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## ***Girl Warriors: Feminist Revisions of the Hero's Quest in Contemporary Popular Culture* by Svenja Hohenstein**

Maria Alberto  
*The University of Utah*

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Svenja Hohenstein's 2019 *Girl Warriors: Feminist Revisions of the Hero's Quest in Contemporary Popular Culture* is a timely, readable, and well-researched intervention into ongoing conversations about adaptation, representation, and characterization in literature and films about young heroines embarking on quests. Hohenstein focuses on the heroines of three texts – Buffy Summers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games*, and Merida of *Brave* – as examples of the “feminist quest heroine” (14) and reads primary, secondary, and tertiary texts about them in order to assert that “retellings of quest stories can reflect upon and offer insights into changing gender norms and concepts of heroism” (30).

### Additional Keywords

children's literature; children's movies; young adult (YA) lit; quest stories; heroines; genre; gender

Kurahashi employs the style of classic fairy tales as free of the perceived excesses of "characters' psychology or description of nature" (108). She dispenses with Andersen's fanciful opening of a lavish sea palace, instead stating quite simply that her tale begins at the bottom of the sea (108). Kurahashi's mermaid is subject to bodily parody; despite being described as beautiful, the *ningyo* is the inverse of Andersen's mermaid by having a fish's head and human legs (108). This inverted mermaid comes across as less human and more doubly animal; she has neither the head nor heart with which to experience love, and the baser, sexual lower half of a human (109). Instead of kissing the prince upon rescuing him, Kurahashi's mermaid has sexual intercourse with his unconscious body, a reversal of the masculine bodily invasion seen in fairy tales such as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" (109). By subverting Andersen's mermaid story, English and Japanese authors challenge the gender roles presented by the original and focus instead on the pleasure of the mermaid.

Fraser's inclusion of Japanese language texts provides a rich tapestry of interwoven tales for comparative study, both through the lens of "The Little Mermaid" and that of *shōjo* in literature. One possible obstacle for English-language readers would be that many of these texts have yet to be translated from their native Japanese, a hurdle that could potentially hinder a Western audience's engagement with the texts. Though they come in the form of secondary sources, Fraser's own translations and carefully detailed summaries pay respect to these brilliant additions to fairy-tale studies. In the transformative spirit of the texts, Fraser's work has allowed these mermaids to become one with the ether of literature, unbound by the limitations of language and culture.

—Bianca L. Beronio

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**GIRL WARRIORS: FEMINIST REVISIONS OF THE HERO'S QUEST IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE.** Svenja Hohenstein. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2019. 255 p. ISBN 978-1-4766-7664-7. \$39.95.

With the proliferation of remakes, reboots, and re-adaptations currently dominating the American film industry—and thus, the global

screen—it seems like just about everyone has an opinion on the ways in which these re-told stories treat beloved characters in their rush to reach new audiences and rake in more cash. And live-action remakes of “classic” children’s films create particularly dynamic sites of debate, since they are often dealing with the unpleasant legacies of older films (racism in *Dumbo*, passivity in *Cinderella*, caricatures in *Mulan*, and so forth) while also attempting to create better legacies now (as with Disney’s first confirmed gay character in the 2017 *Beauty and the Beast* remake’s LeFou).

At first glance, Svenja Hohenstein’s 2019 *Girl Warriors: Feminist Revisions of the Hero’s Quest in Contemporary Popular Culture* might not seem like it contributes to this conversation, since the three primary texts it focuses on—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Brave*—are not adaptations of other media sources in the same ways as any of the examples above. However, Hohenstein’s project of theorizing the “feminist quest heroine” (14) is inextricably bound up with her claim that “retellings of quest stories can reflect upon and offer insights into changing gender norms and concepts of heroism” (3, emphasis mine). In other words, Hohenstein asserts that re-tellings of popular stories are a necessary step toward changing hegemonic gender roles, patriarchal systems, and categorical boundaries—a claim that re-situates debates about adaptation in a very important light indeed.

To be honest, I approached this book expecting a fairly straightforward comparative reading. Maybe there would be a compare-contrast between the three primary texts and their possible influences from various classical or mythological quests (there wasn’t, which was good); maybe there would be some discussion of how new media such as television and film inevitably complicate reception (there wasn’t, and that was also good). There would certainly be sustained dialogue with Joseph Campbell’s germinal but charged work on the hero’s journey (there was, and it was more nuanced than I expected), and there would also be some discussion of how mainstream media tends to treat young, female audiences (there was, and it ranged a lot further than I had anticipated Hohenstein would go).

All that being said—what I *wasn’t* expecting was to be completely blown away by Hohenstein’s nuanced reading of genre subversion existing alongside gender subversion. I also wasn’t expecting to feel so (gleefully) validated by a cultural studies reading that paid as much attention to the contexts of contemporary, girl-centric heroism as to the heroines themselves. But Hohenstein provides all this and more, demonstrating that girl warriors as quest-goers “undermine a variety of archetypes and tropes, not only regarding myths, but also concerning the specific genres from which they stem, namely horror, YA fiction, and Disney princess movies” (14)—which is an ambitious project that I believe she achieves admirably.

