

## *Introduction*

Many readers know Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey: how every man from Moses to Hercules travels the road from childhood to adulthood, seeking acceptance. But that very statement — every man — leaves out a great deal.

In the hero's journey, the boy grows up in the ordinary world — the countryside for King Arthur and Bilbo Baggins, the mundane world of Muggles for Harry Potter. Then a mysterious herald appears summoning him to an adventure. You see, he has ... a destiny. The hero often rejects this call — it is too strange, too mysterious, but, at last, he accepts. He goes on adventures along the way, aided by his friends and companions, with sometimes a token female. Unfortunately, that's all Campbell saw.

Even before reading Campbell, I knew the hero's quest intimately. I was one of those bookworm kids, reading since age two the way my mom tells it, tottering out of the library under an ever-growing stack. These tales of my multicultural childhood told of Japanese Izanami and Izanagi, Russian Vasilisa the Beautiful, Ojibwa Little Burnt Face. I also read books of my parents' childhoods: Robin Hood and King Arthur, the Bible, Arabian Nights.

But I was more than a silent reader — I was a storyteller. Each day on the elementary school playground, I'd retell the tales I'd been reading — not prosaic Cinderella, but exciting tales from far-off lands like "The Lion's Whisker" from Sudan or "The Brocaded Slipper" from Vietnam. Thank goodness the school library had a big enough stock even after I had finished the colored fairy books.

By sixth grade I knew *all* the Greek myths — not just major characters, but all the obscure ones out of my beloved and battered dictionary. I knew Norse myth too, and Native American, and Australian, and all the others that come in big round-the-world collections. Now I did my storytelling while babysitting, or channeled the performance energy into theater camp. I was

devouring a book a day at least, all fiction, with lots of folktales and their longer adaptations. In high school I wrote my first novel, a children's fantasy in a *Wizard of Oz* style, which was far too awful to ever see the light of day. I'm embarrassed to admit that the bad guy apologized at the end and promised not to try to destroy the world again. It's buried ten feet deep in my files. The world it took place in had elves and dwarves, but also kappas, thunderbirds, hamadryads, and kelpies. In a world with limited use for a teenage storyteller, my tales were still finding outlets.

I remember my first real mythology class, day one of college. There in Comparative Literature 6, I studied the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the Irish *Tain*, the African *Mwindo Epic*, and many more. It was an exciting realm beyond Beowulf and the Odyssey, one offering the best stories ever written the world over. I remember inspiration snatching my pen from me as I scribbled an adaptation of Gilgamesh among my class notes. In fact, that short story went on to be reprinted a dozen times and win awards — although the researcher for a Gilgamesh television special seemed disappointed it wasn't autobiographical.

Flash forward to me studying in England, touring every castle I could find, churning out (and occasionally publishing) a hard drive full of stories. The first *Harry Potter* and the *Star Wars* prequel were hitting the big screen, *Lord of the Rings* was coming to theaters soon: Everyone was excited about the big surge in fantasy. And still I was having rough luck getting my big children's novel out there, the story of a girl who fights goblins to rescue the elves from annihilation, with a magic gem glowing on her brow (I did write my more saleable Harry Potter parody that year, but that's another story).

While I mapped my fantasy world of Calithwain and devoured thousands more myths and epics in a new country of libraries, similarities in the "chosen one" story leapt out at me. I started cataloguing these patterns, for I wanted to decipher this most popular plot: the quest, the descent into darkness, the desperate rescue. I charted Siegfried and King Arthur through their battles, Psyche and Persephone through their underworld quests. *The Mists of Avalon* fit too, as did *Romeo and Juliet*, along with so many other popular novels and fantasies and romances and movies and fairytales.

I finally stumbled upon Joseph Campbell's groundbreaking *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and I instantly understood. Here were my theories, clearly delineated, divided into the hero's setting forth, seizing the magic sword, battling the dark lord, and returning with new wisdom to lead his tribe. As Campbell relates: "The hero feels something's lacking in his life. He then goes off to recover it or to discover a life-giving elixir. There's a cycle of going and returning."<sup>1</sup> At the climax of this quest, the hero confronts the ultimate enemy — a figure that represents his dark side, his evil and submerged half. This conflict also represents a war with the father figure and a struggle for

dominance. This struggle is most apparent in works such as *Star Wars* (“Luke, I am your father”) and King Arthur, where the son and opposite covets the father’s place. These were the secret yearning primitive tellers and modern novelists alike employed to frame their universal struggles. This was the destruction of evil, the quest for adulthood, the triumph over the deepest fears of the subconscious. Here was everything in my favorite tales. But where was Snow White?

