

*Superheldenscheiße in Freaks – Du bist eine von uns*¹

“The big question is, what are we going to do with this?”²

The radio alarm playing Roxette’s *Listen to Your Heart* awakens Wendy beside her still-sleeping husband. She sits up and swallows two blue pills. In the kitchen she reads a dunning notice. After breakfast her young son and her husband leave for school and work; Wendy goes to her factotum job at a fast-food joint. She cooks fries, staffs the counter – “Chop Heaven hopes you enjoy your meal” – changes the kegs, and takes out the garbage. She works a long shift; her family urgently needs the money. So once again, diffidently, Wendy asks her boss about the possibility of a promotion. The boss, a large woman resembling Lumpjaw,³ responds by quoting from the book open in her hands: *Fit* by A. Schwarzenegger: »*Der erst Schritt zum Erfolg ist der Wille zur Veränderung.*«

That evening a homeless man approaches Wendy at the dumpster and asks if she has any chicken. The boss sees them talking, yells at the man to drive him away, and goes back inside. Wendy stops the man as he is fleeing and pulls a piece of chicken out of the garbage bag for him. He tells her, *Du bist eine von uns.*⁴ Baffled by the remark she shakes her head watching him ride away on his bicycle.

Walking home after dark Wendy passes three drunken louts who shout catcalls at her. With orange headphones over her ears she pretends not to hear. She’s soon crossing a highway footbridge and someone is approaching quickly from behind. She wheels and strikes the person to the ground. Realizing it’s only the homeless guy trying to get her attention she apologizes; he introduces himself as Marek. He asks her how long she has been taking the pills – “ten years, twenty years? The little blue ones.”⁵ Then he gives her the lowdown: *Die wir schlucken sollen, damit wir so sind wie alle anderen. Ohne die ganze Angst. Traurigkeit. Ohne deine Wut. Diese Pillen unterdrücken noch viel mehr. Unser wahres Ich.* Our true I? Wendy gives him a WTF look, as if he’s raving. He urges her, *Schmeiß die Weg. Nimm die nicht mehr, die Pillen. Dann siehst du, wie du wirklich bist. Dann zeigt sie sich. Deine Superkraft.*

¹ Dir. Felix Binder, screenplay Marc O. Seng 2020; on Netflix with English subtitles available.

² *Freaks*, Elmar speaking.

³ Bongo’s antagonist in the fable that is part 1 of *Fun and Fancy Free* (dir. Walt Disney 1947). Disney’s *Peter Pan* was released in West Germany in 1953, and likely accounts for the first wave of the Vorname ‘Wendy’ appearing there; second wave from the comic book *Wendy*: <https://www.wendy.de/>.

⁴ Scans as ‘Follow th’yellow brick road.’

⁵ Conforming to the color code established in *The Matrix* (dir. the Wachowskis 1999).

Already the Heideggerian parable emerges; with the appropriate substitutions made: *‘Das Man unterdrückt noch viel mehr. Unser eigentliches Selbst.’* And *‘Dann siehst du, wie du wirklich bist’* approximates »werde, was du bist!«. ⁶

In a yeahright tone Wendy asks “What’s your superpower? Collecting bottles?” “Do you want to see it?” Marek asks. He climbs up on the railing of the bridge, tells her, *“Du bist eine von uns. Du weißt es nur noch nicht,”* and does a backward swan dive onto the highway below, where he is promptly run over by a truck.⁷ Wendy is horrorstruck and phones emergency services to report Marek’s fatal leap.

The next day Marek reappears at the dumpster to Wendy’s astonishment: “You’re alive!” “And now,” he replies, “you’re wondering what *your* superpower is.” The boss runs him off again and angrily reproaches Wendy for not being assertive enough to handle even a pesky hobo. *Wo ist deine Durchsetzungskraft? Du hast doch gar keine Power! Wenn du wirklich was ändern willst, Wendy, musst du bei dir selbst anfangen.*

Wendy visits Marek at his squatter digs. He tells her there are many others like them, with superpowers, special. But “They sedate us and make us compliant.” “They who?” “*Alle* – the politicians, the scientists, the so-called doctors, your Dr. Stern [Wendy’s psychiatrist].” Wendy stops taking the pills and her superpower – superstrength – manifests itself. The thing to watch is what she does with it.