*Girl Warriors* is divided into two parts, each containing three chapters. Part I deals with representations of girl warriors in primary sources, dedicating a chapter each to Buffy Summers of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Katniss Everdeen of the novel and then film trilogy *The Hunger Games*, and finally Merida of the animated film *Brave*. Following this, Part II deals with representations of the same three girl warriors in secondary and tertiary sources, with a chapter each on paratextual materials (promotional materials and licensed merchandise), fanfiction, and fanart. I've rarely seen this kind of equal attention to primary, secondary, and tertiary texts outside of fan studies (and it's not a given even there!), so Hohenstein's focus was exciting to see and made excellent sense in her overall picture of girl warriors as a cultural phenomenon.

Each section of *Girl Warriors* brings something new and exciting to the table, right from the introduction where Hohenstein acknowledges how quest stories that follow Joseph Campbell's model can "cultivate and help institutionalize binary and hegemonic gender roles as well as patriarchal systems of power" (1). With these realities in mind, Hohenstein's introduction then turns to examining how teenage girls who are warriors and quest-goers complicate things, particularly since this type of character emerged during the 1990s alongside the Girl Power movement, which critics now critique for its values of silent conformity and overt consumption of "girly" products. Hohenstein uses this context to explain that she is interested in the girl warrior figure because it is often debated whether such characters "can be regarded as empowering or even feminist role models" (5). Hohenstein's own response to this question is a resounding *yes* predicated on two claims: first, that girl warriors are subversive role models who draw from social realities their young audiences will recognize (8), and second, that "while many [critics] accuse female warriors of reiterating patriarchal discourses and gender hierarchies, feminist analyses actually frequently do the same" (9). While readers are still reeling from this excellent—if also under-acknowledged—point, Hohenstein goes on to outline the book's organization, which discerning readers will see mirrored in six chapter subtitles: "establishing" with Buffy, "adapting" with Katniss, and "mainstreaming" with Merida before "containing" with paratextual materials, "promoting" with fanfiction, and simultaneously "affirming" and "challenging" with fanart. Readers themselves are thus encouraged to trace and follow the journey of the girl warrior as Hohenstein finds such warriors and their potential embodied in these three characters and these three forms of paratextual material.

Hohenstein's project continues strong with Part I, the section focusing on representations of girl warriors in primary texts. As she goes, Hohenstein takes care to situate each of the three girl warriors—Buffy, Katniss, and Merida—within the American contexts that produced them, for example

reminding readers that Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* novels "critically engage with" the events of 9/11 and ensuing conflicts in the Middle East (55). Hohenstein also focuses on showing how each of these three girl warriors modifies some Campbell-style quest narrative and expectations of the hero in important ways. Generally speaking, Buffy, Katniss, and Merida subvert male-centric expectations of a quest narrative and hero in some of the same ways: their bodies are adapted to the work they do rather than simple sex appeal for the male gaze, they maintain networks of non-romantic relationships instead of operating alone, and they defy gender norms both masculine and feminine. However, Hohenstein also demonstrates that because each of these three girl warriors emerges from a specific cultural moment and visual genre, each also exemplifies these subversions in different ways. Thus, for Merida being a girl warrior means operating within the strictures of Disney princess canon, where for Buffy it means bucking the trend of the girl dying at the end of the horror movie, and for Katniss it means acknowledging that embodied trauma will affect the hero as much as anyone else. Overall though, Hohenstein contends, these three girl warriors continually exemplify "the artificiality and constructedness of binary gender categories and well-established stereotypes of female weakness and male strength" (33).

Part II is also a robust section with its focus on representations of girl warriors in secondary and tertiary texts, which Hohenstein finds have a much wider and less unified set of objectives than the primary texts they surround. For instance, because promotional and licensed materials are intended to draw in new audiences, they often "contain" (113) or even misrepresent feminist narratives in a bid to draw in male viewers; fanfiction, on the other hand, can serve as a sort of "grassroots sexual education" (152) for its audiences, as well as proof that sex does not define identity for young girls (154), particularly young queer girls. Meanwhile, fanworks such as memes can carry on intertextual conversations that compare different films' depictions of gender roles (184), while "racebent" fanart can both expand and essentialize characters' racial and ethnic identities (204-5).

*Girl Warriors'* conclusion then looks to the continuing trend of girl warriors and quest-goers in mainstream popular culture, including Riri Williams in Marvel comics, Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones*, and Rey in the new *Star Wars* trilogy (210). However, Hohenstein is also careful to note that the culture industry, being an industry, hasn't necessarily created or "developed into a feminist utopia" (210) where all is perfect, though her closing image of the 2017 Women's March illustrates how popular culture depictions of girl warriors, however imperfect and lambasted, continue to prove inspirational heroic role models for those of us in the real world beyond their stories.

