



BOOK REVIEW:

*Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy  
Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent  
Girlhood*

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The representation of female characters in mythopoeic fiction has historically been confined to one-dimensional and traditionally gendered narratives. Leah Phillips' book *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction* is part of a relatively new and burgeoning wave of research that reevaluates and critiques these portrayals, creating new paradigms for conceptualizing female protagonists in fantasy. Basing her research on gender and girlhood studies as well as literary analysis, Phillips employs the Cinderella trope to encapsulate the issues of female representation in popular culture, pointing out how traditional displays of white femininity and personifications of the damsel in distress diminish agency and empowerment in these narratives. In the first chapter of her book, she examines the legacy of Cinderella and the limitations of female portrayals today, reflecting on the history of mythopoeic heroism and the limitations it presents. She dedicates the remainder of her book to analyzing three compelling examples of female characters in recent YA fiction, examining characters who question gender binaries and offer new models of identity and selfhood that are more inclusive and representative of diversity. The book aims to deconstruct the archetypal fantasy hero by demonstrating how these unconventional heroines forge their embodied identities while recognizing plurality and change. Set against a backdrop of growing interest in the effects

of popular culture on youth identity formation, Phillips' book is timely and challenges existing academic discourse.

Phillips begins her first chapter by discussing the figure of Disney's Cinderella and its impact on pop culture. She argues that this widely-celebrated Disney tale, based on the original classic by Charles Perrault, not only perpetuates patriarchal ideals but also promotes performative white femininity. The author draws attention to the role of the male characters in the story, arguing that it was the king's need to find a bride for his son that catalyzed the narrative, effectively positioning Cinderella as the "hero's prize," a domestic virginal figure who must be presented in adherence to traditional norms of white femininity to epitomize the ideal bride. Despite meeting certain beauty requirements and coming from the right social class, Cinderella is still in need of a makeover (a trope that remains alive even today), an event that Phillips assimilates to the rebirth that the archetypal hero undergoes. The metaphorical birth is necessary to transform her into the hero's prize, giving her "the appearance that makes Cinderella eligible to be his bride" (10). Chapter one problematizes this focus on appearance and 'looking the part,' linking it to the harsh beauty standards that are forced on women since girlhood, and that are continuously perpetuated through the Disney franchise and the enduring makeover trope in pop culture.

Phillips proceeds to discuss the legacy of Cinderella, contending that despite ostensible advancements, the new Disney princesses and pop culture heroines have not changed. To substantiate her claim, she refers to characters like Merida in *Brave* (2012) and Mulan in *Mulan* (1998). Phillips argues that despite Merida's less traditional appearance and her rejection of conventional romantic notions, she still adheres to traditional beauty standards and goes through a minor makeover. The same can be said of Mulan as the author points out: "Mulan, Pocahontas and Jasmine all see 'their features audaciously whitewashed'" (14). This is something that warrants further clarification, but unfortunately Phillips does not elaborate on how exactly these makeovers erase cultural representation or change features. Mulan's makeover depicts her in traditional clothing (Hanfu) and makeup that adheres to Chinese aesthetics of that period (although it is not completely historically accurate). While she is in fact wearing white makeup, this cannot be considered whitewashing from the producers' side, as it is an authentic depiction of how Chinese women did their makeup during that time. The key issue in this scene is not conformity to Western standards of beauty but rather the problematic forced transformation trope that Phillips challenges early on in the chapter. Furthermore, Mulan challenges the gender binary by engaging in cross-dressing to replace her father and to be able to fight alongside men, the same act of hybridity for which Phillips praises Pierce's Alanna (*The Song of Lioness*) in subsequent chapters. The parallels between Mulan and Alanna's gender transgression, which is a core component in both stories, is overlooked in this instance, undermining the progressive cultural significance of Mulan's character. Shifting focus to Merida's makeover in *Brave*, it is portrayed as something that she resists and ultimately rejects, freeing herself from her confining dress and wearing her curls proudly, in a powerful scene that shows her going against conventional rules of femininity. What is more, while Phillips rightfully asserts that Merida does not represent racial diversity, I would argue that the lack of romance in her tale and her commitment to her freedom goes against the 'hero's prize'

notion that Cinderella symbolizes. Moreover, Phillips' criticism extends to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, who is viewed as a 'hero in drag' (17) and labeled in the category of characters that are "essentially looking like Cinderella while saving the day" (16). While she makes some valid observations about how Katniss' character resembles that of the male hero and meets the conventional standards of beauty, limiting her character to an inverted version of the archetypal male hero neglects essential components that make her different. Although Katniss does possess characteristics that are stereotypically associated with male heroes, such as leadership skills and physical strength, she also possesses traditionally feminine traits like empathy and caregiving. Furthermore, Katniss uses the Capitol's expectations of her as a young female contestant to bend the system to her advantage, which can be interpreted as Collins subverting and critiquing gender roles through the narration. Overall, while Phillips in this section of the study rightly identifies issues concerning the perpetuation of white beauty standards and the casting of conventionally attractive characters in movies, her analysis could benefit from a more nuanced analysis that recognizes the progressive elements that differentiate these characters from the Cinderella archetype.