The hero’s mentor bestows on him Excalibur, Campbell explained. But none of the fairytale heroines carried swords. He faces the dark lord, his shadow and other-self, all the things he is not. Well, there the wicked stepmother fit. He descends into death, Campbell added, offering the story of Inanna’s descent. So the “hero” could be female. But I was seeing patterns that weren’t the sword–young warrior–dark lord–kingship struggle.

I read other respected commentaries: Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Maureen Murdock’s *The Heroine’s Journey*, Joan Gould’s *Spinning Straw into Gold*, Maria Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde*. These were nearer, and I see my book fitting closely among them. But nowhere did I see described the true heroine’s journey in myth, step by step, from magic slipper to triumphant motherhood.

Campbell had called the feminine the “goal” of the quest — the princess needing rescue. While the hero represented the logical, powerful side of the personality, the feminine offered him creativity, nurturing, and intuition: “The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its master and knower.”<sup>2</sup> But the queen goddess, like Arthur’s Lady of the Lake or Perseus’ Andromeda, is static and shallow. This hero quest of all-powerful Luke Skywalker and sidekick Princess Leia (in her gold bikini no less), or valiant Harry Potter with bookish Hermione, provides an unbalanced and unfair view of the world. In today’s society, women oppressed by hero myths see only two choices: Be the helpless princess sobbing for rescue, or be the knight, helmeted and closed off in a cubicle of steel, armored against the natural world, featureless behind a helmet. Only men or those who act like them, with business suits and power lunches and strategy charts, will succeed.

However, the heroine’s true role is to be neither hero nor his prize. What about the dynamic, valiant, thoroughly feminine girls in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Coraline*, *Twilight*, *The Princess Diaries*, *Inkheart*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Ella Enchanted*, *The Golden Compass*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Lioness Quartet*, *Beauty*, *Caddie Woodlawn*, *Little Women*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Pippi Longstocking*, *Alice in Wonderland*? And that’s just in children’s books. All these clever, creative heroines are not simply modern products of a growing female awareness — they have always existed, as far back as the ancient Great Goddesses who battled the darkness.

The archetypal goddess, or Great Mother, dominated all mankind. She was the earth, the sea, the font of all life. Along with her feminine qualities of beauty, imagination, and compassion, she also offered death and savagery. Across the world, this primal mother goddess reigned uncontested: “Ishtar, Astarte, Cybele were cruel, capricious, lustful; they were powerful. As much the source of death as of life, in giving birth to men they made men their slaves,” writes Simone de Beauvoir in her celebrated *The Second Sex*.<sup>3</sup> The Mother was worshipped as the ultimate creator, the vessel of emerging power and source of all life. Girls emulate that path on their journeys by forming a family circle they can rule as supreme nurturer and protector. Here emerges a different story veiled beneath the hero’s, but just as ancient, just as valid, just as universal and empowering. Here is the heroine’s journey.

The true goal of the heroine is to become this archetypal, all-powerful mother. Thus, many heroines set out on rescue missions in order to restore their shattered families: a shy princess knits coats of nettles to save her six brothers from a lifetime as swans, Psyche quests for her vanished lover. Demeter forces herself into the realm of the dead to reclaim her daughter, while Isis scours the world for her husband’s broken body. Little Gerda in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale quests all the way to Finland to rescue her playmate from the unfeeling Snow Queen. This goal does not indicate by any means that the girls are trying to “stay at home” or “play house.” Though they redeem beloved family members or potential husbands, these heroines work as hard as any fairytale hero. And they do it without swords.

## Epics and Folktales

As Joseph Campbell commented in one of his later books:

In *The Odyssey*, you’ll see three journeys. One is that of Telemachus, the son, going in quest of his father. The second is that of the father, Odysseus, becoming reconciled and related to the female principle in the sense of male-female relationship, rather than the male mastery of the female that was at the center of *The Iliad*. And the third is of Penelope herself, whose journey is ... endurance. Out in Nantucket, you see all those cottages with the widow’s walk up on the roof: *when my husband comes back from the sea*. Two journeys through space and one through time.<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that Odysseus and Telemachus cross oceans and (in the case of Odysseus) encounter fearsome monsters. Penelope outwits suitors with her weaving for 20 years, all the while maintaining her faith and chastity while protecting her son and island. However, this journey involves no battles or flashing swords. It is a quiet task of patience and fortitude.

