

Chapter 4 of *The Hero - Manhood and Power*

by John Lash

Originally published by Thames & Hudson, London

All Rights Reserved to author

No use or citation without permission

Tragedy and Transfiguration

Both in his own eyes and in the eyes of the world, the hero is defined by how he behaves and what he believes. The second factor is truly decisive, for what he believes about himself and about the effect of his actions, both immediate and ultimate, determines if he is truly a hero in character and not merely in the outward display of his acts. As we have seen, in archaic and legendary accounts, the moral dimension of the hero is not an issue. Enkidu knows no right or wrong, merely the awful confusion of becoming a human, a socialized animal. Beowulf is a great hero, indeed, regardless of his acts and attitudes outside the fen, which anyway do not interest us. We do not question the serene benevolence of Yu, master of floods, the Chinese culture-hero who founded the Hsia Dynasty. He is known for his feat of controlling the rivers to preserve the people and for his selfless devotion to civic duties, and that's it. Even though we see in Samson an all-too-human temper, we recognize that his tantrum, bringing down the temple, is just another instance of heroic excess, like the wrath of Achilles and the battle-fever of Cuchullain; and there is not much more to it than that.

As history advances, all this changes and the hero assumes ethical depths and existential fractures that reflect our human predicament in general and the plight of the male in particular. These character-changes first occur in Greek tragedy where the

former heroes of the Homeric Era -- Oedipus, Agamemnon, Ajax, Orestes, Herakles and others -- now find themselves on the stage of the social theater, facing family feuds, sorting out passion and betrayal, enduring crises of conscience. There is domestic violence and plenty of it. Exposed in the arena of collective karma, the hero does odd things, overreacts and miscalculates. Exhibiting nobility and generosity in excess of the average person, he also displays a fatal fallibility, hamartia. He rages and tackles insoluble moral problems. Mostly, he suffers, right out in the open. For the tragic persona he has become, heroic feats and monster-tests no longer matter, for his own suffering has become the supreme monstrosity with which he must contend. In Greek tragedy, the heroic quest becomes internalized as a moral drama and the man of antiquity becomes psychological, like us, today. Kerényi observed that the cult and myth of the hero contain tragedy in germ.

Hybris, it is said, is main cause of the hero's troubles: a word usually taken to mean "arrogance, excessive pride." But in no way is the hero proud, at least not in the Christian sense of pride as a sin that "goeth before a fall." We recall that the hero is marked by the excess of vital force he raises and manages -- or not. Hybris really derives from the Greek verb hybrizein, found in Homer, where it means to run riot and reckless like a force of nature, as when rivers overflow their banks in a raging storm. In the Odyssey, describing Penelope's suitors, Homer uses it for wanton violence and the insolence that so often goes with it. Hybrisma is outrage, violation, rape, serious bodily harm, or a loss at sea. Thus, the primary mark of the hero in Greek drama is not a moral defect of pride, but a vital-emotional excess, exactly of the kind he manifests elsewhere as furor, wut, ferg, the frenzy and surfeit unique to man. In tragedy, hybris is the

counterweight to the enormity of the hero's suffering which comes upon him because he is engaged in human dilemmas with no clear and final solutions.

In Sophocles' Ajax, the protagonist runs riot, beheading a flock of sheep, and the chorus warns Menelaus of losing it and committing similar outrages. Agamemnon, in his turn, warns he'll wreak havoc on anyone gets reckless: i.e, he threatens excess with more of the same. Caught in their hybris, all the heroes are "overreacting." Struggling with emotions he cannot manage, Ajax exhibits typical heroic scorn and impiety, claiming that any coward can be victorious if the gods get behind him. When Athene comes to assist him in battle, he dismisses her! By contrast, Odysseus is a model of sobriety and caution, though selfish and ingenuous compared to Ajax. Sophocles shows Ajax's suicide on stage, involving the audience directly in man's violence turned against himself. Ajax was a national hero in Attica, to whom many families traced their descent, so the spectacle must have hit home, ruthlessly. His final speech is without bravado, heroic and humble.

