



# HEROES AND HEROISM IN BRITISH FICTION SINCE 1800

Case Studies

Edited by Barbara Korte & Stefanie Lethbridge



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# Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction since 1800

Barbara Korte • Stefanie Lethbridge  
Editors

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Case Studies

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ISBN 978-3-319-33556-8      ISBN 978-3-319-33557-5 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-33557-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016955189

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG Switzerland

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume originates from the context of the collaborative research centre on “Heroes, Heroizations and Heroisms” (SFB 948) at the University of Freiburg funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). We thank our colleagues there for inspiring discussions and support. Special thanks are due to Charlotte Jost for her help in getting this book ready for publication.

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# Introduction: Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction. Concepts and Conjunctures

*Barbara Korte and Stefanie Lethbridge*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions for ‘hero’: “A man (or occas. a woman) distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions, esp. in battle; a brave or illustrious warrior, soldier, etc.”, and “A man (or occas. a woman) generally admired or acclaimed for great qualities or achievements in any field.” In both these senses the hero has gained new topicality in the twenty-first century, although, for western cultures at least, the present has often been identified as a post-heroic age. However, military and civil heroism are currently appraised in the media, just as superheroes abound in popular culture. The new relevance of the hero has obvious connections with the anxieties raised by terrorism and war since the 9/11 attacks, but it also seems to be linked to more unspecific needs for orientation and re-enchantment in the postmodern world. With all its topicality, the current attention must be seen in connection

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with earlier representations and negotiations of the heroic that have been handed down through the centuries. It is this diachronic dimension which this volume intends to trace, with a focus on fictional literature and an emphasis on conjunctures (in Fernand Braudel's understanding)<sup>1</sup> and temporal layers of the heroic in British literature. To date, the re-emergence of the heroic in the twenty-first century has been discussed for some aspects of American popular culture, in particular comics and superhero films, but rarely for British culture where it is just as conspicuous and has a long history of literary representation. Indeed, heroes may only exist in real life because they are pre-figured in literature (Bohrer, 2009, p. 942). Until cinema arrived in the twentieth century, literature was the most important source for creating a cultural imaginary of the heroic, and it has retained its power to represent heroes and inspect their cultural meanings. Since the literary history of the heroic has only been sporadically addressed,<sup>2</sup> this volume aims to bring together the various existing strands with new interpretations in an attempt to provide an overview of the manifestations and explorations of the heroic in narrative literature since around 1800. It traces the most important stages of this representation but also includes strands that have been marginalised or silenced in a dominant masculine and upper-class framework; the studies include explorations of female versions of the heroic and they consider working-class and ethnic perspectives.

The volume starts from the assumption that a heroic imaginary and the (real and fictional) figures by whom it is embodied, fulfil important social and cultural functions in specific historical environments.<sup>3</sup> The heroic imaginary is the result of ongoing processes of *heroisation* and *deheroisation* in whose course certain types of heroes and heroisms are abandoned or reconfigured within changing social contexts and changing contexts of representation. Such processes are not always explicit or conscious. In some cases, however, heroes and their counter-figures have been deliberately constructed in order to fulfil specific functions. For the purpose of cultural analysis, historical manifestations of the heroic and the specific forms in which they are enunciated can serve as a lens that focalises cultural and societal constellations and phases of social reorientation.

Conceptualisations of 'the hero' are not fixed, as the dictionary definitions cited at the beginning might suggest, but dynamic and fluent. They oscillate between extraordinary and more ordinary varieties: between views of the hero as model of perfection and the hero as outlaw or criminal made good; between transcendent, transgressive and more domestic types.

