

Rewriting Heroism: A Review of *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* by Maria Tatar[♦]

Maria Tatar, *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*. New York: Liveright, 2022.
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Maria Tatar's *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*, published by Liveright in 2021, offers a compelling, thoroughly researched examination that traverses mythology, folklore, literature, and popular culture with scholarly precision and narrative flair. Positioned as a response to Joseph Campbell's seminal 1949 work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Tatar's book undertakes the crucial task of foregrounding the narratives and qualities of female figures who have often been marginalized or overlooked in traditional heroic paradigms (Tatar, *Heroine* 1-2). As a renowned folklorist and Harvard professor, Tatar brings decades of scholarship to her analysis, demonstrating a deep familiarity with both classic texts and contemporary media. The resulting volume is praised as an engaging study that offers a much-needed makeover of the hero's journey concept (Ragan 139).

One of the immediate strengths of *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* is its direct engagement with Joseph Campbell's work, acknowledging its immense influence, particularly as a playbook for Hollywood, while also highlighting its limitations concerning female representation (Tatar, *Heroine* 3). Campbell's model outlines a linear, twelve-step hero's journey typically involving departure, ordeal, and return with a healing "elixir" or "magic potion" (19). However, his focus predominantly centered on male figures, such as military or spiritual leaders, often confining women to roles ancillary to the male hero, such as "mother of the hero" or "goal of the hero's achievement" (xiii). This narrow perspective famously prompted a student of Sarah Lawrence to ask Campbell, "But what about the women?" and, upon hearing his list of supporting roles, assert, "I want to be the hero" (qtd. in

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Tatar, *Heroine* 43). Tatar frames her book not as a competition but as a sequel, aiming to tell the story of the half that Joseph Campbell left out—a bold rebalancing of the narrative cosmos that invites readers to reconsider the terrain of myth through a wider, richer lens (“Maria Tatar” 11:50). The very title, referencing both Campbell’s thousand faces and Scheherazade’s thousand and one nights, signals this intention, suggesting not merely an addition of one heroine but an “infinite unending number” of possibilities for heroism, particularly those driven by care, curiosity, and craft rather than conquest (Tatar, *Heroine* 78).

Tatar’s approach shifts the focus from Campbell’s outward journey to the heroine’s mission, which she identifies as often rooted in care and curiosity (“Heroine” 14:45). These qualities, she notes, became particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided the author with a period of intense reading and reflection and highlighted new forms of heroism in healthcare workers and scientists. The genesis of the book itself was deeply intertwined with this period, described by Tatar as a “labor of love” that helped her navigate the “eerily silent” time and find solace in storytelling (“Maria Tatar” 8:30). This personal connection adds a heartfelt dimension to the academic exploration, revealing Tatar’s heroic journey and self-exploration throughout the process (Ragan 139).

Structurally, *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* is organized thematically, moving from foundational myths and fairy tales to contemporary narratives, showcasing how the concept of female heroism has evolved and how older stories are being reinterpreted. This layout, which often presents historical case studies followed by contemporary analyses, is a significant strength. Tatar seamlessly transitions from figures like Scheherazade and Philomela to Nancy Drew. This intergenerational arc raises compelling questions: How have the faces of female heroism evolved across time, and what does this evolution reveal about the values we champion today such as Wonder Woman, Katniss Everdeen, and Lisbeth Salander (Tatar, “Heroine”).

She discusses ancient myths, such as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* (Tatar, *Heroine* 15), alongside their modern retellings by authors like Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller, and Pat Barker, demonstrating how marginalized voices are being reclaimed and amplified. This juxtaposition of the classic and the contemporary enable readers, particularly younger audiences familiar with recent figures, to discern the enduring patterns and revolutionary shifts in

female representation. The inclusion of analyses of works ranging from *Little Women* (152) and *Anne of Green Gables* (168) to *Jurassic Park* (249) and *The Queen's Gambit* (288) illustrates Tatar's wide-ranging knowledge and her ability to connect diverse texts under the umbrella of female heroism.

