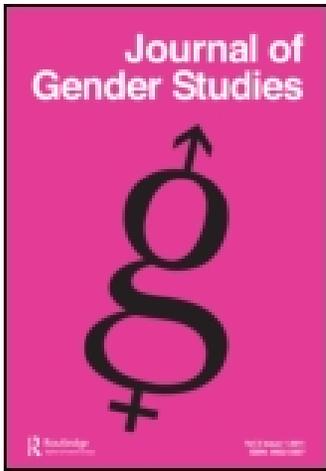


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A sheep in wolf's clothing? The problematic representation of women and the female body in 1980s sword and sorcery cinema

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The muscled, independent woman found in action-orientated cinema is a problematic figure that confronts customary perceptions of masculine and feminine representation and gender roles. The regularly applied active/passive dichotomy is challenged by the agency and skill of these women, but, simultaneously, their position is undermined by an emphasis on the body, relationships with male characters, and the demands of patriarchy. Indeed, Jeffrey A. Brown (1996) argues that a female in an action role is simply a 'sheep in wolf's clothing'. This paper will explore Brown's claim by focusing on the 1980s sword and sorcery cycle, in particular the often critically overlooked *Conan the Destroyer* (1984) and *Red Sonja* (1985). In these narratives, women are seemingly elevated from subsidiary roles to become action heroines or formidable villains. Moreover, the films facilitate discussions of the women as warriors, women as powerful malevolent forces, but also engage with broader issues surrounding the representation of gender, sexuality, race, and the female body.

Keywords: gender; femininity; representation; muscles; sexuality; sword and sorcery cinema

The muscled female present in the sword and sorcery films of the first half of the 1980s is, like her male counterpart, a problematic figure. Discussions of the built body by scholars such as Richard Dyer (1992, 1997) and Steve Neale (1993) in films of this era have revealed that overt exhibition of the male form is troubling to customary perceptions of masculine representation. While masculinity is reinforced by muscularity, the body on display serves to interrogate the traditional notion that the body as spectacle is equated with passivity and the feminine. The muscled heroine in action cinema invites similar scrutiny and contains equivalent contradictions. Chris Holmlund describes the built female body as 'disconcerting' and 'threatening' because it upsets precisely the conventional balance of male/active, female/passive that is called into question by the exhibition of the male body in movies of the same period (2002, p. 19). These muscular women, Holmlund explains, are unsettling because '[t]hey disrupt the equation of men with strength and women with weakness that underpins gender roles and power relations, that has by now come to seem familiar and comforting (though perhaps in differing ways) to both women and men' (2002, p. 19).

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The organisation of gender roles habitually seen in action cinema is reassuring in that it upholds the traditional male/active, female/passive dichotomy. Men can feel safe in their role of deliverer, and women can be comforted by the knowledge that they will be protected. Consequently, as Yvonne Tasker suggests, the genre provides ‘little for the actress to do but confirm the hero’s heterosexuality’ (1995, p. 15). She elaborates that frequently fragility, lack of strength, and vulnerability are traits associated with femininity, and, in contrast to the hard male body, the female body is marked by its softness and undefined muscles, and is a form that is vulnerable (1995, p. 15). As Tasker concludes, ‘[i]t is perhaps no surprise then that the heroines of the Hollywood action cinema have not tended to be action heroines. They tend to be fought over rather than fighting, avenged rather than avenging’ (1995, p. 15). However, the sword and sorcery adventures of the 1980s tender characters that operate outside these conventions and therefore engage with problematic representations of femininity that appear to remove women from a traditionally assenting position and place them within the masculine sphere of action. But the difficulties within these representations are further compounded by the fact that just as male characters are hyper-masculine to compensate for perhaps being read as feminised or homoerotic spectacles, the women in these films are hyper-feminine with exaggerated bodily features that compensate, in part, for their potential masculinisation. Significantly, as Jeffrey A. Brown puts it, the ‘suspicion is that the action heroine is just a sheep in wolf’s clothing, rather than a legitimate role for women’ (1996, p. 53).

