

***The Heroine with 1001 Faces* by Maria Tatar,  
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**Abstract**

*This book explores the notion of heroism from the feminist point of view by tackling notions such as curiosity and knowledge, deeds (masculine approach) vs stories (feminine approach), creativity (at the beginning limited to the domestic area) and inquisitiveness. It also reveals uncomfortable truths about how abuse, abduction, mutilation and torture forced women into silence. Moreover, the author points out that words have the power to resist injustice and that feminine heroism means the courage to break the silence and start telling 'your' story through different channels (weavings, books, social media etc).*

**Keywords:** Mythology, Folklore, female heroism, telling your story, curiosity

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It comes of no surprise that Maria Tatar, a famous Research Professor of Folklore and Mythology as well as of Germanic Languages at Harvard University, published a book on one hand, on Mythology and Folklore, and, on the other, on Gender Studies.

The book was written during the pandemics to keep the author's mind alive (as she confessed) and it is the outcome of more than fifty years of reading experience while paying particular attention to the literary representation of women in myths, epics, folk tales, and cinema. It was conceived as a response over decades to another well-known book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) by Joseph Campbell who envisioned a hero requiring audacity, determination, strength and mobility. The choice of the number 1001 in the title was not meant as a competition to Campbell's book, but as a way to express unlimited possibilities of heroic femininity and as a reference to Scheherazade's *Arabian Nights*, the renowned female storyteller whose role is analysed extensively in the second chapter of this book.

The volume expands on how women have shaped the mythological, literary, and cinematic imagination going beyond their traditionally

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assigned roles of mothers and protectors. As Joseph Campbell's hero embarks on a journey to slay monsters, battle their way to glory and save princesses in distress, the heroines are confined to the less spectacular domestic area where they still manage to find traces of heroism in terms of intelligence and courage (overlapping with the masculine heroic view), but also care and compassion (directly connected to their femininity). To the author, attentive care is associated to curiosity and the openness to the world, while the lack of curiosity becomes "a sin, a failure to acknowledge the presence of the others and care about the circumstances and conditions of their lives."

Maria Tatar starts the book by asking intriguing questions about what heroism means to men and women and identifies two gendered patterns: the masculine approach which emphasizes physical strength and valour (i.e. deeds) and the feminine approach (i.e. words or stories as weapons to restore justice). Moreover, she discovers new forms of female courage, triggered by curiosity and linked to knowledge (Pandora and Eve). Women also embarked on their own quests performing stealth operations, quietly seeking justice and struggling to survive.

The book consists of an "Introduction", six lengthy chapters (with a lot of subchapters), an "Epilogue", and a comprehensive "Index", all complemented by wonderful illustrations and photos of famous paintings or scenes from movies.

The first chapter ("Sing, O Muse. The Hero's Journey and the Heroine's Mission") defines the framework of the whole book: the meaning of the word 'hero' (from warrior to saint) as the epitome of strength and power and the meaning of the term 'heroine', perceived as "distinguished and admired". The heroes and heroines have different strategies for earning merit: the former through what they do (their deeds) and the latter through what they say or report. Consequently, the gendered division of heroic labour shifts from deeds to words. The best example is Scheherazade who skilfully used the magic of storytelling as words were her weapons. She had a dual mission: that of a clever survivor and that of a transforming agent. As a result, women's heroic mission is to testify, to tell the harsh truth. In the British tale, "Mr Fox," the female protagonist who is about to marry Mr Fox discovers that he is a cold-blooded murderer and she reveals the truth through the filter of dream: "I dreamt that I went yestermorn to your castle...". After contrasting Odysseus, a hero who performs "wondrous deeds", with Penelope, confined to the domestic arena,

spinning and weaving, the author concludes that *Odyssey* gives at least three women stereotypes: the bewitching Helen – the seductive femme fatale –, the virtuous and chaste Penelope, and the murderous Clytemnestra who plots to kill her husband. Nowadays Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is told by Penelope and the twelve maids – women without access to the world of deeds and action –, while Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* is a first-person narrative told in the day of Cassandra's death. Similarly, in the *Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker, we listen to the account of Briseis, Achilles' slave. These are all personal reports from victimised women – the social justice storytellers. Maria Tatar connects their voices to the #MeToo movement in which most of the female victims were empowered to use words thus changing their secret from shame into solidarity. In *Circe*, Madeline Miller does the same to Circe when she endows her with maternal instincts and magical healing powers. Both Baker and Miller save Briseis and Circe by memorialising their lives and rescuing them from oblivion.