Curtius devotes a chapter to Heroes and Rulers, in which he traces the genealogy of the topos *fortitudo et sapientia*.⁸ He notes that “the hero as sage and warrior is a basic type of Homeric anthropology;” that is “an ideal norm, which we may describe as a combination of courage and wisdom” because “Wise counsel is as needful as brave deeds.” For example Sarpedon, king of the shield-toting Lykians, led with justice and strength;⁹ and of men his age Diomedes is the

⁶ *Sein und Zeit* 145; “implicitly referring to γένοι’ οἷος ἐσσι μαθῶν: Pindar, *Pythian Odes* II, 72.” Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (2015) 139, fn. 32. Lloyd-Jones translates ‘Be such as you are according to my words.’ “Instead of adding to the lengthy discussion of this sentence, I shall simply say that I see no difficulty in taking οἷος ἐσσι to go with μαθῶν as well as with γένοιο. Pindar has praised Hieron; let Hieron now reveal in action the character the poet has described. The word μαθῶν does not imply that without Pindar’s description Hieron would not have known his own character; it means much the same as ἀκούσας would in this context.” Hugh Lloyd-Jones, “Modern Interpretation of Pindar: The Second Pythian and Seventh Nemean Odes,” 93 *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109, 123 (1973).

⁷ For the versatility of the modern topos ‘run over by a truck’ see Michael O’Donoghue, “How to Write Good,” 1 *National Lampoon* No. 12 (1971).

⁸ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* ([1948] tr. Willard R. Trask 1953, reiss. 2013) ch. 9.

⁹ εἴρυτο δίκησί τε καὶ σθένει ᾧ. *Iliad* 16.542.

staunchest in war and outstandingly savvy.¹⁰ Guided by Dumézil’s *Mitra-Varuna* Curtius shows that this “archaic polarity ‘wisdom-courage’” frequently appears not together in one individual but in pairs of opposites:¹¹ “Polydamas appears as the foil to Hector. Both men were born on the same day, but they are of different natures: ‘For to one man has god given for his portion the works of war, but in the heart of yet another hath far-seeing Zeus placed an excellent understanding, whereof many men get gain.’”¹²

Yet, as Curtius goes on to show, “the proverbial combination of valour in war and wisdom in counsel” (Lloyd-Jones¹³) does reliably appear in one individual – the ruler as depicted by encomium. The second Pythian ode is a famous instance:

“But I shall ascend a ship covered with flowers, and sing the praises of excellence [ἀρετᾶ κελαδέων]. Boldness [θράσος] helps youth in terrible wars; and so I say that you too have found boundless fame by fighting among both horsemen and foot soldiers. And your wisdom beyond your years [βουλαὶ πρεσβύτερα] provides me with praise of you that cannot be challenged in any detail. . . . Learn and become who you are [γένεοι’ οἷος ἐσσι μαθών].”¹⁴

Well, not ‘who’ but ‘how’ you are: *wie du wirklich bist*, doubly-gifted with *fortitudo et sapientia*. And so back to Wendy; who, we learn, is gifted not only with superstrength but also with a firm sense of justice. At the job her overbearing boss has kept putting her off about the promotion

¹⁰ Τυδεΐδη περὶ μὲν πολέμῳ ἔνι καρτερός ἐσσι,/ καὶ βουλῆ μετὰ πάντας ὀμήλικας ἔπλευ ἄριστος. *Id.* 9.53-54.

¹¹ *And see* M. L. West’s chapter ‘King and Hero’: “‘Hero’ is of course not a technical term but one of convenience. By it we mean generally a man of supreme physical strength and endurance allied to moral qualities such as fearlessness, determination, and a propensity for plunging into dangerous and daunting enterprises. He displays his abilities above all in fighting enemies of one sort or another. In many traditions narratives about heroes also involve kings. A king may be a hero, but in most cases the roles are distinct. The outstanding hero—one may think of Achilles, Hector, Jason, Heracles, Arjuna, Beowulf, Cú Chulainn, Lancelot—is usually not identical with the king. The king is remembered for kingly virtues such as justice, prosperity, liberality, or his lack of them; the hero for achievement, for overcoming adversity (whether on the king’s behalf or inflicted by him).” *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007) 411.

¹² *ELLMMA* 171. The full passage shows that in his words to Hector Polydamas describes not bi- but polyethism: ἄλλῳ, ἄλλῳ, ἐτέρῳ, ἄλλῳ; the artists form a distinct group.

Ἐκτορ ἀμήχανός ἐσσι παραρρητοῖσι πιθέσθαι.

