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Heroes, Goddesses, and Tricksters

In his book *The Paradise Papers*, Merlin Stone asks, “At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman. Do you remember?” (Stone). Could God be a female? What about a hero? What defines a hero? Ask a hundred people who their hero is, and you would likely get a hundred different answers. It is also probable that more than a few would include female responses, with famous historical and fictional figures and even inspiring individuals in the respondents’ own lives. A hero need not be male or female, nor even human or alive. Indeed, a properly constructed narrative can contain heroic figures of nearly endless variety. A few responses might even include figures that wouldn’t be considered typical heroes. Sometimes these inspirational individuals more properly fit the role of “trickster” than “hero.” This essay explores what makes an individual heroic and whether the concept of a goddess conflicts with the definition of a hero. It further explores the role tricksters play in mythology and how that intersects with a “hero.” In general, when the terms hero, goddess, and trickster lack quotes it references the generic term, while those in quotes refer to specific archetypes such as Joseph Campbell’s Monomythic roles.

The term “hero” can be interpreted several ways, from the loose definition of simple protagonist to Joseph Campbell’s more extensive classification in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. A full, modern definition begins with the “hero” being said protagonist, the central figure on whom the tale is focused. In fact, some tales like the *Odyssey*, the *Ramayana*, or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, simply mutate or outright use the hero’s name. Unlike Campbell’s original Monomyth definition, a “hero” can be male or female, and conceivably even an animal, inanimate object, or imaginary creature. The primary characteristic is that through a series of trials and tribulations, a seemingly ordinary individual achieves comparative greatness that sets themselves apart from their peers as an inspirational model to others. This contrasts the generic definition of a hero, which is simply an idealized or admired individual.

Whether Reluctant, Intentional, or Accidental, the Monomythic “hero” will inevitably experience at least some of Campbell’s seventeen stages of the Hero’s Journey, primarily some form of the three fundamental chapters of Separation, Initiation, and Return (“Joseph Campbell in Outline”). To accomplish a physical or spiritual deed, they leave a mundane life, where they are typically not exceptional but “odd.” After possible initial hesitation and encouragement by a mentor, they will journey to a new, often dangerous location, where they encounter trials, assistance, and temptation. Eventually, an ultimate battle or supreme ordeal is overcome, after which they acquire a treasure, reward, or “elixir” that is often the initial goal of the journey or tertiary to their adventure, like the love of a romantic interest encountered during the quest. Having achieved greatness, the “hero” returns home with something, physical, spiritual, or otherwise, that defines them as exceptional, a superhuman among mortals. This external triumph brings local renown and often a leadership position at home.

Allowing permutations and omissions of Campbell’s rigid Monomyth is critical in considering a complete definition of “hero.” His Monomyth, while helpful for analyzing and comparing myths, is far too strict to be taken literally. No myth, even the prototypical *Odyssey*, contains all seventeen stages exactly as described by Campbell. Of note, instead of occurring near the end of the tale, Odysseus’s “Return” home encompasses most of his tale. With so many examples already existing in literature and mythology, a modern heroic narrative likely needs to present new twists on some of these stages out of sheer necessity for novelty.

In his article “The Blurry Line Between Humans and Gods,” Robert Segal presents an alternate analysis. Segal states that heroism “blurs the line between the human and the divine…by elevating humans to gods” and that folklorists would likely consider only tales involving “the hero…making the leap from the one [mortality] to the other [divinity]” to be heroic myths rather than legends (Segal 45). One such myth is presented in David Leeming’s *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero.* As Hercules lay dying, “Jupiter spoke: ‘Fear not. Hercules has conquered everything…Part of him is immortal, and, as an immortal, he will live with the gods for ever’” (Leemings 250). This distinction between mortality and divinity was especially pertinent to early heroic tales.

Whether they literally achieve some form of divinity/immortality or not, heroes exist as something greater, between man and god. This is a fundamental aspect of a hero, that they present a superior example, either physical, mental, moral, ethical, or otherwise. Thus, most heroes naturally serve as role models to teach a desired virtue or trait. This emphasizes one of the original functions of myth: reinforcing cultural behavior, rituals, or customs.

