

The Heroine in Fantasy: A Reconstruction of Femininity, or Misguided Gendered Embodiment?

By Jayson Ho

Imagine, for a moment, a world where dragons soar the skies, where magic is cast from your fingertips; and occasionally, we see a woman become a knight in shining armor, wielding a sword and battling against the forces of darkness. Such figments of imagination are some of the many building blocks originated from myths, legends and fairy tales interwoven into the characteristics which define the fantasy genre. Even the term – “fantasy” – itself suggests a form of escapism: a chance to get away from the monotonous realities of everyday life, and just for a few hours, to indulge in a world where the supernatural comes to life. Fire-breathing dragons or wise old wizards may not exist in our world today, but the fantasy might not be so far-fetched when we see women taking on roles traditionally occupied by men, embodying a new discourse of gender while rejecting the conservative patriarchy and social norms. By injecting a much-needed dose of female empowerment, it stands to reason that the heroine has gained her popularity as a recurring trope, and not just within the fantasy genre. Yet with closer evaluation, it becomes clear that these strong exceptional women may assume traditionally expected traits of masculinity (i.e. aggression, tactical leadership and power). So one could pose the following question: Do we see the women in fantasy as being strong, only because they conform to an expected image of manliness we have grown familiar with? While media has given us countless examples of heroines defying social norms, it is also noticeable how ideas of female strength and empowerment have been used for their marketable values, and this might even lead to stigmatisation of other women who do not conform in a certain way that would appeal to audiences.

Using several examples of fantasy in media, this discussion aims to analyse how the heroine reconstructs the notion of aggression as a gendered stereotype, one that is commonly attributed to being solely masculine and patriarchal. By examining Martha McCaughey’s article “The Fighting Spirit” (1998), we can see that the binaries of masculine/feminine attributes towards violence have been realigned, giving women a sense of empowerment and redefining aggression as being feminine. However, this sense of female empowerment also has its setbacks, which will be discussed using Lydia Morrish’s article on the dangers of watering down the meaning of “empowerment” for commercial purposes.

Warrior Maidens: The Heroine in Fantasy

Fantasy has typically been a male dominated genre. From the earliest examples of sagas like Beowulf and the legends of King Arthur, to more contemporary tales such as Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings, we are introduced to stories chock-full of male protagonists ranging from kings to knights and boy wizards. Yet one should not neglect the resurgence of the strong heroine who with her feats and talents of unexpected prowess, rises above a system of expected gender bias, proving herself to be extraordinary. As Jane Tolmie argues in her essay “Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine” (2006), there is a fascination with the heroine who exists in a world that can be harsh towards women, with its society constantly outlining the boundaries between genders. It is this same society that attempts to denigrate women as the lesser sex, demonstrating “a critique internal to patriarchal structures, in that it depends on ideas about medieval patriarchy to delineate exceptional women” (Tolmie 146). As a result, the heroine continues to defy the norms and expectations imposed on her, escaping her oppression while emerging as a stronger and empowered person. The emphasis in fantasy is that the heroine needs to be exceptional to catch our attention, as her defining qualities are usually dependent on binaries distinguishing this from that. The exceptional needs to be shown as a contrast separating itself from a general status quo: for instance, masculine qualities versus feminine ones, dominance versus submission, and strength versus weakness.

What makes these heroic women in fantasy exceptional in most cases is that they embrace masculine traits and make these into defining qualities of their own. They take up arms like men, to escape the pressures of gender-biased restraints, often fighting as proficiently as any warrior or knight. For instance, the Valkyries of Norse legends were warrior maidens who rode into battle and carried the souls of fallen heroes into paradise. The Amazons in Greek mythology were reputed to be a race of fierce female warriors – it is said that they would cut off their right



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into paradise. The Amazons in Greek mythology were reputed to be a race of fierce female warriors – it is said that they would cut off their right breast so they could draw their bowstrings with ease. Martha McCaughey has written about women in today's world taking up self-defence classes as a means of reconstructing their understanding of gendered bodies. Her article leads off with the common misconception that females are not capable of the kind of violence or physical strength usually demonstrated by men. Yet this is because our patriarchal society unconsciously reinforces acts of violence or toughness as attributed to possessing authority and being masculine. As a result, violence has been subtly accepted as a norm that separates genders, while "the prevailing cultural models of sexuality and gender perpetuate men's violence and women's fear" (1998).

