

International Conference on Knowledge and Politics in Gender and Women's Studies

An Existential Alliance of Byronic and “Lilithian” Heroes

Zuhal Yeniçeri^{a*}, Leman Korkmaz^b, Doğan Kökdemir^c

^{abc}*Başkent University, Department of Psychology, Turkey*

Abstract

Myth is defined as “a traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the worldview of a people or explain a practice, believe, or natural phenomenon” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1998). There are three important characteristics of myths: (1) they are passed down from generation to generation over time and across regions and cultures, (2) time and space affect myths while they are transmitted, and (3) they have to be widely embraced by societies in order to be transmitted from generation to generation. By analyzing myths we might find considerable data about how gender roles are defined in society. The data gathered will demonstrate how perceptions of women across time and cultural contexts overlap in narratives of myths. Lilith, the first wife of Adam before Eve, was created simultaneously with Adam in Genesis account and she is one of the most important mythic figures of female rebellion. This paper reveals that Lilith has characteristics similar to a “Byronic Hero” in terms of her non-conformist attitude towards oppressive social norms. Byronic heroes deviate from the stereotypical heroes and are characterized as intelligent, cunning, ruthless, arrogant, depressive, violent, seductive, and so on. Byronic heroes not only do reject and question the social norms, but their revolt against society is defined as male experience. The main purpose of the present study is to introduce the concept of “Lilithian Hero”. The new conceptualization and the recent examples of Lilithian heroes are discussed in the light of social psychological approaches to gender roles and prejudices towards women.

© 2015 Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, Middle East Technical University

Keywords: Lilith; hero; heroine; Byronic heroes; Lilithian heroes.

*Corresponding Author. Tel.: +90-312-246-66-66; fax: +90-312-246-66-30.
E-mail address: zuyen@baskent.edu.tr

1. Myth of Lilith

Patriarchal definitions of women, most of which are derived from Western mythology, construct women as inferior to men. Many feminists, who struggle for women's independence, equality and self-actualization, have reacted against these definitions and strived to find out powerful images of women that women can identify with. Lilith is one of these mythic figures that can be revisioned as a positive representation of woman particularly because of her being created as equal to Adam in Jewish creation accounts. However, her story is buried deep by patriarchal ideology which perceives women as inferior and secondary to men and therefore promotes the story of Adam and Eve in Judeo-Christian tradition.

Vogelsang (1980) states that in the Hebrew version of Bible, God is represented with both feminine and masculine attributes. In other words, God has an androgynous nature. However, in the subsequent forms of Bible the "*Androgynous-God*" was replaced by a masculine one, "*Father-God*". Vogelsang (1980) examined the original form of Ben Sira myth, which also includes the story of Lilith, to understand the differentiation of Father-God image and Androgynous-God image. According to Ben Sira myth, God created Lilith to be Adam's mate, but Lilith rejects Adam's sexual advances because Adam demands Lilith to lie beneath him in sexual intercourse arguing that it's his privilege to lie above her. Lilith does not accept Adam's request by asserting that they are equal. They quarrel without listening to each other's arguments. Then, Lilith utters the unknown name of God and she "*flew up into the air of the world*" (p. 152). Adam prays to God to make her come back. God sends his three angels to bring her back and commands if she refuses to come back, one hundred of her sons (can be translated as devils, demons, ghosts or spirits) will die each day. Yet, Lilith does not return and she fiercely counter-threatens to destroy the health of newborn male infants in their first 8 days and newborn female infants in their first 20 days. But she also promises that if she encounters these three angels or sees their names or the name of God in "camea" (a kind of amulet), she will not harm the newborn infants. Lilith's refusal of going back is punished by her own sons' death. However, her promise of not injuring the newborn infants protected by camea is rewarded with the permission of letting her live in her own kingdom at the bottom of the Red Sea.

In the myth, it is by uttering the ineffable name of God Lilith manages to fly up into the air. This scene takes place in the presence of the androgynous God. This indicates that Lilith is more privileged than Adam because he has told his/her secret name only to her. Then, Lilith is forced by Father-God to return to Adam and remain with the old values (Vogelsang, 1980). Knowing the secret name of *things* and possessing the knowledge as power is a very common motif adopted by various authors in literature. For example, as an extension of Jung's ideas of archetypes, an American feminist fantasy fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin (1968) portrays a male hero called Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, who tries to understand the purpose of the existence of the *shadow* (a Jungian archetype) following him through his adventures. The major theme of the novel is to find the *real / secret names* of everything around us. Once you (or the hero) find out the secret name of a particular living or non-living existence, he or she would have the power to communicate with and control it easily. This implies that knowing the secret name of anything would lead to a direct interference with it. In this perspective, Lilith's power (but not Adam's) to cry out God's secret / real name should be taken into account seriously when comparing the struggle and the competition between the two sexes. That is, not only is Lilith more powerful than Adam but she also intertwines with the nature itself.