In Greek tragedy, the spectacle of the tragic hero gives strength, cathartic release and inspiration. It infuses life-force and inspires the will to learn, courageously, from what life forces upon us. The hero learns from his suffering or he does not learn enough, or soon enough, but the community does. He faces despair, injustice, with no way of excusing it, arguing himself out or appealing to a higher power. The hero forges humanity in his own conscience, for he is the one in whom vitality becomes transformed into that innermost core of moral integrity at whose center one finds what Joseph Campbell called the "hero-heart."

Tragedy humanized the hero and opened the path that would eventually lead him beyond

his role as warrior. As the way he died and suffered changed, the hero discovered something entirely new. Since time before reckoning, he had fought and died hand to hand and eye to eye with the prey, the monster or human foe, who was always a close match. This continued throughout the Age of Chivalry, the era in European history most richly embroidered with heroic lore, but as if by extraordinary foresight the heroes of that much-celebrated time were already preparing for what would come when the chivalric ideal was outmoded and outgrown. Specific technological events would eventually compel the shift, incurring a sea-change and transfiguration for hero.

One such event was the discovery of gunpowder, initially made around 1000 AD by the Chinese who used it for firework displays, then independently reinvented by a German monk in 1314, the same year that Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Templars, was burned at the stake. Then, in 1430 the first cast-iron gun was introduced. The following year saw Joan of Arc burned at the stake in Rouen. From the middle of the 15th century massive technological efforts on all fronts of life show *homo faber* in a frenzy of invention, producing everything from the battleship (1598) to the barometer (1643). As man began to mechanize his world, the career of the hero shifted direction toward invention and exploration. He assumed more and more the role of the explorer, inventor, scientist, physician, engineer; but to a large extent these new roles were a huge distraction from the moral development of the hero, which had already taken its own independent course. Sometime between the 7th and the 12th century, however, man had already entered upon a new path. Even before technology and political change deprived him of his customary habits of fighting and dying, he had been exploring an ingenious alternative: a whole new realm of conflict, a whole other way to die.

In Dante's Inferno, one of the doomed lovers, Francesca da Rimini, is made to say: Amor condusse noi ad una morte. "Love led us to a death." It was woman, of all creatures, who opened the way the hero would take from classical warrior to modern male. Antar, an Arabian romance based on materials from the 7th Century, depicts a chevalier who exalts his beloved, Alba, as guide and protectress of his martial adventures. From Her he draws a surfeit of supernatural power and, in turn, dedicates to her all his heroic acts and contests with overwhelming foes, monstrous and human alike. The hero of Antar represented for that time a moral code independent of the religious virtues and obligations proposed by Christian and Islamic doctrines. He presented a model which rapidly developed in the West, especially in Southern France: the knight dedicated to the tests and triumphs of carnal love, profane passion.

Historians often state in a ho-hum manner that romantic love was a literary invention, as if everyone knows that love sufficient to transform the world, and transfigure humanity in both the sexes, could come off the printed page. Paolo and Francesca, the illicit lovers in Dante, are discovered not in flagrante delictio (as the box office would have it), but reading a book together. A great part of the hero's role in inventing romantic love was that he learned how to read and sing, he became literate. A long tradition supported this development. Chretien de Troyes, author of several chivalric romances, declared that Greece was the origin of three great adventures: romance, knighthood, and "clergie", by which he meant learning. Classical tradition itself showed heroes like Achilles and Herakles being tutored in the fine arts of writing and rhetoric, and Homer asserted that a clear and forceful speaker of words was equivalent to a doer of

courageous deeds. Through the middle ages, the prudencia expected of the hero as complement to his fortitudo became more and more refined into sapientia, wisdom. Training in warrior skills was to be complemented by training of the sensibility through written culture: armas y letras in the Spanish code. The result was a flowering of lyric and romance (a long tale in vernacular prose) on a truly magnificent scale, the literary renaissance of the 12th century.

