

“The Hero’s Bloody Journey”: What Female Characters Encounter in Menopausal Narratives

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This work employs the basic narrative structure of Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey to analyze female protagonists in various menopause narratives found in both fiction and non-fiction books. The article focuses on the study of four texts: Darcey Steinke’s *Flash Count Diary* (2019), Colette’s *Break of Day* (1928), Dana Spiotta’s *Wayward* (2021), and Deborah Levy’s Living Autobiography Series (2018-2021). In his classic work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell outlines three major stages of the hero’s journey: departure from the familiar daily world, initiation in a new, challenging world, and return to the former world with the gains obtained during the initiation. I argue that this framework is a useful tool for interpreting female characters dealing with menopause and its consequences. The daily known world of these protagonists is shaped by their pre-menopause lives and their bodies. Menopause can be viewed as the “other world” where the heroine’s initiation takes place. There, she confronts unknown forces that transform her, as she returns, changed, to her body and her daily life. I propose that in these works, this change marks both a new beginning and a continuity that the protagonists confront with a sense of rage, new places to inhabit, and fresh approaches to their bodies.

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a hero that set forth “from his common-day hut or castle ... to the threshold of adventure” (Campbell 211). But this hero was a woman, and *her* common-day hut or castle was her body, the fertile, youthful body that she carried and that carried her towards middle age. It was not just

"once", but many times. And it was not just one woman, but many women who embarked on the journey to menopause¹ and menopause itself, leaving behind their youthful bodies to encounter their aging ones and a new way to move in the world with them. It is this journey that I want to explore in this reflective essay. More precisely, I want to explore written narratives of this journey, a journey that is also a threshold to a new world to inhabit.

First, I would like to talk briefly about Joseph Campbell. A scholar, writer and teacher, Campbell studied myths and fairy tales from all around the world for decades. He looked for similarities, trying to find underlying structures that told a common story to all humankind. Here I will quote and use his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008), where he analyzes a wide array of narratives, from Ancient Egyptian myths, Greek mythology, and Old Buddhist tales to Inca legends and Christian stories. In this book, he finds and follows the figure of the hero: "a man or a woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations..." (Campbell 14), seeking to bring his or her vision, inspirations, and ideas back to the world, which is transformed for the better, renewed, after the hero's comeback. But in order to be able to go back to the world, the hero must leave it first. What is between this leaving and returning from the world is what the author called the hero's journey (or the monomyth). This essay will not discuss Campbell's methods or theory or the fame it gained in the late eighties (Bond and Christensen; Grebe). It will focus, instead, on his hero's journey, the narrative that, according to Campbell, has been present in human symbolic utterances since ancient times. I want to look at Campbell's work because this narrative structure has pervaded so much of what has been done in film and in literature in the last decades that sometimes

¹ Perimenopause is what we can call the journey to menopause. Perimenopause is the name of the period leading to menopause that can start up to ten years before menopause itself. In this phase, women's hormone levels start changing, gradually going towards the end of the reproductive life (World Health Organization).

it feels that we are surrounded by heroes' quests, and that these heroes are mostly men, and mostly young.² This is why I was elated reading Deborah Levy's memoir *The Cost of Living* (2018), Darcey Steinke's essay *Flash Count Diary* (2019), Colette's novel *Break of Day* (1928) and Dana Spiotta's novel *Wayward* (2021). I chose to read these books because of my interest in representations of aging women. But what I found was so much more than that: I found heroines, who were middle aged. Women who had gotten out of their own worlds, who had battled their past and limitations to come back to a new version of their lives. It felt right to take Campbell's hero narrative and read these books along with it, looking for similarities and wild differences.

There are several female scholars and writers who have read Campbell and have written against the plot he described and that keeps pervading popular culture. In 1990, the Jungian psychotherapist and writer Maureen Murdock wrote *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, proposing a narrative for women's pursuits that allowed them "to fully embrace their feminine nature, learning how to value themselves as women and to heal the deep wound of the feminine" (Murdock 3). In 2021, the folklore and mythology scholar Maria Tatar published her own take on women's journeys, *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*. There, Tatar explores a wide range of cultural products—novels, myths, biographies, movies, etc.—from different times and geographies, reading in them the overlooked or forgotten paths of many heroines. One year before Tatar's book appeared, the bestselling fiction writer Gail Carriger published *The Heroine's Journey: For Writers, Readers, and Fans of Pop Culture*. In this book, that

² It could be said that the hero's journey is a specific way of narrating men's lives in a society—the Western one—already inclined to tell more stories about men than women. It is a well-known fact that George Lucas followed the steps of the hero's journey that Campbell had systematized to create Luke Skywalker's path through the *Star Wars* saga, but it may less known how much influence this structure had in the writing of other major films as *2001*, *Matrix* or *The Lion King*. See Lazin-Ryder and Linn.

also works as a guide to writing, Carriger outlines a narrative for heroines who, more than anything, are actively creating networks and taking a community—of friends or family—towards mostly happy endings.