Although it is Adam who aspires to be superior to Lilith while Lilith only proclaims equality, she is attributed negative characteristics. The subsequent mythical beliefs have portrayed her as a murderer who kills babies and mothers and a stealer of men's seeds to give birth to her devils (Osherow, 2000). She is associated with evil through her representations as a snake or a devil woman. She is depicted as the one who gives "forbidden fruit" to Eve who causes Adam's fall. Thus, she has become the representation of

female origin as evil (Özbay, 2013). In time, the original form of myth is suppressed by patriarchal ideology and the negative portrayal of Lilith has become more dominant. In 1970s, Jewish feminists revived the story of Lilith and by focusing on her courage and independent character they embraced her as the symbol of their movement (Osherow, 2000).

The punishment given to Lilith is a symbolic act that demonstrates what will happen if women do not conform to the patriarchal norms, rules, and cultural rituals. It is a warning to women who attempt at actualizing the self. If they demand emancipation, they will be excluded by the male-dominated society which will render them evil doers.

Today, women, who demand equality and independence, are still condemned and imprisoned within patriarchal confinements like Lilith. Besides, Eve, as a traditional representation of women, reinforces the negatively constructed image of women by her portrayal as a weak character who is easily tempted by devil. On the contrary, independent and strong male characters are widely portrayed some of which can be classified as Byronic heroes. A Byronic hero is an independent, autonomous, arrogant, and aggressive man who resists norms. Because of such characteristics, they are idealized as romantic partners for short-term relationships in a male-dominated culture (Kruger, Fisher, & Jobling, 2003). There is no female counterpart of a Byronic hero. Women should be submissive, obedient and passive. If they demand autonomy, they are punished when she does not obey Father-God's will. Thus, patriarchal ideology does not provide positive role models for women. Although there is no empirical study about the probability of selecting Lilith as a mate by males, it can be easily assumed that non-obedient nature of her characteristics would be regarded as a sign of being a dangerous candidate to mate. It is very hard to test the impact of Female Byronic heroes, which we will call it Lilithian Hero, because such images do not emerge in culture.

2. Heroes and their characteristics

Being a hero is one of the most important ways to achieve symbolic immortality because (1) heroes are deviant individuals who are assumed to have greater levels of self esteem and (2) although they are deviant, other people may adore them for their strength and their defiance of death. It can be argued that heroes do not have to be a representative of any specific cultural worldview; they rather have the power of creating their own worldview.

2.1. Heroes as risk takers

The term hero comes from the Greek word “*heros*”, meaning a demigod creature and defined as a “*man of superhuman strength and courage*” (Online Etymology Dictionary, September 25, 2015). Heroes are presented as individuals who commit certain actions for the benefit of others while they are taking the risk of being injured or getting killed. In other words, seeking for others' welfare is not sufficient to define someone as a hero. In order to be regarded as a hero, one should undertake a vital risk for the well being of others (Becker & Eagly, 2004). The definition of hero stated by Becker and Eagly (2004) derives from the *Carnegie Hero Fund*. Carnegie Hero Fund is a civil organization that was founded “... *to recognize persons who perform acts of heroism in civilian life in the United States and Canada, and to provide financial assistance for those disabled and the dependents of those killed helping others...*” (Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, September 25, 2015). This commission rewards heroes in USA and Canada. They define a hero as “*a civilian who voluntarily risks his or her own life, knowingly, to an extraordinary degree while saving or attempting to save the life of another person...*”.

The major concern of the definition quoted above is that “saving one’s life”, “voluntarily risking one’s life”, and “extraordinary degree” are somewhat abstract and/or perceptual terms that need operational definition. For example, being a voluntary participant for the first experimental use of a specific, unknown drug can be regarded both as a heroic action or a careless behavior. The label (hero vs. dull) is in the eye of the beholder.

