

From Viragos to Valkyries

Transformations of the Heroic Warrior Woman in German Literature from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century

Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly

This article focuses on the variety of guises in which the heroic woman is imagined in German literature from the Early Modern period on, in order to attempt an answer to the question: can women ever be heroes?

The Virago, the Monstrous Queen and the Martyr

Three protagonists of literary works dating to the middle of the seventeenth century convey such contrasting visions of the heroic warrior woman that they make an excellent starting point for our discussion. The virago is Bucholtz's Valiska, the monstrous queen is Lohenstein's Sophonisbe and the heroic martyr is Lohenstein's Epicaris.

In 1656–60, the Lutheran clergyman Andreas Heinrich Bucholtz published a novel of some 2,000 pages entitled *Des Christlichen Teutschen Groß-Fürsten Herkules und der Böhmischen Königlichen Fräulein Valiska Wunder-Geschichte* (1659–60).¹ The novel relates the coming of Christianity in the latter days of the Roman Empire and describes the union of Germany and Bohemia, symbolised by the marriage of the eponymous hero and heroine. Bucholtz explains in his introduction that he is writing out of “Liebe zu meinem Vaterlande” (love for my fatherland) and that “unser Teutschland” (our Germany),² which for him includes the Bohemians, Goths, Swedes, Danes and other northern peoples, has brought forth just as many heroes as the Greeks and Romans. Bucholtz wrote *Herkules und Valiska* in the 1630s,³ so the context for his patriotism is the Thirty Years' War and both the main characters can be imagined as the heroes that are needed in a time of national struggle.

¹ Andreas Heinrich Bucholtz, *Des Christlichen Teutschen Groß-Fürsten Herkules und der Böhmischen Königlichen Fräulein Valiska Wunder-Geschichte*. In acht Bücher und zween Teile abgefasset und allen Gott- und Tugendliebenden Seelen zur Christ- und ehrlichen Ergezligkeit ans Licht gestellt, Brunswick 1659/60. See Martin Disselkamp, *Barockheroismus: Konzeptionen 'politischer' Größe in Literatur und Traktatistik des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Frühe Neuzeit; 65), Tübingen 2002, pp. 83–157.

² Buchholtz, *Herkules und Valiska* (Fn. 1), p. 3.

³ See Ingeborg Springer-Strand, *Barockroman und Erbauungsliteratur. Studien zum Herkulesroman von Andreas Heinrich Bucholtz*, Bern 1975, p. 1.

Bucholtz's heroine is the "unvergleichliche tapffere und gottfürchtige Valiska" (the peerless, brave, and god-fearing Valiska).⁴ She is not a realistically delineated human but an ideal figure, a superhuman being not only possessed of all the most desirable female qualities, but of many male ones too. She is stunningly beautiful, strong, graceful, musical, and dances well. She is learned in Latin and Greek, German, and Czech. She deliberately rejects female activities, a limited education, and a restrictive way of life. She despises sewing, knitting, and lace-making, saying that these are activities for servants who have to earn their living by them, choosing to learn ancient languages instead. She considers that women should spend several hours a day at weapons' practice "so that they would not hide in the cellar in times of need but would come to the aid of their country and not leave their husbands in the lurch."⁵

Valiska loves arms and armour and can fight on horseback. Far from being presented as a transgressive character, she is depicted as wholly admirable. Her mother asks her frequently, however:

Do you delude yourself, dear child, that you can become a man by means of these exercises? But she always replied: she would like to wish that such a thing were possible or that it was at least the custom for the female sex to cultivate knightly exercises.⁶

She enjoys the skilful use of arms for its own sake and takes part in tournaments on several occasions, where her skill is so extraordinary that she vanquishes all challengers, the one exception being Herkules. She organises a tournament at the emperor's court in Book VI, in which she herself competes, disguised as an Amazon. In this tournament, Valiska shows herself not only to be valiant and strong, but perfectly ready to inflict pain and injury on her opponents, smashing out the front teeth of a boastful fencer in single combat, for instance. She does not relinquish her warrior persona and her martial skill either on marriage or even on becoming a mother. Valiska, therefore, is a perfect example of a virago, an exceptional woman who has risen above the limitations of her sex.

A sign of her exceptional status is her cross-dressing, which she indulges in at numerous points of the novel. There is plenty of sexual ambivalence in this. When she is wearing trousers, women are attracted to her as well as men. Valiska closely resembles Herkules and in his preface to the novel Bucholtz hints to the reader that she should see Valiska and Herkules as one being. This idea is further confirmed by their names. When dressed as a man, Valiska calls herself Her-

⁴ All English translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. Bucholtz, *Herkules und Valiska* (Fn. 1), p. 2.

⁵ "daß in zeit der Noht sie sich nicht in Kellern verstecketen / sondern dem Vaterlande zu hülffe kämen / und ihre Ehemänner nicht im stiche liessen", *ibid.*, p. 187.