I am not using Murdock's or Carriger's narratives here—Tatar does not propose a narrative in her work—because I read something different in the books that I study in this paper. There are steps in Murdock's heroine's journey that I don't see in these menopause narratives,³ and, in addition, she says that in her plot proposal there is “no chronological age when the journey begins” (Murdock 3). But perimenopause and menopause are biological, animal, affecting bodies and minds at a specific chronological age. On another note, Carriger's take is particularly focused on family or friendship networks that break at the beginning of her suggested journey and reunite at the end of it. In the books that I will analyze here there are friends and family around, there are, in some cases more than in others, community, a sense of the collective, but what is on the other side of the journey is not a reestablished network but a new sense of self. And there are no real ends, but continuations, a path that doesn't finish with the end of each book.

So I go back to Campbell, to his narrative, to reclaim it because, as I will show in this work, I recognize the plot he described, the hero's journey, in these books dealing with menopause. Tatar tells in her book the story of a student of Campbell at the then women-only Sarah Lawrence College, who after a class interrupted into her teacher's office to tell him that she was tired of hearing about men. She wanted to hear about women. Campbell said: “The woman's the mother of the hero; she is the goal of the hero's achieving; she is the protectress of the hero ... What else do you want?” (Tatar xiii). To that she answered: “I want to be the hero” (Tatar xiii). That is what I want for the protagonists of the

³ In general, Murdock's thoughtful heroine's journey strikes me as better suited for telling the story of a whole life cycle or, at least, of a less defined period of time than menopause.

menopause narratives that I explore here: I want for them to be the heroes. *And* the heroines. Why not?

Who is Afraid of “The Change”?

In *The Change*, her seminal book about menopause, Germaine Greer tells the story of a breakfast she had years ago with a friend on a beautiful Parisian morning. Both women were in their early fifties, the sun was shining upon them, there was a great vegetable stall next to them, the coffee and the pastries were wonderful. But then an old woman passed by, small and grey, shyly carrying a bag with a baguette and some other groceries, trying to avoid some raucous boys and prostitutes still not gone for the day. Greer’s friend became anxious looking at this old woman and said she was not going to end up like that—small, invisible, alone (Greer’s friend was recently separated). Greer’s friend unleashed a melancholy and a sorrow that neither she nor Greer had felt in their forties but that was now a frequent visitor. Suddenly, as Greer tells it, even the sunlight changed. It became unkind and showed:

... every sag, every pucker, every bluish shadow, every mole, every freckle in our fifty-year-old faces... Suddenly something was slipping away so fast that we had not had time quite to register what it might be... I would have rattled off some names of other fifty-year-old women who had overcome the climacteric and been reborn into a different kind of life, but they were not names that sprang readily to mind. I needed role models for a woman learning to shift the focus of her attention away from her body ego towards her soul, but for the life of me then and there I couldn’t bring to mind a single one. The journey inwards towards wisdom and serenity is as long, if not longer, than the headlong rush of our social and sexual career, but there are no signposts to show the way. If there are leaders beckoning, most of us have no idea who they might be. (10-11)

If we lived in a different kind of society, one that valued and respected old age, it would be easier to find those leaders around us. They would be our

mothers, grandmothers, aunts, older sisters or friends. But we live in a society in which menopause and aging bodies are something that is better not to mention, not to look at, something that is easier and better if it is passed by. So, most of the women around us have kept silent during the end of their fertile years, and the same goes for women writers, as Greer writes:

Women are not given spontaneously to describing their own menopause experiences: women writers, memoirists, *bellettristes*, diarists, novelist, poets, rarely so much as hint at menopause as an event. In the vast majority of cases women do not see the climacteric as a factor in their development... In fiction, whether written by men or by women, middle-aged women are virtually invisible. All our heroines are young. (18-19)

Greer wrote this book in the 1990s and revised it in 2018. Since then, new narratives have appeared that bring menopause and postmenopausal women to the front; bold, clear stories, either in fiction or non-fiction, that deal with the process that takes a woman beyond her fertile years towards the many more years that this contemporary life has granted us. Almost a century ago, Colette wrote about the bright, active woman one could be after the climacteric. But Colette was Colette, and we had to wait a long time for what we can hope is the beginning of a myriad of texts that give voice to the postmenopausal woman, to the thousand faces she can have.

For the women in the texts I analyze here, perimenopause—the biological processes leading to the end of menstruation—and menopause are thresholds to different ways of constructing and understanding their identities, their ways of being women, humans, part of the society and the world. For example, in *The Cost of Living*, Deborah Levy reflects on the life she started when her daughters were almost grown up and she discovered that she didn't want to stay in the marriage—or in the house—where she had been for more than twenty years. She tells us about working and financially maintaining a new house and

supporting her daughters. She also tells us how, at fifty, in the transition to a new life, she found out that the idea of femininity, as she had been taught it, no longer fit her. She writes:

The phantom of femininity is an illusion, a delusion, a societal hallucination. She is a very tricky character to play and it is a role (sacrifice, endurance, cheerful suffering) that has made some women go mad. This was not a story I wanted to hear all over again.