οὔνεκά τοι περὶ δῶκε θεὸς πολεμῆϊα ἔργα

τούνεκα καὶ βουλῆ ἐθέλεις περιδμεναὶ ἄλλων:

ἀλλ’ οὐ πως ἅμα πάντα δυνήσῃαι αὐτὸς ἐλέσθαι.

ἄλλῳ μὲν γὰρ ἔδωκε θεὸς πολεμῆϊα ἔργα,

ἄλλῳ δ’ ὄρχηστύν, ἐτέρῳ κίθαριν καὶ ἀοιδήν,

ἄλλῳ δ’ ἐν στήθεσσι τιθεῖ νόον εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς

ἐσθλόν, τοῦ δέ τε πολλοὶ ἐπαυρίσκοντ’ ἄνθρωποι,

καὶ τε πολέας ἐσάωσε, μάλιστα δὲ καὐτὸς ἀνέγνω. *Iliad* 13.726-734.

¹³ “Modern Interpretation of Pindar” 123.

¹⁴ Tr. Diane Arnson Svarlien.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0162%3Abook%3DP.%3Apoem%3D2>

even though Wendy's been there working hard for three years. In an early scene at Chop Heaven Wendy is carrying out the garbage and stops by an SUV parked in a handicap-stall. "You can't park here," she tells the driver, who rolls up the window and continues texting. After work one evening she walks past a soccer field and asks her son Karl why he isn't home. She learns three kids on the pitch kicking the ball have taken his shoes. "We traded, fair and square," says the chief tough. "For only one round," her son objects. "You didn't say anything about that." Still on the pills at that point Wendy feels powerless to get the shoes back, and takes her dejected son home.

Now off the pills Wendy reacts to yet another upbraiding from her boss by lifting her in the air and telling the terrified woman to back off. When Wendy sees the SUV parked again in a handicap space she pushes it sideways out of the stall to the fright of its occupants. Again walking past the catcalling louts she confronts them; when one attacks and pins her to the ground she frees herself and hurls two of them through the air as the third runs away in panic. Coming upon the three playground kids once more tormenting her son she tells them to let him go. When the leader challenges her to do something about it she twists their bicycles into a pretzel-heap. Wendy ἔμαθε δ' ὑβρίζοντα μισεῖν, grew to hate the bullying.¹⁵

Wendy finds out her co-worker Elmar is also 'one of us.' Like Wendy he is a patient of Dr. Stern, who has him on a regimen of the blue pills. Elmar is in his twenties but still lives in his affluent father's home. His father tells him he is troubled that Elmar is not 'making something of himself,' that he continues to live in this aimless way. He replies, "Over five billion people live their lives in exactly this aimless way." Elmar is a devoted reader of superhero comics. As becomes apparent later he has cathected on the sex-and-violence of the genre; the fantasy world of *Superhelden* is his *Erbe*.

So when at Wendy's suggestion Elmar, too, stops taking the pills and his *wahres Ich* emerges he dubs himself (choosing his hero) Electro Man. Elmar wants Wendy also to take a superhero name and urges 'The Valkyrie.' She replies, "That's a bit Nazi-ish." Which is where Elmar is headed. He dons a black costume with a *Blitzbolzen* on the chest and a long cape. Like Hashem's in the Pentateuch Elmar's personality deteriorates the longer he wields his power.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Pythian* 4.284. Cf. "The indignation raised by cruelty and injustice, and the desire of having it punished, which persons unconcerned would feel, is by no means malice. No, it is resentment against vice and wickedness: it is one of the common bonds, by which society is held together; a fellow-feeling, which each individual has in behalf of his whole species, as well as of himself." Joseph Butler, "Upon resentment" in *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (ed. T. A. Roberts 1959).

¹⁶ "In the course of the Pentateuch, God's personality deteriorates. The deity of Genesis—Who with His own hands fashions Adam from dust ('humus' in one of Alter's less happy improvements upon the King James text) and Who strolls in the evening cool of Eden, teases Sarah into geriatric childbearing, and wrestles the night away with her grandson Jacob—becomes, after His implacable hail of plagues upon Pharaoh's land in Exodus, dismayingly cruel.

Wendy, Marek, and Elmar break into Dr. Stern's asylum where other superfreaks like them are being held. The three are quickly surrounded by ten armed guards. Elmar orders the security detail to "Kneel down before Electro Man and beg for mercy." One of the guards calls him a dork and Elmar electrocutes all ten. Wendy throws up. Elmar exults, "I really fried those guys!" Marek is furious at Elmar's lethal infatuation with *dies Superheldenscheiße*. "This is why they lock us up. Maybe they're right."

