Women Writers and the Hero of Romance

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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 Dunnett

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).
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Wuthering Heights: A Romance of Metaphysical Intent

The reader completes Catherine's and Heathcliff's unrealized romance ... in his or her desiring imagination. The unwritten erotic romance exists in our passionate experience of *Wuthering Heights*.

Gavriel Reisner¹

This chapter begins my “appreciation” of women’s novels in the romance tradition with a novel that both consolidates and innovates the fundamental fiction of the hero of romance, although the chapter’s origins are double. I have an argument to undertake, but also, like the heroine of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) at the beginning of her journey, having already read the novel on her own, “I decided to read *Wuthering Heights* – the novel we were currently studying in English – yet again for the fun of it” (34). For I have been reading and re-reading *Wuthering Heights* for decades. My first lecture on the novel at Princeton in 1973 tried unsuccessfully to answer the question: Catherine and Heathcliff, what ARE they to each other, really? My latest experience was facilitating a discussion (spring 2012) at Boston College’s Women’s Resource Center on the “Twilight” vampire romances as a re-writing of Emily Brontë’s novel, climactic baby daughter and all, a comparison to which I will return along the way.

There are essays in the critical tradition that are almost as fun to read as the novel itself. I think of C. P. Sanger’s classic treatment of the psychogenetic makeup of “Earnshaw” and “Linton” and the way the Catherine wheel spins, the rogue gene “Heathcliff” turns, through the story’s generations. There is Ellen Moers’ recognition of the Frankensteinian strand in Emily Brontë’s hero, Mary Shelley’s brew of “incest, infanticide, and patricide ... transformed into a phantasmagoria of the nursery”
... May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
... the sweet presence of a good diffus'd,
And in diffusion ever more intense!

George Eliot

Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Middlemarch* made its strongest impact on me when I came to teach it. Student-reading it hungrily for its wit and romance, and above all as the pride-imparting proof of a woman writer's sublime mastery of both world and word, I eventually faced the teacher's problem of establishing some illuminating, and preferably intriguing, framework for the two or three weeks during which we could read the novel together, from the beginning, for structure as well as character and theme. I also found, to my surprise, considerable discontent in the critical tradition about the romance that drove the novel, between Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw. Many felt betrayed by a plot that, having established what Henry James called the "two suns in the firmament of the novel," Dorothea and "the real hero," Tertius Lydgate, then cheated us of the romance we had a right to expect.  

Writing anonymously in the March 1873 issue of *Galaxy*, James allowed that while George Eliot's heroes are mostly miles better than the usual "trowsered offspring of the female fancy," Will Ladislaw is a "failure." He is "too insubstantial, factitious ... vague and impalpable ... in short, roughly speaking, a woman's man," no doubt, James hints, because "the author is evidently very fond of him" (Carroll 1971: 354, 356). Leslie Stephen, in a similar example of that male critical reflex that drove the nineteenth-century woman writer crazy, dismissed Will in a 1902 book as the product of the author's own romantic fantasy, suggesting
Exotic Romance: The Doubled Hero in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *The Sheik*

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?
Yeats, "Leda and the Swan," ll 19–23 (1923)

They seek him here, they seek him there,
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere;
Is he in heaven? is he in hell?
That demmed elusive Pimpernel.

*The Scarlet Pimpernel* (99)

I was born too late in the twentieth century to have my romance-reading fires lit by *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) or *The Sheik* (1919). My generation learned the structures of romance from *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Margaret Mitchell’s two heroes were actually two different men, not a doubled one; they did, however, appeal to the curious virgin and the managing mother in Scarlett, and in me. When I saw Leslie Howard play Ashley Wilkes in the film version, I knew why Ashley attracted me as much as Rhett, and wished they were both one hero; when later I saw Leslie Howard star in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* on late-night television I saw my doubled/unified hero in the flesh and went hunting the original novel. Little did I know at the time that this romanticized version of Englishness was written by a Hungarian émigré, that the 1934 film version I saw on television was produced by the Hungarian émigré
The Hero as Expert: Ayn Rand’s Romances of Choice

From the first, I recognized commercial popular culture as the authentic native voice of America ... I’m very happy to be considered one of [Ayn Rand’s] successors, even if not influenced by her directly ... She and I say to people, “Think for yourself! Stop going along with the group!”

