Mythomania

St. Dorothy of Oz

Until Bill Moyers introduced us to Joseph Campbell on the PBS series The Power of Myth, we might have thought of Dorothy, as portrayed by Judy Garland in The Wizard of Oz, as an ordinary kid from Kansas with a big voice, a noisy little dog, and fabulous shoes. Now, of course, we realize she is an Archetype.

Throughout his career as a popularizer and interpreter of myth, Campbell never had much to say about women as heroes. His thesis was that all quest stories are one, which trivializes the specific content of disparate myths by blithely ignoring vast cultural differences, and by cutting all tales to fit one moral. They are all, in his account, the story of how we develop our unique individuality by courageously finding our bliss within. Campbell’s approach notoriously belies the fact that women and men are assigned different goals by all societies, as well as different ways of achieving them, as represented by differing plot trajectories for central male and female characters in traditional narratives.

But there are also real advantages to the comparative method, and to recognizing the cogent similarities among tales. Dorothy’s story is more than the sermonette it is usually taken for: a parable showing that you can go home again, and that—let us all click our heels together three times—there’s no place like it. It is a primary modern example of the traditional tale of the daughter (as opposed to son) as hero, with all the limitations necessarily implied. A comparison to another well-known story of a runaway daughter, Joan of Arc, may help make the point.

Like Joan, Dorothy is called to adventure against her will. Where Joan’s victories are attributed to the intercession of God, Dorothy’s are fortuitous, even accidental—she conquers the two Wicked Witches by sheer happenstance, rather than cunning, or even courage. (Not so much because she is female per se as because she is a young girl, Dorothy is not allowed the intention of actually harming her enemies.) Like Joan, she is a leader, an inspiration to her forces rather than a soldier herself; she also finds her helpers deficient, and her mission in whipping them into fighting shape. And like Joan, she undergoes imprisonment by the evil enemy. The most significant contrast between the two is the happy ending of the modern tale, as opposed to Joan’s martyrdom. We might say that Dorothy of Oz, virgin hero, is Joan of Arc without the Christian emphasis on exemplary suffering.

As it happens, the director of The Wizard of Oz, Victor Fleming, filmed Joan of Arc nine years later. His version reinforces these similarities, and even restyles Joan, as played by Ingrid Bergman, bringing her closer to Dorothy, just as

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from The Passion of Joan of Arc, 1928

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L. Frank Baum, the author of the Oz books, may originally have found inspiration for Dorothy in the figure of Joan.

Without making a case for Fleming as an auteur, the use of mise en scène to emphasize parallels is striking. The opening of Fleming's Joan of Arc portrays Joan as a farmer's daughter. The director chose to demystify conventional film depictions of the heavenly host, so that when Joan communicates with her famous "voices," we neither see nor hear the angels. What is romanticized instead of the supernatural is, as in Oz, the rural countryside and the psychological experience of the lonely female adolescent—distinctly, if not deliberately, echoing Oz's "Over the Rainbow" scene (which happens to have been directed not by Fleming, but by King Vidor, so it may be considered homage rather than self-plagiarism).

Joan's triumphal entry into Orleans in Fleming's version practically calls out for a chorus of "Ding-Dong, the Witch is Dead." Indeed, as Joan stands before the adoring peasants who consider her their savior, the camera shoots up at her to dwarf the extras—a tactic used repeatedly by mounting Ingrid Bergman on a horse, or by sending her among throngs of kneeling soldiers, looking like munchkins.

But it is really in her relation to particular male characters that Joan imitates Dorothy, as Dorothy resembled the Joan of legend, and a reciprocal influence is established. In Fleming's depiction, Joan's allies among the captains...
of the French army are arbitrarily narrowed down to three. The armor on all three
creates a reminiscence of the Tin Man; one, however, is clearly a Cowardly Lion,
and the Duc d'Alençon, an historical figure after all, is restyled in the role of
Dorothy's Scarecrow—the first and most faithful follower of the three (the actor
even resembles Ray Bolger). When each of the three captains is given a separate
send-off, there is an overt borrowing from the climax of Oz, which sentimentalizes
the relationship between girl and men in similar terms:

"Don't lose heart, Joan."

"If anything could make me lose heart, it's saying goodbye to you three."

As the Tin Man in Oz says, "Now I know I have a heart, because it's
breaking." Ingrid Bergman, as Joan, stops just short of saying, "I think I'll miss
you most of all."

The figure of the Dauphin in Fleming's Joan of Arc echoes the Wizard,
ineffectual and lacking in authority; it is Joan who empowers the Dauphin by
showing him his own weakness, as Dorothy liberates the Wizard by unmasking
him. The message Joan brings him, a religious and political one in traditional
legend, is reduced to the banality of the ostensible moral of The Wizard of Oz:
What you seek is within you, and true power derives from being true to yourself.
Perhaps more significantly, this message doesn't save Joan herself any
more than it helped Dorothy; it redeems only the men around her. The little girl
from Kansas still requires magical aid to return home, and as we know, Joan may
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have rescued the French monarchy but was burned as a witch—a wicked one, not a good one.

Why, after all, these stories of virginal female heroes and spectacularly inadequate men? The key to the similarity of the two stories may be in just this linkage of motifs. Dorothy’s three male comrades are, as everyone knows, defined by their respective deficiencies. The essentially anatomical flaws in the makeup of the Scarecrow and Tin Man reveal that the Cowardly Lion’s more abstract shortcoming, his lack of courage, is a bowdlerization; as the Scarecrow and Tin Man are missing brains and heart, what the Lion is missing is cojones. The munchkins and, of course, the Wizard of Oz himself are similarly imperfect and incomplete. That Dorothy meets no real men on her quest is not the consequence of the conventions of fantasy—it is their precondition. In both the stories and films of The Wizard of Oz and Joan of Arc, the males encountered are deficient precisely because the object of the virtuous, virginal female hero’s quest is a father figure, and the fantasy requires that she find no one on earth adequate to the role.

There is a style of traditional fairy-tale heroine like Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella, who passively awaits her prince, and another, like Joan and Dorothy, who is carried off on a quest that ends in disappointment. Archetypally, the ultimate model must be Persephone, who is dragged off to Hades, as Lewis Carroll’s Alice, another possible incarnation, is transported underground. Joan and Dorothy are more than the patron saints of runaway children, however. If the Persephone tale reflects the adjustment mothers and daughters must make to separation when the younger generation marries, the later stories, perhaps because they come from patriarchal societies, concentrate on a fantasy of reunion between daughter and father, with no handsome prince to be found. Whether it is the daughter’s fantasy or the father’s may be judged according to who holds the power in the story. Dorothy’s return home may be a happy ending, but it is also a failure. She acknowledges the deficiencies of men by returning to her place—even the all-powerful Oz is a humbug. Joan’s god, who also fails her, is darker and angrier and requires immolation in his name. The goal of the story in both cases is to show the adventuress daughter, who cannot, like the traditional male hero, hope to supplant the father, that no other man can take his place for her. Yet another reason why, in popular literature, a good man is hard to find.

Bernard Weit’s column, “Mythomania,” analyzes examples of popular art and ideology and appears regularly in Art Issues. He is Associate Professor of Academic Studies at the Corcoran School of Art and a contributing editor to Art Issues.