

Revolutionary Girl Utena: Playing the Protagonist, Hero, and Girl

To smash the shell of the encompassing world, rarely is it enough to simply to be different or new—revolution demands sterner, wilder stuff. Those who seek to revolutionize the world must directly challenge its systems, injustices, and imposed expectations. *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, the 1997 anime created by BE-PAPAS, directed by Kunihiko Ikuhara, and produced by J.C. Staff, a show made in “a mode no one [had] ever seen before,” sets out to bring exactly such a challenge to the narrative form, to the idealized hero figure, and to the traditional conceptions of gender roles (Ikuhara 5). While the show strives for revolution in numerous ways, it is in the titular character, Utena Tenjou, that *Utena* issues the widest range of and most deeply subversive challenges to the existing systems in which it plays and fights. Utena, through the ways she plays the roles of protagonist, hero, and girl, deconstructs these archetypes and reinterprets each of them in her own identity.

While the titular Utena is ostensibly the protagonist of the anime, she occupies a peculiar narrative space in the structure of the story. *Utena* is most certainly Utena’s story, but the illumination of her character is comes through refracted, rather than projected light. In her interview with for the laserdisc linear notes, Chiho Saito, the writer of the *Revolutionary Girl Utena* manga that ran simultaneously with the anime, commented on the differences between the two media, saying “[...] the way the anime is structured, Utena is far too removed from the center of the drama, and I’m just really not sure that’s suited for manga” (78). Utena wins Anthy, her princess, early on in the story, and thus becomes *the* obstacle standing in between the rest of the characters and their goals. In this sense, Saito’s statement is both somewhat correct and somewhat in error—the main story arcs that make up the majority of *Utena* focus the internal drama of other characters, but Utena is the mirror reflecting their particular flaws. Storyboard artist Katsuyo Hashimoto notes, “The special people are ‘special’ because they lack something”

(90). In contrast to the emptiness that defines the lives of other duelists—whether that be Miki’s “shining thing,” Jury’s unrequited love, or Touga’s desire for power—Utena appears preternaturally fulfilled. Where then can her journey as protagonist take her? She is already complete. She illuminates the where other characters must grow, rather than growing herself.

The irony, of course, is that Utena’s holistic persona is predicated on more than just the inherent nobility that has defined her since her childhood. “Little one, who bears up alone in such great sorrow, never lose that strength or nobility, even when you grow up”, says the prince of her memories (Episode 1). The particular phrasing of the prince’s instructions indicate an important unity between Utena’s youthful innocence and her nobility. Even the grown Utena of the main timeline sustains codependent obliviousness and honor—her ideals place her in unique positions of ignorance. Immediately before Utena ascends the stairs to the Dueling Arena, the Shadow Play Girls call out, “But, be careful, brave hero. There are rules in the forest. Do you know what they are?” (Episode 1). Indeed, Utena the protagonist has no idea what she is doing; she is blown about by the winds of her own idealistic passion within the (to her) invisible structures of the narrative. And so, when she wins Anthy in the duel, it is against her will and tangential to her intentions as an actor in the story.

If *Utena* were a traditional story of revolution, Utena would be taking action to tear down the dueling game she despises, but the very structure of the narrative elements forces her into a position where agent challengers must bring the fight to her. In other words, Utena the protagonist is dependent on the motivations of the other “special” characters to present her with obstacles for her to overcome. With every duel she wins, Utena perpetuates a dramatic situation in which she must wait for the next obstacle to encounter her on its own path. Utena is the constant; it is around her existence, rather than her actions, that the drama centers.

Yet there is no denying that Utena is the protagonist of the story, the heroine, the hero, the prince, and the main character—from the anime’s very title, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, this much is explicitly clear. This is also not to say that Utena is completely passive throughout the show, only that the avenues through which she takes action are usually untraditional for the protagonist of a fictional story. Because of this, when Utena does take back agency in the narrative, those moments of action take on greater significance. At the conclusion of each of the anime’s arcs, Utena moves with the intention to change something. With the ending of the Student Council Saga she challenges Touga to repossess Anthy, in the finale of the Black Rose Saga she challenges Mikage to halt his machinations with the other students, and at the resolution of the Apocalypse Sage (and the entire show) she stands in Akio’s way to save Anthy once and for all. In this way, Utena redefines what it means to be the protagonist of a story—to be the main character, to be the protagonist is not to drive the action of a story, but to instigate change. Functionally, the moments in which Utena possess agency are the moments when the story shifts between acts. Furthermore, it is through encountering Utena that the other characters are able to progress through their own arcs. It is Utena who shapes the entire story by her presence, whether she is acting or not.