In full Electro-drag Elmar crashes a backyard party at Wendy's home, tells her he loves her, and asks her to leave her family to be with him: "We are the future," he says. "We are better people for a better world. *Der nächste Schritt in der fucking Evolution.*" Wendy tells him to go. Rejected, Elmar returns later and menaces Wendy's family. She knocks him through the air into the pool where his superpower short-circuits and nearly kills him. We last see Elmar being carried out of Wendy's house on a stretcher by Dr. Stern's minions, bound for the asylum where he will be drugged and held until the sequel, if any.

Evading Dr. Stern Wendy parts from her family and, heeding Marek's last words, will now set out to "free the others." Wendy's closing voiceover says,

"But the real prison is their lies, the invisible wall,¹⁷ and the chains that stop us from being ourselves. But that's over now. We'll take back our freedom. There are a lot of us, more than they think. We live among them, right beneath their noses – in their offices, in their neighborhoods, in their families. And whether they like it or not we will open their eyes. Together. Because in reality, you, too, are one of us. You just don't know it yet."

Elmar's folly has prepped us to hear '*ob sie es wollen oder nicht*' as *ein bisschen nazimäßig*, a wee *on les forcera d'être libres*. Traditional hero that Wendy is, ἄτη is at hand to snare her into tragedy.¹⁸

Late in the movie a flashback to Wendy's origin story foreshadows this prospect of tragedy. A child about eight years old she sits beside her mother in the school principal's office. From behind his wide desk the principal lectures Wendy and her mother about obeying the rules. On the desktop lie Wendy's walkman and orange headphones, apparently taken from her as

More than once, he urges Moses' followers to put opposing nations 'under the ban'—that is, to massacre them, to commit genocide." John Updike, "The Great I Am," *The New Yorker* October 24, 2004.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/11/01/the-great-i-am> .

¹⁷ I.e., "that thin wall by which the 'they' is separated, as it were, from the uncanniness of its Being." *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 323.

¹⁸ Wheresoever is Dasein there is *Irre*; *ubicunque ἦρωες ibi ἄτη*.

contraband. Wendy remains silent, and gazes at a print on the wall; the print fills the screen for a couple of beats. It depicts Kali standing above supine Shiva with her foot on his chest.

The movie doesn't recount the myth behind this emphatic allusion. Sita, seeing that her husband Rama's army has been driven away by the thousand-headed demon he set out to destroy,

“smiles and immediately assumes the form of Kālī. She attacks and kills the demon and then begins tossing his heads and limbs about. She gulps his blood in her frenzy and begins to do an earth-shattering dance. The gods become alarmed and petition Śiva to intervene. He comes to the battlefield where Kālī dances in madness and throws himself down among the corpses of the slain under her feet. Brahmā then calls to her, directing her attention to Śiva beneath her. Recognizing him there (he is called her husband here) she is astonished and embarrassed and stops her dance. (This is a very common representation of Kālī in Bengal). She resumes her appearance as Sītā and accompanies the humiliated Rāma to their home.”¹⁹

Kali the Destroyer is an allomorph of Sita the housewife; more generally of the divine feminine, as an older myth portrays her. Two great demons have subdued the gods and now rule over them. The gods petition Devi, the Great Goddess also known as Durga, for help. She sets out to battle the demons.

“The first demon heroes sent forth to battle her are Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa. When they approach Durgā with drawn swords and bent bows, she becomes furious, her face becoming dark as ink. Suddenly there springs forth from her brow the terrible goddess Kālī, armed with a sword and noose. She wears a garland of human heads, a tiger's skin, and waves a staff with a skull handle. She is gaunt, with sunken, reddish eyes, gaping mouth, lolling tongue, and emaciated flesh. She fills the four quarters with her terrifying roar and leaps eagerly into the fray. She flings demons into her mouth and crushes them in her jaws. She wades through the demon hosts decapitating and crushing all who stand before her. Laughing and howling loudly, she approaches Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, grasps them by the hair, and in one furious instant decapitates them both with her mighty sword. Returning to Durgā with the two heads, she laughs jokingly and presents them to the Goddess as a gift.”²⁰

¹⁹ David Kinsley, “Freedom from Death in the Worship of Kālī,” 22 *Numen* 183, 196 (1975); slightly expanded in David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: Kālī and Kṛṣṇa, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (1975). Note that arguing with her husband Wendy throws him across the room and he lands on the floor, stunned. ‘Astonished and embarrassed’ Wendy leaves.