It was time to find new main characters with other talents. (87)

Steinke has a similar feeling that becomes more acute when she is experiencing a hot flash:

Sometimes within a flash I feel as if my femininity is not figuratively but actually physically coming apart, being slowly but continuously burned off. It is often by heat that physical matter is transformed. I feel less like a woman or, at the very least, less like the woman I was. (83)

Through their texts Levy and Steinke explore new ways of being a main character in their own lives, and so do the other women (real and fictional) of the books that I will explore here. They are all transiting through that radical rearrangement of a woman's place and being. They are "changing," as Steinke says:

The change for decades has been a euphemism for menopause, whispered behind the backs of aging women: *She is going through the change*. It sounds sinister and surreal but is actually accurate. Like the Hulk, I don't have symptoms or a condition; I am in the midst of a rupture, a metamorphosis, an all-encompassing and violent *change*. (16; emphasis added)

Maybe the Hulk is an appropriate (super)hero for this time and circumstances (my time and my circumstances), but no. I prefer Steinke, Levi, Colette, and Spiotta's protagonists because, although they may change their clothes, they do not turn green or rip away what they are wearing to keep pace with their deep inner change. I prefer them as heroes because they are speaking

up, telling their tale, our tale, making it visible. Others have done their part: Greer tells of a woman of fifty who bought red hats for her and a friend of fifty-five who founded a club dedicated to female solidarity and fun that later had chapters in many countries around the world. She also writes about another woman who decided to run the New York Marathon when she turned fifty and after succeeding became a writer and encouraged other women her age to run as well. Some followed, including one who said that running the marathon taught her “to believe in life again” (Greer 37).

During perimenopause and menopause, women’s brains change as much as they did during puberty, but now it is because hormones diminish naturally. Our bodies and our minds transform deeply. We could say that something dies with it (the fertile years, a way of thinking about femininity for many) and something else appears; but in our contemporary Western societies, there is no rite of passage for this vast change, nothing like a baptism, a *quinceañera* party, a wedding, or a Norwegian confirmation.⁴ No rite for crossing this threshold.⁵

Campbell writes: “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation---initiation---return*” (23). In the *Separation* or *Departure* phase, the hero hears a call to adventure that separates him from the world he inhabits. That call is many times given by a herald, a dark messenger (Campbell, 44), from a world unseen. Following this call the hero leaves behind his world and enters an unknown zone. It is in this space of the unknown that the *Initiation* happens. Campbell tells us that the hero penetrates some source of power where he faces

⁴The French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, who studied the rites of passage of many cultures and was a vital influence on Campbell’s work, said that there were no rites of passage for menopause. But there are some to be found, for example, Jiezhu a rural Chinese ritual for Hakka women who had reached menopausal age. Among other things, women receive a set of beads and are allowed to pray to a deity to prevent them from becoming a lesser animal in the next life (see Northup and de Salis; Owen-Smith; Donovan and Lawlor).

⁵ Some individuals are creating their rituals to mark menopause, for example, women who identify themselves as Pagans usually perform a croning ritual to mark the passage to elderwise womanhood, but this is far from a social rite of passage (see Manning).

trials and monsters. He can face, depending on the tradition from which the myth in question comes, a battle with a dragon, dismemberment, crucifixion, or a journey in the belly of a whale, among other fantastic happenings. But the hero is usually not alone in this, he gets rewarded often with the support of “helpers,” who can give him wisdom or magic talismans to be better prepared for the road ahead. The hero will be able to have a glance at what his life might be like after the triumphant return, but before doing so, the hero will have to gain knowledge, about life, but mostly about himself. After doing that and surviving the initiation, the hero finally *returns* to his previous life deeply changed, knowing his true self. This successful transit is also what is celebrated in rites of passage rituals. I will look now at these three major stages and how they are written in the stories of menopause that I discuss here, stories that I want to propose are read as both the journey of heroes and rites of passage. Such ways of reading will allow us to talk about menopause and post menopause without shame or fear. The hero becomes a heroine. The “he” that Campbell mentions most of the time in his work becomes a “she.”⁶

1 Departure

Call to Adventure

2:11 a.m.: I wake, heart thwacking, as heat flows up from my stomach, courses behind my face, and radiates out through the top of my head ... An hour later I wake again, this time within the aura before the flash. No matter my mood, each aura brings a surreal déjà vu feeling, the “thorn in the flesh” that Saint Paul talked about; everything is stilled, everything is wrong. It’s as if a shard of a different and darker reality has been thrust into my current one. (Steinke 3)

Steinke begins her *Flash Count Diary* “thrust” into the night and her upset

⁶ Even though Campbell mentions a few women-heroes while elaborating his narrative structure the heroes that populate his work are mostly men.

body by some sudden occurrence, something running deep inside her. This suddenness and the darkness that surrounds it, the uncomfortable feeling that overtakes the speaker/writer can be read as the encounter that sets the hero in motion. “This is an example ... of the ways in which the adventure can begin,” says Campbell about a classic story whose analysis is useful here. He continues: “A blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood ... The blunder may amount to the opening of a destiny” (42). It is important to note that Campbell, following Freud, does not believe that blunders occur by chance. They are, he thinks, “the results of suppressed desires or conflicts” (42), but then, we may read the climacteric as an internal conflict, a crisis triggered by the nature of the female body and its timing. In the story that Campbell is referring to there is a frog that follows a princess. The frog is the herald or announcer of the adventure. That role in Steinke’s excerpt would be taken by the flash.