Of course she would do so—Utena is the hero of the story, the prince who ultimately saves the damsel in distress, who reaches out for and grasps “something eternal” (Episode 33). In the context of *Utena*, hero and prince are, effectively, synonymous terms. The prince of Utena’s memories tenderly reaches out to her younger self and saves her from despair: a heroic action. It is to this action that Utena responds and because of it “the princess vowed to become a prince herself one day” (Episode 1). The questions the show deals with thus become: What does it mean to be a prince? And can a girl become a prince? Catherine E. Bailey suggests that Utena, by

maintaining her female nature alongside her princely aspirations and behaviors, modifies the traditional conception of the prince: “The ‘prince’ becomes, then, a body of ideas, connoting a heroic agency that is unfixed from gender” (212). In other words, there is no longer a need for the distinction between hero and heroine, prince and princess—being heroic depends on factors other than gender. For Director Kunihiro Ikuhara, the defining trait of the prince is the ability to assert power:

A prince isn’t ‘someone who looks cool’; nor, of course, is a prince ‘a girl who dresses as a boy.

Oh.

A ‘prince’ is ‘someone who can exercise power.’

What is that power for? Who is it for? (9)

The title of episode 12, on which Ikuhara is commenting, may hold a clue indicating to which end a prince’s power ought to be directed: “For Friendship, Perhaps.” But is it enough for a prince to merely wield power for friendship? Is that all that being a hero means?

The oft-repeated story of Utena’s childhood encounter with the prince reveals the core of heroism to Utena herself, and to the audience: strength and nobility. Less explicitly, the events of the final episode contrast competing heroic ideologies, and it is Utena’s actions that dictate the true form of heroic status. At the start of the episode, Anthy stabs Utena in the back, telling her, “You can never be my prince. Because you’re a girl” (Episode 39). But Dios, to whom Anthy returns the Sword of Revolution, is unable to become a true prince himself, unable to reclaim the power that lies through on the other side of the gate. “Without power,” he muses, “you’re doomed to live life dependent on another” (Episode 39). This is how Akio sees heroism: as possessing the power to save others. And yet he fails, because he seeks power outside of himself.

Utena, though, embodies another form of power, a strength that does not merely save the powerless, but restores power to them. Timothy Perper and Martha Cornog observe, “Although Utena cannot rescue Anthy, Utena’s gentleness—her noble heart—opens the Way for Anthy to escape” (185). Rather than sacrificing Anthy to gain power as Akio has done time and time again, Utena presents herself as the sacrifice to the Swords of Humanity’s Hatred, releasing Anthy from her painful destiny as the Rose Bride. Patrick Drazen’s interpretation of Utena’s fate displays a fundamental misunderstanding of Utena’s action: “Plain and simple: a girl cannot be a prince. [...] If she tries to be what she’s not, there’ll be a price to pay” (245). As Anthy slips out of Utena’s grasp, Utena mourns that she “couldn’t be a prince,” but Anthy’s final lines of the show indicate that she now has agency she never had before—she is independent and free (Episode 39). Thus, despite the fact that Utena feels she has failed, she has become the hero—her nobility has freed Anthy and Akio’s has not.

In opposing Akio, the former prince, Utena redefines the state of being a hero by succeeding in her goal through sacrifice. If Akio represents the traditional hero—male, proud, absolutely confident and certain in his purpose, willing to use violence to achieve his heroic ends—then Utena comes to be an incarnation of the new heroism. She rejects Akio’s quest for an external power and exercises the power inherent within herself to take Anthy’s place and free her friend. By doing so, Utena liberates the concept of the hero-prince from the trappings of gendered qualifications and asserts that the capacity to be princely and heroic is naturally derived from nobility of spirit and strength of character.

Critically, Utena’s ability to so recapture heroism is facilitated by her explicitly stated gender. Utena is female; the clothes she wears or the activities in which she participates do not define her gender. From the very first episode, Utena affirms that she is, indeed, a girl. After

trouncing the boys' basketball team, the captain tries to recruit her for the playoffs, to which Utena indignantly replies, "Excuse me, I happen to be a girl!" And when the captain protests, "You act like a guy anyway, Tenjou," she snaps back, "Would you quit insulting me?!" (Episode 1). Already, Utena has divorced her desire to be a prince entirely from her gender. Her wearing of the male uniform and her playing boys' sports does not challenge her self-conception as a female. In fact, she is empowered by asserting her femininity through "masculine" channels. Annalee Newitz observes, "The magical girl subgenre [is] based upon the idea that women should conceal their power" (5). *Utena* is at least partially indebted to the magical girl tradition (indeed, Ikuhara made his name directing the intentionally famous magical girl anime *Sailor Moon*), but Utena conceals none of her power. She directly competes with, and surpasses, the ordinary boys at Ohtori Academy.