⁶ "bildestu dir ein / liebes Kind / durch diese Übungen vielleicht ein Mannesbilde zu werden? Sie aber allemahl zur Antwort gab: sie möchte wünschen / daß solches möglich wäre/ oder doch zum wenigsten der Brauch seyn möchte, daß das Weibliche Geschlecht den Ritterlichen Übungen nachzöge", *ibid.*, p. 189.

kuliskus, a combination of her name and that of Herkules. When he is travelling incognito in search of her, he uses the name Valikules. The eponymous hero and heroine, who differ from all the other characters in terms of their virtue and heroic qualities are, therefore, two aspects of the same person and together they make up one perfect human being. So if Herkules and Valiska are actually one person, this explains why Valiska's behaviour is not transgressive. She can do all that a man can do as Herkules's other half. She is a cross-dresser who is not punished, a warrior who continues to fight after losing her virginity, a wife whom marriage has not diminished or subordinated, a heroic woman who is allowed to live. Valiska, however, is more than a virago, she is, at least partially, a man.

Sophonisbe and Epicharis

Now let us look at two of the six tragedies by the dramatist and novelist Daniel Casper von Lohenstein.⁷ *Sophonisbe* (1666) tells the story of a Carthaginian queen (d. 203 BC) who lived during the Second Punic War.⁸ Sophonisbe is married to the Numidian prince Syphax who has revolted against Rome and has been taken prisoner by the Romans. In his absence, Sophonisbe takes command of the army but is captured by Masinissa, a Carthaginian ally of Rome's. Masinissa is strongly attracted to Sophonisbe and she uses this to turn him against Rome. When Scipio, the Roman general, demands that Masinissa hand her over as a rebel, Masinissa sends her a cup of poison to save her from the humiliation of surrendering to Rome. She drinks the poison and dies a heroic death.

In the first act of the play, when Sophonisbe learns that her husband has been taken prisoner by the Romans, her first reaction is to hand herself over to them as a substitute, but then she decides to take up arms in her husband's place. Lohenstein puts into her mouth a stirring speech in which she declares her intention, not just of arming herself for battle, but of unwomaning herself by cutting off all her hair in order to go to war like a man to defend her country. She compares herself to Tomyris, the queen of the Massagetes, who conquered King Cyrus and fulfilled her promise to make him drink blood by plunging his head, cut from his corpse, into a skin full of human blood. She also invokes the Amazons. However, Sophonisbe's undoubted courage and decisiveness are shown to be perverse. Having donned male clothing, it is only a short step before she decides to sacrifice her own children on the altar, like a second Medea, and to feed her people with her

⁷ See Cornelia Plume, *Heroinnen in der Geschlechterordnung. Weiblichkeitsprojektionen bei Daniel Casper von Lohenstein und die Querelle des Femmes*, Stuttgart/Weimar 1996, p. 286–308; Renate Kroll, *Die Amazone zwischen Wunsch- und Schreckbild*, in: Klaus Garber [et al.] (Ed.), *Erfahrung und Deutung von Krieg und Frieden. Religion – Geschlechter – Natur und Kultur*, Munich 2001, p. 521–537.

⁸ Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, *Sophonisbe*, ed. by Rolf Tarot, Stuttgart 1970.

children's blood, in a terrible perversion of the mother's role.⁹ Then we learn that, since she is now putting on men's clothes, her stepson Vermina has to dress as a woman. The 'heroic' woman who goes to war emasculates and symbolically castrates the men around her. Lohenstein goes on to portray Sophonisbe as a kind of sorceress who bewitches men and leads them to their doom, like Medea. Masinissa, who is unable to resist her charms, calls her a lethal spider, a snake, a leech, a dragon, an adder, and a witch. The danger this woman represents is only removed at the end of the play when, urged on by his Roman mentor Scipio, Masinissa sends her a cup of poison which she drinks. By accepting this, she rises above her femininity and her sexuality and is allowed to become heroic in death.

If Sophonisbe is the sexually voracious warrior woman, Epicharis is the other side of the coin: the chaste virginal heroic woman.¹⁰ By using reason to discipline desire, she rises above physical passion and so comes closer to the male ideal. The historical Epicharis was a freedwoman who took part in the unsuccessful Pisonian Conspiracy against the tyrannical emperor Nero and who died in 65 AD. Volusius Proculus, the commander of the fleet, betrayed the plot and Epicharis was arrested. She refused to betray the other members of the group, even under torture. When she was being brought back to be tortured a second time, her limbs were so badly broken that she had to be carried bound to a chair. Refusing to surrender or give Nero the satisfaction of killing her, she strangled herself with her own bonds – thereby dying a martyr's death.

