

**Exploring Alternative Notions of the Heroic
in Feminist Science Fiction**

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I discuss feminist science fiction as a literature that explores a variety of alternative social realities. This provides the site to explore alternative notions of the heroic inspired by feminist critiques of the traditional heroic, which come from feminist philosophical, as well as literary critical sources. Alternative notions of the heroic offer a shift in perspective from a specific fixed heroic identity to the events the characters are involved in. The shift to events is made precisely because that is where the temporal is located and dynamic change occurs. Events are where ‘becoming’ alternatively heroic occurs: in the interaction between a character and the environment.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Ivy Jean Pullin, who was a graduate of the University of Sydney in 1934. The twinkle in my grandmother's eye encouraged in me a love of learning and of life.

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Contents	v
Prologue	1
<i>Chapter One</i> Feminist Science Fiction – an exploration of alternative social realities	6
‘Second wave’ feminism collides with science fiction	9
Feminist Science Fiction	11
Exploring alternative social realities	13
<i>Chapter Two</i> Traditional Heroes in fiction and popular culture	25
Traditional philosophy’s orientation towards death and ‘being’	27
Feminist critiques of traditional philosophy’s abstractions	30
‘Being’ traditionally heroic	35
Feminist critiques of the traditional heroic	41
Feminist re-definitions of the traditional heroic	45
Feminist re-definition as ‘girl power’ hero	51
Feminist science fiction re-defines the heroic	58
<i>Chapter Three</i> Alternative Notions of the Heroic – Part I	64
‘Troubling’ traditional concepts	64
‘Becoming’ alternatively heroic	66
‘Becoming’ in theory	68
The meeting of flows – connecting ideas	72

Dissolving the distinction between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’	75
‘Becoming’ alternatively heroic – the collision of ideas	78
Chapter Four Alternative Notions of the Heroic – Part II	89
‘Troubling’ the dualisms that divide us	90
The mind-body collision: subject as a ‘living-body’	91
The mind-body collision: subject as a ‘living-thinking-body’	98
The mind-body collision: subject as a ‘multiplicity’	104
The masculine-feminine collision: bending-gender & horizontal differences	112
The culture-nature collision: subject and environment relations	114
The theory-narrative collision: the particulars of experience	115
Chapter Five Suzy McKee Charnas’ <i>Holdfast Chronicles</i>	118
Examining the traditional heroic in <i>Walk to the End of the World</i>	119
Examining the traditional heroic in <i>The Furies</i>	135
Exploring alternative notions of the heroic in <i>Motherlines</i>	144
Exploring alternative notions of the heroic in <i>The Conqueror’s Child</i>	164
Chapter Six Exploring alternative notions of the heroic in Nicola Griffith’s <i>Ammonite</i>	184
Epilogue	218
Appendix I Narrative Catalogue to Charnas’ <i>Holdfast Chronicles</i>	221
Appendix II Narrative Catalogue to Griffith’s <i>Ammonite</i>	231
Bibliography	237

Prologue

Science fiction is the mythology of the modern world...even though it is a highly intellectual form of art, and mythology is a non-intellectual mode of apprehension (Le Guin 1979:74).

In this thesis, I am interested in an alternative to the traditional hero found in mainstream literature, film and popular culture. Such potential exists in feminist science fiction. That is, in the science fiction written by women in the context of feminist theory. From this perspective, I examine and critique the philosophical concept of the traditional heroic and offer an alternative model. I create this model from a dialogue between feminism(s), philosophy and cultural theory. In this thesis, I consider the ways in which alternative imagined worlds explicate feminist theory as well as the ways in which literature explores the abstract problems of gender and social theory.

Chapter One is an introduction to feminist science fiction as a literature that explores alternative social realities. Examples of alternative notions of the heroic can be found in these societies. As Le Guin notes above, science fiction uses both science and mythmaking to imagine how the world could be otherwise. The most radical social realities began to emerge during the collision between 'second wave' feminism and science fiction in the 1960s/1970s. This collision created a fluidity of boundaries or 'territories' that mark the genre of feminist science fiction with diversity. In the first Chapter, I offer a discussion of some of the utopian texts that dominated the genre at that time. These texts present challenges to contemporary Western society's established social conventions and imagine possibilities for women and men not available to them in mainstream literature or popular culture. I also discuss the James Tiptree Jr. Award for gender-bending science fiction. The Award is important to my thesis because it provides the place from which I have selected the texts that shape my fictional discussion of the heroic. The science fiction community recognises texts that have won and/or been short-listed for the James Tiptree Jr. Award as highly effective explorations of what women and men can do when not bound by gender assumptions. However, before I turn to an exploration of alternative notions of the heroic in feminist science fiction, it is necessary to describe the kind of 'hero' and the type of 'heroic' to which I refer.