Why do people take unnecessary risks? Several studies demonstrate that unnecessary risks are taken more by males than females; and among males, it is performed more by young adults rather than older age groups. *Costly Signaling Theory* explains these findings in an evolutionary perspective. Heroic risk takers are desirable mating partners. Especially for males, taking risks means one has “good genes”. This is the reason why they are attractive for females. Taking risks indicates that he can protect and defend himself, his partner and their children. Additionally, *Showoff Hypothesis* claims that people, especially males, prefer heroic risk takers as friends who may make future benefits for them. Farthing (2005) shows that individuals prefer heroic *risk takers* as mates and friends. Yet, if the risk taken is related to any kind of physical or drug risk which does not include heroic action, then they prefer risk avoiders.

Coates (1998) presents four types of hero: (1) People who are at direct physical risks such as soldiers, (2) people who are in danger because of their occupation such as police and fire fighters, (3) people in scientific and artistic fields who resist hostility and threats, and (4) people who achieve some political or social objective despite the risks.

2.2. Heroes as deviant individuals

There is also a controversy in the definition of deviance. However, Heckert and Heckert (2002) divided deviance into four testable categories. The first deviance category is called *negative deviance*. Negative deviance is characterized by underconformity or nonconformity to normative expectations and it results in the negative evaluation of the deviant person (e.g., any type of crime). *Positive deviance*, on the other hand, is overconformity to the norms that in turn lead to positive evaluations (e.g., Mother Theresa). However, some types of overconformity may cause negative evaluations. An overprotective mother, an extremely hard working student, or an extremely gentle man are possible examples of such a deviance that is called *rate-busting*. The final category is *deviance admiration*. In this category, there is nonconformity or underconformity with the normative expectations; however this violation of the norms receives positive evaluations (e.g., Robin Hood). It seems that deviant individuals who fall into this category are the ones who are also labelled as heroes.

2.3. Heroes as immortality agents

By emphasizing Ernest Becker’s works, Kenel (1998) and Scimecca (2002) states that society is a playground in which people play the game of life that can only become meaningful through existence. It is apparent that religion as a system provides the meaning of life for theists; however it is not the only source to derive meaning from in society or symbolic immortality.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of heroes are their being unforgettable. This is how they achieve symbolic immortality. An excellent example of actively immortality seeking was scripted in the movie *Gladiator* (Franzoi, Lustig, & Scott, 2000). The Roman General Maximus encourages his soldiers by declaring as follows: “*What we do in life echoes in eternity*”. It is an example of what Boon (2005) states as the purpose of a hero. Heroes provide other people’s protection that gives a sense of security and human transcendence that leads to immortality. Heroic images are also important for young people’s self

development. Although children and adolescents have different heroic images across cultures it can be claimed that heroic images of any culture provide people with an image of ideal self. It is also important to state that the conceptualization of cultural hero system is subject to change. Gash and Conway (1997) indicate that 3rd and 4th grade children switch their heroic images to more prosocial ones after classroom intervention which help students think about heroes in a more critical manner. Awareness of one's cultural hero system, being respectful to others' heroes, thinking about the construction of heroes, and examining heroic images in media would help children develop a more concrete view of "hero system" and thus their possible selves.

2.4. *Byronic Heroes*

George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron) is one of the leading English romantic poets of the 18th century. Byron is considered as a hero by the Greeks because he joined the Greek War of Independence and fought against the Ottoman Empire. His narrative poems such as *Don Juan* introduces the Byronic Hero. A Byronic Hero is an idealised but deviant, flawed, even sometimes insane, and romantic male character. Besides, he is arrogant, self confident, violent, depressive, narcissistic, seductive (to both sexes), intelligent and self-destructive. The relationship between the Byronic Hero and society is often problematic. He does not conform to society and has no respect for social ranks and status; he is free and independent from social norms.

There are many examples of Byronic Heroes observed in popular culture today. *Jack Sparrow of The Pirates of Caribbean, The Vampire Angel, Dracula, Snape of Harry Potter*, both *Batman* and *Joker* can be considered as the vivid examples of Byronic Heroes. When we consider Turkish films and TV series, *Behzat Ç.* appears as an excellent example for deviant heroes. The chief police officer *Behzat Ç.* has all the characteristics reported above. He is arrogant, non-obedient (although he is a police officer), violent, very depressive, seductive, and clearly self destructive (he tries to commit suicide more than once).

One of the most prominent characteristics of different Byronic Heroes in different products of popular culture is that they are all men.