Something similar happens in Dana Spiotta’s *Wayward*. At almost the beginning of the novel, we find the following: “Sam woke up at five a.m., unable to continue sleeping. She attributed this unnecessarily early waking to the approach of menopause. Her period still came each month, but odd things had started changing in her body, even her brain” (6). Sam, the main character in Spiotta’s novel, is also startled by the inner workings of her own body turned a herald of the unknown. Campbell writes that the announcer of the adventure “is often dark, loathly, or terrifying, judged evil by the world; yet if one would follow, the way will be opened through the walls of day into the dark where the jewels glow” (44). If someone is brave enough to follow, to go deeper for the jewels, that person has to dive into the dark, the chaos, the arcane world that intersects with the one that the hero has to leave behind to become the hero. Here is Deborah Levy on her experience of leaving the world she inhabited for

so long:

When I was around fifty and my life was supposed to be slowing down, becoming more stable and predictable, life became faster, unstable, unpredictable. My marriage was the boat and I knew that if I swam back to it, I would drown. It is also the ghost that will always haunt my life.
(8)

Levy leaves her family home, her marriage, and starts an independent life, providing for her daughters—one already gone to college and the other one about to depart as well. Levy moves to an old building up a hill, where she can watch the London sky as never before. The building was shabby, but the apartment was beautiful and airy. There was some sort of renovation program planned for the building, but it never seemed to start. She thought that this non-fixable deterioration resonated with what was happening in her life. Levy wrote, inspired by some lines in Elena Ferrante's *The Story of the Lost Child*, that the impossibility of repairing that old building seemed appropriate to the moment of her life because: "I did not wish to restore the past. What I needed was an entirely new composition" (20).

But Spiotta's Sam wished to renovate a building and more. Before leaving her modern and perfect house (and her husband, and her teenage daughter who, enraged by Sam's decision to leave, does not want to move in with her) she finds a house that calls her. The house works for her as a kind of herald. We read that she loved to visit "unusual old structures" (9) in Syracuse. She went all around them, exhausted them on the outside, and she loved even more to attend open houses because they "gave her the rare chance to go inside, which was a much more intimate experience. As soon as she crossed the threshold into a house's space, she could feel it shape who she was—or would be—in some deep way" (Spiotta 9.) One day she finds an old, rundown house on a hill, selling for a cheap price, in need of total renovation but with the original details

(special tiles and so on) in good condition under the dust and filth. She is the only one that shows up to the open house. Spiotta writes:

She touched her fingertips to the tiles and felt an undeniable connection ... she felt *grounded*. There was no other word for it, as if a corrective current flowed from the house through the dusty tiles and into her hand and, truly, her whole body ... The hearth drew her in, invited her to sit. She now understood the fireplace as a form of secular worship. She imagined it would make her feel close to something elemental. (10-11)

Just a few hours after the visit, Sam buys the house, feeling herself mutating, acquiring a new shape, and drives “back to her home in the suburb.” “[O]nly then,” the text goes on, “did she realize, as she drove, that she was leaving her husband” (Spiotta 13). She enters then in a cleaning frenzy, she adjusts, repairs, and leaves the house ready for her to settle in. Living in that house, by herself, she prepares for the adventure of being closer to herself, to see what she is, what she has become.

Steinke does not change houses or leave a husband, but she also dives into her own self, into books, and she starts a quest for a better understanding of the animality of her climacteric process, of her new changing body. She enters her discomfort, and, through all this, gets a glimpse of another dimension, as when she describes the experience an aura—the eerie sensation that in some women precedes the flash—and then the flash itself:

Looking beyond boilerplate misogyny, I’d argue that the flash has been debased because it’s a sort of conduit, a profound crossing to the older stage of life. The sensation I have in the aura before the flash is elevated, possibly even hallucinatory, though that does not diminish its power: I feel I will soon find out knowledge no one else possesses, something to do with the boundary between life and death ... In an earlier era, I might have felt the flash as wicked as easily as divine ... During a flash I reside in the liminal; I feel that the membrane between me and another world is worn thin. (11-12)