However, by forcing women to act in unfeminine ways, violence enacted by females not only identifies some of the discourses that create and sustain gender inequalities; it also serves as a means to subvert them. One need only look at contemporary remakes of fantasy stories and children's literature like *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012), as well as Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). In both films, the heroine starts off as naïve, innocent and ladylike, but she is chosen to save her kingdom from an evil queen. The hardships of war and violence take their toll on these maidens, transforming them into Joan-of-Arc-like figures. By the time the final battle takes place, they are dressed in full suits of armour, leading an army and wielding a sword. We cheer for these heroines as they are literally fighting to get their happily ever after, ultimately achieving the kind of closure we expect to happen only in fantasy. For the audience, we see that a sense of empowerment has been obtained. These women develop a new self-image; a new understanding of what the female body can do, and go on to defy the traditional roles previously expected of them. As mentioned by McCaughey, the practice of fighting, whether for self-defence or a greater cause, celebrates women's potential for violence, thus "[making] their aggression, and the femininity that prevents it, conscious [to others]". This is also suggested due to the assumption that masculinity and femininity are two opposite sides of the same coin.

Exploiting the Heroine in Fantasy

But if strength is shown in contrast with weakness, then the strengths demonstrated by these exceptional heroines have occasional downfalls. As Tolmie mentions, "one of the most consistent representational trends [in fantasy] is a condition of disenfranchisement of women, which is then overturned by the heroine" (150). Writers end up returning to the same formula over and over again, so long as it achieves marketing sales and profits. In other words, what's trending right now in the fantasy market is the investment of the exceptional heroine as a role model for audiences. We see the heroine taking on roles traditionally occupied by men, struggling against a system that threatens to oppress her. Yet she triumphs against all odds and reverses the expectations. While some see this as a progressive stance for female characters, this perspective becomes dangerous when we forget about the other women in fantasy who choose to retain their feminine roles. The disenfranchisement of women, and those who stand up against it by defying traditional gender norms ultimately becomes a source of narrative pleasure.

To briefly summarise the idea of narrative pleasure, Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" (1999) suggests that cinema as a visual medium offers a variety of pleasures in looking, though none is more central than the image of woman. Even the art of looking is divided into gender binaries. If strength is associated with men and passiveness related to women, the male gaze tends to actively project its desires and fantasies onto the female figure as an object, usually to be eroticised. Mulvey also comments that the woman's presence in a narrative film makes for an indispensable element of spectacle, "yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line" (837). As such, the female character needs to be worked into cohesion within the narrative of the film's story. Nonetheless, she still functions as the object of desire (and pleasure) on two levels – both for the character in film, as well as that of the viewing audience. Even if the heroine in fantasy serves as the main protagonist of the story (whether for TV or film), Mulvey's theory of the male gaze has now reduced her into a projected image of traits and attributes commonly desired by the unconscious patriarchal society. In fact, female characters who adhere to their comfort zone by retaining a lot of feminine qualities are typically cast in the roles of damsels in distress. These gender discourse routinely positions women, in McCaughey's words, as "vulnerable sex objects – objects that brave and physically capable men protect, save, and have sex with" (1998).

Furthermore, women depicted in media are also judged by different standards than men, often based on whether or not they are likable. An example can be found in the current hit HBO TV series *Game of Thrones*, possessing one of the biggest fan bases since its release in 2011. With no shortage of exceptional, if not strong female characters, almost all the women on this show have a definable quality of being strong or empowered because they demonstrate their exceptional skills as warriors, strategists or rulers. They even perform their duties better than their male counterparts.