As I've hinted at above, Hohenstein's project is ambitious and far-ranging. To my mind, one of its most important—and also successful—aspects is the way in which Hohenstein continually ties back to genre and cultural subversion as equally important parts of the “feminist quest heroine” (14). As she reminds readers that new media texts in particular draw from their cultural moment, Hohenstein raises several interesting points that I hadn't considered before. Regarding *Buffy*, for example, Hohenstein cites critical concerns that the show features primarily white characters in mostly heterosexual relationships. The fact that she brings this up, instead of focusing on the heroic character alone, strengthens her overall argument already; however, Hohenstein also takes this acknowledgment a step further by considering such criticisms within her own claims about heroism as a cultural construct built within gender and genre norms. Returning to *Buffy*, Hohenstein contends that it's actually important Buffy Summers is slim, white, and middle-class because this is the demographic allegedly most impacted by the Ophelia discourse (49), which imagined girls primarily as innocent victims in stories primarily about men (22). Thus, Hohenstein argues, the show first pries open the genre conventions for horror before ending with a plot twist that empowers girls all around the world—not just white, slim, middle-class girls like Buffy herself—to become Slayers (49). Hohenstein proposes a similar thought about *Buffy's* dependence on heterosexual romances: she maintains that these relationships are a way of rewriting horror tropes by depicting heterosexual partners who support one another instead of turning on one another (30). I'm still considering whether I fully agree with these readings or not, but Hohenstein provoked me to think about them in ways that I hadn't before, and that is already a win for this book. But even when she does not have a way to think about textual problems in terms of subverting hegemonic gender or genre norms, Hohenstein does not hesitate to call out such problems. For example, chapter 2 ends with a scathing, multi-page reading of the “dangerous” ways in which the *Hunger Games* novels queer-code the Capitol through specific depictions of citizens' body modifications, gender variances, and unproductivity.

I also appreciate how *Girl Warriors* treats with topics such as girls' and young women's sexuality, rather than falling into the same discussion taboos that Hohenstein sees in US culture at large. Hohenstein's frankness and objectivity also show to good advantage in her chapters on fanworks, where she pays fair and equal attention to both positives and negatives. The chapter on fanfiction, for instance, avoids simply glorifying fan practices as subversive and empowering, and instead commits to examining *why* they work while also acknowledging that they can seem didactic and simplistic (168). I've rarely seen such balanced readings of fanworks outside of fan studies scholarship.

On the other hand, weak spots do peek through in places, such as when Hohenstein reads the *Hunger Games* novels as demonstrating that "Gale symbolizes Katniss's masculine side [...] [while] Peeta, on the other hand, symbolizes the feminine aspects of Katniss's personality" (58). This is reductive, and comes far too close to allegorical claims for my liking, but in my experience these kinds of symbolic reading are fairly common practice when doing comparative work with Campbell, and I was actually expecting far more of them than Hohenstein included.

Overall, *Girl Warriors* impressed me by delivering a far more in-depth argument, using a far greater variety of texts, than I was expecting to encounter. I imagine that this book will be valuable to anyone writing about adaptation in almost any way, not just children's film or girl studies, and I look forward to seeing more of Hohenstein's work in the future.

—Maria Alberto



**THE FABULOUS JOURNEYS OF ALICE AND PINOCCHIO: EXPLORING THEIR PARALLEL WORLDS.** Laura Tosi with Peter Hunt. McFarland & Company, Inc, 2018. 227 pages, ISBN 978-1476665436. \$55.00.

IN THE CHAPTER ENTITLED "ALICE'S EVIDENCE" of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the King orders the White Rabbit to "Begin at the beginning, [...] and go on till you come to the end; then stop" (Carroll 12:109). Yet it is sometimes necessary to begin at the end in order to understand the context of the evidence one is presented with. Peter Hunt's "Strange Meeting in Wonder-Tuscany," the Appendix to Laura Tosi's *The Fabulous Journeys of Alice and Pinocchio: Exploring Their Parallel Worlds*, is a charming short story of a chance encounter between the decidedly British Alice and the Italian Pinocchio:

Alice was growing very tired of sitting next to her sister (who was flirting with a very handsome Italian boy) and trying to understand this strange language, and trying to eat all this strangely-shaped food. [...] Alice longed to be in the shade of the tall trees that lined the white road, so she slipped off her chair and tiptoed in among the leaves of the lower branches. There was a little path and she followed it for a while, until she was startled by a voice near her shoulder, which said "Chi sei?" [...] Oh dear, Alice thought, more nonsense, but she said, politely, in the only phrases of Italian that she had learned: "No capisco. Ho solo parla Inglesi." (195)