Romanticism had a penchant for the rebellious hero; Victorian Britain valued both the hero of imperialism and the ‘moral’ hero in ordinary life; the twentieth century has mainly been associated with hero-scepticism, while the twenty-first seems to hover between the diagnosis of post-heroism and a revival of the heroic. Basically, however, intersections between affirmation and scepticism determine the negotiation of the heroic in all periods. Different understandings of heroes typically co-exist, and they are at all times open to shifting interpretations and evaluations, especially because heroes never stand alone. Even as outsiders, they are usually part of comprehensive figurations in which they stand side-by-side, or overlap or mix with other social types through which cultures express their values and assumptions: *anti-heroes* (whom we understand to have a distinctly *unheroic* status either through lack of agency or morality),<sup>4</sup> *outlaws*, *rogues*, *villains* and other kinds of *counter-heroes*, *scapegoats* or *victims*.<sup>5</sup> Such constellations can cause significant ambivalence because the status of the hero as hero also essentially depends on perspective, the viewer’s cultural location and need: “What insiders revere as the embodiment of the sacred is considered by outsiders as ridiculous, crazy, mad or even horrible and demonic. Viewed from the outside, the heroic revolutionary, the martyr, the suicide bomber is a terrorist, a madman, a criminal” (Giesen, 2004, p. 18).

Despite changeful and ambivalent semantics, this volume requires a basic definition of the hero and one that is more sophisticated than those given in a dictionary. While it is habitually stated how difficult it is to define the terms hero and heroism, approaches offered by historians and sociologists prove fruitful also for the analysis of cultural production. Geoffrey Cubitt defines the hero as

any man or woman whose existence [...] is endowed by others, not just with a high degree of fame and honour, but with a special allocation of imputed meaning and symbolic significance—that not only raises them above others in public esteem but makes them the object of some kind of collective emotional investment. (2000, p. 3)

Cubitt and Warren’s collection of critical articles (2000) is primarily concerned with “exemplary”, admirable heroes who embody established cultural values and serve as inspiration for the non-heroic mass. Nevertheless, Cubitt’s definition is broad enough to encompass adventure heroes that defend basically conservative value systems, or heroes that represent

entrenched cultural values, as well as rebellious heroes who violate the dominant standards and ideologies of their societies rather than embodying them.

The social functions of heroes emphasised here can be defined in terms of boundaries of the social order that heroes and their actions mark, stretch and overstep. Cubitt sees heroes as “products of the imaginative labour through which societies and groups define and articulate their values and assumptions, and through which individuals within those societies or groups establish their participation in larger social or cultural identities” (2000, p. 3). In this view, figures that are deemed heroic crystallise the ideals and norms of a society, or groups within a society (who may be conformist or oppositional) and they can contribute to the building, maintenance or destruction of communities. Heroes are intricately linked with communities that benefit from their heroic actions and that recognise and admire them as heroes (Reichholf, 2009, p. 835). But the transgressive agency of heroes can also pose a risk to a community because the limits of the existing order are destabilised. Rebels, who often have a strong charismatic effect on their followers, may have a long-term impact that is far greater, or at least more dramatic, than that of socially compatible heroes. In any case, heroic figures can be analysed as sounding boards for dominant, resistant and emerging ideologies and in the wider context they always also intersect with major social orders of gender, class and ethnicity.

Apart from social functions, heroes have been attributed with an anthropological function in so far as they mark a capacity to go beyond the limits of ordinary human existence: “The very image of man is bound up with that of the hero”, states Victor Brombert, who also declares the hero to be “the poetic projection of man as he unavoidably faces the meaning or lack of meaning of life” (1969, pp. 11f). Robert Folkenflik claims that “we can hardly do without heroes of some sort, for the idea of heroism is a mirror of an age’s very conception of itself at its best” (1982, p. 16). This echoes Jenni Calder’s assertion that heroes “are not only enjoyable, they are necessary. The hero has often been rejected, exaggerated, exploited, scorned, but the idea remains, the idea that there are heights to be reached in courage and commitment which are admirable and inspiring” (1977, p. ix). Such assessments have recently been rephrased in a cognitivist vocabulary. Allison and Goethals claim that “human beings do have mental lists or models, or images, of heroes, and also of villains”, so that we “react emotionally to charismatic people” whose appeal “attracts us and entrances us” (2011, p. 7, 65).