Here we discover the one-sided nature of epics. Most are of warfare: *The Song of Roland*, *Shaka Zulu*, the *Cid*, the *Mahabharata*. The heroes become

COMPARISON OF MODELS  
THE STEPS OF THE JOURNEY

*Campbell's Hero's Journey*

*The Heroine's Journey*

*Stages*

The Ordinary World	The Ordinary World	Innocence and Discovery
The Call to Adventure	The Call to Adventure	Innocence and Discovery
Refusal of the Call	Refusal of the Call	Innocence and Discovery
Supernatural Aid	The Ruthless Mentor and the Bladeless Talisman	Innocence and Discovery
The Crossing of the First Threshold	The Crossing of the First Threshold	Journey through the Unconscious
The Belly of the Whale	Opening One's Senses	
The Road of Trials	Sidekicks, Trials, Adversaries	Journey through the Unconscious
The Meeting with the Goddess	Wedding the Animus	Meeting the Other
Woman as the Temptress	Facing Bluebeard	
	Finding the Sensitive Man	
	Confronting the Powerless Father	
Atonement with the Father	Descent into Darkness	Meeting the Self
Apotheosis	Atonement with the Mother	
	Integration and Apotheosis	
The Ultimate Boon	Reward: Winning the Family	Meeting the Self
Refusal of the Return	Torn Desires	Meeting the Self
The Magic Flight	The Magic Flight	
Rescue from Without	Reinstating the Family	
The Crossing of the Return Threshold	Return	
Master of the Two Worlds	Power over Life and Death	Goddesshood and Wholeness
Freedom to Live	Ascension of the New Mother	Goddesshood and Wholeness

legendary for their actions *in battle*: Beowulf slays monsters, the kings of Persia defend their thrones. Women are rare on the battlefield, though not unheard of, thanks to warrior goddesses like the Morrigan, Athena, and Anat.

Of course, within these battles, Helen of Troy beguiles thousands in the *Iliad*, Blood Moon quests for adulthood in the *Popol Vuh*, and Durga destroys an army of monsters as the Indian pantheon cowers. For this reason, many memorable heroines hail from these hero epics. Who can forget Brünnhild's vicious revenge that destroys two kingdoms or Tiamat gnashing her dragon jaws? For this and other reasons, Joseph Campbell overgeneralizes when he says, "All of the great mythologies and much of the mythic story-telling of the world are from the male point of view."<sup>5</sup> Ancient pantheons, too, are more balanced. Most countries offer creatrix mother goddesses like Isis, benevolent protectresses like Kwan Yin or devourers like Kali. Gods and goddesses equally share the events of the Norse *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* or Japanese *Kojiki*.

Women's heroic epics, though rarely of battle, do appear, such as *The Burden of Isis*, *Hymn to Demeter*, *The Legend of Miao-shan*, *Cupid and Psyche*, and *The Descent of Ishtar*. Many heroines are subjects of ballads like the Scottish *Tam Lin* or Chinese *Mu Lan*. Antigone and Medea are title characters for their classical plays, as are the Trojan women, Electra, Iphigenia, Alcestis, Andromache, Helen, and others. And many devotional hymns are still sung today in Native American, Neo-Pagan, and Hindu cultures to the Great Goddess. Non-Europeans have worshipped her for millennia, spinning such epics as *Pele and Hi'iaka* from Hawaii and *Devi-māhātmyam* (Glorification of the Great Goddess) from India. Side by side with these are the "newer" epics — African and Native American oral epics only recently transcribed as the storytellers are fading from our modern world. While the African ones I found were mostly phallogocentric, I discovered new and valuable Native American works of the Great Goddesses: *Diné bahané: The Navaho Creation Story*, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, and *Daughters of Copper Woman*.

Though these epics once proliferated, they, like so many books discarded and altered through the centuries, can be difficult to unearth. Often male chroniclers, particularly Spanish missionaries in the New World, focused on male practice and gods, leading to a set of one-sided narratives recorded first-hand from now-extinct civilizations. Chroniclers were excluded from women's ceremonies such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, thus shrouding them in secrecy for all time. With the exception of some famed writers such as Sappho and Enheduana, male authors far outnumbered females, leaving the ancient world with far more Virgils and Homers.

