When I was seventeen, I questioned everything I was presented with. “You lack strength of character,” my father often said. I was, to him, a sinful girl, a weak vessel, I had a huge problem with being compliant, obedient, respectful and ladylike. I, however, doubted in the usefulness of these much extolled ‘virtues’, and frequently said so. He got mad every time I expressed my opinion, “I don’t want to be like the women in the Bible!” How heroic was it to spawn children till you died, have no say in common law, to be cowed into submitting to men’s judgment, to be nothing more than property, no better than a cow? He hated my independent, cynical way of thinking and promised me the fires of hell. The strength of his punishments, he thought, would curb my defiance. HARDLY. I considered myself a hero, overtly questioning his biblical interpretations of justice, law, judgment, right and wrong with huge words that my father didn’t have in his vocabulary. His face always seemed stern, red, and mad. He found my relentless and varied arguments insufferable and expressed his fatherly doubts cruelly, “You’ll never be anything more than a whore!” Me? A whore? The boys I knew highly doubted my desirability as a woman. They despised my lightning wit. I was unrelated to the cow-like girls, with their goo goo-eyed adoration of those pretentious pricks. The girls thought I was mad, “How can you NOT think men are WONDERFUL?!” I didn’t have friends. The acerbic strength of my tongue, and my perpetual refusal to keep my opinions to myself left me with a huge lack of enjoyable social interaction. I read books instead. I believed I was like my favorite heroes:
bold, brave, daring, dauntless. I was ready, also, to pay the consequences a hero must pay: to be misunderstood, friendless, forsaken, left with severe self doubt on many occasions, wondering if my search for knowledge and truth was worth the huge price it seemed to extract from me. My mother cried so often that year. She, loving and gentle as a cow, thought it was her fault I was incorrigible. She thought my willful, oppositional strength to stand shouting, as a man would, toe to toe with my father a sign of either madness or possession by the devil. “Can’t you just pray for God to help you do his will? It’s madness and a love of evil to resist!” she’d plead. She couldn’t understand me. I cried too; sure, I was a hero but I was so tired of fighting ignorance, irrationality, tradition – the brutal, unnatural strength of puritanical faith that my parents possessed. “The Scarlet Letter” refined my rhetoric of doubting into a machine. I was only silenced by his jarring slap to my face. They finally cowed me into submission and docility after they took away my books. My depression was huge, drowning out even the numbing rage I felt when my father threatened to burn them in a huge pile. They were locked in the attic instead. I thought, “This must be how insanity and madness begin.” But my fortunes changed! A “good girl” from church got pregnant, and the dumb cow’s mistake made MY little insurrections seem positively angelic. That poor, knocked up kid was my hero; her downfall my reprieve. My books were returned with certain conditions. My candid doubts in my father’s God must be silenced. I gave in. I hated the situation with passionate strength,
but I wanted my books back THAT bad! Silence was hugely difficult. That demanded a heroic effort. If I could manage to ignore my father’s madding belief system quietly and keep my doubts to myself, I could do anything in the world. I’m not a dumb sheep or cow. I’m a woman of strength.