroism in myths and fairy tales to a happy end after a century or so in Bluebeard’s secret chamber? I think not. One needs to address what kinds of heroism is sought after in different historically and culturally determined societies (pre-industrial to post-industrial), to what extent these qualities are gendered, and, finally, how these notions are given narrative expression today, regardless of gender.

Björn Sundmark