The second chapter ("Silence and Speech. From Myth to #MeToo") looks at the tales about abductions (Persephone kidnapped by Hades, Europe taken away by Zeus under the form of a bull, Danaë impregnated by Zeus' golden shower) as well as their representations in paintings. The classicist Mary Beard comments that the first documented instance of a man silencing a woman – telling her that it is unseemly for women to speak in public – appears in *Odyssey* (Telemachus and her mother, Penelope). This episode may not reflect Homer's worldview but tells us more about women in ancient Greece whose voices remained unheard. There are however several exceptions. Philomela, raped by her brother-in-law, threatens Tereus to expose him in public, but he imprisons her and cuts off her tongue. Nevertheless, Philomela is resourceful and weaves her story into a cloth delivered to her sister, Procne. Maria Tatar ponders on the role of weavers such as Philomela and Arachne to become artisans with a social mission. Besides abduction, the chapter comments on mutilation (the cutting out of tongues) and on how this form of torture condemned women to silence depriving them of their most feared weapon (the power of speech). Moreover, the chapter emphasizes the value of testimony or telling your story.

The third chapter ("Resistance and Revelation. Storytelling and the Unsung Heroines of Fairy Tales) explores the power of language (in *Jane Eyre*) and the female forms of discourse as displayed in fairy tales focusing

on chitchat, gossip and rumour (“The Talking Skull”, “The Princess in the Suit of Leather” etc.). Sometimes the old wives tell stories related to toxic marriages, bad betrothal and abject circumstances to prevent the cultural amnesia. However, these narratives were discredited and excluded from the literary culture because people were used to stories about heroes and power (i.e. the power to inflict damage) and dismiss stories about ordeals, persistence and forging alliances. Later on, these folk tales were planted into the culture of childhood and all the stories with a subversive turn were eliminated. The anxiety about transporting fairy tales in printed form continued even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we take a closer look at stories that were not part of the contemporary literary canon, we discover the strategies used by women to talk back, to create solidarity and to survive. Authors such as Anne Sexton (in *Transformations*), Angela Carter (*Wayward Girls and Wicked Women; The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*), Margaret Atwood (*Bluebeard’s Egg*) and Toni Morrison (*The Song of Solomon; Tar Baby*) revisited fairy tales and added a new hermeneutical twist to their original form. ‘Their mythology’ has been but an instrument to perpetuate femininity myths and correct patriarchal discourses.

The fourth chapter (“Wonder Girls. Curious Writers and Caring Detectives”) revolves around the various meanings of the word “curiosity” as either ‘bestowing care or pains, careful, studious, attentive’ (the obsolete usage) or ‘inquisitiveness’ (the contemporary use). Curiosity is a form of desire which can sometimes leads to risks and excesses rooted in the Faustian thirst for knowledge. Out of curiosity, Pandora opened the “jar with countless plagues” and Eve – the mother of humankind – shouldered the blame for the loss of innocence and became the embodiment of transgressive desire. The literary heroines in this chapter live by their wits (e.g. the protagonist in Perrault’s “Bluebeard”). The 19<sup>th</sup> century gave us the novel of adultery (*Anna Karenina; Madame Bovary*), but also introduced the coming-of-age story, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, which shows the imaginative power of the women who dreamt of becoming writers, as Jo March did. When Lucy Maud Montgomery published *Anne of Green Gables*, she put reading, imagination, talk, and writing on trial. Moreover, in *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne Frank has the opportunity to speak out her mind with impunity, using words as therapy. In *Harriet the Spy*, Louise Fitzhugh accounts the misadventures in espionage of a heroine obsessed with writing everything in a diary at a cost of hurting her classmates and friends. When Starr Carter, the female protagonist in *The Hate U Give* by

Angie Thomas speaks out about the shooting of her Afro-American friend, everyone in her orbit is animated by her speech, proving that words do matter in the aftermath of a tragic event.

Women in the post-war era faced Achille's dilemma – they had to choose between *nostos* (home) and *kleos* (glory). Some of them found their path to glory by writing, becoming women of letters (Carrie Bradshaw in *The Sex and the City*), or by finding a voice of their own to deliver social justice. Reading may enlarge your world, but writing is a deeply personal experience. Unlike the writer who traffics in words on a page, the detectives require investigative action in the public arena – the inspection of the crime scene, the search for clues, the interrogation of suspects. The female detective is a breakthrough figure, driven by curiosity and the desire to find justice. The first woman detective in British literature (Mrs. Gladden, envisioned by Andrew Forrester) was soon followed by other private eye heroines such as Nancy Drew and Agatha Christie's Mrs. Marple, presented through the lenses of curiosity in the fifth chapter ("Detective Work. From Nancy Drew to Wonder Woman"). Even Hermione in *Harry Potter* series or Katniss Everdeen in *Hunger Games* are reminders of the image of Nancy Drew. Maria Tatar looks for the etymology of the word spinster and finds it resonating with notions of spinning and solitude: Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* or Mrs Marple who solves mysteries while constantly knitting. The final part of this chapter takes us in the myth-like world of Wonder Woman who fights evil and injustice of all levels.