To discuss these complications and contradictions in more detail, *Conan the Destroyer* (1984) and *Red Sonja* (1985), both prominent films of the sword and sorcery cycle, will be employed as examples of narratives where women are seemingly elevated from subsidiary roles to action heroines. In addition, the representation and fate of the antagonists of these narratives, both powerful and malevolent women, will be explored.

Red Sonja is perhaps unusual when compared to other high-profile films of this cycle from the early 1980s, such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *The Beastmaster* (1982), in that not only is a woman the main protagonist, but the film emphasises the heroine’s name within the title. Other productions of the cycle that centralise women certainly exist, for example *Sorceress* (1982), *The Warrior and the Sorceress* (1984), *Barbarian Queen* (1985), and *Warrior Queen* (1987), but these are, on the whole, low-budget, borderline exploitation pictures made for the video market. More importantly, though, Brigitte Nielsen as Sonja exemplifies the particular incongruities that surround the warrior woman found within this genre.

Within *Red Sonja*’s narrative, Sonja is a young woman who has been subjected to rape and forced to witness the murder of her mother, father, and brother at the command of the evil Queen Gedren (Sandahl Bergman). Sometime later, and after the death of her sister, Sonja becomes involved in a quest to retrieve a powerful sacred talisman from Gedren who now has designs on world domination. Sherri A. Inness, in her discussion of tough girls in popular culture, argues that ‘[t]he inference is clear that women do not “naturally” become tough, as men do. Instead, the childhood memory of an extreme act of violence drives these women to become tough’ (Inness 1999, p. 91). Although certainly motivated by her ordeal, Sonja is already mature when she and her family are attacked by Gedren’s henchmen. Nonetheless, her desire to become tough is precipitated by an extreme act of violence. Interestingly, it is male characters in the sword and sorcery films that seem to best fit Inness’s description, in particular Conan (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in *Conan the Barbarian* and Dar (Marc Singer) in *The Beastmaster*, who are both traumatised as young boys and train in the art of combat to take revenge as adults.

Sonja is an accomplished swordswoman who has yet to meet her equal in a fight, she is statuesque, strong, muscular, and imposing, and, most importantly, she has the potential to exact vengeance and restore the balance of power. She even appears to be the heroine that Brown (1996) describes as being in direct opposition to women of classical cinema who are, according to a Mulveyian perspective (1975), objectified and lack the means or ability to control the narrative progression and are contained by the gendered gaze. In fact, for Brown, the recent action heroine's removal from a compliant position places her in new territory altogether. He writes that:

[c]ertainly the action heroine is often filmed to accentuate her body, but this new hardbody is not offered up as mere sexual commodity. While the well-toned, muscular female body is obviously an ideal in this age of physical fitness, it is presented in these films as first and foremost a functional body, a weapon. The cinematic gaze of the action film codes the heroine's body in the same way that it does the muscular male hero's, as both object and subject. Where once stood silicone-injected breasts and delicate shoulders now stands rippled pecs and striated delts. Hers is not a body that exists solely to please men, it is a body designed to be functional. (Brown 1996, p. 56)

This passage is predominantly related to Brown's discussion of the female characters Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in the films *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), respectively, and it describes a character that reverses traditional modes of feminine representation. According to Brown, the creation of this desexualised heroine in these productions means that the women also have to sacrifice their femininity and risk accusations that they operate outside the norms of heterosexual identity and, by acquiring proficiency with weapons, they are essentially pretending to be men (1996, pp. 62–63).

Sonja conforms to some elements of Brown's assessment; her height, build, muscles, and androgynous, angular face allow her, at least in part, to be compared with Ripley and Connor. Similarly, her vow not to form an intimate relationship with any man until she finds one who can beat her in a fight with the phallic sword deliberately removes her from 'normal' heterosexual identity. However, the fact that Brown limits his consideration of the female heroine to mainly Ripley and Connor means that he does not have to tackle the particular ambiguities and paradoxes contained in the warrior women in the sword and sorcery epic. Though Sonja does become masculinised by aspects of her physique and her commanding role within the plot, she is still unmistakably sexualised. The silicone-injected breasts and eroticised form that Brown claims have been replaced by a 'functional body' have been incorporated into this heroine, making Sonja perhaps better understood as the 'contradictory body'.

