Atalanta: A Female Hero — by S.L. Ager

In the last issue of *Labyrinth* we looked at Tolkien's hero, Aragorn, and saw how his life pattern was that of the universal hero. Why shouldn't these characteristics apply to a heroine as well as a hero? Well, there's really no reason for them not to. There's nothing innately masculine about the generic hero myth, especially if we see it as a kind of imaginative symbol of the human journey through life. So sometimes we do find the life pattern of a hero appearing in feminine form—but there are some very interesting modifications!

The best example of the "female hero" in ancient Greek myth is probably Atalanta, the Arcadian huntress. Her life, like those of other heroes, was threatened at birth. Her father wanted only sons, and so left the baby Atalanta to die on Mt. Parthenon. Female infanticide was common enough in ancient Greece, so Atalanta's story is so far typical of both real society and traditional (male) heroic fantasy. But there's already a hint of different things to come in the name of the place where the newborn heroine was exposed: the "Virgin Mount".

Since heroic infants must of course be saved in order to fulfill their destiny, Atalanta had to be rescued. Like Paris, like Romulus and Remus, she was nurtured by a wild animal (a she-bear), until she was found by some hunters and brought up as one of themselves. Atalanta thus grew up to be a famous huntress, like the goddess Artemis, her patron deity. It seems that in order for a female to participate in the generic heroic life pattern, she must accept its masculine characteristics. Like Tolkien's Eowyn, Atalanta not only leads an active life in the company of men (not generally a prerogative of women in ancient societies), but she herself has qualities that are traditionally masculine. She is good at hunting, at running, at wrestling—not at the customary female tasks.

In keeping with this "masculine" aspect of their own characters and their neglect of the female role, heroines like this generally shun sexual relationships with men. The maintenance of her virginity was of paramount importance to Atalanta (remember, she was exposed at birth on *Mt. Parthenon*). In many cultures, a widespread popular notion has it that the sexual act entails submission of the female and dominance of the male. Certainly in ancient patriarchal societies this was the case, since a sexual relationship implied a woman's submission in the social institution of marriage. Incidentally this belief was probably behind the existence of powerful *virgin* goddesses in the Greek pantheon, like Athena and Artemis. These were goddesses who refused to compromise their power by allowing a male partner to dominate them.

So while the heroism of males is not compromised by a sexual involvement, chastity *is* an issue for the female hero. But Atalanta's independence of a binding relationship with any one man, and her competition with men in general, are not "normal". Her characteristics and her life pattern, acceptable in a male hero, threaten the status quo of a patriarchal society. Therefore attempts must be made to compromise our heroine's chosen chastity.

Atalanta, following the heroic life pattern, re-encountered her father as an adult. Generally, where mythic fathers distrust or fear their mythic daughters, it is because they really fear their daughters' potential offspring. So King Acrisius locked his daughter Danaë away in a tower to keep her away from men; of course this did not prevent the god Zeus from visiting her and enabling her to conceive the hero Perseus. But Atalanta's father seems to have discerned a threat in *her*, rather than in any children she might have. Instead of preventing her from marrying, as the fathers of more traditional passive females tried to do, Atalanta's father tried to marry her off. He evidently understood that marriage would end her heroism.

In many folktales where the king tries to prevent his royal daughter from marrying he institutes a contest for her hand, an unwinnable contest that usually results in the deaths of countless suitors. But here too, as in other aspects of the Atalanta story, there is a reversal: Atalanta's father tried to marry her off, and Atalanta herself instituted the contest. She and the aspirant to her hand would run a race, in which the hopeful suitor was given a headstart. But she would invariably catch him up and run him through with her spear

when he failed to keep ahead of her. These abortive courtships continued until one suitor, Hippomenes or Milanion by name, arrived armed with his own weapon: the golden apples of the Hesperides. Each time Atalanta came close to catching him up, he tossed one of the apples before her. She would turn aside to pick it up, and as a result Hippomenes/ Milanion won both the race and her.

The aftermath of Atalanta's marriage to her successful suitor shows that her efforts to retain her heroic status by remaining unwed had been justified. Hitherto she had taken part as a full-fledged "hero" in various actions and expeditions, such as the hunt for the Calydonian Boar or the funeral games of Pelias. But her union with Hippomenes/Milanion was the end of her independent heroic career. No more do we find Atalanta in the company of the other heroes of Greek myth—she has subsided into the traditional role of the wedded wife.