²⁰ “Freedom from Death in the Worship of Kālī” 186-187. Cf. the battle-ghouls “Ἐρις, Κυδοιμός, and Κήρ at *Iliad* 18.535-540: “And amid them Strife and Tumult joined in the fray, and deadly Fate, grasping one man alive,

The Kali jump-out occurs – as in *Carrie* and *Firestarter*, in *Medea* and in *Westworld's* Dolores Abernathy – at that furious instant when a subaltern female erupts as ruthless Destroyer. In Wendy's backstory this eruption happens in the principal's office under the very eyes of Kali. "Let's start with this," the principal says, picking up Wendy's walkman to lock it away. Little Wendy rises roaring with rage, seizes the desk and hurls it, with the principal seated behind it, through the wall of the office onto the street one story below.

Wrath, μῆνις, figures among the existentials of epic and tragedy, preeminently in the *Iliad* and in Sophocles.²¹ For taking her walkman – for the outrage to her τιμή – Wendy does to the principal what Achilles was about to do to Agamemnon for taking Briseis – kill him on the spot.

The movie opens on the immediate aftermath. The camera follows Dr. Stern as she walks through the school parking lot now filled with police cars. She stops to stare at the bloody desk on the pavement. She makes her way through the evacuated building to find Wendy huddling in weepy shock at her own violence, walkman and orange headphones at her feet. Athena has arrived too late to stop this killing, so takes the child Wendy into her care to prevent further carnage. As Dr. Stern reminds adult Wendy on a surprise visit to Chop Heaven, counseling and pills have allowed Wendy to have a normal life, a family, and a job.

"But that's over now." And another round of earth-shattering dance, we expect, is on the cards.

Bishop Butler puts his finger on the dynamics of tragedy in his phenomenology of the passion of resentment, "which, if generally indulged, would propagate itself so as almost to lay waste the world"²²:

"there is one thing, which so generally belongs to and accompanies all excess and abuse of it [abuse of the God-given passion of resentment, in Butler's schema the spring of justice], as to require being mentioned: a certain determination, and resolute bent of mind, not to be convinced or set right [i.e. the ἀμήχανος bent: so of Hector, ἀμηχανός παραρρητοῖσι πιθέσθαι; of Achilles, σύ δ' ἀμήχανος ἔπλευ; of Antigone, ἀμηχανῶν ἐρᾶς] . . . In this there is doubtless a great mixture of pride [τιμή, bruise thereto]; but there is somewhat more,

fresh-wounded, another without a wound, and another she dragged dead through the mellay by the feet; and the raiment that she had about her shoulders was red with the blood of men. Even as living mortals joined they in the fray and fought; and they were haling away each the bodies of the others' slain." tr. A. T. Murray (1924).

²¹ Where "they are all angry heroes." Bernard M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (1964) 21.

²² "Upon forgiveness of injuries" 85. Advances since the eighteenth century have removed the technical limitations implicit in 'almost'. Cf. the fate of the Krell in *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox 1956).

which I cannot otherwise express, than that resentment has taken possession of the temper of the mind, and will not quit its hold.”²³

In epic and tragedy this possession is by ἄτη: “Twice before the assembled hosts, Agamemnon complains: Ζεὺς με μέγα Κρονίδης ἄτη ἐνέδησε βαρείη, and the δαίμων Ἴατη may be the power that binds.”²⁴ Ἴατη is not itself μῆνις or *Wut* or *Zorn*. Ἴατη shackles the power of *sapientia* to restrain the hero’s *Destruktiontrieb*, the inner Kali; the drive euphemized with names like ‘courage,’ ‘fortitude,’ ‘valor,’ ‘brave deeds.’ The heroic ideal is the fame earned by supposedly righteous killing, the highest glory.²⁵

That our violence can be controlled when wielded for the sake of justice or freedom or the τιμή of our Dasein is what warlords paid poets to repeat for so long it became the central monument of the heritage, *das Erbe*. So here it is again in the form of Wendy *und ihre Freunde*, the tomorrow-belongs-to-me gang. *Und wir sind einer von ihnen?*

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²³ “Upon resentment” 77.

²⁴ Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (1951) 327, quoting *Iliad* 2.111 and 9.18.

²⁵ Urukleves now I call to mind,
the son of valiant Seghekleves,
who with his great thirsty spear
slew men and horses by hundreds.
...
Well-joined was the dear name
you set on your son, Seghekleves:
wide in truth his glory spreads
under that heaven, over this earth.
...

M. L. West, ‘Elegy on an Indo-European hero’ in West (2007) 504.