The sexless plain vests and trousers or shapeless industrial suits found in *Aliens* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* have been rejected, partly by necessity and history in the quasi-medieval settings of *Red Sonja*, in favour of minimal armour and/or slight leather attire that accentuate the female form, thus potentially undermining her subjective position. Sonja, for most of the film, is dressed in a low-cut snake-skin bodice that emphasises her breasts and a short skirt formed from animal hide straps and strips which reveals her long legs. As Tasker observes,

Nielsen embodies then a contradictory set of images of female desirability, a sexualised female image which emphasises physical strength and stature. Like the figure of the muscular male hero, Nielsen's version of woman warrior borrows on comic strip traditions which deal in parodic, exaggerated characterisations of gendered identity. (Tasker 1995, p. 14)

As she originates from a comic book, Sonja is an inflated caricature of femininity, and therefore Scott Bukatman's (1994) discussion of the body in superhero comics is also

useful here. Bukatman writes that the creators of comics are young men and that the readers are predominantly adolescent boys who are struggling to come to terms with their sexuality and self-image and therefore are attracted to characters which are physically superior and have exceptional powers (1994, pp. 93–96). The exaggerated muscularised male body found in these publications, Bukatman argues, is accompanied by ‘hypermasculine fantasy’: the spectacle and fetishisation of the female form that is evident in the visual presentation of the female superhero (1994, p. 112). He writes that:

[o]f course the female form has absurdly exaggerated sexual characteristics; of course the costumes are skimpier than one could (or should) imagine; of course there’s no visible way that these costumes could stay in place; of course these women represent simple adolescent masturbatory fantasies (with a healthy taste of the dominatrix). (Bukatman 1994, p. 112)

These women are a spectacle of femininity, a gratuitous exhibition for the publications’ young male readership but, conversely, are at the same time ‘superheroines’ who are powerful and domineering. More accurately, to borrow a useful term from discussions of the doubleness of bisexuality and bisexual desire in mainstream cinema by Maria Pramaggiore (1996, pp. 272–300) and Alexander Doty (2000, pp. 131–154), they are ‘both/and’. The characters become a conflation of subject/object and are both active agents and highly sexualised spectacles. Sonja, like her comic book counterparts, is compromised by her sex and the representation of it, and exists in the ambiguous territory of ‘both/and’.

The foregrounding of Sonja’s gender throughout the film problematises her representation and unsettles Brown’s claim that the heroine is permitted to occupy the same position as the hero. When the audience first sees her victorious in combat, her master (Tad Horino) describes her as having no equal with the sword, but it is not sufficient for her to be recognised as a skilful warrior. Her master also expresses a concern that she should not hate men and proposes that rejection of the opposite sex in such a ‘lovely young woman’ could be her undoing. Her encounter with Brytag the Giant (Pat Roach) becomes a fight to defend her honour and her body, and, although he is her ally, her relationship with Kalidor (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is fraught with sexual tension. It is clear that there is a mutual attraction between them, and Kalidor attempts to seduce Sonja, initially to no avail. Subsequently, his persistent advances followed by her rejection become a distinct pattern throughout the film. Such consistent pursuit of the central protagonist is not a feature of the male-centred films of this genre. Similarly, the link between Sonja’s celibacy and her blade and the challenge to prospective suitors that they must prove their superiority over her is not a trial that her male counterparts would be required to set. Her dare to Kalidor ultimately seems to assume that she requires to be dominated, and it is telling that Prince Tarn (Ernie Ryes Jr) comments: ‘Why does she fight so hard? She doesn’t want to win’.

This poses further difficulty in accepting the character of Sonja as a legitimate action heroine in the film that is linked to the presence of Schwarzenegger as Kalidor. Gallardo and Smith argue in their study of *Aliens* and the principal characters, Ripley and Corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn), that while it introduces an action heroine ‘the film disavows the possibility of a solo female hero, or a lesbian hero by constructing Hicks as her ideal heterosexual partner’ (2004, p. 113). Hicks remains the ‘true hero’ because at all times he is level-headed, precise, and in control, and when Ripley does exhibit signs of hysteria he is there to give support and comfort. In *Red Sonja*, Kalidor is constructed as a similar character; he is responsible for instigating Sonja’s quest by delivering a message and aiding her dying sister, and he is a presence within the narrative at times when she is most in need. Indeed, on two occasions he is instrumental in rescuing Sonja: first when she faces Bytag’s lizard-men, and second when she is nearly defeated by a mechanical fish-like monster.