In Chapter Two, I refer to the ‘traditional hero’ as the fictional male action hero that was developed by the ancient Greeks and to his slightly modified descendant, the modern action hero so popular during the late twentieth century. Whilst ancient Greek action heroes achieved immortality by dying heroic deaths, the modern action hero prefers the immortality which accompanies heroes who succeed and survive. Both find their immortality in the narration of their heroic deeds. In this Chapter I discuss the intersection between the concept of the heroic and traditional Western philosophy, which fixes the hero in a state of disembodied and timeless space. ‘Being’ traditionally heroic is a static social role and identity. Those who do not meet the attributive criteria of the action hero are excluded from ‘being’ considered heroic. Similarly, traditional action heroes are not connected to the places in which they display their heroic attributes. Fixed in attributes and identity, traditional heroes move through different spaces demonstrating themselves in the same way over and over again. The traditional hero is firmly fixed within dichotomous thought and linear, hierarchical, formulaic narratives.

Feminist critiques of the traditional hero come from feminist philosophical, as well as literary critical, sources. Following these critiques, I establish that traditional Western philosophy’s preoccupation with ‘being’ is an abstraction of timelessness. Feminists also critique the system of dichotomous thought which continues to privilege ‘Man’ over all ‘others’, ‘mind’ over ‘body’, ‘masculinity’ over ‘femininity’ and ‘culture’ over ‘nature’. These critiques include the recognition that narrative space is just as gendered as the characters that occupy it. In this way, feminists make visible the entanglement of theory and narrative.

In this Chapter, I also discuss feminist attempts to re-define the hero including the ‘girl culture’ variety of ‘third wave’ feminism known as ‘girl power’ heroes. ‘Girl power’ heroes combine the attributes of traditionally positive and negative ‘femininity’ with positive ‘masculinity’. They present a female version of the modern male action hero. ‘Girl power’ heroes exist in a similar disembodied and timeless space. They are not favoured by feminist science fictional re-definitions of the heroic. Those that envisage the most alternative model to the traditional hero imagine heroes who are not (traditionally recognisable) heroes at all, just people committed to establishing change in their alternative social realities. Similarly, science fiction critics and writers imagine alternatives to the structure of traditional heroic narratives. They imagine stories that disrupt gendered

narrative dimensions and resist closure. These stories are necessarily located in time as well as space and are oriented towards living rather than dying. What is most interesting about these ideas is the potential they create for a collision between traditional philosophy's dichotomous oppositions.

In Chapters Three and Four, I offer an alternative perspective to that of traditional philosophy, one compatible with the re-definitions of the heroic that literary theorists, feminist science fiction critics and writers imagine. I discuss how the perspective from which one views does not necessarily have to be dichotomous and hierarchical. Building on feminist critiques of the traditional heroic and the ideas of feminist science fiction critics and writers, I turn to the theories of Elizabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Adriana Cavarero, and Benedictus de Spinoza, the last through the scholarship of Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. These theorists engage in 'thinking differently' about traditional philosophy, which offers the opportunity to establish alternatives to the concept of the traditional heroic – the opportunity to explore alternative notions of the heroic.

In these Chapters, I explore contemporary theories of 'sex', 'gender', 'subjectivity' and the 'body'. I am concerned particularly with these concepts as they are organised around the heroic as a process of 'becoming'. 'Becoming' alternatively heroic is a process of continuous change that occurs over time and in time. This process causes a collision between time and space – between 'becoming' and 'being'. 'Becoming' induces the unknown – difference, change, and transformation – which frees the heroic from stasis and allows for alternative choices. Deleuze & Guattari's understanding of 'difference' invokes 'becoming' and 'multiplicity'. Alternative notions of the heroic are tri-fold – attributes emerge in the interaction between the character and the environment (the social circumstances and physical situation, in which they are engaged). In this way, identity and the attributes which emerge are interactive, dependent on the character and the environment. This process defies sameness and is inclusive of all those who are willing to participate in change. Alternative notions of the heroic interact horizontally.