The only exception is the character of Sansa Stark, who prefers to indulge in needlework, making dresses and other ladylike activities. In contrast with the other stronger female characters, Sansa is depicted as being the most feminine and passive. During the show's initial

seasons, when Sansa remains a captive in the capital of King's Landing, she is forced to constantly demean herself in the eyes of the public, occasionally claiming that she is "a stupid little girl who knows nothing". By playing on such backward ways of thinking, Sansa guarantees her own chances of survival in this Machiavellian fantasy. And yet, her character has received an initial amount of backlash from the show's viewers, mostly because she does not demonstrate any means of empowerment or stand up for herself – whether physically or by using her wits. Such favoritism over the empowered woman in Game of Thrones has its own traces back to the fantasy heroines and warrior maidens of the Icelandic and Scandinavian traditions. These old texts, according to Carol Clover, suggest that a fantasy already exists within a Scandinavian context whereby the 'powerful' woman was consigned solely to the realms of fantasy. Clover's concept can also be applied to more contemporary forms of media where "the 'powerless' woman is the real one, and the 'powerful' woman a medieval fiction" (1988, 147).

Empowerment: When and When Not to Use It?

As writer Lydia Morrish states from her online column Chick-Chat, "empowerment" means "to give autonomy to a group of people who otherwise don't have it, so they can act with their own authority" (2016). Yet the term itself may seem like it has been thrown around a lot lately, given the way it has been commercialised and caters towards a growing media-savvy audience. We tend to associate "empowerment" with individuals having made a personal yet life-changing decision. This often results in the individual being rewarded with some bestowment of strength, although not necessarily physical. While this perspective might not be far from wrong, there lies the danger of using empowerment, within every context, of making individual choices to the point where the meaning itself becomes watered down over time. What we may see as "girl power" today could actually be an overdose of consumerism being force-fed to women and other audience members alike, all in the hope of selling the so-called concept of "women's rights". Empowerment should not be solely about a personal feeling of achievement, nor should it be reduced to rejecting whatever dominant patriarchy we live in just so that we can "stick it to the man". Giving any woman a sword and proclaiming her as a warrior does not necessarily mean she is empowered, and saying that a woman deserves to rule simply because her male predecessors are neglectful or lousy rulers hardly suggests any empowerment. As Morrish puts it: "if it's not contributing to equality in some sort of way directly, it's probably not empowering" (2016).

Instead, what should be seen as empowering are examples mentioned in Morrish's article such as "giving dominance to someone who has been oppressed... [or] ending the use of women's bodies for profit" (2016). One who indulges in fantasy media (such as the Game of Thrones example mentioned above) could argue that a majority of female characters appear at first to be constantly grounded and demeaned by the imposing norms of a patriarchal society. They are eventually given the chance to speak up for themselves and make decisions as stronger, more powerful individuals. Yet a counterargument also arises when these same women have been eroticised and used as a spectacle. In a way, these fictional female bodies are still a means of marketability, as we continue to capitalise on the heroine's exceptions that stand out against relative gender norms, repackaging it over and over into a constant source of narrative pleasure. The only thing being empowered here is the male (and sometimes even female) gaze, as well as the profits that go straight to the media corporations.

Conclusion

Like other contemporary media, fantasy isn't just selling you stories; it is also selling you ideas. It is telling you how things might have been in a different world and time, but also, how some of these ideas might have already projected themselves into what we perceive and how we think today. From the many examples provided, the heroine in fantasy still has a long way to go. While her many different portrayals and guises have certainly won the hearts of both male and female spectators, we see the constant repackaging of familiar elements within the maiden-warrior plot, whereby strategies of contrasts and adaptation play to the heroine's strengths. As long as there remains a society set in patriarchal norms, so shall the heroine attempt to defy all odds against her.

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