Essentially, he displaces Sonja in these key action sequences. Kalidor's steadfast and watchful presence mirrors that of Hicks in *Aliens*, and he also serves a comparable function in reaffirming the heroine's sexual identity. Although her built body remains a site of potential anxiety, her romantic attachment to Kalidor allows her to be recuperated into the 'normal' heterosexual order. Laurie Schulze (1990) in her study of female body and muscle suggests that the female body-builder has to be made 'safe' within the parameters of the hegemonic gender divisions and identities. The 1980s fitness culture that promoted the body beautiful also had to manage the potential problems that surrounded the built female body. Schulze writes that '[p]opular discourse harnesses female bodybuilding to this regime of hedonism and self-maintenance. It positions the bodybuilder's body as a site of heterosexual pleasure, romance, youth, fun and beauty' (Schulze 1990, p. 65). It is within these boundaries that Sonja is contained; she is fit, healthy and attractive, and positioned as an object of heterosexual desire through her eventual union with Kalidor. In addition, maternal concern also serves to assure Sonja's heterosexuality through her protective role over the young Prince Tarn. A male partner and nurturing instincts are both employed to abate fears that the female heroine is in fact sexually deviant. In the case of *Red Sonja*, as Tasker puts it, the film 'follows Sonja's journey to a "normal" sexual identity, or at the very least the rejection of lesbian desire' (1995, p. 30). In this light, it is important that in the ultimate battle to save her world she faces another woman, Gedren, whose sexuality is also 'suspect'.

Ultimately, within the character of Sonja, a number of contradictory and problematic attributes and traits are contained. She is active and physically strong, but also sexualised and objectified; she is independent, but has a protector; she is potentially sexually transgressive, but is 'normalised' by a heterosexual companion. Elizabeth Hills (1999) has identified in her discussion of mainstream action cinema of the 1990s that it is possible for female stars of the genre to challenge the rigid division of masculine and feminine. Hills argues that 'female action heroines confound binaristic logic in a number of ways, for they access a range of emotions, skills and abilities which have traditionally been defined as either "masculine" or "feminine"' (1999, p. 39). However, while Sonja does defy comfortable gender binaries, the intensely contradictory nature of her character and physical representation prevents her from becoming the 'transformative' figure or 'alternative' woman that Hills is keen to advocate (1999, p. 49). Hills' terminology suggests that the action heroine has progressive potential, but there remain too many compromises and inconsistencies for a character such as Sonja to be transformative. The notion of an 'alternative' woman, though, is perhaps an appropriate expression to describe another of the sword and sorcery genre's significant female characters.

Conan the Destroyer provides a considerably divergent female character that invites further discussion of the representation of women within the adult screen fairy tale. Zula, played by the Jamaican-born model, singer, actress, and performance artist Grace Jones, is an alternative to her white counterpart in *Red Sonja*. Zula's role and visual presentation within *Conan the Destroyer* is closely linked to Jones's star persona and exotic, androgynous, and challenging image. Miriam Kershaw writes that 'Grace Jones filled her performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s with multilayered references to racial and sexual stereotypes associated with the African diaspora and its relationship to colonial Euro-American prejudice' (1997, p. 19). Jones's awareness of her race and sexuality, and the perceived representational archetypes associated with them, was intrinsic to the creation of her unusual image. The narrow understanding of African cultures and traditions prevalent within Europe and America that informed prejudices and helped foster notions of primitive, uncivilised peoples and savage sexuality was reworked within