3. **Gender of heroes**

The heroes who are publicly recognized are mostly male characters. Becker and Eagly (2004) question the rarity of female heroes by asking whether the scarcity of female heroes is associated with the frequency of heroic acts performed by women or not. In order to answer this question they made a research by considering the definition of heroism and by focusing on the real life examples. Becker and Eagly (2004) state that heroic acts should include both risk taking and serving to socially valued goals. They analyze heroic acts by classifying them in three groups: (1) Carnegie Hero Medal Recipients (e.g., people who risk their lives to save other people from disasters), (2) the Righteous Among the Nations (non-Jewish people who saved the lives of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust), and (3) other heroic acts (e.g., living kidney donors, volunteers of Peace Corps and Doctors of the World). The results indicate that more than 90% of Carnegie medallists are men. However, in the second and third categories the percentage of women is equal to the percentage of men. The researchers conclude that even though females perform substantial number of heroic acts, heroism is mostly associated with male because the heroic acts by women are performed in private sphere and women are deprived from the roles that bestow them the heroic status in public sphere like military and the combat roles.

In addition, the desirable characteristics for women and men can be compared by taking into account the conceptualization of heroism. Prentice and Carranza (2002) investigate the perception on the desirable characteristics for women and men in American society. The results show that willing to take risk is perceived as more desirable for men and being sensitive, compassionate which are qualities related with doing something for others is reported as desirable for women. Thus, considering the conceptualization of heroism including both risk taking and serving to society, we might conclude that heroic characteristics are represented by both masculine and feminine roles in society.

Considering the other conceptualization of heroism, heroes challenge and break the existing rules and become the creator of new society. Thus, they are active, daring and capable. The qualities of heroes in this definition are completely different from the representation of women. Whether they are assumed as heroes or not, women are generally expected to be and represented as passive figures who are attached to social norms (Olsen, 2014). To illustrate, although Snow White and Cinderella are the main characters in the fairy tales, they are passive figures who need others to be saved. However, considering this definition, if we examine creation myth, Lilith should be accepted as the first hero in the history of humanity since while Adam easily accepts existing rules Lilith did not accept the role given to her and she was courageous enough to actualize herself at the risk of being alone and her struggle for equality still has an influence in our society.

In the early creation myths, similar to Lilith, there are strong female characters such as Inanna, Cybele, and Isis. These female characters with their heroic qualities are characterized as ‘equals of god’ and they are blessed by power of creation and fertility. However, women deities become less prominent and the domination of male Gods has begun with the influence of medieval chivalric codes and the shifts in religion (Becker & Eagly, 2004). Accordingly, Lilith and all the associated values with feminine such as courage, passion, ego strength, and desire have been denied.

Although women display a great number of heroic acts and most characteristics of heroes perceived as feminine, female heroes are rare. More focus on female heroic acts and allowing -at least not discouraging- women to take roles bringing heroic status might create a change from male-dominated heroism to androgynous heroism. When female heroic acts are emphasized and when women are encouraged to adopt roles that will take them to the heroic status, male-dominated heroism will be transformed into an androgynous one.

4. From Byronic Hero to Lilithian Hero

Some authors argue that Byronic heroes are not exclusively male (Olsen, 2014). However, it is not easy to find out Byronic heroines in literature. Female representations of Byronic heroes are not common. Lymberopoulos (2014) claims that one of the well-known examples of Byronic Heroines is Margaret Hales in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (2003). In her analysis, Margaret Hales seems to adopt so called “male-based” Byronic characteristics such as resistance to social norms and customs particularly observed in love and marriage relationships. She is also portrayed as an arrogant person who also decides what is fair or not on her own and therefore she takes the necessary actions for the sake of justice. On the one hand, arrogance and resistance against social norms are the main traits displayed in male representations of Byronic heroes and these characteristics might be perceived as acceptable for the society and for the hero as well. However, this is not true for the case of Margaret Hale. In addition to her being excluded by society, she herself also feels disappointed with her own rebellious nature. As stated in the analysis of Lymberopoulos, Margaret cries by saying “... I have passed out of childhood into old age. I have no youth-**no womanhood; the hopes of womanhood have closed for me-for shall I never marry**; and I anticipate cares and sorrows just as if I were and old woman, and with the same fearful spirit” (p.315, emphasis added).

Although depressive mood is also one of the characteristics of Byronic hero theme, the “cry for womanhood” certainly is not.

5. Conclusions

Lilith is a symbol for women “to grow beyond Eve”, “...to free itself (the feminine) from subjugation by the masculine” (Vogelsang, 1980). Considering the conceptualization of Byronic heroes, Lilith might be presented as a female alternative to Byronic heroes. Perceptions are highly influential in creating future thus the findings can be interpreted that in future women will be more androgynous. Women who can easily show both masculine and feminine characteristics will be freer to follow their willing and truths that allow them to show their heroic and anti-heroic qualities. However, rather than analyzing her under the male-dominated category of Byronic heroes we suggest a new concept, “Lilithian heroism”, to define female existential heroes. We used the term “androgynous” but we do know that this conceptualization has also its own flaws of reference. Therefore, by “Lilithian Heroism” we do not want to imply that women should attain some male characteristics or personality to reach the desired level of self-actualization. Rather, each individual, man or woman, should exist in the world as she or he aspires to be.