Steinke finds herself in a body that acts out as it never has done before. She

writes at some point that she would like to flee her body, but she cannot buy a new one as someone buys a new house. Both Levy and Spiotta's Sam leave behind the domestic place where they no longer fit. They go out to find, and live in, a new place where they can be the women they are becoming. But Steinke cannot leave the body that now seems so strange for her. Furthermore, in that changing body she can guess something else, something new, immense, and moving underneath her uneasiness. She does not feel at home in her body, and it is that discomfort that makes her research, search, and write. That is her movement, her answer to the call to adventure. In a way, her movement is as physical as the one that Levy and Sam perform when moving between houses or apartments. Through her searching and writing Steinke is trying to catch up and inhabit the body that seems to go ahead of her. In a similar way, Sam and Levy are trying to attune their new living spaces with their changing selves. That is their entering a strange realm, the unknown world where the hero—these heroines—will complete the trials. Maybe we could draw a line that links the house to the body and think together with Levy: "To not feel at home in her family home is the beginning of the bigger story of society and its female discontents. If she is not too defeated by the social story she has enacted with hope, pride, happiness, ambivalence and rage, she will change the story" (16). The women whose voices we read in these words, in these texts, are not too defeated. They heard the call to adventure and set forth to navigate their discomforts. They leave their old houses or try to catch up with a strange new body. Either way, they have crossed a threshold and now I will explore what they seem to have found there.

2 Initiation

Campbell says that after crossing the threshold the road of trials begins:

Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of

unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph maybe represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again ... his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft): intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). (211)

Is there anything more intimate than one's own body? Anything stranger than one's own body? That body, the way it works and the way it stands and moves and belongs or not to the world, is one of the arcane realms the women in these texts explore after crossing the threshold. And "the crossing of the threshold is the first step into the sacred zone of the universal source ... The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown" (Campbell 67). Steinke writes similarly:

Though no one wants to say it out loud, menopause is about loss; it's about departure—each flash reminds me of my corporeality, my mortality. With every flash, my psyche is pushed to grasp what it does not want to let itself know: that is not immortal. This is terrifying. It's also a rare opportunity, if faced directly, to come to terms with the limitations of the self. (9)

For Steinke that closeness with her body's upheaval puts her in touch with something that, more than unknown, is not easily acknowledged: the finitude of human life, the cycle or process of ageing and where it leads to. She crosses the boundaries, terrified, but also recognizes the gains that could lie there, the opportunity of consciousness. As in every mythical trial, this crossing, this acknowledging of something that seems unknown because most of time it goes unsaid, is far from easy. Steinke's departure or crossing brings the first trial: she has to learn to trust herself, her mind, her sensations, to get a glimpse of what lies beyond, and that, she says, is not easy because it means learning to trust

feelings historically regarded with shame and condescension:

Menopause and PMS share the same chemical landscape. I was taught not to trust my feelings of frustration and fury in those days before my period when my hormones would drop. I was told instead that I was crazy, that the world I inhabited was not real ... Women too demonized their anger (109).

So, how to learn to trust oneself? How to advance and defeat the monsters on the journey? How to reconcile with the changing body, the changing mind, the shifting concepts and ways of seeing the world, one's place in it? One way would be, as Steinke says, to directly face the human finitude that menopause makes so present. And this doesn't have to be just a coming to terms with loss. Menopause could be an occasion for reflecting and accepting that the changes in the body come along with other changes in life that are impossible to avoid. Some of them will make us sad, while others can be liberating, or both. There is one big change—besides menopause—that happens to all the women who are the center of the texts studied here. At some point in Spiotta's *Wayward*, the reader finds out that Sam's beloved mother has cancer and is dying. "... you need to prepare yourself for what comes next, Sammy" (157), the mother tells Sam:

... several weeks later, she found the house. The broken, needy house on Highland. The house buy was an act of instinct. What Sam wanted was ... a place to be alone, to do some time, to change herself. Whatever she was—the sum of fifty-three years on the earth in this body—was insufficient to what would come next. She clearly had to change.

... Her accommodations to the future were insufficient. (159)

That is the moment: after buying the house, leaving her husband, and moving, after the instinct had been followed, Sam starts her quest, unleashed by her approaching menopause and her mother's sickness. In many cases, menopause comes to women around the time they are losing their parents, their

mothers. In her memoir, Levy does not recount the how and when of the end of her marriage, but that event is presented as a big trial she must face, almost as big as the illness and death of her own mother who gets sick just a year after her separation. Also, in Colette's *Break of Day* the main character's ruminations are in a way a response to her mother's passing. "Now that little by little I am beginning to age, and little by little taking on her likeness in the mirror, I wonder whether, if she were to return, she would recognize me for her daughter, in spite of the resemblance of our features," the main character wonders (5). Maybe that space left by late mothers and fathers—a space where the features get mixed, where you must see yourself standing alone—is so big that only a hero/heroine can know how to fill it.