routines and persona. For example, Jones drew upon the iconic performances at the Folies Bergère by 1920s dancer Josephine Baker whose bodily eroticism was accentuated by her racial origin and suggestions of the primitive. As Kershaw observes, 'Baker's exaggerated performances in banana and tusk skirts have little to do with Africa's diverse cultures, and everything to do with the exotic Other in the imagination and art of 1920s Paris' (1997, p. 21). Jones adapted Baker's performance in her own act by dressing in animal skins and suits, including that of a gorilla for her 1980 *A One Man Show*, which playfully challenged racial/racist stereotypes and associations with the primitive. Kershaw writes that Jones's identification with Baker provided a nostalgic pastiche of the 1920s star but stresses that 'Jones adds a level of complexity, however, as her performances oscillated between exploiting the "feminine" myth of "primitive" sensuality and the "masculine" construction of threatening savagery' (1997, p. 21). Jones's muscular body and trademark crew-cut hair problematised her gender identity and allowed her to occupy a position that straddled both masculine and feminine representation.

Jones's role in *Conan the Destroyer* mirrors her stage persona, and the same knowing references to racial and sexual stereotypes are incorporated into her character. Zula is introduced to the audience when Conan's (Arnold Schwarzenegger) party is riding through an isolated settlement. Through the crowds they see a group of men apparently baiting a chained woman who is straining at her metal leash ferociously snapping and growling at her captors. She is dressed minimally in a leather bodice and tight shorts with a black, possibly fox, tail hanging from her belt emphasising her apparent animal nature. Princess Jenna (Olivia D'Arbo), who is the object of Conan's quest, asks the barbarian to aid the struggling Zula, but, whilst he breaks her chains, he does not become involved in the fierce fight that ensues. It becomes clear that this warrior woman is more than capable of securing her escape with expert use of a massive spear-like staff. Although this is an effective weapon, it appears rudimentary when compared to Conan's elaborate sword which is obviously a work of advanced craftsmanship.

After her escape, Zula follows Conan's party and pledges to repay his help by joining his cause and assisting in the protection of the princess. With the alliance between the two women, Zula and Jenna, firmly established, it is obvious that the barbarian is constructed in direct opposition to the princess. Zula's face is sharp and angular and off-set by her short hair which is shaved at the sides and decorated with two red lines above each ear. Her body is lean, her chest is flat and muscular, whilst her movements are lithe and cat-like. By contrast, Jenna is blonde with a plump girlish face, her body is soft and curved, and she has no training with weapons. Furthermore, Zula is clearly sexually experienced whilst Jenna is a virgin; indeed, when the inexperienced princess, who has become attracted to Conan, asks Zula what she would do if she wanted a man, the warrior leans towards the girl and snarls 'grab him and take him'. Despite her apparent sexual awareness and exposed body, Zula is not constructed as an erotic object. Certainly she is exotic, but her body seems to be more in keeping with Brown's description of the 'functional body' that occupies the subject position usually reserved for the hero. She is strong and capable and does not have the potential weaknesses that hindered Sonja in a similar position. Also, she is not the object of the hero's affection. From the opening of the film, it is clear that Conan's attachment to his dead partner, Valeria (Sandal Bergman), remains intact, and it is the promise of her return that drives him to accept his quest. Furthermore, as already highlighted, Conan has another potential partner in Jenna. Therefore the hero does not look on Zula with desire at any point within the film, and although Conan's accomplice, Malak (Tracey Walter), does show some interest in the female warrior, his small stature and intermittent displays of cowardice makes his advances towards the Amazonian woman comical rather than serious.

This perhaps suggests that as a black woman in this action role, Zula appears to be beyond the conventional unease that surround muscled women, and the film does not deliberately recuperate her within heterosexual patriarchal order. As Tasker identifies, the black action heroine's masculine characteristics, her strength and self-confidence, are linked to her primitive, aggressive sexuality and consequently incur a specific anxiety around her representation (1995, p. 22). Tasker writes, with particular reference to martial-arts movie *Black Belt Jones* (1973), that independent black women in action cinema are often treated as a joke to contain and dissipate the anxiety (Tasker 1995, p. 22). The 'relationship' between Malak and Zula described above is humorous, and indeed Zula's savage outbursts and direct, limited speech seem exaggerated for comic effect. Notwithstanding this, at the close of the film she is rewarded by Jenna who makes her captain of the guard, and the princess states that she sees no reason why a woman could not do the job as well as a man. She accepts the post, but not without seeking a solemn nod of approval from Conan first.