In different versions of the narratives on Lilith, she is described as an immortal character since she left Eden before the original sin takes place (Özbay, 2013), which implies she can appear in collective consciousness and she can claim her position back. We aim that in near future, with more examples of Lilithian heroes in arts Lilith will take her deserved place and reputation back. Indeed, some studies on the dynamic nature of gender stereotypes (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000) imply the prevalence of Lilithian heroes in the future. The study has demonstrated that female stereotypes, but not the male ones, are perceived as dynamic and therefore female stereotypes will change in the future. The projection of the participants is that while there is a need for preserving the female characteristics of women in the dynamic transformation process, the masculine personality characteristics (i.e., daring, courageous, aggressive, dominant qualities and reacting under pressure) will also be observed in Lilithian figures. This implies the aspiration for equality between men and women.

Neither being brave is a male characteristic nor tenderness is a female biological make-up. Being a hero of one’s own life can only be achieved by perceiving of, thinking about, and acting in the world according to one’s own will and desires. The world should be free from gender restrictions.

Acknowledgements

We are deeply indebted to Dr. Selen Aktari Sevgi for her constructive criticism about and corrections in the earlier draft of this paper.

References

- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *American Psychologist*, 59(3), 163-187.
- Bogg, R. A., & Ray, J. M. (2002). Byronic heroes in American popular culture: Might they adversely affect mate choices? *Deviant Behavior*, 23(3), 203-233.
- Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. (n.d.). *Mission of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission*. Retrieved September 25, 2015, from <http://www.carnegiehero.org/about-the-fund/mission/>

- Coates, J. F. (1998). The future of heroism. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 59, 305-308.
- Diekman, A. B., & Eagly, A. H. (2000). Stereotypes as dynamic constructs: Women and men of the past, present, and future. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26(10), 1171-1188.
- Farthing, G. W. (2005). Attitudes toward heroic and nonheroic physical risk takers as mates and as friends. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 26, 171-185.
- Franzoi, D., Lustig, B. (Producers), & Scott, R. (Director). (2000). *Gladiator*. [Motion picture]. United States: DreamWorks and Universal Pictures.
- Gash, H., & Conway, P. (1997). Images of heroes and heroines: How stable? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 18, 349-372.
- Gaskell, E. (2003). *North and south*. New York: Penguin.
- Heckert, A., & Heckert, D. M. (2002). A new typology of deviance: Integrating normative and reactivist definitions of deviance. *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 23, 449-479.
- Kenel, S. A. (1998). A heroic vision. *Zygon*, 33(1), 59-70.
- Kruger, D. J., Fisher, M., & Jobling, I. (2003). Proper and dark heroes as dads and cads. *Human Nature*, 14(3), 305-317.
- Le Guin, U. K. (1968). *A wizard of earthsea*. San Jose, Ca.: Parnasus Press.
- Lymberopoulos, J. R. (2014). A Byronic heroine in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. *The Explicator*, 72(2), 77-79.
- Merriam-Webster, (Ed.). (1998). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th Ed.). USA: Merriam-Webster.
- Prentice, D. A., & Carranza, E. (2002). What women and men should be, shouldn't be, are allowed to be, and don't have to be: The contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 269-281.
- Olsen, G. (2014). Rewriting the Byronic Hero: "I'll try the firmness of a female hand". *European Romantic Review*, 25(4), 463-477.
- Online etymology dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved September 25, 2015, from http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=hero&searchmode=none
- Osherow, M. (2000). The dawn of a new Lilith: Revisionary mythmaking in women's science fiction. *NWSA Journal*, 12(1), 68-83.
- Özbay, E., (2013). Adem-Havva-Lilith figürleri izleğinde bir olanaksızlık miti: Aşk. *İdil Dergisi*, 2(10), 40-58.

Scimecca, J. A. (2002). Cultural hero system and religious beliefs: The ideal-real social science of Ernest Becker. *Review of Religious Research*, 21(1), 62-70.

Vogelsang, E. W. (1985). The confrontation between Lilith and Adam: The fifth round. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 30(2), 149-163.