The Helpers

A hero cannot or should not confront such an enormous trial as a mother's death without help, and according to Campbell, they do not. Most of the time, the hero has the assistance of a protective figure, "often a little old crone or old man, who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 57). In Spiotta's novel, Sam, appropriately, gets inspired by the secret internet-based group "Hardcore Hags, Harridans and Harpies,"⁷ which she finds surfing the internet: "The description said it was a resistance group for women over fifty ... it addressed things like perimenopausal, menopausal, and postmenopausal states, and body (not beauty) strategies" (30). Sam gets to know a couple of the members of the group

⁷ The name of the group is appropriate given that old women in myth and folklore were often familiar with dangerous domains of fertility, midwifery, life and death and, as importantly, because the stereotypes built around older women. As Kathleen Woodward says: "Fears of ageing are fed almost from birth by terrifying images in myth or folktale—the hag, harridan, gorgon, witch or Medusa. Such frightening figures are not incidentally female, they are quintessentially female, seen as monstrous because the combination of age and gender." (Woodward 13)

in person, and she thinks of them as friends, or at least, allies in the frustration that comes in the novel as it did in real life after the presidential election which took Trump to the White House, and in the strangeness of their aging bodies. There is not a deep, real bond here, but Sam is willing to assign value, a deep meaning to these women, especially the one that calls herself MH. Sam wears this friendship as a talisman in a turbulent period of her life. It is interesting to note that these helpers are about the same age as Sam. There is no old crone helping a young hero, but old crones connecting briefly while navigating, at the same time, the changes that their bodies and lives are going through. The heroine here is the old crone. And this frail friendship is not the only help that Sam will get on her way to post-menopausal life. Sometimes the helpers have brief but decisive appearances:

A woman was showering with her adult daughter, who had Down syndrome or something like it. The mother poured water on the daughter's round belly from a little bucket, and the daughter laughed and hugged her. They were naked and joyful ... (Sam) found herself mesmerized. They had old-looking bodies (daughter in her late forties, mother in her late sixties), and Sam had never seen old bodies in a state of play.

... There is something human—touching—in the older body, in its honest relationship to decay and time. Seeing the two women's bodies, Sam felt a form of enchantment. To look, to behold, to abide age gave her an almost narcotic clarity; she could, for this moment, as long as it lasted, see and face what life really was. ... You had to hide the shame of your body's age and your body's fragility from others and from yourself. This state of terror and shame made us desperate, cruel, occasionally savage. But here was human love, joy, innocence. (Spiotta 123)

Sam's own aging body gets illuminated by this encounter. She feels for a fleeting moment that she has been allowed a glimpse of a better reality.

Levy also has helpers that help her navigate the climacteric and the idea of her own aging. She had two of those helpers hanging from her fridge, in the form of pictures fixed with magnets:

[one is] the British sculptor Barbara Hepworth, age sixty, a carving tool in her hand, leaning into the giant sphere of wood she was shaping ... The other photograph was of the sculptor Louise Bourgeois, age ninety, an iron carving tool in her hand, leaning over a white sculptural sphere that came to her waist. (39)

Two sculptors, women artists who transform matter into expression: Even more than that, two older women artists, tool in hand, shaping, carving, creating, after long lives of the same. Not bored, not tired, but working, making. They may not interact directly with Levy, but they are there, every day, looking at her, and, most importantly, being looked at. And she has more helpers crossing her path: there is Celia, an actor and book seller in her early eighties that offers Levy her garden shed—the one Celia’s late husband used to use for writing—so Levy can have a room of her own where she can write. There are also the three Turkish brothers who own the only shop where Levy can find the lollipop that becomes the only thing that her mother can, and likes, to eat while dying from cancer in a hospital. It refreshes her lips; it brings a little joy to her days. Until one day, Levy does not find the flavors her mother likes, but one that she knows she will hate, so she yells at the brothers who don’t understand what is happening. And then, the mother dies, and it is only after the funeral that Levy goes back to explain to the brothers why she yelled about the lollipops. The brothers feel for her and with her, and they lament that she didn’t tell them earlier why she was always looking for those flavored lollipops. If they knew they would have bought her mother’s favorite flavors, always. For Levy even her dead mother becomes a helper when amid her grief she “realized that was what I wanted after my mother’s death. More life” (131).

Steinke also finds helpers on her exploration of the climacteric and her own changing body. Preparing herself to write the book she reached out to a myriad of women who exchanged emails with her, sharing their experiences of the

process that leads to menopause. Often in the book she mentions them, for example when she writes: “One of *my menopausal correspondents* wrote to me: ‘Reporting that I finally get the whole animal thing regarding menopause, suddenly my physical body is very present. Heart palpitations. Strange bloating. Shape shifting like a motherfucker’” (Steinke 38; emphasis added).

The mention of animals is not gratuitous; it is one of the questions that Steinke had asked her correspondents. Their changing, contorting bodies make some of these women acknowledge their animal side. The woman from the quotation above feels her body’s violence, its very clear presence. She seems annoyed and surprised at being in her own skin. Throughout her book, Steinke seems to be experiencing some of that same surprise in relation to the violence of her own body’s presence, and some of that may be behind her questions about the subject. But Steinke also asked her correspondents about animals because animals became helpers for her. Not all the animals, but whales, specifically orcas, one of the only five species—including humans—that go through menopause.