At the center of this vast cultural breakthrough were two figures, a man and a woman, hero and lady. The idealization of woman by her knight has rightfully been considered as one of the most astounding moral, cultural, sociological, psychological and spiritual shifts in human history. For the hero, amor courtois, courtly love, was a school of manners in which his self-image became entirely transfigured. Just as the passage from hunter to warrior had entailed the evolution of a whole set of values, now another passage began and nothing less than a new morality emerged. The heroic path now became the path of the heart, of passion and intimacy. Chivalric tales of knights fighting dragons or jousting against formidable adversaries remained popular fare, but the subtext contained the true story. Usually, the dramatic tension of the narrative hinged on the conflict of loyalties facing the hero: he must weigh his feudal allegiance to his lord against his dedication to his lady, who was often enough the lawful wife of the lord. Now the well-known love-triangle appears, for instance in Arthur-Lancelot-Guinevere, a complete transfiguration of the archaic triangle of hero-woman-monster. Often the hero is tested by the choice between desire for his lady and longing for the time-tried challenges of his masculine power, or by the choice of humility over manly pride. To save his lady's honor, Lancelot had to accept the indignity of riding in a cart, something a knight worthy

of the name would never do. A moment's hesitation in deciding convinced Guinevere that his love was less than perfect. The overwhelming force here is human passion, romantic love, invested by Gottfried of Strassburg with all the markings of religious torment. For Tristan and Isolde their love is the bread and wine of an intimate communion, overtly displacing the communion and atonement offered by the Church. The hero attains the highest expression of his masculine power by surrendering it, for Woman is no longer the helpless victim he rescues from the dragon: she herself is his deliverance.

In the troubadour idiom, She is called Domna: lord and superior, she who dominates the man in the sense that she alone determines the purity of his motive and the value of his actions. Socially, Domna is a rival to the feudal lord to whom the knight typically owes his loyalty and his life. Spirit-ually, she is erected as a higher power in a feat of psychological transformation that profoundly effected Western culture.

I In a consummate act of self-surrender, the hero renders himself powerless and stays that way, unless his power is reflected back to him through Her. Previously he had found in death the perfect measure and seal of his heroic will, now it is love itself that leads him to another kind of death. In Gottfried, the liebestod, love-death, is the culminating moment of the Tristan's quest. No more a warrior seeking his equal for a final match of strength, the hero dies in the arms of his beloved, and she in his, transported to that dimension of final intimacy to which death itself is merely an accessory.

As the hero evolved into the lover, a new language evolved from his experience. The chevalier and his lady conversed in a subtle, sophisticated code preserved in troubadour lyric -- an arcane vocabulary that did not, for the most part, find its way into modern

French. Amor courtois was called in the Occitanian idiom of Provence, fin amors: not fine or perfect love but "sincere, not obliged," not required by social rules or any demands external to the power exchanged by the lovers. Even strong physical passion, viewed as a mere symptom of the pro-creative urge, was considered as external. Troubadour language made excruciating distinctions regarding true passion and the right manner to express it. Chauzimen was the discretion that prevented the lovers from wasting themselves by the excess to which their passions might naturally tempt them. It was the heroic virtue of self-restraint, essential to the management of male excess, now applied to the overpowering attraction between the hero and his lady. Mezura was constantly invoked as essential to all romantic discourse and intercourse: temperance, balance, with a nuance of elegance. In submitting to love, the hero exchanged prowess for sensibility, enans: literally, superior manners. He rejected drut, carnal love for its own sake, and folor, virility in its base form, seeking instead to find in his very passions a path toward proenza, insight or recognition in the sense of a soul-felt rapport with his lady, and pretz, loving esteem, worthiness, the dignity conferred by intimate contact with woman and her mysteries. In place of Christian charitas, he sought cortezia, self-esteem reflected in beautiful manners.

Moderated in self-love by the reflection of his Beloved, the hero now managed his masculine charisma as he had formerly managed his rage. In doing so, however, he did not renounce force completely, but he only continued to undertake adventures and tests in the service of his Domna. From her he received supernatural protection and the permission to use violent force. Many of the troubadours who developed this exquisite code of manners and the language to express it were also seasoned fighters, adept with



sword and lance.