Questions of gender, as well as of heroism, are at the heart of the play. Epicharis is portrayed as being more a man than the men. She loves to wear trousers and often disguises herself as a soldier. She espouses the manly virtues of "Recht" (law) and "Vernunft" (reason) and is given speeches of clipped soldierly brevity by Lohenstein, while the future traitor among the conspirators, Proculus, tries to seduce her in speeches full of flowery Baroque rhetoric. One of the other conspirators says of Proculus that he is "von der Zung ein Mann / ein Weib [...] in der That" (A man in his speech but a woman in his deeds).¹¹ In modern parlance: he talks the talk but does not walk the walk! Epicharis refuses Proculus's advances, for her chastity is an essential precondition for her heroism, and out of wounded vanity Proculus betrays the conspiracy.

But then, all the male conspirators surrender in the course of the play, betraying their comrades. Epicharis is the only one who resists to the last, managing to cheat Nero of his victory over her with her last breath, exhibiting the extraordinary steadfastness and courage of the martyr.¹² She is a 'femme forte', a woman

⁹ Plume, *Heroinnen in der Geschlechterordnung* (Fn. 7), p. 228, sees this as wholly positive.

¹⁰ Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, *Epicharis*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, Vols. II.2.1 and II.2.2, ed. by Lothar Mundt [et al.], Berlin/New York 2005.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II.2.1, p. 294.

¹² See Pierre Béhar, *Silesia Tragica: Epanouissement et fin de l'école dramatique silésienne dans l'oeuvre tragique de Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635–1683)* (*Wolfenbütteler Arbeiten zur Barockforschung*; 18), 2 Vols., Wiesbaden 1988, Vol. 1, p. 118.

who possesses the virtues of a man. But she only does what she does because the men, whose proper business it is, do not take on the task of trying to topple Nero. She thereby comes closer again actually to being a man.

Can a Murderer be a Hero?

The biblical Judith is the embodiment of the heroic woman who, to save her people, uses her beauty to get close to a tyrant before murdering him in cold blood in his sleep. In the bible, Judith does not die after her deed but lives the life of a chaste widow. Nineteenth century writers, notably Friedrich Hebbel, imagine Judith as the woman who kills Holofernes because he raped her and because she desired him. In Hebbel's version, she will probably die, since she is most likely pregnant with Holofernes's child.

The historical figure of Charlotte Corday was sometimes compared to the biblical figure of Judith.¹³ Corday, whose full name was Marie Anne Charlotte Corday d'Armont, had revolutionary sympathies but was disgusted by the September Massacres in 1792 in which thousands of so-called Counter-Revolutionaries were brutally lynched and murdered by the mob. Jean-Paul Marat was principally responsible for urging them on, so Corday took an independent decision to go to Paris alone and kill Marat in order, as she hoped, to end this bloodbath. In July 1793 she gained access to him on a pretext and stabbed him to death with a kitchen knife that she had bought the day before. Marat, who suffered from a painful skin condition, was sitting in his bath, so that he was not only defenceless but naked when she killed him. At her trial Corday stated very clearly that she had taken a rational decision to liberate France from Marat. She went calmly to her death at the guillotine.

To her admirers, the parallels with Judith were clear: a beautiful young woman, acting alone, using a knife, kills a defenceless man, who is in an intimate setting and therefore off his guard. The man is a villain, so the woman considers it necessary to kill him to save her people. However, there are three important differences between Corday and Judith that make it easier to turn Corday into a saint and a martyr. First, there is no hint in Corday's encounter with Marat of an erotic relationship between killer and victim, as there was with Judith even in the Early Modern period, for she did not use her beauty to seduce him and only

¹³ See Inge Stephan, *Gewalt, Eros und Tod. Metamorphosen der Charlotte Corday-Figur vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart*, in: id. / Sigrid Weigel (Ed.), *Die Marseillaise der Weiber. Frauen, die Französische Revolution und ihre Rezeption*, Hamburg 1989, pp. 128–153; Inge Stephan, "Die erhabne Männin Corday". Christine Westphalens Drama "Charlotte Corday" (1804) und der Corday-Kult am Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts, in: id., *Inszenierte Weiblichkeit. Codierung der Geschlechter in der Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2004, pp. 135–162; Helga Abret, *Tyrannenmord. Politische Attentate in der Literatur und Erik Mitterers Drama "Charlotte Corday"*, in: *Der literarische Zaunkönig* 3, 2008, pp. 7–19.

spent long enough in his presence to plunge in the knife. Second, she was a virgin, as attested by the doctors who examined her corpse. Third, she paid for her deed with her death, a public death nobly borne.

