

# The Witch, the Wife and the Warrior: Women in Classic Historical Narratives of the West

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## ABSTRACT

*Historical texts of medieval and pre-medieval Europe have designated women into three archetypes based on their position in society. The Witch is a monster persona, the femme-fatale, that is powerful and dangerous. These women - like Shamhat the civilizer of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh - are necessary evils to history. The Wife is a subjective observer who depends on others for support. The Wife is also an object transacted to maintain peace or given as gifts for her skills. Finally, the Warrior is the most powerful archetype that defines and defies history itself. Warriors are bound in realism, strike against injustice, fight for freedom and are devastatingly intelligent. They are such terrible beauties who defy authority and the society itself. This paper researches these archetypes and their representations in Western classics.*

**Keywords:** *New Historicism, Archetypes, the Witch, Subjection, Warrior-Women*

History calls for light; it cannot remain in darkness for long. Narrative texts have breathed life into history ever since 2,500 BC when the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the very first chronicle was documented on clay tablets in Sumeria. Myths were created soon after this throughout the world and soon the Epic was born. Fiction gave more freedom to authors and engaged readers further. After the twentieth century, these texts begin to contest history rather than celebrate it. With the advent of the avant-garde, readers and writers are now in a phase of inquiry. Deconstructing ancient texts prove that, in fact, history was never celebrated in any text at all. All these documents, from contemporary fiction to clay tablet cuneiform inscriptions, exist for one reason only: to predict the future by analysing the patterns of the past. What happened a century ago will happen in the exact same way tomorrow.

Chronicling the life of women was not the primary focus of historical texts. Yet they have unintentionally recorded, and even glorified, the lives of women. The intentions, and the representations, vary from century to century but all have placed women into certain limited archetypes. These women have not shaped history, they were victims of reality. They were the reason writers contest history. No woman is spared from victimization: even the

heroic warriors accept their places and stand behind the line. But it is not history that made them a victim. They were victims to those who created history, the men and women with absolute power. This paper researches the representations of women in historical texts and the purpose behind those representations.

Primarily written to document the deeds of heroes and kings, historical texts did not entertain readers till the eighteenth century. They were just codes, like the Code of Hammurabi, inscribed to hold law and order. Myths and legends served a similar purpose in a deified way. With the application of Post-modern theories and New Historicism, these texts provide new meanings. Rereading them proves that they are not just classics and records of heroes of the past, but records of tyrants and power-politics. Women historical victims appear as martyrs, slaves, odalisques, queens, geishas and even goddesses. They are exchanged as gifts, property or chattel to gain kingdoms and keep them under the power of rulers. Prized for their beauty, artistic sophistication and skills, women make history and unfortunately erase it too. Often the subjects of art and literature and the consorts of monarchs, women have witnessed history and the representation of history. Historical narrative weavers have represented women under the following archetypes

The Witch - this archetype represents the mythification and deification of powerful women in ancient texts. Medieval history did not accept women philosophers and women with superhuman strength or intellect - like Hypatia and Sappho, for instance - so they were turned into witches. The Witch was too powerful for history to subdue. Witch-hunting became a full-fledged madness after the publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* or *The Hammer of Witches*. Cultural diversity and totems have also led to witch-hunts as in the Salem witch trials. Sir Walter Scott's Rebecca is a witch in *Ivanhoe*. So is Ken Follett's Caris in *World without End*. These women are described as 'femmina bulba' [1], the female-monster who appears both beautiful and terrible at the same time.

The temple prostitute Shamhat civilizes Enkidu in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and makes him human. Shamhat is originally the priestess of Ishtar, the Sumerian goddess of love and war. This symbolises the upcoming adventures in the epic. Enkidu, the primeval power, loses his strength after being with Shamhat for six days and seven nights. Stephen Mitchell, in his translation of the epic, asserts, "this superhuman feat easily matches anything Gilgamesh and Enkidu accomplish later in the epic" [1]. Enkidu gains the consciousness and intelligence of a human. But more than just teaching the ways of men, Shamhat changes the course of Gilgamesh's cruel reign and creates history. She also destroys the gods' plan of destroying Gilgamesh.

Greece, the birthplace of philosophy and logic, nevertheless produced two amazing records of history and culture of the eighth century, namely the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Read for their imperfect account of the Trojan War and the perfect representations of Indo-Greek relationships, these texts present the vantage points of powerful women who, unfortunately, fall under the Witch archetype. Cassandra, daughter of Priam and Hecuba, is cursed with prophecy that no one listens to. She predicts the Trojan War and warns the council who never listen to any of her prophecies. They often consult the oracle of Apollo who riddles them when Cassandra openly warns them.

Calypso, the nymph of Ogygia, has the power to make Odysseus immortal and gain eternal youth - unlike Aurora - but he refuses. The gods force her to send him home as that is his destiny. Nevertheless, she has him in thrall for seven years, while the politics at Ithaca hang heavily on the ruthless suitors. The *Odyssey* presents yet

another powerful Witch, Circe, the enchantress and daughter of the Titan Helios. Modern readings of the epic reveal that she is a powerful healer and herbalist more than a witch. She presents Odysseus with a bag of winds that lead him on another adventure. Both Calypso and Circe unintentionally remind Odysseus of his nostos or his homeward journey. The Greek tragedies written to celebrate Dionysia and honour the god of entertainment have left us powerful Witches who have deconstructed history. Medea of Euripides' tragedy of the same name is once again too strong to be the wife of Jason. She worships Hecate of the Crossroads, symbolising the turns of history. Medea murders her children and Jason's new wife to save them from Jason's weakness.