Tatar's writing style contributes significantly to the book's success. She has a remarkable ability to "defamiliarize the stories we know" (Ragan 139), offering fresh perspectives on well-worn narratives. Her analyses of figures like Philomela, who uses weaving to tell the story of her sexual assault after being silenced (Tatar, *Heroine* 61), or Charlotte the spider, who saves Wilbur with words woven into her web (49), powerfully illustrate the theme of words and domestic crafts as tools for survival, justice, and rescue. Tatar's discussion of the "perils of a single story," drawing on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—a theme closely aligned with the broader issue of narrative framing and the suppression of marginalized voices, which continues to shape not only literary studies but also Tatar's own research focus—and the importance of "perspectivalism" (280), highlights her nuanced approach, recognizing that truth and justice often require hearing multiple voices, particularly those historically silenced. The book's epigraph from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, celebrating "unhistoric acts" and those who "live faithfully a hidden life," sets a tone that values heroism in its less obvious, less public forms (qtd. in Tatar, *Heroine* xi).

A particularly engaging aspect of the book is its exploration of how women, often excluded from formal systems, have utilized "extrajudicial strategies" and storytelling to pursue justice (Tatar, *Heroine* 95). This is directly linked to the #MeToo movement, which Tatar views as a modern manifestation of women sharing private knowledge through unofficial channels and narratives (103). She cites Chanel Miller's public victim impact statement as a powerful contemporary example of breaking silence and reclaiming agency through words (208). Tatar's reflection on how a male professor's actions almost derailed her PhD links her own experience to the broader #MeToo context she discusses (xxiii).

The discussion of "curiosity" is another recurring theme. While traditionally depicted negatively in figures like Eve and Pandora, Tatar re-evaluates curiosity as a positive, often lifesaving strategy, particularly for female detectives like Miss Marple and Nancy Drew (Tatar, *Heroine* 197), who use their investigative nature to uncover truths. By reframing curiosity as

heroic inquiry, Tatar challenges conventional interpretations and aligns this trait with the pursuit of knowledge and justice.

Despite the book's numerous strengths and its significant contribution to expanding the concept of heroism, it is possible to interpret Tatar's focus on the heroine who operates through intellect, craft, care, and words as potentially overshadowing the female character who exhibits physical strength, courage, or in other words the "tomboyish hero" who meets her male counterparts "toe-to-toe." Tatar effectively argues that traditionally female protagonists in folklore have been less likely to be defined as physically heroic or courageous compared to males, often achieving goals through less active means (Gottschall 85). A quantitative analysis of folktales supports this, finding female protagonists to be significantly underrepresented as main characters and less likely to be described as active, courageous, or physically heroic, while more often noted for their physical attractiveness and altruism towards kin (75-85). This empirical data certainly validates Tatar's observation about the historical record.

However, Tatar also discusses modern figures who embody more physically assertive traits. She mentions the emergence of new warrior women, figures who are muscular, brawny, and often hypersexualized, citing examples like Black Widow, Black Panther, and female assassins ("Jung" 16:53). She also includes characters like Lisbeth Salander (Tatar, *Heroine* 247)—described as muscular, masculine (or boyish), and taking charge—and Katniss Everdeen (265), a boundary crosser with hunting skills. While these figures are acknowledged and analyzed within the book, Tatar often discusses them with a degree of caution or critique, questioning if they merely replicate male archetypes or are products of male fantasy. She asks whether cinematic portrayals of heroines risk becoming anti-heroines bent on revenge, or are still so stuck with the male warrior killer model (Ragan 140).

While this critical perspective on the replication of male archetypes is academically valid—and likely resonates with readers attuned to media critique—it is also worth acknowledging that some may expect a broader embrace of physically dynamic heroines. The "tomboyish hero," who is active, courageous, and combines strength with wit, might not fit neatly into Tatar's categories of care-based or hypersexualized archetypes. Yet figures like Katniss Everdeen deserve a more central place in the pantheon—not as replicas of male heroes, but as legitimate and evolving female archetypes.

The power of Tatar's book lies in revealing the astonishing but long-buried history of heroines who have flown beneath the radar. By championing those who use words and stories to change the world, Tatar provides a necessary corrective to narrow heroic ideals. However, a more comprehensive picture of heroism might give equal weight to those who wield swords as well as those who wield stories.

Maria Tatar's *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* is a significant, engaging, and masterfully written work. It challenges conventional notions of heroism while providing a rich exploration of female figures across centuries and genres. Its strength lies in profound scholarship and compelling analysis. While its emphasis on non-traditional heroism is groundbreaking, readers may look forward to future editions that also celebrate the full spectrum of heroic expression, including physical strength, courage, and direct action. The book opens a crucial conversation on the evolving values embedded in heroism and lays the foundation for richer, more inclusive mythologies to come.

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