Panel 12: The Girl as Hero

Susanne Schneider, Girlhood in Early Historical Fantasy: Challenging the Traditional Hero’s Quest

Strong girl protagonists have increased in fantasy (Nilson 2010 & Ehriander 2018) which is a change from the traditional male norm, where girls either support the hero, are love interests or strong and independent witches (Nilson 2018 & 2010). The aim of this study is to analyse the girl protagonists in two early historical fantasy books, in relation to the traditional hero’s quest.

The protagonists design and function are analysed (Nikolajeva 2004) with an intersectional approach, and in view of the concept of ‘gender contract’. The common theme of a mission or a quest found in fantasy also appears in historical fantasy (Ehriander 2012). Usually, it has been the male hero’s journey. He goes out in the world on a mission, fights enemies, succeeds and finally comes back home. The characters Penelope, from Penelope: en resa i tiden (1939) by Alison Uttley, and Abigail, from Vem är rädd för Beatie Bow? (1980) by Ruth Park, are compared to this concept and pattern.

The girls’ quests are different, but they both have reasons for their time travel and they face it, and the magical element, with strength. They are also quite round and dynamic protagonists. Both girls are like outsiders in their own time and also in the past, although a few finds out the truth. While they really can’t change the future, they still make an impact and evolve as characters. The implications, in these older books, are that even though there are elements of more traditional gender roles, the girls challenge the traditional hero’s quest, as more silent heroes.

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Leah Phillips, Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent Girlhood

Hero stories are deeply rooted in Western Culture. From religion and myth to blockbuster films and YA literature, the story is everywhere, and it shapes how we, the ones who hear and see it, understand the world around us. For too long, hero stories, which could also be called dominant discourse, have undertaken this social and cultural work through the archetypal hero: a white, often ‘god’-touched, and young man who exists in opposition and superiority to that which he is not, including adolescent girls. This paradigm works by imposing radical alterity on that which is not-hero to ensure his heroiness. Crucially, while this exclusion affects all girls, it does not do so evenly. If the girl is also Black or Brown, disabled, or otherwise not performing expected and accepted versions of adolescent girlhood, marginalisation increases.
This paper explores how the heroes in a subgenre of YA fantasy, one it names mythopoeic YA, intervene in narrow and limiting heroic norms by breaking the boundaries and blurring the borders of what it means to be hero, girl, and even human. Emerging in the early-1980s with the work of Tamora Pierce and Robin McKinley, mythopoeic YA is a speculative, ‘imaginary world’ fiction initially by women and still ‘for’ adolescent girls. This fiction is ‘about’ creating a new mythology, a new way of seeing and understanding the world, not through opposition but connection. It undertakes this work through the female-hero: Tamora Pierce’s Alanna the Lioness, Marissa Meyer’s Cinder, and the heterogeneous ‘crew’ at the heart of Leigh Bardugo’s Six of Crows duology. These heroes, who are not always girls, frustrate the system of opposition at the heart of the archetypal hero story. In so doing, they offer an alternative and inclusive model of being-hero, one directly impacting adolescent girlhood and beyond.

Dr Leah Phillips is Senior Sessional Lecturer at the University of Warwick. Her research interests include representations of female adolescence in Young Adult (YA) fiction, especially fantasy. Her paper today is a version of her forthcoming monograph Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent Girlhood. It is due out with Bloomsbury in early 2021. She’s a member of the Children’s Literature Association’s Phoenix Award committee and founder of the YA: Literature, Media and Culture association. Her next research project will focus on a re-theorizing of YA, paying particular attention to markets and fields outside of the dominant American.

Tzina Kalogirou and Voula Chourdaki, Antigone: A Tragic Heroine, A Rebellious Teenager

The myth of Antigone is one of the greatest myths of classical antiquity. According to the legend, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, secretly buried her brother in defiance of the orders of Creon, king of Thebes. Creon sentenced Antigone to death, but, before the order could be executed, she committed suicide. The conflict between Antigone and Creon has captured the Western thought and has been depicted in literature, philosophy, and art. Antigone has been a rebellious girl who, revolting against the patriarchal law, experiences what we call in ancient tragedy a “tragic fall”.

This paper takes under discussion the challenging adaptation of Sophocles’ Antigone by Ali Smith, namely The Story of Antigone, illustrated by Laura Paoletti (2015). The analysis – informed by various critical theories, from post-feminism to cultural politics and visual poetics – is focused upon the ways in which the author re-appropriates the figure of the heroine and the fundamental antitheses she embodies, young vs. old, divine law vs. human law, state vs. individual, etc. We are also particularly interested in the possible similarities/differences between Smith’s version and Greek tragedy’s notions of hybris (ὕβρις), atis (άτις), nemesis (νέμεσις), tisis (τίσις). In tragedy, the disturbed moral order is usually restored, and the audience experiences a form of catharsis. In Smith’s post-feminism/ postmodern version catharsis is treated with skepticism.

Dr. Tzina Kalogirou is a Professor of Modern Greek Literature and Literature Teaching in the School of Education/ Department of Primary Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece, and Director of the Postgraduate Programme of “Rhetoric, Humanities, and Education”. She is the author, editor or co-editor of 16 academic books (in Greek and English) and numerous
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**Voula Chourdaki** holds a Master’s Degree in English Literature and Media. She is a doctoral candidate at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece and her research interests are referred to the poetics of experimental fiction, creative writing, and theory of literature. She is the author of an academic book on contemporary detective fiction and two collections of poems.