The first Anglo-Saxon text with Scandinavian history *Beowulf* shows the hero slaying Grendel's mother, another Gorgon-like woman who is the descendant of Cain. She is condemned for her inhuman strength when Beowulf is celebrated for it. In the process of avenging Grendel, she becomes a tough match for Beowulf who has to use a special sword forged by the giants to kill her. He does not use any special weapon for killing the dragon at the end of the text. *The Mabinogion* gives us yet another powerful woman, Rhiannon, mistress of horses and the commander of the immortal birds. Though she appears as a miracle to Pwyll, the king of Dyfed, she is still exchanged as a gift. She plays her hand in the power-politics of Ireland after her marriage to Manawydan.

Arthurian legends are studied today for their structural ambiguity and historical delineation. Thomas Mallory introduces Morgan le Fay, the sister of Arthur and the rightful heir to Camelot, as a sorceress and seductress. She indirectly rules Arthur's lands by conjuring adultery between Launcelot and Guinevere. She takes him to Avalon where he would wait and rise again to rule England. Morgan le Fay is so powerful a match to the knights of the round table that none can take her down. The celebrated Launcelot is held prisoner by her and Arthur has to go to her in the end to heal his wounds. She even clones Excalibur, the symbol of Arthur's tyranny. It is a fact that the whole legend rests in her design.

The Wife - this archetype shows the beautification and weakening of heiresses for personal and political gains. These women are queens, princesses or noblewomen who are pawns to historical conquests. They are peace-keepers, bread-makers, pledges of honour and house-warmers. Some of them are not literally wives - they are slaves prized for human labour, concubines conquered to produce beautiful offspring and odalisques or geishas purchased for entertainment. Helen is the first woman to come into prominence in the *Iliad*. Her beauty, or rather her political place as a princess of powerful Sparta and Troy, is the cause of a major war. She is merely an object, observing and waiting to be taken by Paris, Meleaus or Agamemnon after a single-combat. She calls herself a "dog, nasty contriver of evil" [2] and hopes she dies before the winner has a claim.

Andromache and Briseis share the same level of subjection though the former is a princess and the latter a slave. Andromache is a typical madwoman and a dependent waiting for the worst to happen to her. She and Briseis could be equally taken captive after the war. Briseis, at least voices out her opinions. She is a captive, a war-prize and symbol of dominance between Achilles and Agamemnon. She is given as a gift with tripods, cauldrons and horses back to Achilles. It is because of her that Achilles refuses to fight for the Greeks and many die.

Going back to *Beowulf*, apart from Grendel's mother being a Witch, the text also has a peace-keeper and bread-maker in Queen Wealhpeow, wife of Hrothgar. Her name means "a foreign slave or captive" [3] held as a

pledge of peace between Wulfings and Scyldings. Apart from being the hostess and cup-bearer, she has to wear rich garments to show off her husband's status and remind the men of their obligations. Though given a minor role, Wealhpeow maintains the delicate balance between two clans. Guinevere in *Morte D'Arthur* is yet another similar Wife archetype given in marriage to Arthur by Leodegrance to fend off his enemies. Geoffrey of Monmouth describes her as a Roman noblewoman and the ruler of Britannia in *Historia Regum Britanniae*. She is the object of a never-ending abduction-war-rescue cycle and finally causes war between Arthur and Launcelot, giving way for Mordred to capture the country. Guinevere's adultery was nothing unusual of the time but it was seen as power-politics.

The Warrior - this is the most powerful archetype that has come closer to the making of history. The Warrior is an untameable and formidable adversary, excelling in various skills with an incomparable intelligence and unbreakable will. Queen Brunhild of *Nibelungenlied* is the perfect example of this archetype. The legendary warrior-queen's virginity is the source of her physical strength and beauty. She is considered a barbarian or foreigner to the Germanic Gunther who wants to marry her to get all of Iceland. All of her suitors must defeat her in three rounds of combat to get her hand or face death if defeated. Brunhild is said to have thrown spears over impossible distances and worn the heavy armour of knights on horseback. She is featured as a Valkyrie in Norse folklore. Historically, Germanic and Scandinavian shield-maidens like Brunhild fought for their tribes and lands. Another woman, a Wife archetype - Kriemhild, Gunther's sister - is promised to Siegfried in exchange for his skills with the invisible cloak. It is Brunhild who brings about the murder of Siegfried and the burial of the famous Nibelung horde.

Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Sophocles' *Electra* are all Warriors. The former avenges her daughter Iphigeneia who was sacrificed to ensure a Greek victory in the Trojan War. Clytemnestra rages for years before she finally gets her revenge. Electra, who remains unmarried to get vengeance on Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, braves social evils and tyranny. Clytemnestra and Electra shift the powers of rulership of the Aegean to foreign hands, the very hands they loathed.

The Warrior archetype is a rather complex persona that surpasses excellence itself. These archetypes are bound in realism, equality and violence. Their bodies do not conform to the delicate physiques assigned to them by history. Warrior-women are, in the words of Rosi Braidotti, "both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration" [5]. They are counter-stereotypes of legendary heroes and represent war, strength, violence, freedom and power - everything the Western Classics denied women. Deconstructing these Classics prove the existence of female commanders like Telesilla and Boudicca. Telesilla commands the Spartan legion in Plutarch's *On the Bravery of Women*. Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, rebels against the ruling Romans and razes the settlements of the tyrant Nero. These are real Warriors putting their kingdom and people before family and self. They are equals to the legendary Penthesilea, the Amazon who fights Achilles in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Modern historical texts of the twenty-first century exhibit the Warrior archetype in recasting historical women. They are all based on these real women who lived and fought for everything they loved, they once stood for. And that makes history.

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