Viewing a “hero” thusly permits both ancient and modern instances to be valid. Allowing non-masculine characters to be the “hero” in their own tales does not invalidate classic examples like Odysseus, Rama, Jason, or Gilgamesh. Encompassing traditional male protagonists in modern sagas like *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*, it also includes more diverse examples like the young woman Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, the clownfish Marlin in *Finding Nemo*, or even a robot in *Wall-E*. The beauty and timelessness of this flexible definition of “hero” allows anyone or anything to be the hero in their own Hero’s Journey.

Goddesses in myth typically possess limited prototypical powers, mostly related to aspects of life like fertility, renewal, protection, agriculture, rebirth, healing, and on rarer occasions, death or destruction. In *Divine Women: When God Was A Girl,* Bettany Hughes discusses the evolution of the goddess, from “voluptuous form[s]” of women in the Neolithic carvings of the Catal Hoyuk representing “some symbol of fertility and a life-­‐giving force” to the Greek creator Gaia to the Roman Magna Mater, the “Big Mamma. She will protect you…she’s powerful, aggressive, violent, scary” (Hughes).

A goddess’ role in myth is primarily to provide health, safety, and inspiration. While a goddess is typically female, it doesn’t necessarily have to be in the same way a hero need not be male. It can also appear as a specific role in the Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey, where this is a female character that stereotypically represents a powerful love, romantic or otherwise. The “goddess” is “alluring to the hero. She … inspire[s] him to continue in the quest” and may even become the “temptress” and act as a hindrance by pleading for them to remain safe with her or otherwise abandon their quest (“The Monomyth: Understanding the Seventeen Stages of the Hero’s Journey”).

While Campbell, as discussed above, and others might disagree, there is nothing stopping a divine female goddess from also being a “hero”; they are not mutually exclusive terms. They are, however, extremely rare, as heroic myths tend to center around a masculine “hero.” It is important to be clear on this distinction: a divine female goddess is not the same as Campbell’s “goddess” role. As such, you could see a goddess “heroine,” but will not find a “goddess” “heroine” as these are two distinct roles in the Monomyth. As is the case in any technical discussion, proper use of terminology is key and perhaps the use of mortal/divine “hero/heroine” is most accurate.

One myth that contains a divine “heroine” is *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Demeter is a major goddess in the Greek Pantheon with classic feminine divine powers related to harvest, healing, and birth and her daughter with Zeus, Persephone, is also a full-fledged goddess. While Persephone would be considered the “hero” as she is the one who travels to the Special Realm of the Underworld and eventually returns home with new powers concerning the Underworld and nature’s seasons, it is primarily Demeter’s actions that affect her daughter’s release (Homeric Hymn of Demeter). Together, their tale fits many of the stages of Campbell’s Hero’s Journey. It is logical to argue that a goddess would, by nature, break some of the stages of the Monomyth, notably the ordinary origin, but this doesn’t invalidate the concept of a divine “heroine.”

Madea is an excellent example of the distinction between “goddess” and goddess. She is first introduced as the archetypal Campbell “goddess” role in *The Argonautica*, the heroic tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece, and though technically not a goddess, she does have divine ancestry and displays magical abilities. In her subsequent narrative in Euripedes’s play, she could be considered the “hero,” despite her violent and questionable actions (“Madea in Outline”). Though her actions arguably turn her into the eventual villain of Theseus’s narrative, she does experience some of the stages of Campbell’s Monomyth during her lifetime. These include being plucked from relative obscurity, pairing with another notable heroic figure, gaining supernatural powers of sorcery, and eventual fame and legacy upon return to her home of Colchis through her son Medeus and the Medes people.