Contemporary German sympathizers with the revolution were very interested in the case of Corday. The historian Johann Wilhelm Archenholz translated Corday's letters and the trial transcript into German a month after her execution, and published them in his journal *Minerva*. Christoph Martin Wieland composed a dialogue between Corday and Brutus also in 1793, in which Brutus (the killer of Julius Caesar) debates the ethics of political assassination with Corday, and in the same year Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock was already calling Corday "die erhabne Männin Corday" (the noble virago Corday). Among the early German commentators on Corday it was Wieland who made the connection not only between Corday and Judith but between Corday and Jael, the other heroic female biblical killer.¹⁴

Heinrich Zschokke and Renatus Christian Karl von Senckenberg published plays about Charlotte Corday in 1794 and 1797 respectively but it is in Jean Paul's *Halbgespräch* (1801) that we see the heights to which Corday veneration could ascend.¹⁵ The *Halbgespräch* depicts a meeting between the author, a nobleman called Graf von -ß, and a presiding judge. It takes place on 17 July, the anniversary of Corday's execution, and debates the rights and wrongs of Corday's deed. Can it be right, asks the judge, for an individual to be judge and jury and simply decide to execute someone, as she did? She was not acting as an individual, objects the author, but as a warrior defending her people from a public enemy:

Corday did not, as a citizen, fight and stab another citizen of the state but as a warrior in a civil war against the enemy of the state, therefore not as one individual stabbing another but as a healthy member of the party a treacherous cancerous limb.¹⁶

The nobleman has erected a shrine to Corday in his park. The three men go to this shrine at sunset, and when he gazes at the picture, the author calls Corday a second Jeanne d'Arc. The author reads out an account of Corday's life, deed, and last days, in which her decision to renounce marriage and love is an important factor in her heroic death. As the nobleman says: "Only the virgin dies for the

¹⁴ Christoph Martin Wieland, Ein paar Anmerkungen des Herausgebers über Scharlotte Korday, in: Neuer Teutscher Merkur 9, 1793, pp. 79–98. See Stephan, Gewalt, Eros und Tod (Fn. 13), p. 132.

¹⁵ Jean Paul, Über Charlotte Corday. Ein Halbgespräch am 17. Juli. Zuerst gedruckt im Taschenbuch für 1801. Herausgegeben von Fr. Gentz, J. P. und Joh. Heinr. Voß, in: id., Sämtliche Werke, Vol. 6, ed. by Norbert Miller, Munich 1963, pp. 332–358.

¹⁶ "Corday bekämpfte und durchbohrte nicht als Bürgerin einen Staatsbürger, sondern als Kriegerin in einem Bürgerkriege einen Staatsfeind, folglich nicht als Einzelne einen Einzelnen, sondern als gesundes Partei-Mitglied ein abtrünniges krebshafte Glied." Ibid., p. 337.

world and the fatherland; the mother only for children and husband.”¹⁷ Thus, her chastity enables Corday to become Marat’s Nemesis, as Jean Paul calls it.

The piece was published in the same year as Schiller’s *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, which presents another heroine and liberator of her people.¹⁸ In the first three acts of the play, Schiller gives us a goddess of war. She is a virgin who has strength and courage beyond that of most men. In her soliloquy in the last scene of the prologue before her departure for the French court, she tells us that God’s instructions to her are to unwoman herself and, by encasing herself in bronze and steel, to transform herself into a warrior. Once she embarks on her mission to free France and have the Dauphin crowned in Rheims, she is presented as not only resolute and fearless but as terrifying. In Act II, scene 5, Talbot calls Johanna “die Schreckensgöttin” (the goddess of terror) and Schiller invents the character of Montgomery, solely so that Johanna can kill him in cold blood on the battlefield. Act II, scene 6 is one of the most chilling in the play. Montgomery sees Johanna coming towards him across the battlefield with the world in flames behind her and says: “Dort erscheint die Schreckliche!” (There the terrible one appears)¹⁹ Speaking of herself in the third person, Johanna tells him that he has fallen into the hands of a death-dealing virgin who is less merciful than the crocodile, the tiger or the lioness defending her cubs. She says that her binding contract with the spirit world obliges her to put to the sword all living things whom the god of battles sends her. When Montgomery tries to appeal to her womanly nature, she replies: “Nicht mein Geschlecht beschwöre! Nenne mich nicht Weib” (Do not appeal to my sex. Do not call me woman),²⁰ before slaying him without remorse or feeling.

Schiller emphasizes Johanna’s lack of womanly feeling by juxtaposing her with Agnes Sorel, the Dauphin’s mistress, who is all feeling. But by this point Johanna has encountered the Englishman Lionel on the field of battle, has disarmed him, and is about to drive her sword into his body as she did with Montgomery, when she looks into his eyes. Suddenly, she is lost. The goddess turns in an instant into a mortal woman who has only to see this man to love him. She cannot kill him, begs him to kill her and then realizes she has broken her vow of chastity. Lionel takes her sword and escapes, thus ‘unmanning’ Johanna, the unwoman. The fourth act shows us a Johanna racked with remorse, lamenting the mission that was imposed on her, and longing for Lionel. Having turned from warrior goddess to witch, she now turns from witch to saint. Not for this Joan of Arc death on a pyre but a heroic death on the battlefield, standing up with her banner in her hand before a sky lit with a rosy glow. In her last speech she has a vi-

¹⁷ “Nur die Jungfrau [...] stirbt für Welt und Vaterland; die Mutter bloß für Kinder und Mann”, *ibid.*, p. 337.

¹⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, Sämtliche Werke, Vol. 1, Munich 1958.