This attraction also explains the cultural significance of heroes, the way they respond to cultural sensibilities and desires. “The hero”, as Judith Wilt remarks, offers “an invented/invested space ‘between’”—between man and god, between real and utopian. He occupies “a middle ground, a mediating/mystifying function both generative and occult, in philosophy, in sociopolitics, in aesthetic desire” (2014, p. 3). The hero offers a projection space for dreams, ideals, explorative fantasies and experiments. In this space cultural boundaries can be tested and possibly renegotiated. Hero figures, male or female, frequently operate in boundary zones where engagements with potentially threatening ‘others’ enact cultural conflicts. They can help to resolve conflict by uniting the community in their support (fighting the ‘dragon’ that threatens the community). They can also create morally charged delimitations by clearly identifying ‘the enemy’. Knights in Renaissance romance for instance, frequently encounter a pagan, oriental other and the romance genre negotiates the terms in which Christianity can and should engage with this ‘enemy’.

Despite critical scepticism, the heroic continues to provide a nodal point for the negotiation of social and cultural concerns, and it has always done this in and through literature. For centuries, literature has drawn justification from a basically didactic function of the hero. Homeric epics, as much as Renaissance romance, gothic novels or Victorian adventure stories, down to contemporary action cinema have been defended (against always prevalent attacks against the imaginative exploits or emotional excesses of fiction) on the grounds that the presentation of model behaviour in the attractive figure of a hero or heroine can create social cohesion, an imaginative community that supports certain values and rejects others. Literature also has a special capacity to bring out the attractiveness and emotional appeal of heroes and heroic narratives. Indeed, as much as social constructs, hero figures are products of the media and genres in which they appear. They cannot be thought apart from the forms and aesthetics in which they have been aggrandised or belittled, glorified or mocked. As mentioned above, only a few of these forms and aesthetics have received critical scrutiny.

This volume focuses on various genres of narrative fiction, whose *crafted* heroes emphasise the constructed nature of the heroic imaginary, and which—perhaps more so than poetry or drama—offers writers the opportunity to explore heroes within a wide range of perspectives and styles, realms of action, settings and psychological insight. Furthermore, it is the privilege of the teller of tales to describe action in time—as opposed



to the fine arts which necessarily focus on the moment in time, as Lessing outlined. The heroic figure is largely constituted through action (even in cases where action consists of passive endurance) and thus uniquely suited for narrative literature. The chapters in this volume each focus on a prominent conjuncture of texts, histories and approaches to the heroic. Taken together, they present an overview of the ‘literary heroic’ in fiction since the late eighteenth century. The subsequent sections of this introduction sketch general lines of development, also considering the legacy of heroic concepts and genres of earlier periods that has been continually reworked since the eighteenth century.

### EPIC TRADITIONS AND ROMANCE TRANSFORMATIONS: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW TO 1800

The hero in literature is, to a large extent, determined or at least restricted by genre conventions which operate as “co-constructors” of the hero (Berns, 2013, p. 219). Certain genres require certain types of heroes. Vice versa, certain plot types and narrative perspectives elevate characters and the ideals they represent to the status of hero. Literary representations guide reader perceptions through narrative perspective, privileging specific characters and points of view. The main character of a narrative thus has a good chance of also becoming a hero in the proper sense of the word (that is more than the protagonist). The overlapping meaning of the term hero and protagonist itself suggests the potential of narrative positioning to create heroic characters.<sup>6</sup>