In her article “The Oedipus Complex, Antigone, and Electra: The Woman as Hero and Victim,” Dorothy Willner defines Oedipus’s daughter Antigone as a “tragic hero.” She discusses the distinction between a victim, who “suffers rather than acts,” and a “tragic hero, [on whom] suffering is never merely imposed; he incurs it by his own decisions” (Willner 62). By burying her brother in defiance of King Creon, her own actions seal her fate. Thus “if Oedipus epitomizes the tragic hero, as Knox suggests, Antigone also shares the heroic qualities of her father” (Willner 62).

An example of a goddess genuinely going on a Hero’s Journey comes from *The Tale of Cupid and Psyche*. In his article on the subject, M.J. Edwards describes the tale of the beautiful princess Psyche, cursed by the goddess Venus for her beauty. Subsequently courted and abandoned by Cupid, she is assigned impossible tasks by Venus if she is to reunite with true love. After accomplishing tasks akin to the Trials of Hercules, including a trip into the Underworld, she eventually transcends to true divinity as Cupid’s bride (Edwards 77-78). Though not technically a goddess prior to her journey, it could be argued that her supernatural beauty qualifies her as quasi-divine as it predestined her to a fate beyond mere mortals before her journey even began.

Joseph Campbell and other structuralists like Levi-Strauss and William Hynes sought to define and categorize myths according to certain characteristics. One way they did this was by defining characters or roles that seemed to occur across myths from different cultures, or even within the same culture’s myths. As discussed above, two of those roles are the “hero” and the “goddess.” Another such role that appears widely in global mythology is the “trickster,” and his target or counterpart, the “dupe.” Hynes presents the trickster as a figure exhibiting one or more defining characteristics: “ambiguous/anomalous personality … , deceiver/trick-player, shapeshifter, situation-invertor, messenger/imitator of the gods, and sacred/lewd bricoleur” (Hynes 34).

First coined “by American anthropologist Daniel Brinton in 1885 in an article concerning the paradoxical features of the Supreme Being of the Algonquian,” the “trickster” serves a different purpose in myth than the hero, who is typically the star of his/her own tale and leads by idyllic example, and the goddess, who inspires and protects the hero on his journey (Szyjewski 164). By comparison, the trickster is not a defined role in Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth, though it can appear in myths of that type. The “trickster” most often acts as either a gift-giver, a provider of knowledge, or an agent of chaos/change. Unlike the “hero,” whose triumph over the “supreme ordeal” typically involves a physical challenge or battle, “Brinton indicates that [this character] does not use force but trickery” to accomplish his goals (Szyjewski 164).

Since the “mentor,” another figure on the Hero’s Journey, and the “goddess” could also be considered gift-givers or providers of knowledge in many myths, the “trickster” is defined by other aspects. First and foremost, they usually defy conventional classification or don’t fit in with the group/society by some fundamental quality of their being. Sometimes this is very basic or intrinsic, as in *The Dance For Water*, where Rabbit is simply the only animal who doesn’t go along with the group’s idea to dance in the dry riverbed or *The Prose Edda*, where Loki is giant-born and whose progeny are unique, often monstrous creatures intricately tied to major events such as Ragnarok (Honey 79 & Prose Edda 33-34). Quite frequently, this ambiguity is supernaturally manifested by the “trickster” in the ability to literally shapeshift their physical form, either gender, species, or both. In *Raven Steals Light*, the Raven tricks a man and his daughter by first transforming into an evergreen pine, which the daughter drinks, then once inside the daughter, transforming again into her fake child. Later, the dupe is completed when the Raven steals the light, reverts to his original form, and gives the world the gift of the Sun and stars.

As “trickster” can be a vague and over-inclusive term in mythology, Professor of Sociology Michael Carroll seeks to further categorize tricksters by their motivation. In his article *The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero*, he makes a distinction between the “clever hero” “who consistently outwits stronger opponents” and the “selfish buffoon.” The latter is “’selfish’ because so much of the trickster's activity is oriented toward the gratification of his enormous appetites for food and sex, and [a] ‘buffoon’ because the elaborate deceits that the trickster devises in order to satisfy these appetites so often backfire and leave the trickster looking incredibly foolish” (Carroll 106).