Phillips dedicates the remaining part of the first chapter and all of the second chapter to discussing the concept and origin of mythopoeic heroism, articulating her aim to construct a female hero that exemplifies the model of an embodied subjectivity recognizing plurality and change (19). She further contends that mythopoeic young adult literature carves out both figurative and real realms where women can thrive and establish their presence as heroic figures. Phillips explores how mythopoeic fiction is a powerful tool for gender equality by introducing diverse characters that break away from the typical white male hero archetype and subvert traditional gender hierarchies. The notion that mythopoeic YA literature transcends mere storytelling is central to the author's argument, as it engages in reshaping our perceptions of gender through presenting inclusive representations of identity and agency. Therefore, Phillips posits, these literary works aim not to simply mirror reality but to mold it through inspiring readers to envision realms not bound by the constraints of gender and through "creating new maps and new ways of mapping" (34). The strength of Phillips' argument lies in relating literary criticism to gender and girlhood studies through examples from popular mythopoeic works that employ characters such as Meyer's Cinder (*Cinder*) and Pierce's Alanna, and her study establishes a solid connection between theory and practice.

Chapters three to six are dedicated to studying the characters of Alanna the Lioness, and Daine the Wildmage in Tamora Pierce's *The Song of Lioness* and *The Immortals* series as well as Cinder in Marissa Meyer's novel *Cinder*. In these chapters, Phillips examines how such characters challenge traditional gender norms and societal expectations, demonstrating the aspects that give these representations empowering strength. The focus in chapter three is on the story of Alanna from Tamora Pierce's Tortall universe and its implications on gender performativity, examining the significance of the protagonist's choice to mask herself as a boy in order to gain access to the training opportunities that her gender is denied. Discussing how "Alanna uses her counterpart status to destabilize the linear, teleological trajectory of the heroic romance and the unified, coherent and individual (heterosexual) identity it exists to produce" (58), Phillips views Alanna's journey as a powerful criticism of binary gender

norms and the standardization of heterosexuality. This amounts to an effective explanation of how the protagonist's movement through these socially constructed barriers enlarges the definition of heroism beyond that of the archetypal male hero.

The focus shifts in chapter four to Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*, where the female main character is a cyborg rendition of the classic Cinderella character. Phillips argues that, through Cinder's identity, the novel highlights themes of bodily integrity and autonomy, as well as the intersection of technology and humanity, all of which have been topics of debate in the last two decades. Cinder's struggles for bodily autonomy in a systematically oppressive world mirror the real-life challenges that women continue to face in terms of objectification and the right for self-determination. The chapter also touches on issues of body image and its effects, particularly those that are especially relevant to teenage and young women.

In the final sections of her analysis, Phillips discusses how evolving representations of heroism can challenge traditional notions of power and individualism. Chapter five explores the character of Daine from Tamora Pierce's Tortall universe, a young woman gifted with a unique bond with nature and the ability to communicate with animals, prompting readers to ponder the blurred lines between human and non-human beings. Phillips points out how Daine's exceptional talents relationally reconceptualize heroism, building on ecological awareness and empathy as well as highlighting a sense of co-existing with the other. Drawing on feminist perspectives, she also finds Daine's narrative to contribute to a broader discussion about the relationship between nature and the human. In the last chapter, Phillips builds upon the themes and issues explored in the previous chapters to establish a new more inclusive paradigm of heroism. Her new model suggests that heroism should be founded on the notions of engagement, compassion, and mutual reliance, in turn subverting the traditional narratives of solitary achievement and domination perpetuated in the past.

Throughout its chapters, Phillips' study draws on a foundation of insightful research and analysis of critical theory, all the while remaining engaging and accessible. This volume would serve effectively as a textbook for emerging scholars and undergraduate students alike. Her insights truly resonate when exploring the impact these heroines have through their self-exploration and identity-building journeys that mirror those of their young audience. Phillips' work not only explores the historical concept of heroism in fantasy, but offers a fuller, more humane definition of what it means to be a hero. Although her research could benefit from a more well-rounded analysis of contemporary heroines such as Katniss or Mulan, who share many of the progressive aspects that Phillips demonstrates in the characters she analyzes, she highlights significant limitations that can undermine the impact of these characters. Her work thus broadens the academic conversation about female representation in YA mythopoeic fantasy and encourages writers and readers alike to consider more inclusive portrayals that challenge traditional narratives.

*Biography:* Maryem Ben Salem is a second-year PhD student at the North American Studies program at the University of Debrecen in Hungary. She specializes in female heroism in young adult fiction and fantasy and her academic interests include gender studies, posthumanism, and pop culture.