The habitat of the hero proper is heroic verse; ancient epics served—at least until the early eighteenth century—as standard models for what a hero should be, could be and perhaps also what he could not be. However, these models did not go uncontested. The central difficulty which arose was that classical epics presented hero patterns that did not necessarily coincide, in fact frequently conflicted, with Christian values. The epic hero’s self-reliance, hunger for fame and wrathful revenge clashed with Christian requirements of humility, obedience to God’s will and forgiveness. A central concern of heroic literature from the Middle Ages onwards was thus to try and correlate Christian with classical ideals. The classical model retained its status as superior poetic form: the “best and most accomplished kinds of Poetrie”, as Sidney affirmed (1923, p. 25). The main purpose of the heroic poem was, to Renaissance writers, not only to please but also to teach virtue (Evans, 1970, p. 5) and the hero in heroical

poetry according to Sidney “doeth not only teache and moove to a truth, but teacheth and mooveth to the most high and excellent truth” (Sidney, 1923, p. 25). The epic served a didactic purpose in the moral education of the individual as well as providing “the most comprehensive models for public life” (Di Cesare, 1982, p. 59). While thus an effort was made to maintain the highly prestigious classical framework in recognisable form, various modifications became necessary to accommodate Christian values. These modifications included changes to the evaluation of heroic action (often through a narrator) or to typical plot elements.

In *Beowulf* (eighth century), the earliest extant epic of the British Isles, the standard revenge plot—Beowulf’s campaigns against Grendel, Grendel’s mother and finally the fight against the dragon—stands uneasily beside narratorial references to Christian piety and humility. To Bernard F. Huppé, *Beowulf* “demonstrates the limits of heathen society” and with it “the limits of the heroic” as it shows Beowulf’s eventual failure in the foreboding of disaster that is to come (1975, p. 19). The gloomy mood at the end of the poem, despite the people’s celebration of Beowulf’s heroic death, “reveals the doom of the one who lacks saving grace” (p. 21). The epic, according to Huppé, presents a pagan world from a Christian point of view, essentially a rejection of the pagan heroic model, even while it is reiterated.

Perhaps more successful, certainly more optimistic, than the doom of the hero which governs *Beowulf*, is the concept of the *miles christianus* which found an early perfection in the saintly Galahad, member of the Arthurian round table and presented as perfect knight in the Arthurian chivalric romances, for instance in Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* (1485). While Galahad was theoretically a model of perfection, he is also notoriously uninteresting, in particular compared to the more sinfully inclined knights of the Holy Grail like Lancelot or Arthur himself (Bolgar, 1975, p. 124). Nonetheless, the warrior saint was to carry appeal well into the nineteenth century, when for instance Sir Henry Havelock was frequently praised as such. Even if Galahad fails to draw a large following, the romance genre tendered further possibilities to integrate classical models into Christian concepts, especially through allegory.

Two generic traditions of romance offered variations of hero-patterns that facilitated allegorisation: in romances dealing with ‘the matter of France’, knights at the court of Charlemagne fought for Christianity against paganism. The Celtic tradition, or ‘the matter of Britain’, introduced love as motive for heroic deeds (Hempfer, 2009, p. 54). In

this tradition, knights follow their quest for the honour of a lady. It was a comparatively small step to combine the two motifs and turn the religious quest of the Christian knight into an internal struggle within the conventions of the *psychomachia*. Conceptualised as internal struggle between good and evil, the clash of arms and the wrathful killing of the enemy in epic romances like Philip Sidney's *Arcadias* (1580s/1590s) or Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) were much less objectionable from a Christian point of view. Though the princes Musidorus and Pyrocles in the *Arcadias* engage in large-scale slaughter, it is inevitably out of an impulse that defends the weak or wronged. More than that, the *Arcadias* "allegorize inner conflicts of heroic development" (Borris, 2000, p. 116). Pyrocles for instance, disguised as the Amazon Zelmane, is captured and imprisoned with the two princesses Pamela and Philoclea at a moment when they indulge in an overly sensual celebration in the forest. Sidney allegorises "moral progress through temptation, trial and discipline of the 'lower nature'" (p. 116). In Cecropia's castle, Pyrocles and the princesses are subject to mental torture and increasing despair. It is the sisters' goodness and virtue that enables all three to survive the torment, not Pyrocles's prowess or Basilius's martial endeavour from the outside. Notably, Sidney also censures an excess of reason untempered by emotional understanding. Thus Cecropia's coldly calculating power politics is unable to comprehend her son Amphialus's love for Philoclea which leads to the eventual destruction of both mother and son. Heroic development thus incorporates the control of excess, both of the senses, and of reason and teaches a reliance on spiritual values.

