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).
We inherit this process as a gendered one, but it is deceptively complex. The roles of hero and worshipper seem gendered male and female respectively, but what if the worshipper “conceives” the hero? The 1982 television show *Remington Steele* featured a canny female detective-entrepreneur creating an illusory male as (the head of) her agency in a patriarchal world: a nameless man stepped into the empty office of the hero and there began a struggle – is there enough “agency” in the agency for two? The young Pierce Brosnan made a wonderfully wayward child to the sexily mature young Stepfanie Zimbalist, but the imbalance tilted almost immediately out of family romance to popular romance, where the premise always is that Love Changes Everything, making magically illimitable what we fear is the zero-sum game of power. “I’m holding out for a hero,” sang Bonnie Tyler in the 1984 film *Footloose*, “he’s gotta be strong and he’s gotta be fast … and he’s gotta be larger than life.” The drumbeat of the song calls up subtle mockery as well as “wildest fantasy,” but the lyrics by Jim Steinman and Dean Pitchford go on to locate the hero in the invisible place-between, “where the mountains meet the heavens,” where the “larger” is a mirror for what should/could be “life,” and the worshipper can feel the approach of the hero-god “like a fire in my blood.” For Emily Brontë, poet and storyteller, “a flood of strange sensations” internal to the worshipper blurs the distinction between the emphatically bodily imagination and its external trigger and object, the god, the hero, the power.² In cultures shaped by western Christianity, whose “sacraments” insist on a mystic relationship between an external sign and an inward transformation, the hero seems a kind of sacrament. We can think about “the hero” anthropologically, psychologically, in cultural and literary representation. It is a well-traveled theme, and I want to travel it again, an avid reader and later teacher and critic, a bodily imagination gendered female, a professional specialist in Victorian fiction with a consciousness deeply structured by twentieth-century popular culture genres – fantasy, mystery, history, and the mother of them all, romance. Out of that experience I ask myself: How do the shapes of hero and hero worshipper wrestle each other in the stories of culture, and what does the rise of women storytellers bring to that encounter? Are the hero and hero worshipper an eternal dyad? Striving for incorporation? Separation? Both? Is one the instrument or prosthesis of the other? The hero emerges in culture as a pedagogical example for, but also from, the worshipper. “Conceiving the hero,” the worshipper romances her/himself. The last lines of Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” ask the question whether the worshipper might actually have “put on his knowledge with his power, before the indifferent beak could let her