The whales accompany me, not unlike other invisible presences: a boyfriend whose physical tenderness was hard to get out from under, and, more recently, my mother, a phantom whose proximity both tears and quickens. The whale’s presence is similar in sensation to—psychic pressure, sudden jerks at the edge of my eye—but different from being haunted by a person. The whales remain near but separate, unknown. (Steinke 25)

The whales offer Steinke a glimpse of another, truer, better reality. If the mother’s ghostly presence saddens the author, the whale seems to promise a place of rest, a pause from all the changing or, at least, a place where all that changing leads to something good. Steinke quotes the veterinarian and academic Charles Foster to explain what she was feeling: “I desperately wanted to be close to animals ... Part of this was the conviction that they knew

something that I didn't and that I, for unexamined reasons, needed to know" (27). The animal, for Steinke, becomes a guardian of secrets, the holder of an arcane knowledge that may explain what is at the end of all the changes, the trails of the body and the passage of time.

Steinke gets close to the whales, very close. After reading and researching about them she travels to Seattle to see them. She is looking especially for one, Granny, a postmenopausal orca, leader of her pod, a matriarch of the sea. She finds her while whale-watching in kayaks with a group and a guide. Suddenly, the group of whales appears and gets very close to the kayaks. Steinke can see Granny looking at her, Steinke looks directly into her eye. The helper, this idea of a matriarchal whale, a postmenopausal female valued, respected, followed by her community, becomes something else:

Now I was realizing that nature was not *full* of divinity ... *Nature itself was divinity* ... I know I should sleep, but my new position in the universe is making my brain feel as if it is on fire. And not because of hormonal withdrawal. I don't want time to keep going forward, separating me from the whales, from Granny. (Steinke 193)

As Campbell said in the path of the hero, there are a "multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land" (90.) Each of them takes the hero closer to her final victory. One of the key events that can happen before this final climactic moment is the sacred marriage of the hero with the goddess, a female sacred form. "Woman," says Campbell, "in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (97). This union of hero and goddess is one of the ways in which the hero can master and know life.⁸ So, what happens to this mythological formula when the hero is a woman? And what happens when she doesn't marry the goddess but, for example, a cat?

⁸ The other ways, not addressed here, are atonement with the father and apotheosis.

The protagonist of Colette's *Break of Day*—a woman who has left behind both her forties and the running after lovers—says at some point in the novel: “One doesn't love beasts and men at the same time. I am becoming daily more suspect to my fellows. But if they were my fellows I should not be suspect to them” (42). And then, just a few pages later: “I no longer want to marry anyone, but I still dream that I am marrying a very big cat” (44).

The desire that Colette's protagonist is expressing here may be a way to connect with that animal side that seems to become so evident in the process leading to menopause. And this need for a sacred bond during the climacteric can take other forms too. On that note, Germaine Greer in *The Change* reproduces a bit of an interview that Tracey Emin, the contemporary British artist, gave to *The Guardian* (Brown) when she was forty-eight:

I am going through the menopause and I have been for ages. It is a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. It's horrible ... People don't talk about it, but the menopause, for me, makes you feel slightly dead, so you have to start using the other things—using your mind more, read more, you have to be more enlightened, you have to take on new things, start looking at the stars, understand astronomy ... just wake yourself up, otherwise it is a gentle decline. For women, it is the beginning of dying. It is a sign. I've got to start using my brain more—I've got to be more ethereal and more enlightened. (Greer, 152)

This using of other things, this exploration, led Emin to marry “a rock in the garden of her house in Provence” (Greer 152). This unusual wedding took place in 2016, when Emin was 52. The artist wore her father's funeral shroud as a wedding dress and said her vows to a huge ancient stone covered in lichen and with a view of the sea. She said about the rock in a later interview: “[It's] beautiful, it's paleolithic, it's monumental, it's dignified, it will never, ever let me down. It's not going anywhere: it's a metaphor for what I prefer to live with. I prefer to be single, doing everything I want to do and how I want to do it” (Needham). So, Emin married a metaphor of the life she wanted and through

this ceremony she took “a glimpse of the wonderful land,” as Campbell said the hero usually did in going through the trials of initiation. Emin took a step forward to the woman she wanted to be after menopause and found something: “If I feel really low—anything from ‘I shouldn’t have said that’ to ‘I don’t feel very well’, to ‘I feel a bit lonely’—I think about the stone and it actually makes me feel better” (Needham).

The encounter between Granny and Steinke has some of this ceremony, the same landmark quality. In Sam’s case one can say that somehow she marries the house: “The key in her palm stunned her; the first step across the threshold, by herself, as the owner gave her focus. Purpose” (Spiotta 40). Levy’s own sacred union seems to be more than just one: it is her new apartment that faces the London sky and the home she builds there, the clock that greets every hour with a different bird song, the shed where she writes, a cactus, her electric bike. Whatever form they take, these encounters/marriages seem to take these women’s journeys to something similar to a climax, to speed it up towards their endings—which really are not endings but returns. And they are all strange unions, outside the norm. There are no goddesses and no usual grooms for these women who have confronted their aging selves and are now better equipped to keep advancing on their journey to old age and death. Going back to Campbell it is possible to say that here the heroines are the ones who come to know. These aren’t women being known, but women who know their animal bodies, the violence, the agitation that comes at the end of the reproductive years. These are women who have the possibility of being just themselves, women who know women, and who are heroines because of that.