As allegories, epic romances were more generally applicable beyond a limited circle of aristocracy. Based on St Paul's recommendation to "[p]ut on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the deuil" (KJV, Eph. 6:11), every Christian was in fact encouraged to (figuratively) join the fray against evil and temptation. Crucially, within a Protestant context, this could not be done without god's grace, and thus the hero could not rely on his strength or courage alone. This becomes explicit, for instance, in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. After his long imprisonment in Orgoglio's castle (which stands for pride) and a near-fatal brush with *Despayre*, Una takes the Redcrosse Knight to the House of Holinesse a "fraile, feeble, fleshly wight" (I.ix.53). Restored by the ministrations of *Fidelia*, *Speranza* and *Contemplation*, the knight faces the dragon that threatens the castle of Una's parents in a classic heroic configuration. Just at this point the poet explicitly renounces heroic poetry and calls

on the “sacred Muse” to “Come gently, but not with that mighty rage,/ Wherewith the martiall troupes thou doest infest,/And harts of great Heroës doest enrage” (I.xi.6–7). Despite his knightly valour and prowess, Redcrosse does not defeat the dragon of his own accord. It is only the intervention of divine grace that saves him and enables him to eventually defeat the monster. Spenser’s heroes represent specific virtues (Holinesse, Temperance, Justice and so on) but in most cases they need to learn the virtue they represent. It is through this learning process that they eventually earn their status as ‘true’, that is to say virtuous hero.

While Spenser thus presents his heroes as members of a “meritocracy of virtue” (Borris, 2000, p. 7), carefully balancing theological issues of grace and faith, literature for a more popular market was quite content to continue a tradition of heroism that was interested neither in the hero’s internal struggle for virtue nor in the finer points of justifying Christian violence. Richard Johnson’s enormously popular and often reprinted *Seven Champions of Christendom*, first published in 1596/1597, incorporates many of Spenser’s motifs and with St George one of Spenser’s heroes, “but he shares none of Spenser’s moral and religious preoccupations” (Fellows, 2003, p. xvi). This St George challenges the dragon largely for the “large proffer” of the Egyptian king’s daughter for a wife and the crown of Egypt after the king’s death (*Seven Champions*, p. 13). During his seven years in prison, eating rats and mice, there is no indication that this Champion grows in virtue, self-understanding or humility. Though “[f]rom time to time Johnson attributes to his heroes a specifically Christian motivation, or ascribes their success to their faith in God, [...] the story is always paramount” (Fellows, 2003, p. xvii). This popular hero, while he keeps external markers of a Christian faith, like occasional prayer or a hatred for Muslims, maintains his status as hero or “champion” through martial strength and an unquestioning assumption that a ‘Christian’ champion is a ‘good’ champion, which is not demonstrated through any particular show of virtue.

However, not all popular literature focused on the externals of heroism. The most long-lived example for the interiorisation and allegorisation of the heroic journey from a Christian viewpoint is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), which, next to the Bible, was one of the most widely read prose pieces of English literature well into the twentieth century (Swaim, 1990, p. 388). Christian’s struggle through manifold trials and temptations on his journey to the Celestial City in many ways “fulfills the paradigm of heroic departure, initiation, and return which Joseph Campbell