Fin amors involved an entire system of interpersonal values independent of Christian ethics. The hero in love valued fizanze, confidence, not fidelity. The ennobling love he sought, amors enansa, was finally a spiritual gift, superior to anything that noble blood or Christian grace could offer. The mark of achieving it was virtu, authenticity, pure and simple. In the Renaissance virtu became the moral signature of the courtier, the enlightened, humanized man of the world who was none other than the hero himself, man reborn in a new image. Along the way to this transfiguration, the hero had achieved through the medium of the Domna an array of experiences which can be imagined as modification of the primary heroic asset, vitality, excess of the life-force. In this way, the demonstration of male surfeit outlived its aggressive phase. It was no longer fulfilled in acts of power but in the power of acts inspired by deep personal love, esthetic sensibility and human-istic vision.

Perhaps the ultimate gain, the highest social and spiritual achievement of the chivalry, was simply the inception of amistat, friendship between the sexes. Rene Nelli, a poet and scholar of Occitanian culture, has proposed that the male devotees of fin amors found with woman a bond of friendship previously and exclusively known between men themselves. Since Paleolithic times, men had revered the Goddess for her life-nurturing largesse, yet feared her in her mortal form as the one who lured him to where she bled from her secret recesses and the mother who often bore man into birth covered in that same taboo-charged blood. To compete with this mystery, men in archaic cults had resorted to practices of ritual bloodletting, circumcision and subincision, investing

themselves with the taboo nature confers on all women and, paradoxically, becoming true men by imitating how women bleed. In death and wounding, the warrior-hero forged a blood-bond with his kin and even with the foe who "blessed" him -- blessor in French meaning "to wound." Orders of knighthood were commonly bound by blood-ties but even these were not strong enough to prevent man from ultimately making that heroic transition beyond blood to its transcendent components, ephemeral passion and enduring love.

Outside of Europe, this transition did not occur in any-where near as dramatic a fashion. In many parts of the world, the hero remained arrested in his stone-age status right down to the beginning of the 20th Century: in America, for instance, where the pure type of the "noble savage," every inch a hero and warrior by the Homeric standard, persisted until he and his kind were driven to near extinction by the genocidal aggression of the colonials and frontiersmen. In Central America, the era of chivalry and amor courtois corresponded temporally to the rise of the Aztecs, a warrior culture in which heroism on the battlefield was carried to psychotic excess. Nonetheless, among the Aztecs there existed forms of lyrical love-poetry as tender and compelling as anything one can find in the troubadour cult. Historically and culturally, there seems to be an odd parallel between high violence and high esthetics, both of which are indications that male surfeit has been developed to an extreme and decadent degree. Masculine beauty, a classical mark of the hero, seems to thrive in those cultures where masculine power is valorized almost to a pathological extent. The heroic culture of the Celts also displayed this dual glorification of power and beauty. Cuchullain is described in numerous accounts as so radiantly beautiful that the sight of him is practically unbearable.

In Japan, also, the cult and mystique of the samurai closely paralleled the epoch of chivalry in the West, but instead of Romantic Love it was the Buddhist concept of the Void that dominated the morality and esthetics of the feudal courts. Around 700, the national chronicles began to be compiled out of massive oral lore derived from the traditions of the katari-be, bards who sang the exploits of clan heroes and mounted aristocratic warriors. Prince Yamato, one hero of the era, is the exact counterpart to King Arthur.

The Heian period (794-1185) saw the emergence of the samurai as a folk-hero possessing a unique mix of masculine charisma and feminine sensibility. The heroic acceptance of death was ritually observed in seppuku, suicide performed as the honorable alternative to disgrace or dishonor. Often the samurai recited a spontaneous haiku, a three-lined Zen poem, as a final elegant act of self-composure before disembowelling himself. To live and die beautifully was the primary criterion of conduct for the aristocratic hero whose spirit was permeated with aware, the sense of the sad, exquisite transience of all things. Buddhist compassion for all sentient beings here took the extreme and decadent form of an esthetic of polished impersonality. Passional romantic engagement of the kind that transfigured the hero in the West was impossible in Japan, because life in its dream-like transitoriness did not really afford the opportunity to fathom the depths of the Other. One and other were the same in the Void, a dimension where the unitary love-death was impossible because there was, ultimately, no one there -- certainly no one particular and personal -- to undergo either love or death.