Notably, Utena's interactions with the normal students at her school gain her nothing but praise, admiration, and love. It is only when she enters the Student Council's hyper-masculine game as a Duelist that her power is questioned and subverted. Again returning to Utena's first duel with Saionji, the arrogant Vice-President snidely congratulates her on her efforts midway through the fight, saying that she has done well "...for a girl" (Episode 1). It is all the more important, then, that Utena does defeat him in this fight—and does so with only the hilt of her wooden practice sword. If the sword in this context is seen as a phallic symbol for masculine power, then Utena triumphs over the fully endowed Saionji with only a fraction of a weapon. Timothy Perper and Martha Cornog write, "[...] the *bishōjo senshi* relocates the girl [...] from the patriarchal domain of partial beings to the feminine domain of completeness" (334). *Bishōjo senshi* literally means "pretty girl soldier," a trope that portrays a beautiful female who is skilled with weapons. Utena is certainly a member of the *bishōjo senshi* tradition, and as such, her

victory not only avenges the honor of her friend, but also validates her identity as a female and justifies her place as a Duelist. Mari Kotani hypothesizes, “In effect, it is as a prince that she becomes active, which raises a question: ‘Can only boys become princes?’” (167). But, as has already been argued, *Utena* sublimates a gendered conception of the prince to a universal one. So, while it is true that Utena becomes active as a prince, she does not need to do so as a boy.

Utena, importantly, cannot be understood as a girl divorced from her roles as protagonist and as hero. She is all three at once, interdependently. As Mari Kotani so succinctly summarizes, “She is a girl prince” (163). It is here appropriate to consider a point somewhat tangential to Utena’s unifying existence as protagonist, hero, and girl. Once again returning to the traditions on which *Utena* leans, Utena’s character is informed by the constructs of the *shōjo* genre—that is, a demographic category whose stories target young women. In the Japanese title for *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (*Shōjo Kakumei Utena*), *shōjo* is the specific word used to describe Utena. Fusami Ogi writes that “the term *shōjo* is fixated on the notion of youth,” an observation that provides an interesting reflection on Utena’s character (794). Canonically, Utena is fourteen years old—and much of her personality reflects what could be labeled as youthful exuberance and, as has already been discussed, youthful ignorance. Utena’s youth is an inextricable element of her identity; it facilitates the perpetuation of the ideals around which her nobility is focused.

Utena’s role as a girl also engages the issue of sexuality as she comes in contact with the forceful traditional masculinity of Touga and Akio. Both men make romantic advances towards her, but where Touga fails (twice), Akio succeeds. Earlier in his episode 12 commentary, Ikuhara muses, “An ‘adult’ is not someone who has lived a certain number of years. We call someone who can exercise power an ‘adult’” (9). Akio has replaced the princely power of his youth with the sexual power of adulthood and wields that power to manipulate Utena through her ignorance

and innocence. Bailey sums up his sinister actions well: “He pointedly aims to socialise her into a prim and proper woman, infantilizing her while simultaneously sexualising her” (214). In other words, by compartmentalizing Utena into the role of a traditional girl, Akio attempts to strip her of heroic nature, to re-gender the concept of the hero, and to convince her that boys are princes and girls are princesses. But despite the fact that Akio does successfully make Utena fall in love with him and seduces her into his bed, Utena preserves her core nobility in her final, heroic actions. She has passes through the liminal state of adolescent sexual awakening and emerges beyond it, not as a girl oppressed by her role as a female, but as a girl able to integrate both her gender and her heroic nature. Indeed, the fact that Utena has been limited by traditional gender roles and then broken free of them revolutionizes her girlhood into a fully aware, fully realized self incorporating the entirety of each of her roles: protagonist, hero, and girl.

And this is only the beginning of *Revolutionary Girl Utena*’s revolution—for Utena Tenjou’s appropriation of the protagonist, the hero, and the girl outside of their traditional structures conditions the anime to encompass a wide range of other revolutionizing tactics. Whether it be the theater-style lighting or the idiosyncratic code of visual symbols, nothing in *Utena* is content to sleep peacefully in contented silence; the creative impulse of Ikuhara and the other members of the BE-PAPAS team gusts against the shells of tradition and archetype, cracking through stagnancy, and rushing out in a tempest of hope and freedom. Like Anthy, we the audience are empowered by *Utena*’s example—for us, the shell of the world remains to be broken and *Utena* gives us permission to strike out on our own to revolutionize the world.

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