¹⁹ “Dort erscheint die Schreckliche!”, *ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

sion of her own apotheosis, her heavy armour turning into wings, as she soars up to heaven and the choirs of angels. The king, who has just called Johanna an angel, gestures to the bystanders to cover her corpse with their lowered banners, after she has sunk to the earth in a death honourably caused by her wounds. She is therefore not the victim of a malevolent church or of her country's enemies like the historical Joan: this Joan has died for king and country – like a man. The pagan goddess has become a saint, but she can only do so by displaying the emotions of a mortal woman, which of course entails love for a man, and then renouncing them. As Inge Stephan points out, the death of Schiller's Joan has nothing to do with history. She dies because of her own contradictory nature.²¹ By renouncing her womanly nature, but in a different way to her initial unwomaning, Schiller can allow Johanna to die a *man's* death on the battlefield and so become a hero. Schiller goes further than anyone else dares to either in his day or in the nineteenth century in making a woman a real warrior and a hero by conferring the approbation of her society on her in the play. He thereby raises the question he confronts us with in other plays such as *Wilhelm Tell*: what is heroism?

At the same time as Schiller's *Jungfrau* began its successful career on the German stage with performances in Leipzig, Berlin, Stralsund, Hamburg, Schwerin, Dresden, Breslau, Kassel, Güstrow, and Stuttgart within the first nine months after publication, real women were joining up to fight for their country in the Napoleonic wars. We have records of twenty-three such women, who put on uniform and fought alongside the men in regular campaigns, often masquerading as men.²² Of them, by far the most famous is Eleonore Prochaska (or Prohaska). She came from Potsdam, was the motherless daughter of an invalid soldier, and joined the Lützow Volunteers in April 1813 at the age of twenty-eight, taking the name of August Renz. Her military career only lasted six months because she was wounded in September of the same year and died on 5 October. She had snatched up the drum that a wounded enemy drummer had let fall and was drumming to rally her own side and give the signal to attack when she was fatally shot. At this moment, she is said to have uttered the words: "Herr Leutnant, ich bin ein Mädchen" (Lieutenant, I am a girl).

Because Schiller's Johanna was fresh in the mind of the German public, the real historical Eleonore Prochaska became subsumed into the myth, raised onto

²¹ See Inge Stephan, *Hexe oder Heilige? Zur Geschichte der Jeanne d'Arc und ihrer literarischen Verarbeitung*, in: id. / Sigrid Weigel (Ed.), *Die verborgene Frau. Sechs Beiträge zu einer feministischen Literaturwissenschaft*, Berlin 1983, pp. 35–66; "Da werden Weiber zu Hyänen..." *Amazonen und Amazonenmythen bei Schiller und Kleist*, in: Inge Stephan / Sigrid Weigel (Ed.), *Feministische Literaturwissenschaft. Dokumentation der Tagung in Hamburg vom Mai 1983*, Berlin 1984, pp. 23–42.

²² See Karen Hagemann, "Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre". Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens, Paderborn [et al.] 2002, pp. 383–393.

a higher plane, and thereby made safe. Prochaska is in many ways the antithesis of Johanna: she actually masquerades as a man, she learns to shoot, she acts of her own volition rather than at God's command. But what is stressed in accounts of her life is her motherlessness, her independence from her father, her male attire, her rallying of the troops, and her death caused by wounds sustained on the battlefield. By emphasising these aspects, Prochaska could be compared to Schiller's Johanna very soon after her death and, like Johanna, could be dehumanised by being turned into a literary figure.

The first work about her appears to be Friedrich Duncker's play of 1815, *Leonore Prohaska*, only known today because Ludwig van Beethoven wrote incidental music for it. The work that kept Prochaska before the public consciousness was Friedrich Rückert's six-stanza poem entitled *Auf das Mädchen aus Potsdam, Prochaska*, published in 1816 in his *Kriegerische Spott- und Ehrenlieder*.²³

In the same work Rückert celebrates another so-called 'Heldenmädchen' who fought in the Wars of Liberation, Friederike Krüger.²⁴ As a nineteen-year-old she also joined Lützow's troop in April 1813 and took the name of August Lübeck. Her sex was quickly discovered, but she was allowed to stay with the soldiers, rose to be a non-commissioned officer, was decorated with the Iron Cross and the Russian Order of St George, and was only discharged from the army in 1815 after the second campaign. Rückert calls his poem *Der Unteroffizier August Friederike Krüger*. Both poems treat these women ironically.