But it is likewise true that sourcing these epics written by literate men are the myriad of folktales spun by women around their hearthfires. These were learning tales, psychological tales, tales that influenced children of both

genders immeasurably. They were passed along by wisewomen, teaching girls how to change their beast into a prince, or transcend the abuse still far too common today. These were teaching tales about girls who rescued themselves, tales that originated in now-vanished “rites de passage and initiation rituals ... most of them celebrate the metaphoric death of the old inadequate self as it is about to be reborn on a higher plane of existence.”<sup>6</sup> All cultures in the world have great stores of tales, usually passed through the women, emphasizing cleverness and patience and smaller magics along with the great creation magic, descent into death, and resurrection that mark the passage to adulthood for heroes of both genders. The men might have written, but the women told.

The Brothers Grimm tales, for example, derive from interviews with female tellers.<sup>7</sup> Thus, many of their heroines take center stage: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Goldilocks, Little Red Riding Hood, Clever Gretel, Tattercoats, Rapunzel. Before the Victorians’ program of censorship and diminishing heroines (and Walt Disney’s even more extreme version of the same), fairytale heroines were brave, resourceful, and clever, accustomed to saving themselves and their princes. Gretel rescues her brother, Molly Whuppie outwits giants, the girl in “East o’ the Sun, West o’ the Moon” walks the entire world to free her lover.

These were teaching tales about women’s fears: child abuse (Tattercoats, Hansel and Gretel), marriage to a monster (Beauty and the Beast, Bluebeard), and facing death (Snow White, Sleeping Beauty). These most archetypal tales that shape our childhoods are the tales of women’s growth and understanding.<sup>8</sup> As one critic explains:

Women’s oral history ... is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewer is not herself a feminist. It is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women’s experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity which has been denied us in traditional historical accounts.<sup>9</sup>

Folktales, more ancient and widespread than the great epics, are integral to humanity, the imaginings and hopings that separate us from the animal. Fairytales are the bedtime stories of the collective consciousness. Their dreamers employ them as wish fulfillment, conflict resolution, and self-discovery. “Fairytales and mythos are our initiators; they are the wise ones who teach those who have come after.”<sup>10</sup>

While these listed are all Grimms’ tales, the stories themselves echo across cultures. With a little reading, one can stumble upon the Tahitian Rapunzel, the Arabic Bearskin, the Indian Bluebeard. They’re all the same tale, after all. The most ubiquitous is Cinderella, the story of the persecuted drudge who becomes the greatest of all. This is the story that resonates across boundaries, as a fantasy of a better life. As Jack Zipes notes in his *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*:

Perhaps the most striking feature of the tales is that, at their beginning, the majority of the protagonists, whether male or female, are either poor, deprived, or wronged in some way. They come largely from the mercantile, artisan, or peasant class. By the end of many tales, these protagonists, whether male or female, experience a rise in fortune which enables them to win a wife or husband, amass a fortune and power, and constitute a new home.<sup>11</sup>

Generally with a girl in the title role, this is the tale of bravery and constancy in the face of persecution, the woman's struggle for autonomy in the world of myth.

## Sources

As I started my research into the world's great tales, I originally planned to use the oldest, most authentic versions — with Sumerian Inanna preferable to Babylonian Ishtar. However, Greek legends that predate Homer are startlingly different from the “classic” versions, and many Brünnhilds forego slumbering in their legendary rings of fire. In these and other cases, I found myself drawn to the popularized versions, the ones people best remember. So I used *The King James Bible*, Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with translations by Evelyn-White or Butler. For the many, many other works I read in translation, I once again selected well-known editions that were often classics in themselves. The Internet Sacred Text Archive and interlibrary loan system were invaluable. Continuing to winnow, I selected Euripides' famous *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, though he also wrote epic plays on Alcestis, Andromache, Hecuba, Helen, and Iphigenia. A small amount of Shakespeare slipped in as he, like Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, Jane Yolen, and others, used a great deal of folklore as a base for his tales.