3 Return

Campbell says: “The final work is that of the return ...the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings

restores the world (elixir)” (211). He also writes that to complete the adventure, the hero must survive the impact of the world. Let’s take Levy. Her return would be finding out that she can survive outside the family home she spent decades building, and out of the marriage she thought would last forever. Her return, her triumph, full of complexities and imperfections, is that she can build a life, a perfectly good life, for herself and her daughters because she has re-entered her life being more herself than ever:

... to be making this kind of home, a space for a mother and her daughters, was so hard and humbling, profound and interesting, that to my surprise I found I could work very well in the chaos of this time.

I was thinking clearly, lucidly; the move up the hill and the new situation had freed something that had been trapped and stifled. I became physically strong at fifty, just as my bones were supposed to be losing their strength. I had energy because I had no choice but to have energy. I had to write to support my children and I had to do all the heavy lifting. Freedom is never free. Anyone who has struggled to be free knows how much it costs. (Levy 22)

The hero has paid the price of her journey; she has been illuminated and knows that now she just can go forward. As Steinke notes:

I am no longer my old self, and I can’t go backward ... The feminist Germaine Greer has said that during her brief period on hormones, she didn’t like the feeling of going back into the cycle. She felt she had spied another region, one beyond sexual desire and hormonal docility, and wanted to get back there. (13)

It seems that beyond the journey of menopause there is a rest in terms of the biological changes of body and mind. There is a kind of arrival, as Steinke notices: “Since I’ve stopped my struggle to be beautiful, I am overtaken by beauty more often. I stroke toward the sun so that rays splinter as they hit the water and seem to encase me, carry me as if I were a spaceship lifted in my own radiating light” (93). The woman has re-entered the world, and that world seems now kinder, better. There is almost a sense of bliss in the way the

heroines of these books move about their lives after they have settled—or have begun to settle—after reaching menopause. They all have found something to bring back from their transit to this new stage: independence (economical and/or emotional), calm, a new sense of self, a new way to look at men, as happened to Colette's protagonist, who declares:

Come, Man, my friend, let us simply exist side by side! I have always liked your company. Just now you're looking at me so gently. What you see emerging from a confused heap of feminine cast-offs, still weighed down like a drowned woman by seaweed (for even if my head is saved, I cannot be sure my struggling body will be) is your sister, your comrade: a woman who is escaping from the age when she is a woman. (16)

Colette's protagonist equates being a woman with being a sexual female being, one constructed upon the expectations of men and a patriarchal society, and she celebrates being freed from that. Now, these women are still women, different from the ones they were before, having crossed the threshold of menopause. They know themselves a bit better, they know their ogres and their ideals, as Campbell would say. These women return to their lives braver, wiser, full of questions and complexities. Sam is perhaps a bit better prepared for her mother's imminent death—or not, but at least she has recovered herself for herself. She can hear herself thinking, moving ahead. She knows she still has a story ahead of her, something that may seem obvious but for so many women it is not. Steinke writes in her essay:

Our story ends with a house, babies, and a loving husband ... I have felt that my story was over, that nothing more could happen to me. Unless, of course, I divorced again and the old marriage plot could be invigorated, albeit with less sex appeal and lower stakes. But what if the postmenopausal narrative, like the prepubescent one, is focused not on romance, but on a creature? ... I am not interested in girl meets boy, but in woman meets whale. "Questing," Pollit writes, "is what makes a woman the hero of her own life." (36)

So, the quest that has been her exploration of her menopausal journey, is a conscious attempt to make herself the hero of her own life. She just went, knowingly, to meet time and its effects on her body. Steinke was annoyed by them, challenged but not defeated:

One of the clear gains of menopause has been a resurgence of my fierce little-girl self. My passion, taken up for a while with the domestic, now lasers out into the wider world. My sense of injustice is sharper and I want to resist. This resistance may itself be an antidote to menopause. (215)

Resistance, not to menopause and to the postmenopausal life, but to the injustices of the world. That could work as one of the elixirs that the mythological heroes sometimes bring back from their journeys in order to restore the world. And that could work as well for the heroines of these texts, who, following in their own terms a narrative road that flows closely to Campbell's hero's journey, navigated perimenopause and menopause to come back to themselves, their bodies, their minds, stronger and more themselves than ever. Even if the myths are not alive anymore, some of their basic narrative structures are. They can be useful as ways to tell stories not told for too long and to make heroines of brave old crones. And maybe, after years and years of silence and shame, just the mere act of talking, writing, or reading about menopause and its process and the transformations that it brings, works as a rite of passage, an acknowledgment and celebration of this tremendous threshold.

So here goes this essay, conceived as an analysis but also as a quest. Maybe this is the beginning of a return to a life that has not been left, but a life that has been lived in a body that ages, and changes. A body in transit towards a new way of carrying itself, and the mind, and the heart of the woman who carries it with her.

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