Using the theories of Deleuze & Guattari combined with Spinoza shifts the perspective from hierarchical relations to horizontal relations. The process of 'becoming' alternatively heroic takes place in a positive ontology. By changing the perspective, other traditionally opposed dichotomies collide. I am concerned particularly with the collision between the

'mind' and the 'body', the 'masculine' and the 'feminine', and 'culture' and 'nature'. The change in perspective means that the subject is no longer thought of as a divided and singular identity but rather as a combination of differences. This creates a subject-in-process: a subject is a 'living-thinking-multiplicity'. These collisions allow me to move the abstract to the material, which erases the universal leaving only the particulars. The particulars occur in narrative, which points to another collision of traditional oppositions: the entanglement of theory and narrative. 'Becoming' injects the popular and pervasive fictional action hero with movement and change. The hero is part of the interactive temporality of events. Events are endlessly alterative. The combination of theories, heroic critique and re-definitions creates the foundations for exploring specific subjects as 'living-thinking-multiplicities'. These subjects as 'living-thinking-multiplicities' engage in specific events and it is in this interaction that examples of alternative notions of the heroic emerge.

In Chapters Five and Six, I offer examples of alternative heroes found in Suzy McKee Charnas' series, the *Holdfast Chronicles* and Nicola Griffith's text, *Ammonite* (Charnas 1994, 1999a,b; Griffith 2002). As I mentioned above, what these authors have in common is that their texts won and/or were short-listed for the James Tiptree Jr. Award for gender-bending science fiction. In these Chapters, I explore alternative notions of the heroic in the futuristic non-technological societies of the Holdfast and a planet called Jeep. Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this thesis to include some discussion of texts involving technological societies, although the possibility is indeed an interesting and equally suitable one.

Charnas' series offers an interesting journey through the process of writing in reaction to writing in creation. As part of the 1970s tradition, Charnas' text *Walk to the End of the World* is a futuristic, post-apocalyptic dystopia where women have been reduced to slaves and breeding stock (1999a). Also following the 1970s tradition, the next text in the series, *Motherlines*, describes an all female separatist utopia as radical solution to the extreme problems of *Walk* (1999a). Charnas' third text in the series, *The Furies*, suggests that between the extreme world of dystopia and the radical solution of utopia, a war between the sexes cannot be avoided. Yet, at the same time, Charnas highlights the disadvantages of war for everyone. The war causes the destruction of traditional gender boundaries. It also indicates that separatism is not an adequate solution for everyone. Both *Walk* and *The*

Furies offer an examination of 'being' traditionally heroic. In the fictional world Charnas has created this is a necessary process to go through. The characters must first establish their own 'being' before they can 'become' different. In the fourth and last text in the series, *The Conqueror's Child*, Charnas describes the alternative social reality of the New Holdfast. The text explores the difficulties of 'becoming' subjects as 'living-thinking-multiplicities' engaged in creating a 'becoming' community full of complexities and diversity. Charnas also considers reform for both sexes by creating alternative codes of behaviour mutually beneficial for everyone. The characters that engage in the process of 'becoming' in interaction with the events in *The Conqueror's Child* find that they are alternatively heroic.

Griffith begins with a social reality that Charnas' New Holdfast (*The Conqueror's Child*) is trying to reach. Griffith's *Ammonite* is at once reminiscent of the 1970's separatist texts and a variation on those ideas. Rather than reading Griffith's text as a utopia without men, I am interested in how *Ammonite* challenges assumptions about gender and how people can 'become' heroic without those assumptions. Griffith's futuristic, alien humanlike world imagines what happens when the boundaries that separate the sexes into specific gender attributes are removed, without removing their bodies from the female characters. In *Ammonite*, the characters are always embodied and the genitalia they have 'becomes' just one aspect of who they are, rather than the only attribute that dictates how they can 'become' alternatively heroic. Embracing some aspects of 'second' and 'third wave' feminism(s), *Ammonite* also explores what happens to identity when you 'become' irreversibly connected to your environment. The environment of Jeep has a very explicit physical impact on the people. This impact has the potential to be enabling and disabling depending on how the characters interact with it. In a way similar to Charnas' *Holdfast Chronicles*, the characters that engage in the process of 'becoming' in interaction with the events in *Ammonite* find that they are alternatively heroic. If alternative heroes exist at all, they exist in feminist science fiction.