Like most Americans, I was most comfortable with the Bible stories and European fairytales, the Greek myths and Arthurian knights. Some areas of the world, like Central America or the South Seas, were a mystery. Luckily for me, I found incredible assistance in the politically-correct scholarship of the last few decades. I live in the multilingual, multicultural Silicon Valley, with three major universities and extensive public library systems. These bulged with multicultural folktale collections, strong women around the world collections, religious texts, Wiccan compilations, international Cinderella projects. *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood* by Merlin Stone and *The Book of Goddesses and Heroines* by Patricia Monaghan proved the most useful of many outstanding anthologies, as they scoured elusive corners of the globe for warrior women, strong-hearted girls, and mighty goddesses. I remember coloring in a world map to make certain I'd reached just about everywhere (not every country but most geographical areas, as well as cultures known for major epics and folktale

tropes). There was a big blank over Antarctica, but otherwise, the earth seemed well-covered.

To find all these, I looked up the storybooks from my childhood or discovered new collections, combining two or three tales into a retelling if there were multiple sources. Often, my search led me straight back to the classics: The best known stories of Aphrodite and Demeter derive from the Homeric Hymns, while many of my remembered tales came straight from the *Kojiki*, *The Book of the Dead*, or the *Poetic Edda*. As I researched, I discovered new ones, and my childhood tales of Lilith and Sheh Hsien stepped aside to make room for Copper Woman and Ix Chel. I delved into the maiden-mother-crone triad, which has become our modern goddess myth. Still, I'm glad I ended up with one tale each by Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, and Lang, the fairytales that shaped the baseline of my childhood, along with their more multicultural cousins.

Mindful of my weaker areas, I checked out West African tales, Peruvian tales, Zuni, Australian. While I was at it, I scooped up the rest of the library shelf on my way out and read more legends, more commentaries, more psychology, history, and sociology. I think over the past six months, I've read about four of those books per day — an obsessive load even for me. Every book offered a deeper perspective on the tales, and hundreds of those often-clashing viewpoints inform my work. From all these sources came bibliographies and websites that led to more books, more references, more articles, and especially more tales.

Though I read stacks of anthropology, historical and current, I determined to keep my research centered on myth, supporting the great sagas, rather than overwhelming them. At the same time, these theories of the hero's journey are based on humankind's universal drives: love, fear, the challenges of adolescence, the dark side of the psyche. As such, exploring myth means exploring the psychology of Jung and Freud, along with Jungian mythographers like Maria Tatar or Toni Wolff. However, I consider this book fairytale analysis, rather than psychoanalysis. There are no case studies, no "real life" tales, save those of historical heroines such as Joan of Arc and Cleopatra who have transcended history into legend. As I researched, it became clear how I could easily write this book entirely about historical personages, children's books, classic novels, television, or nearly any other medium, for this is the universal journey of women, one that has existed as long as our gender.

The Great Goddess as Devi, Gaia, and Danu was once revered above all. From this, the roles cycled until the great goddess epics dwindled into gossipy tales about Baba Yaga, witch of the forest, or Saint Bridget and her gentle favors. The ancient tales of multiracial, multiaged heroic women have faded, though modern writers try to recreate them forcibly with tales of "Iron Joan" and "Miss Ali Baba." While this type of tale is a kindly-meant gesture, it sug-

gests that powerful women are a creation of modern times, rather than an archetype that has always existed, from Inanna to Deborah, Scheherazade, Ying-Ying, the Wife of Bath, Lady Macbeth, Jane Eyre, Queen Lili'uokalani of Hawaii, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Like Water for Chocolate*.

The heroine's journey is a path of cleverness and intuition, buoyed by water and earth. It is a path of circular logic, of kindness, of creativity so forceful that the world shapes itself to a wish. It is a path of birth and patience, or guardianship, but never of passivity. Women's work, nowadays devalued as folk craft and biological urges and time wasting, is the work that has conquered and preserved nations. It is as White Buffalo Calf Woman told the Lakota women: The work of their hands and the fruit of their bodies keep the people alive. "You are from the Mother Earth," she said. "What you are doing is as great as warriors do."<sup>12</sup> This is the path of the great mother goddess, destroying mountains and creating civilizations. And each woman journeying toward insight, toward adventure, toward motherhood, toward wisdom is following this path, just as great Astarte, valiant Judith, passionate Isolde, and even sweet Cinderella once did. "It is important to realize we are not women channeling the goddess or pretending to be her — we *are* the goddess pretending for a single lifetime to be a mortal woman."<sup>13</sup>