

Wrapped Up and Entangled

Wit and Drama in the Works of Patricia Waller

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The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan fell out with the followers of Sigmund Freud because unlike many of his colleagues in analysis he rejected the assumption that human identity could achieve a state of health and harmony. Identity is always a drama, he claimed. For it is based on an unbridgeable discrepancy between a self-perception as deficient and an idealized image of the self. This irreconcilable gap between the “je” and the “moi”—as he termed it—is both necessary and present in every person. Though we are constantly striving to overcome this schism, we are never able to do so, and this is what makes us so susceptible to identifying with ideal figures.

Heroes are such ideal figures. Heroes are people who, we assume, have made it. It seems that they have succeeded in achieving the impossible: they have reconciled Lacan’s “je” and “moi.” They are good-looking, brave, successful, young, intelligent, athletic, affluent, desired, free—they have all the qualities that we ourselves seem to be lacking.

And now this! Sad, pathetic, vulnerable creatures. Patricia Waller presents these heroes as victims. At best they are clumsy (like Spiderman), entangled in his own web. SpongeBob apparently joined an extremist group, ready to sacrifice his own underwater life as a suicide bomber in the manner of an Al-Qaeda terrorist. Minnie Mouse, Mickey’s platonic girlfriend, has been abused and left for dead in a puddle of her own blood. Others are so desperate that they have resorted to drugs or even suicide.

Victims of desperation, of violence and crime, of radical indoctrination are surely always a pitiful sight. But if we had previously perceived these victims in a shining and exemplary light, the effect is significantly enhanced, in the poetic sense of the elevated heights from which the drama of antiquity had its tragic heroes fall.

Unlike in classical drama, however, we are in this case not faced with humans. All of the heroes paraded and shown up here spring from the world of comics, illustrations, or animated movies. They are all very popular and well-liked figures. They are cute, nice, innocent, and without doubt morally good through and through. None of them has deserved such a cruel fate. This is really shocking. Why, Patricia Waller, why?

I have a hunch: unlike real people made of flesh and blood Patricia Waller's tortured and tormented creatures are fictive characters from popular culture. Unlike real people these characters have always been one-dimensional. Their appearance is not just a façade (as in our case, for our public image conceals abysses quite often unknown even to ourselves). Mickey Mouse, Kitty, and all the superheroes are *nothing but* façades, they are but imaginary.

Patricia Waller's deconstructions help us realize that the imaginary ideal-ego that, according to Jacques Lacan, we carry around with ourselves, is also but a one-dimensional figment of our imagination. This insight will not in itself resolve the drama of our identity—and it would be a shame to lose all motivation for self-improvement. But it might help us to relax now and then, particularly at those times when the difference between the “je” and the “moi” is again threatening to become unbearable.

In thus disillusioning us, Patricia Waller's works do the best that art can do. They not only provoke reflection but also comfort us. Patricia Waller's art helps us live our lives. She is able to do so because she manages to address, without passing judgment, a sense of discontent. She succeeds in pinpointing the flaws in our culture without delivering a moralizing sermon. This gesture is much harder to achieve than it looks: touching the wounds like *Doubting Thomas*, without lecturing us. Patricia Waller can do so because she is witty—witty in the old sense of wit, spirit: funny *and* intelligent.

This also shows in the way she works. Crochet work is a profoundly unheroic artistic technique. Heroes have to be cast in bronze or hewn from marble, be made of gold or ivory. At the same time Patricia Waller's procedure parodies the feminist discourses that have dominated gender theory in recent decades. The idea of transforming activities of homely crafts supposed to be typically female in nature, into high art and thereby free them from the stigma of inferiority, is rendered absurd

when applied to the icons of a commercial cultural industry. On the subtle level of material the “Broken Heroes” thus already irrefutably demonstrate how man (or woman) lets him/herself be caught up in intellectual approaches aimed at liberating our identity from drama.

The thread of this witty line of thought spun by the artist can be followed into deep mazes. We can get wrapped up and entangled in the drastic charm of these objects. In the realm of insects the pupa spins a protective cocoon of silk, only to emerge from it in a wonderfully transformed shape. In this sense Patricia Waller’s works are always also a symbol of metamorphosis: let us make peace with our own imperfection. With this hope we might even be able to enjoy the drama that is our being—at least for a moment.