outlines” (2008, p. 390)<sup>7</sup> and it incorporates several heroic set pieces, most notably his encounter with the monster Apollyon (who represents pride) whom he defeats with the (Pauline) shield and sword he received in the Palace Beautiful. Christian’s journey is, however, the journey of a solitary fighter—Christian, though joined by occasional companions, essentially fights only for his own salvation. It is only in the second part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, when Christian’s wife Christiana and her children start on their journey, that the value of community starts to dominate the tale. Bunyan, according to Kathleen Swaim, extends concepts of individualistic, masculine heroism by including the more sociable, feminine part Christiana stands for. It is also not Christian who is the model hero in the end, but Great-heart, who fights for the whole community of pilgrims: “it is only through a feminizing and socializing process that Christian can become Great-heart, ‘under another name and at another stage of his growth’” (Schellenberg, 1991, p. 314). The interiorisation of knightly valour and the Christianisation of the hero, enforcing humility, gentleness and reliance on the powers of providence rather than personal prowess, made the heroic accessible not only for every Christian man, that is across class lines, but also across gender lines. Character traits that are stereotypically assigned to the ‘feminine’, and thus typically not considered part of the warrior hero, became constituent for the christianised hero. Ina Schabert traces the growing prestige of female heroism in literary and cultural contexts during the Renaissance—embodied in characters like Spenser’s Britomart or Ariosto’s Bradamante but manifest also for instance in the protagonist’s painful recognition of the values of endurance and humility in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* or *King Lear* (Schabert, 2013, esp. pp. 41–43). Such extended conceptualisations of heroism repair the shortcomings of the more traditional, self-reliant and confrontational hero, who is repeatedly shown to be one-sided and potentially (self-)destructive, as in *Othello* or *Henry V*.<sup>8</sup> Mary Beth Rose outlines a similar process for the seventeenth century, where not only Milton, after the experience of religious conflict and a civil war, advocates a “Heroics of Endurance” and “the better fortitude/Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom” (*Paradise Lost*, 9.31–9.32), but Aphra Behn in *Oronooko* (1688) compromises the agency of her hero in slavery “simultaneously idealizing and scrutinizing the heroics of endurance” (Rose, 2002, p. 100).<sup>9</sup> Toni Wein diagnoses an incorporation of the feminine in concepts of the heroic as explored in the gothic novel at the end of the eighteenth century (Wein, 2002) and, as will be seen, the Victorian concept of moral heroism fully embraces quali-

ties that used to be primarily associated with the feminine.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 4 on gendered heroism in the Victorian novel by Ralf Schneider further considers this aspect.

Rather than a feminisation of the heroic at any particular period in time, what emerges from these observations is that ideas about the heroic seem at all times to have included aspects that were stereotypically connoted as feminine, such as gentleness, endurance, passive suffering, emotional vulnerability and a strong communal orientation. At all times the hero (male or female) needs to reach out to his community, evince an attitude of caring and self-sacrifice, in order to qualify as hero. While there seem to be times and genres where the more martial and masculine aspects of heroism are foregrounded constituents, the overall trend from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on was to expand the concept of heroism to increasingly accommodate and incorporate characteristics that are at least neutral in terms of gender ascriptions.

The eighteenth century turned to an emphasis of the civil rather than the martial virtues of heroism. Milton's graft of classic heroic attributes onto Satan in *Paradise Lost* and the suggestions of a milder, humbler heroism in *Paradise Regained* held two mutually opposed options for post-Miltonic conceptions of the heroic. These developed further in the eighteenth century especially as the *Zeitgeist* moved away from religious preoccupations. On the one hand, the classical model continued to be interrogated and the milder strand of heroism received further attention in the less elevated domestic or private heroes of the novel and the fictionalised periodical piece. On the other hand, the gothic hero, so popular towards the end of the century, for instance as the Byronic hero, shows the continued fascination with a dominating, masculine heroism which combines strands of sublimity and rebellion with (forbidden) desires, as does Milton's Satan.

According to popular conceptions, the eighteenth century is "An Age without a Hero". But, as James W. Johnson has remarked, this should more accurately be phrased as "an age with far too many [heroes]" (1982, p. 25). The novel in particular struggled with the concept of the (unflawed) hero since it aimed for high degrees of verisimilitude and heroism presented itself as increasingly unlikely and impracticable for a middle-class context. Johnson locates the very problem of the eighteenth-century hero in the plurality of potential candidates and options for heroism. To the lack of consensus about "the constituent elements of heroism, or even as to whether the heroic concept had any validity" (p. 25), one