Since they serve mostly different functions, a “hero” would rarely fit the full definition of a “trickster,” but since it is not a clearly defined role in the Monomyth, there is no reason the “trickster” cannot also be the “hero.” Some examples of this are in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, possibly the most prototypical “hero” in any myth, dupes the Cyclops Polyphemus with simple wordplay before escaping his clutches and in the *Argonautica*, where the “hero” Jason, with the help of his “goddess” Madea, tricks armed men sent by King Aeetes into killing each other (The Odyssey: Book IX & “Madea in Outline”). Also, in the looser context as an agent of change, many heroes affect their world enough to qualify.

Tricksters may be the oldest and most common archetype in mythology. Michael Carroll ponders that “more has probably been written about "tricksters" than about any other single category of character that appears in the myths and folktales of the world. In fact, tricksters are so ubiquitous that Jung (1970) has been led to conclude that they reflect an archetype buried in the mind of all human beings” (Carroll 105). Author Lewis Hyde posits that the trickster originates with the primal cycle of hunger/hunting. The trickster’s actions as a “bait thief” “preserve a set of images from the days when what mattered above all else was hunting” (Hyde). The roles of “trickster,” “hero,” and “goddess” have existed in myths since ancient times, and these roles still exist in modern narratives and myths as well.

There are many examples from modern times of all three roles and two characters that certainly qualify as “tricksters” are the classic cartoon character Bugs Bunny and the enigmatic being Q from Star Trek. With “tricksters” originating and commonly embodied by animal characters, Bugs Bunny is arguably a modern, cartoon adaptation of the classic “trickster” Brer Rabbit. In virtually every appearance, whether he is the protagonist or an ancillary character, Bugs Bunny employs trickery, both physical and with wordplay, to outwit various other cartoon characters. Whether it’s someone hunting him, like Yosemite Sam or Elmer Fudd, the alien Marvin the Martian, or his rival Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny consistently makes his dupe look a fool while Bugs himself casually avoids danger or otherwise gains the upper hand. In the 1970’s sci-fi television show Star Trek, the otherworldly being Q appears per his own whims, distorting reality to play often childish tricks on the crew of the USS Enterprise. He usually becomes the dupe himself and is outsmarted with science by Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock before the episode ends, but not before causing havoc in deep space.

With less defined characteristics than the Monomythic “hero,” the “trickster” can be more widely interpreted and designated to individuals with few or no seeming similarities. Some tricksters are noble while some are selfish, “amoral, egoistic, and insubordinate to any external, higher imperatives, […acting] only in accordance with [their] desires” (Szyjewski 165). Many are animals while others are gods. Depending upon the reader’s definition of each role and the author’s particular usage and implementation of these figures in their works, modern “tricksters” and female goddesses like those mentioned above can fit both classic and less strict definitions of these roles.

Modern tricksters like Bugs Bunny often impart wisdom through their deceptions, and as can be personally testified to, are frequently used in a targeted manner to impart knowledge and lessons to the youth, a core function of mythology. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist from the popular teen novel *The Hunger Games*, exhibits traits and plays the role of “trickster,” “hero,” and “goddess” at various points in her narrative. She clearly goes on her own Hero’s Journey, protects, comforts, and inspires others along the way, and stays alive by tricking her opponents on multiple occasions. It is no wonder that she has become a positive role model of strength, intelligence, and willpower for many young women of today. As discussed above, Like Katniss, Madea and even Psyche could also be said to don the mantle of each role at various times in their myths.