Camille Paglia

When I arrived at graduate school at Indiana University in 1967, I saw an index card among others of its kind neatly affixed to a bulletin board on the outside of the humanities building. It read:

Who is John Galt?

John Galt, b. 1779 d. 1839 Scottish writer and colonial official, author of The Annals of the Parish, Ringan Gilhaize and other novels, histories and poems, and founder of the city of Guelph in Canada.

It was a delicious moment for one who got the joke, who had read Atlas Shrugged (1957) five times and was now ready to read both famous and obscure nineteenth-century British fiction in the quest for a PhD in Victorian literature. And the delicious moments just keep coming. In 2002 the middlebrow London Daily Telegraph published a story revealing that a breakaway faction of libertarian Tories had chosen a leader code-named “John Galt” to head their revolution: the story held the headlines for two weeks, while politicians and scholars discussed and debated the philosophy of Ayn Rand, before the discovery that the whole thing was a hoax. In 2007 New York City and State officials launched an investigation of the way the John Galt Corporation was
The Hero in "Gouvernance": Family Romance in the Novels of Dorothy Dunnett

Leaving [Lymond] was less like leaving ... one of her friends ... and more like losing unfinished a manuscript, beautiful, absorbing and difficult, which she had long wanted to read.  
Dorothy Dunnett, *Pawn in Frankincense*, 477

Working on my graduate degrees in the 1960s I came to recognize that the reign of "new" criticism, with its emphasis on irony, ambiguity, and the decoding of meaning, was almost over. The new expertise would be the "new" historicism, a muscular return to the vision of the interactive self-making of literature and time, speech and self, culture and nature, an approach that is still in the ascendant, having assimilated insights from, and generated insights to, linguistics and formalism, gender and queer studies, psychoanalytic and ethical criticism, post-colonialism and cultural studies.

Fortunately for me, the private library prows of my teens had given me not only the solitary joy of the Ayn Rand reader, but also the time and culture hunger of an avid historical novel fan, and I had found my richest food here in the unfolding novel sequences of the Scottish writer Dorothy Dunnett. Dunnett’s saga of Francis Crawford of Lymond, later called *The Lymond Chronicles*, covered the years 1548–58, the period key to the founding text of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.¹ The sequence’s six volumes appeared in 1961–75, the time of my own self-fashioning.

The voice of Dunnett’s narrator, informed, engaged, rhetorically confident in a range of modes from the domestically comic through the shrewdly analytic to the flamboyantly dramatic, kept me turning the pages, especially as it became clear that, like the Victorian novelists
Conclusion: Kingdoms of Romance in *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Reading is thus situated at the point where social stratification (class relationships) and poetic operations (the practitioner’s construction of a text) intersect; a social hierarchization seeks to make the reader conform to the “information” distributed by an elite (or semi-elite); reading operations manipulate the reader by insinuating their inventiveness into the cracks in a cultural orthodoxy. One of these two stories conceals what is not in conformity with the “masters” and makes it invisible to them; the other disseminates it in the networks of private life. They thus both collaborate in making reading an unknown out of which emerge, on the one hand, only the experience of the literate readers (theatrical and dominating) and on the other, rare and partial like bubbles rising from the depths of the water, the indices of a common poetics.

Michel de Certeau,
*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 172

Romance has always been nourished not only by individual memory and international history but also by the cultural myths that enable the creation of whole alternate universes, epic kingdoms of romance. From Camelot to Metropolis to the Federation they emerge, and merge with each other and with memory and history. They re-inscribe, sometimes in “pedestrian” prose, the magical powers of proper names and fugitive meanings that de Certeau’s walker in the street craves as s/he passes through urban spaces reduced to mere numbers, looking for a “crack” in the “techno-structure.” They are the “magical narratives” that Fredric