But there was another young woman whose contribution to the war effort in subsequent decades was to receive nearly as much literary attention as that of Eleonore Prochaska, and her deed stays well within the boundaries of womanly conduct: Johanna Stegen. When the Napoleonic troops clashed with the First Pomeranian Regiment near Lüneburg, their munitions threatened to run out. Johanna Stegen saw that the French had abandoned a cart full of munitions. She filled her apron with them and ran to the German front line to supply the fusiliers. She ran back and did the same again, often holding a corner of the apron in her teeth so as to leave her hands free. In this way, she kept the German troops constantly supplied and they won the battle. She fearlessly ignored the hail of bullets through which she had to pass again and again, even when they cut through her clothes. Just as Eleonore Prochaska became known as the Heroic Maiden of Potsdam, Johanna Stegen was called the Heroic Maiden of Lüneburg. Rückert devotes a poem to her too in which he is far less ironic about her deeds than he was about those of Prochaska and Krüger. "Aber seht, es ist ein Engel / Unterwegs mit schnellem Fuß" (But see, there comes an angel fleet of foot), he writes about Stegen.²⁵

²³ Friedrich Rückert, *Kriegerische Spott- und Ehrenlieder* (1816), in: Friedrich Rückert, *Poetische Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. by Heinrich Rückert, Frankfurt am Main 1882, Vol.1, p. 210.

²⁴ Friedrich Rückert, *Zeitgedichte* (1814/15), in: *Poetische Werke*, Vol. 1, pp. 61–62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–61, here p. 60.

Where Friederike Krüger's salient piece of clothing was her Iron Cross, an object which causes great unease to the men around her in Rückert's poem, Stegen's is that most female of garments, an apron, emblematic of womanly service.

Prochaska and Stegen were portrayed in literature again and again over the next century. Rückert's poems alone would have served to keep them before the reading public, as collected editions of his works were published in 1834, 1836, 1843, 1846, 1868/9, and 1882, but works about them continued to be written throughout the nineteenth century and they appeared in cheap popular prints right up to and beyond World War I. As the century progressed, it seemed as if every region wanted its own 'Heldenmädchen': Friedland, Lemberg and Bremen are examples, while the Austrians, for instance, had Katharina Lanz, the "Heroic Maiden of Spinges", a figure revered to this day in the Tirol, for instance, in tourist literature for St. Vigil in Enneberg, where her statue stands in the market place.

While these women were being mythologised, the German stage was being dominated by a very different mythical figure.

Brünbild, the Germanic Warrior Maiden

The first entrance of the Valkyries into the consciousness of German intellectuals was Johann Gottfried Herder's translation of a poem from Thomas Berthelin's *Antiquitatem Danicarum et de causis contemptae a Danis ad huc gentilibus mortis libri tres* (Copenhagen, 1689). This poem, entitled *Die Todesgöttinnen*, had as a subtitle: "Das Gesicht eines Wandrers in einer einsamen Grabhöhle, da er die Valkyriur also weben sah" (The vision of a wanderer when he saw the Valkyrie weaving in a lonely cavernous grave) and Herder incorporated it into the collection of folk-songs that he had been putting together since the 1760s.²⁶ What these wild and sanguinary women are weaving are human entrails from which they are hanging human heads. Herder's Valkyries, therefore, are angels of death, personifications of war, 'femmes fatales', and the Sister Fates rolled into one. Johann Gottlieb Fichte's friend Friedrich Heinrich Karl, Baron de la Motte Fouqué, is the first writer to present the Nibelungen saga in dramatic form in his trilogy, *Der Held des Nordens* (1808–1810). The next literary treatment is Ernst Raupach's play *Der Nibelungen-Hort*, first performed in 1828 and printed in 1833.

In the 1850s, three men, close contemporaries, were working simultaneously on dramas based on the Nibelung material – Emanuel Geibel, Friedrich Hebbel, and Richard Wagner.²⁷ Geibel called his blank verse tragedy simply *Brunhild*. It first appeared in 1857, going into a second edition already in 1861.²⁸ It is a com-

²⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Die Todesgöttinnen*, in: id., *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*. Zwei Teile 1778/79, ed. by Heinz Rölleke, Stuttgart 1975, pp. 313–315.

²⁷ Another nineteenth-century work based on the Nibelung material is Heinrich Dorn's opera *Die Nibelungen* (1855).

²⁸ Emanuel Geibel, *Brunhild*. Eine Tragödie aus der Nibelungensage, Stuttgart/Augsburg 1857.

elling psychological drama that focuses on a small number of well-drawn characters. There are two heroic figures, Siegfried and Brunhild. Siegfried is heroic because of his magnificent physique and joy in his own physicality, while Brunhild is heroic because of the depth of her feeling and because of her capacity for suffering. Friedrich Hebbel called his trilogy *Die Nibelungen* and he is not particularly interested in Brunhild at all.