The last chapter ("To Double Duty Bound. Tricksters and Other Girls on Fire") dives deeper into the world of cinema and shows how myths were recycled in movies. A new type of character emerges: the female trickster – outsider, misfit, opportunistic. She will lie, steal or cheat, refusing to play by the rules and thus undermines the system. At the same time, she is an agent of change and renewal. Along with their male counterparts (Anansi, Hermes, Loki, native American Coyote), there is a large pantheon of female tricksters: Margaret Atwood's Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, Lizbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson's Millenium Trilogy, Lex from *Jurassic Park*, Pippi in *Pippi Longstocking*, Amy in the movie *Gone Girl* etc. Moreover, the films offer us a generous array of warrior women who made their way to screen (*The Game of Thrones*, *Moana*, *Frozen II*) as well as savvy saviours such as Katniss in the *Hunger Games* who combines intelligence with combat abilities.

After another journey into Greek Mythology revisiting Cassandra, Medusa and Helen of Troy, the “Epilogue” warns us about the perils of telling “a single story” – as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it in a TED talk in 2009. Single stories are dangerous not because they are incomplete, but because they can create stereotypes. The 1001 face-heroines in this volume reveal new sides to old stories. No single face dominates or endures, but heroines keep evolving, rebelling, and resisting. They reinvent themselves countless time, as the number 1001 suggests.

The book dismantles the canonical models of patriarchal heroism in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and shows new surprising ways of how women managed to survive by appealing to domestic crafts to reweave the fabric of society, by using words as weapons and by wearing curiosity as a badge of honour. Moreover, this broad-ranging volume the book lures us to embark on a multidisciplinary journey through mythology, folklore, history, literature, cinema and sometimes through philosophy and psychology.

Still, there are few drawbacks. For instance, in the second chapter, Maria Tatar mentions the painting *The Abduction of Europe* by Jean-Francois de Troy (18<sup>th</sup> century) and feels appalled by an art comment which describes the painting as delightful while failing to admit that it is about a rape. The author transplants 20<sup>th</sup> centuries standards into the 18<sup>th</sup> century art mentality (not to mention that the subject itself belongs to Greek mythology, dating back to several centuries before Christ) and then feels shocked that those standards do not apply. Of course, they don’t. What would happen if people from a distant future descended in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and would be horrified that we did not react to a certain situation which was quite common in our century, but not in ‘the visitor’s’ time frame.

To be honest, I found the book a little bit unbalanced in terms of perspective, meaning that sometimes it lacks perspective or it takes the American/Anglo-Saxon perspective as universal. The author’s background in Mythology and Folklore is quite obvious as she navigates easily through Greek and Roman Mythology and provides numberless examples of folk tales from different parts of the world: “Nourie Hadig” (Armenian); “Seventy-Year-Old Corpse” (Persian); “Maiden with the Rose on her Forehead (Portuguese); Tongue-Meat (African); The Cut-Tongue Sparrow (Japanese); “How a Husband Weaned His Wife from Fairy Tales” (Russian), not to mention examples from the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Giambattista Basile etc. However, when she switches from oral to written

literature, almost 90% of the mentioned books are extracted from authors belonging to English speaking countries: Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, Agatha Christie, Harper Lee, Anne Sexton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Alice Walker, Ursula K. Le Guin, Madeline Miller, E. B. White, Pat Barker, Neil Gaiman, Joan Didion, Charlotte Brontë, Louisa May Alcott, Betty Smith, Angie Thomas, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, Suzanne Collins, Philip Pullman, Rebecca Solnit, J. R. R. Tolkien, L. M. Montgomery vs Stieg Larsson, Christa Wolf, Astrid Lindgren, Leo Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert, Anne Frank.

In spite of all these, the book is fascinating and casts a vast net which expands the male-dominated literary canon. It also provides a different framework to re-evaluate heroism and the female contribution to it and makes an erudite and lively work that is worth reading.