Ultimately, the character occupies a somewhat paradoxical position within the film, and consequently Jones, particularly through this role, can perhaps be further aligned with Josephine Baker. Anne Anlin Cheng has noted that Baker's career has invited both positive and negative interpretation by scholars and that Baker's story has been 'taken to represent either a tale of ongoing racial and gender prejudice or a fable of political triumph' (2009, p. 42). The character of Zula in *Conan the Destroyer* is, at the same time, an able warrior who is recognised for ability, played with an acknowledgement of certain primitive stereotypes by Jones, a woman, and a savage, but sometimes comical figure. She therefore, like Baker, perpetuates a problematic racial and gender representation, but also offers a potentially successful negation of them. Unlike Sonja, therefore, Zula does have a progressive potential and is perhaps much closer to Hills' notion of a 'transgressive and transformative' character.

Overall, the warrior women discussed here specifically makes reference to the adult female protagonists fighting for, or protecting, the forces of good within the sword and sorcery film. She is a mode of representation that is particular to the 1980s and is largely a product of the decade's fascination with the body beautiful, specifically the muscled body. She also demonstrates Hollywood's heavy-handed and often problematic concession to changing racial and sexual politics. The villains of these films offer a somewhat different but equally challenging and problematic representation of femininity. The women who seek power within these films operate outside accepted gender roles and as such can be transgressive sexually and socially. Like the heroines of the text, they are complex characters that respond even more keenly to their period of production and concurrent fears surrounding shifts within familial structures and the changing landscape of employment.

The dangers of women who transcend 'normal' gender roles, especially in relation to the domestic and the work-place, have been explored extensively in 1980s cinema. Sarah Harwood argues that the 1980s was 'a decade which was obsessed by defining its morality, politics and practice through the lens of the "happy" nuclear family' (1997, p. 60). Because of this emphasis on the family or, perhaps more accurately, the success of the family unit, women were firmly consigned to the part of protector and nurturer, and despite the impact of feminism in the previous decade they 'once again disappeared into the role of wife and mother' (Harwood 1997, p. 48). According to Susan Faludi, Hollywood responded to the reinstatement of family values with narratives that appeared to condemn women who deviated from their natural course, supporting what she calls a 'backlash' against feminism (1992, p. 141).

One group of films that emerged at this time introduce what Elizabeth Traube calls the 'superdads' who contrived to fill the void left by ambitious women who had abandoned their responsibilities to the home and family (1992, p. 145). These narratives, in particular *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), Traube writes, did not construct the negligent mother as threatening or masculinised and were instead content with reconciling her with the child and the paternal circle at the end of the film (1992, p. 145). Far more ominous, though, were the aggressive, independent women with masculine sexual drives and aspirations: '[e]mbodied in rejecting mothers, psychotic seductresses, and overambitious career women, "excessive" female desire appears as a problem in Hollywood movies of the 1980s, a danger to the family and society' (Traube 1992, pp. 145–146). The 'excessive' female desire, particularly for power, has also aided in shaping the female villains in the 1980s screen fantasy films and allows them to be considered alongside their counterparts in domestic and work-place dramas. There are essentially two issues that can be isolated from the blanket category of evil or wicked woman in the sword and sorcery cycle; first, the woman whose sexuality can be called into question because she operates outside normative gender conventions and, second, the wayward mother or woman with maternal responsibility.

Queen Gedren in *Red Sonja* is marked immediately as a danger to the heroine's sexuality and gender identity. The audience are informed, by a female apparition who visits Sonja after her home and family have been destroyed, that the warrior's current plight has been brought on by the rejection of Gedren's advances. 'She wanted you for herself. Your disgust was clear', the luminous spirit declares, as a flashback shows Sonja's facial expression and body language express revolt at the Queen's proposal. In her anger, Sonja is seen to struggle free of the guards who are restraining her, long enough to snatch a blade and lash out at Gedren's face cutting her deeply. The Queen's revenge is to instruct her guards to rape Sonja and murder her family. Gedren poses a threat on essentially two levels that are interrelated; the first is tied specifically to Sonja's sexual identity. The contradictions and anxieties that surround the female warrior are played out in this film as a tug of war between heterosexuality represented by the heroic Kalidor and deviant sexuality personified by Gedren. The death of Gedren at Sonja's hand and not Kalidor's at the end of the film is essential in aiding Sonja's recuperation into heterosexuality. As Nigel Floyd writes:

[s]ince there are suggestive hints in the way in which Gedren looks at Sonja, the heroine's quest for vengeance is also an exorcism of latent lesbian desire – a symbolic rejection of what might be thought of as the corollary of her man-hating stance. The despatch of Gedren, and hence the removal of the spectre of 'abnormal' desire, becomes a necessary precondition of Sonja regaining her ability to relate normally to men. (Floyd 1985, p. 349)

The second threat that Gedren poses is that she is a woman who, above all else, seeks power. She exhibits what Traube describes as 'excessive desire' and rejects all customary feminine modes of representation in favour of an unstable form of masculinisation. She is placed, even more precariously than Sonja, outside normative gender conventions and not without cost. It becomes apparent after Gedren steals and begins to use a powerful talisman with a destructive energy that cannot be contained, yet she is determined that it will help her crush kingdoms allowing her to usurp their rightful leaders. As her palace crumbles around her, Gedren ignores the words of her adviser as he implores her to return the magical orb to its dark confinement, and she remains on her throne, laughing hysterically.

In this light she is perhaps the direct forerunner to the female characters of late 1980s and early 1990s films labelled 'the bitches from hell', which are present in films such as *Fatal Attraction* and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992). Deborah Jermyn describes them as 'women whose violence, cunning and monstrosity are almost unparalleled in the

women who form her cinematic predecessors' (1996, p. 251). The dramatic alignment of Gedren's apparent lesbianism with psychosis and destructive forces is not coincidental. Her character is constructed as deliberately containing the most dangerous elements of female aberration from accepted roles, and, in a decade that advocated the restoration of the family unit, women who existed on the periphery were unceremoniously despatched.

The second type of female villain can be found in *Conan the Destroyer*. Queen Taramis (Sarah Douglas) is an example of a woman who has rejected her natural maternal roles in order ruthlessly to pursue power and domination. Taramis is the guardian of her niece Jenna and has been grooming the girl to undertake a quest that will culminate in the resurrection of a powerful god. While it would appear that she has cared for the girl (the viewer witnesses the Queen calming her ward after a nightmare), it is obvious that she is willing to discard her inherited maternal duty in order to succeed in carrying out the necessary ceremony. It is revealed, as the Queen briefs her captain of the guard, that Jenna is only important because she alone can retrieve two sacred objects crucial to the ritual. After these tasks have been performed, her remaining use is as a virgin blood sacrifice. Consequently, Taramis is a monstrous mother who undermines the accepted foundations of femininity itself.

Traube describes how over recent decades the traditional family has been damaged by working mothers and absent fathers, and although it seems that both parents are accountable for the failings of this formally stable unit, often it is the women who are judged most severely. She writes that:

[a]ccording to the underlying logic of the ideology of the spheres, a man who puts self-interest before familial duty gives in to his masculine nature whereas a woman denies her femininity when she commits a similar offence, and her 'unnatural' conduct warrants the strongest sanction. (Traube 1992, p. 131)

Although the wicked maternal figure in this film is perhaps an extreme manifestation of the rejecting mother, it is possible to suggest that the vibrancy of her character is in keeping with concurrent warnings for women against deviation from the reasserted familial structure. This film swaps authority in the board-room for the rule of a mystical kingdom, but the message that natural roles should not be jettisoned in favour of 'unnatural' progression into the masculine arena remains intact.