It is Wagner who gives Brünnhilde – this is his spelling – a truly tragic dimension and makes her a central figure in his four-part operatic cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung), for which he composed both the libretto and the music. It had a long gestation period, beginning in 1848. He began work with a prose sketch of *Siegfrieds Tod* (Siegfried's Death), concluding in 1874 with Act III of *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods).²⁹ The first of the four parts to be completed was *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie) in 1856 and the entire *Ring* was first performed in August 1876 in Bayreuth. Wagner's Brünnhilde is the daughter of Wotan by Erda. She is a "Walküre" or Valkyrie, that is, one of a group of warrior maidens who roam the battlefields and take dead heroes up to Valhalla, the place of the fallen heroes. If we look objectively at Brünnhilde, we see that, though she is a heroic warrior maiden and appears wearing armour, her outstanding quality is the expression of those emotions that are connoted female. She feels compassion for Sieglinde, love for Siegfried, hurt and betrayal for herself, and finally overwhelming grief at Siegfried's death. She leaps into the flames and joins Siegfried in a love death. Rather than being the warrior queen who strives to the last to keep her pride, her honour, and her sense of self intact and who is prepared to destroy the hero Siegfried to do so, she is depicted as remaining faithful to her love for Siegfried and dying in order to join him beyond the grave. Her last words are: "Siegfried! Siegfried! Sieh! / Selig grüsst dich dein Weib!" (Siegfried, Siegfried, look – blissfully thy wife greets thee), before she leaps into the flames.³⁰ Wagner's Brünnhilde, like Werner's Wanda, sacrifices herself for the man she loves and, even though he wronged her, she removes the curse of the ring through her faithfulness.

Women Writers and the Heroic Woman

Women writers, entering the public sphere through the back door, had the handicap of writing within a cultural system and using rhetorical tools that they themselves did not create. In the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, they left well alone the tropes about mythical and biblical warrior women that began to

²⁹ See Peter Wapnewski, *Weißt du wie das wird...? Richard Wagner Der Ring des Nibelungen. Erzählt, erläutert und kommentiert*, Munich/Zurich 1995. Norbert Müller compares Hebbel's and Wagner's versions of the Nibelung material in his *Die Nibelungendichter Hebbel und Wagner*, Essen 1991.

³⁰ Richard Wagner, *Die Musikdramen*, Hamburg 1971, p. 814.

dominate the stage and invented their own fictional warrior women instead. They imagined women putting on trousers and taking part in war and revolution in the real world, acting in a way that society would never allow a virtuous woman to act in real life. Fiction, therefore, allowed women to think the unthinkable and they sometimes created the most surprising works. Maria Antonia, Electoral Princess of Saxony, composed an opera about enlightened Amazons in the 1760s, Christine Westphalen wrote a play glorifying Charlotte Corday in 1804, Karoline von Woltmann retold the story of the Bohemian Amazons in 1815, and Elisabeth Grube depicted Eleonore Prochaska in 1864 in her play about the Lützow Volunteers. But these works are exceptions. What women writers do most often is to invent completely fictitious women warriors, dress them in trousers, and place them in a war zone in a realistic setting, whether contemporary or historical. This enables them to meditate on woman's role in a time of national upheaval, to consider woman's capacity not just for agency, but for leadership and even for violence, to depict woman's survival in a disordered world, and to think about how a woman reconciles her destiny as wife, mother, daughter, sister within the exceptional situation that is war and to examine the question of heroism.

Virtually all the works in which women imagine a woman going to war are prose fiction, works to be enjoyed in an intimate setting or consumed in private by a solitary reader, who we may imagine was very often another woman.³¹ Writers and readers can enjoy the transgressive behaviour of the heroine, who has a freedom of movement and an autonomy that they themselves, in most cases, did not have.³² Benedikte Naubert's *Geschichte der Gräfin Thekla von Thurn oder Scenen aus dem dreyszigjährigen Kriege* (1788) places her heroine into the midst of the Thirty Years' War, while Friederike Lohmann's *Die Talmühle* (before 1811) is set during the Schmalkaldic War of 1546–47. Two other authors depict the counter-revolutionary uprising in the Vendée in 1793–96 from two different political standpoints: Therese Huber's *Die Familie Seldorf* (1795/6) is written shortly afterward the struggle and takes a pro-revolutionary stance, while Caroline de la Motte Fouqué's *Das Heldenmädchen aus der Vendée* (The Heroic Maiden from the Vendée, 1816) is written twenty years later from a royalist perspective. Huber questions a whole series of accepted truths, among them the dictum that a heroic woman's destiny is either marriage or death. Fouqué shows her heroine expiring heroically at the end of the novel but only after she has had a career remarkable for its resolution and daring.

Louise Aston's *Revolution und Contrerevolution* (Revolution and Counter-Revolution, 1849) has a wonderful, wholly implausible heroine called Baroness

³¹ See Ulrike Prokop, Die Einsamkeit der Imagination. Geschlechterkonflikt und literarische Produktion um 1770, in: Gisela Brinker-Gabler (Ed.), *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen*, 2 Vols., Munich 1988, Vol. 1, pp. 325–365; Barbara Becker-Cantarino, *Schriftstellerinnen der Romantik. Epoche, Werke, Wirkung*, Munich 2000; Helen Fronius, *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era 1770–1820: Determined Dilettantes*, Oxford 2007.

³² See Mechtilde Vahsen, *Die Politisierung des weiblichen Subjekts. Deutsche Romanautorinnen und die Französische Revolution (1790–1820)*, Berlin 2000, pp. 40–44.