While Campbell and others may limit the term “hero” by defining it as exclusively a human male who undertakes the Hero’s Journey, a modern, inclusive perspective unlocks a myriad of options for what makes an individual heroic. These run the gamut from a simple, inspirational protagonist in a myth, legend, or other narrative to ancient and modern myths and stories with male heroes to multiple goddesses in ancient Greek mythology to diverse examples such as animated animals or robots in modern cinema. Furthermore, a “hero” can also include diverse characters who may fit the role of “trickster” as well. Mythology is system nearly as ancient and diverse as humanity itself, with a myriad of individuals, male and female, good and questionable, human or otherwise, that one may find heroic for their own reasons.Focusing on Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth, David Leeming’s book examines a plethora of famous and obscure world myths and legends and analyzes how each one fits into the different stages of the Hero’s Journey. The works of Stone, Willner, and Edwards further explore how myths and femininity intertwine, both in ancient and modern cultures. With sexual, racial, and other equalities still yet to be achieved, especially in less developed countries, including feminine and other diverse heroes as role models in modern media is crucial.

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The Trickster

The authors William Hynes and Lewis Hyde present differing viewpoints on the trickster archetype in myth, folklore, and narrative. While both perspectives are correct, Hyde’s limited definition of a trickster is founded in the origins of the role, while Hynes offers a comprehensive, modern characterization of the archetype.

William Hynes presents the trickster as a character exhibiting one or more defining characteristics: “ambiguous/anomalous personality … , deceiver/trick-player, shapeshifter, situation-invertor, messenger/imitator of the gods, and sacred/lewd bricoleur” (Hynes 34). This multi-faceted classification falls more inline with the modern, inclusive definition of the term trickster.

As Hynes immediately addresses, the trickster need not display all these attributes, in fact “the trickster himself eludes univocality by escaping from any restrictive definition” (Hynes 35). The more one tries to define a trickster, the more the trickster will reject such categorization. The trickster may even display very “ordinary” attributes to further elude similarity to other tricksters and normalization of what a trickster is.

The next characteristics are mostly self-explanatory, but Hynes essentially describes a figure who dupes others and can alter their appearance. This character isn’t afraid to break rules; there is “no ‘too much’ for this figure. No order is too rooted, no taboo too sacred, no god too high” (Hynes 37). They often bridge mortals and the divine, cross between life and death, and bring some greater gift or knowledge to humanity. Finally, as a “bricoleur” they use their intelligence and “ingenuity [to transform] anything at hand in order to form a creative solution” (Hynes 42). Subverting norms and traditions, the trickster “can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd” (Hynes 42).

Lewis Hyde posits that the trickster originates with the primal cycle of hunger/hunting. The trickster’s actions as a “bait thief” “preserve a set of images from the days when what mattered above all else was hunting” (Hyde).

These tricksters often appear in myths and tales imparting some knowledge of hunting tactics; “Coyote teaches humans how to catch salmon, he makes the first fish weir out of logs and branches. On the North Pacific coast, the trickster Raven made the first fishhook; he taught the spider how to make her web and human beings how to make nets” (Hyde). In so doing, they are fulfilling the trickster role of dispenser of knowledge.

This figure also plays a role in the cycle of evolving intelligence of predator and prey. Hyde quotes author Harry Jerison’s analysis that comparing “herbivores and carnivores at any particular moment in history the predators are always slightly brainier than the prey. But the relationship is never stable; there is a slow step-by-step increase in intelligence on both sides” (Hyde).

In this predator/prey dupe cycle, the trickster acts as an agent of change, whether as predator or prey. Coyote tricks Rabbit, but is himself later tricked by Rabbit. The “trickster is cunning about traps but not so cunning as to avoid them himself” (Hyde). As “bait thief”, the trickster “commonly relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes” and his greatest “cunning is the desire to remove himself from the eating game altogether, or at least see how far out he can get and still feed his belly” (Hyde).

Hyde’s view of the trickster is rooted in the origins of the figure. As I noted in my term paper, the term “trickster” originated from study of Native American myths. Many of these and other myths involving tricksters are simple, short stories with a basic dupe centered around a hunger for food/water, as seen in Dance for Water, the Tales of Anansi, or How the Koala Lost His Tail. In this sense, Hyde’s view is correct, but limited. The trickster archetype has since evolved from this “appetite”-based view of the role into a wider, more inclusive category of individuals in myth and narrative. Hynes’s multi-dimensional, adaptive theory is thus much more in line with the modern understanding of the trickster archetype.