In the final section of the film, Jenna has retrieved the talisman (an elaborately decorated phallic horn that will be placed on the head of a statue of an ancient god to revive it), and Taramis reveals her intentions to sacrifice the girl. Like the female warrior, Taramis is sexualised by her costume, a dramatic black ensemble consisting of a low-cut dress with splits either side up to the bottom of her breasts and a long shimmering cloak. The rest of the *mise-en-scène* is suitably ostentatious: scantily dressed female attendants, cavernous marble rooms, and exotic objets d'art, all echoing the excesses of the queen's desire for power. A ceremony follows, and as the god begins to awaken, Taramis, in her rapture, calls out to a priest 'kill her!' with palpable excitement. When the ritual is disturbed by Conan and his small band, the queen drags Jenna through the chaos erupting around them and tries to complete the sacrifice herself. However, because the rite was not completed immediately, the god has become a wrathful deformed monster and impales Taramis on the now much larger tusk on its forehead. The ruthless queen is destroyed by her wicked aspirations, and order has to be restored by the heroic Conan who fights with the beast and removes its horn, thus diminishing its power.

Although it could simply be argued that these films are adhering to convention and present a fundamental battle between good and evil, in which good will inevitably win,

it is the gender, ambition, and the nature of their transgression that make these characters important to this discussion. It is through them that any progressive potential of the narratives is further undermined. By making the villains women, these narratives reinforce patriarchal structures and reinscribe notions of acceptable roles and drives for women. The cycle of transgression and punishment and the treatment of powerful women in these films are reminiscent of classical Hollywood cinema and seem largely to negate advances in sexual politics made by the mid-1980s. These women are by no means transformative, nor are their representations enlightened.

The female warrior figure of the sword and sorcery films of the 1980s has shown that a woman situated in male-dominated action cinema is inherently problematic. Although in *Red Sonja* the heroine is given strength and ability, she is viewed as a threat to heterosexual order and therefore has to be contained. Whilst she is muscular, she is also sexualised and objectified, and proved, ultimately, to need male support to triumph. Zula in *Conan the Barbarian* goes some way to achieving a status comparative with the male characters, but as a black action heroine she is side-lined by the narrative and is, to a degree, undermined by her representation as a savage and comic figure. Women in the guise of evil queens who brandish malevolent power contain fears about the rejection of accepted gender roles and therefore have to be removed and/or destroyed. Both films work to reposition the female character within gender and genre conventions or eliminate them altogether. This perhaps suggests that in 1980s cinema of this type little progress had been achieved in allowing women to operate outside cultural imperatives. Annette Kuhn's observation that '[p]erhaps the only thing that can be concluded with any degree of certainty is that, structurally and thematically, the classic Hollywood narrative attempts to recuperate women to a "proper place"' appears to have continuing resonance (1982, p. 35).

Perhaps even more importantly, this relative status quo in the representation of women in action genres and heroic roles can be identified in more recent television productions. Mary Magoulick (2006), in her article about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), and *La Femme Nikita* (1997–2001), argues that the representation of women in these popular television series remains unsatisfactory because they are largely constrained by patriarchy. Magoulick writes that '[f]emale superheroes are fantasies of male writers who shape them according to their experiences in this world' (2006, p. 750), and that they are damaged women who struggle to achieve happiness in life or success in relationships. Moreover, 'female superheroes are portrayed as hypersexual and are punished regularly for their strength and independence' (2006, p. 750). Like their predecessors in 1980s cinema, these women fail to fulfil their initial promise, and, as Magoulick identifies, a truly feminist hero has yet to emerge (2006, pp. 750–751). Riddled with contradictions and undermined by compromise, the warrior woman may well take on the appearance of a 'wolf', but she remains only a sheep in wolf's clothing.

Notes on contributor

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Revisitings of Fairy-Tales and Fantasies (New York: Edwin Mellen Press), and *Quiet Earths: Adaptation, Representation and National Identity in New Zealand's Apocalypse* for the Gylphi SF Storyworlds series.

Selective filmography

Aliens, 1986. Film. Directed by James Cameron. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
The Beastmaster, 1982. Film. Directed by Don Coscarelli. USA: Leisure Investment Company.
Conan the Barbarian, 1982. Film. Directed by John Milius. USA: Dino De Laurentiis Company.
Conan the Destroyer, 1984. Film. Directed by Richard Fleischer. USA: Dino De Laurentiis Company.
Red Sonja, 1985. Film. Directed by Richard Fleischer. USA: Dino De Laurentiis Company.
Terminator 2: Judgement Day, 1991. Film. Directed by James Cameron. USA: Carolco Pictures.

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