Alice. She is the president of a revolutionary club, she takes part in the 1848 revolution in Berlin, striding over the barricades through a hail of bullets, and then she plays a part in the revolution in Schleswig-Holstein. Alice also practises what today might be called 'free love', manipulates men to her political ends, bears arms, and wears trousers. Mathilde Franziska Anneke's account of another episode during the same revolution, *Memoiren einer Frau aus dem badisch-pfälzischen Feldzuge 1848/49* (1853), is a non-fiction account of her own real participation in war.

Of course, some women writers had internalized patriarchal ideas about women as passive, helpless, emotional, and irrational victims, and even when they invent heroic women, they make them conform to these norms,³³ thus policing the boundaries of woman's sphere even more thoroughly than male writers did. The turning point comes at the end of the nineteenth century when women writers and thinkers finally begin to take issue with such male tropes as the eroticized depiction of Judith as 'femme fatale' and to use the figure to debate very different questions. In her novella *Königin Judith* (Queen Judith, 1895), for instance, Maria Janitschek claims an agency for her heroine that comes from Judith's own sense of self, which gives her an ascendancy over the Holofernes figure that has nothing to do with seductiveness and everything to do with sheer force of personality.³⁴ Other women writers use the figure of Judith to debate the morality of killing a defenceless and sleeping man or the problem of guilt. But most hearteningly, women begin to rethink the figure of the Amazon, to imagine for themselves what an Amazon state could conceivably be like and to ask whether such a state might have utopian and emancipatory potential for their own lives. Ilse Langner's play *Amazonen* (1933) is the most positive and affirmative example of this, showing in the epilogue how modern technology can compensate for women's physical weakness and how, in a new age, men and women can be comrades in some great endeavour, instead of encountering each other only either in an adversarial or in an erotic relationship.³⁵ Women, in other words, begin finally to write back.

So can women be heroes? If one criterion for heroism is to die a noble death, as is the case from at least the mid-eighteenth century on, then there should be no problem. Lohenstein's Epicharis, Schiller's Johanna, Zacharias Werner's Wanda, Grillparzer's Libussa, Wagner's Brünnhilde, Eleonore Prochaska all suffer bravely and die such a death for a good cause. So surely they are to be seen as heroes? They have an unsurmountable problem, however: they are women. They have to rise above their own sexuality and renounce motherhood, even though their destiny, their 'Bestimmung', is to be mothers. Male authors reinforce this

³³ Sigrid Weigel, Die geopferte Heldin und das Opfer als Heldin. Zum Entwurf weiblicher Helden in der Literatur von Männern und Frauen, in: *Die verborgene Frau* (Fn. 21), pp. 138–152.

³⁴ Maria Janitschek, *Königin Judith*, in: *Lilienzauber. Novellen* (1895). *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen* (Digitale Bibliothek; 45), Berlin 2001, pp. 35561–35581.

³⁵ Ilse Langner, *Amazonen*. Komödie, in: id., *Dramen*, ed. by Eberhard Günter Schulz, Vol. 2, Würzburg 1991.

notion again and again. Then, having renounced these central aspects of their being, there is nothing left for them but to die.

Gustav Roethe, professor of German studies at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, expresses the impossibility of a woman being a hero with exemplary clarity in a speech entitled *Deutsches Heldentum*. He gave this speech in 1906 on the occasion of the birthday of Emperor Wilhelm II. – Kaisers Geburtstag. This is how he begins:

The German lands are strewn today with a plenitude of powerful women in marble and bronze wearing armour who as 'Germania' are supposed to represent the symbol of our national unity. I would not rejoice at this un-German form of artistic expression even if it were of higher aesthetic value. It does not touch our hearts. The chilly female personification has never acquired blood and life for us. The German has always clothed his ideal, the quintessence of his desires, in the form of a *hero*. The hero, however, is a man.³⁶

Women cannot be heroes? Why not? Because they are women.³⁷

³⁶ "Das deutsche Land ist heute übersät mit einer Fülle gepanzerter Machtweiber in Marmor und Bronze, die als 'Germania' das Symbol unserer nationalen Einheit darstellen sollen. Ich würde mich dieser undutschen künstlerischen Ausdrucksform nicht freuen, selbst wenn sie ästhetisch wertvoller geraten wäre. Sie berührt uns nicht das Herz. Die frostige weibliche Personifikation hat für uns nie Blut und Leben gewonnen. Der Deutsche hat von jeher sein Ideal, den Inbegriff seiner Wünsche, in die Gestalt des *Helden* gekleidet. Der Held aber ist ein Mann." Gustav Roethe, *Deutsches Heldentum*, in: id., *Deutsche Reden*, Leipzig 1927, pp. 1–18, here p. 1.

³⁷ The ideas in this article are developed at much greater length and with many more examples in Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Beauty or Beast? The Woman Warrior in the German Imagination from the Renaissance to the Present*, Oxford 2010.