

Fear of Rabid Dogs

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REVIEW OF MANAGING MONSTERS: SIX MYTHS OF OUR TIME by Marina Warner.

In his last days, the exiled and ageing Aristotle wrote to a friend: ‘The lonelier and the more isolated I am, the more I have come to love myths.’ We may puzzle over what Aristotle meant. Did he love folk-tales, religious stories or high-minded allegories? The Greek word *mythos* means (centrally) ‘story’ but all stories have or acquire meanings, and we tell ourselves stories all the time. A culture is the stories that it tells itself.

In *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, the Reith Lectures of 1994, Marina Warner takes up some of our stories and the ways in which we manage them. Her use of the word ‘myth’ is deliberately all-encompassing, taking in the varieties of meaning now attached to the word; and her ‘myths’ include, but are not limited to, the famous old Greek stories that have so vexed our lives. She deals with narrated stories (e.g. the *Odyssey*) as well as with dramatic forms (the *Oresteia*, *Jurassic Park*), narrative images, folk beliefs, popular canards – and lies.

Since the 19th century, myth has had both a high and a low status. At its high level, it is considered admirable or consoling or important. Yet at the same time, to be able to name something as a myth serves as a magical de-mystification, robbing the story or image of its centrality or transcendence. This is a favourite Victorian rationalist device – as in ‘Christianity is a beautiful myth.’ At the high level, at least, myth is considered aesthetically and socially creative, if not strictly necessary. At its ‘low’ level, ‘myth’ is a measure of untruth. ‘Myth’ often means a bad explanation of phenomena – even a dead, a putrid explanation.

As in her book on the Virgin Mary, *Alone of All her Sex* (1976), Marina Warner is a clearheaded but subtle mythographer, though she is sometimes a bit sweeping in her generalisations. She asserts, for instance, that ancient literary works, such as the epics and tragic poems, did not influence people’s behaviour in the way that films and video games do. That may be partly true, but it is not the whole truth. For one thing, Homeric characters (among others) figured in the ‘media’ – in recitations, dramas, pictures, mosaics, graphics on pottery. And they did not serve only as ‘tragic warnings’. For the use of a character as a model, it would be hard to beat Alexander’s deliberate and well-documented modelling of himself on Achilles. For Alexander, the epic was sufficient to ‘trigger desire and excite identification’ in the manner Warner attributes only to modern advertising. The danger here is of mythologising an absolute division between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, a barrier Warner elsewhere tries to break through.

Warner is attracted to myth and reacts against it, for she is always conscious of the social uses to which myth is put. A myth circulated in a culture, Warner urgently states, is anything but politically innocent. There is an innate division within Warner’s writing, for she partly loves myth and the mythic artists who are capable of getting our attention, filling our minds with material worth pondering – including artists as diverse as Steven Spielberg and Derek Walcott. Yet at the same time she is distressed by some of the controlling notions or clichés of our time – ‘myths’ in the lowest sense, dangerous rotten explanations. The six lectures do not allow her the scope to work out some of her own contradictions, or to delve into the varieties of types of myth she looks at. After all, the *Oresteia* is a myth in a very different sense from the cliché ‘boys will be boys’ (the title of her second lecture), which is no story, and has little in the way of image, but attaches itself as a belief or pseudo-belief to a variety of images in particular contexts. Warner is very shrewd at analysing both narrative and context. The most pernicious and least complex versions of myths, she evidently believes, are likely to be pushed at a public (as in video games) by commercial interests that have more than immediate financial gain at stake. The deployment of myth can serve to mould a public impervious to argument, and inoculated against discussion and dissent.

Among the ‘popular’ (or well-pushed-home) myths of our time that Warner deals with are the untruths or half-truths that childhood is or ought to be totally ‘innocent’; that masculine aggression is natural, or ‘boys will be boys’; that the English are an island race living in an island home, untouched by the foreign and thus righteously demanding exclusion of anything ‘alien’. Warner is very acute in catching British and American treatment of ‘aliens’ in various guises, including those appearing in monster-breeding films such as *King Kong*. As Warner makes clear in her opening lecture, myths are very versatile, though it is a piece of social engineering to pretend that a myth-story is always the same, and the same from time immemorial, because it is true. Actually, myths renew and refigure themselves; there is no sacred original: ‘Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth; there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account.’ Pretending to reveal ancient wisdom is an aspect of myth’s ‘seductive charm’; myth’s own secret cunning means that it pretends to present the matter as it is ... at its heart lies the principle, in the famous formula of Roland Barthes, that history is turned into nature.’ The deployment of myth as reality, of history as nature, is the cunning work of government as a mental art – and without successful deployment of myth, all police are useless. People behave as they are taught they always ‘must’, they behave in the way they believe is ‘natural’ to them. We may not always want all the results of the deployment of certain myths, but some of the results of popular myths are generally felt to be highly desirable. In reinforcing an idea of ‘masculinity’ we give small boys video games in which they must become serial killers. Yet we can shiver in not wholly undelightful horror at two male children who kill another child, labelling them Monsters, for they offend against the myth of childhood innocence. Children are supposed to be early consumers of the culture, yet untouched by it. Even if mistreated, they must hang onto ‘innocence’, their only asset.

Violence is deployed constantly in advertising and entertainment, and is continually reinforced even while officially decried. Anti-violence groups are always ridiculed in the media, even while newspapers may decry some particular film or television programme. Violence may even be more stark now than formerly. As Warner ruefully points out, an old component of heroic myth, ‘a gleeful use of cunning and high spirits against brute force’, has practically disappeared. Ulysses and Chaplin are done in by a barrage of Schwarzenegger clones. Although beating or killing women is a fairly common occupation at home, films and video games customarily do not directly depict men conquering women. Instead, women disappear from the stories. What does appear is ‘the Monster’ in various guises – the monster always needing to be conquered, to be killed. Kill, or be killed.

Modern commercial culture has extrapolated from Darwin – and rather unfairly attributed to him – the social myth of ‘survival of the fittest’. I am supplementing Warner in pointing out how strongly this figures in most modern bestiaries (often known as television nature programmes), in which images of animals or insects co-operating or contributing to each others’ mutual benefit are jolted out of the picture in favour of prey-seizing and lone prowling. ‘Nature’ is thus made ‘history’ and ‘history’ is rendered ‘natural’. At other times in our own cultural history, however, we have seen animals differently, as ancient or medieval bestiaries will show. Once upon a time, ‘nature’ and ‘animal’ supported a view of feudal order, decorous hierarchy. This is strangely revived in *The Lion King*, the recent Disney movie, the Disney studios’ riposte to the more egalitarian and anti-hierarchical strains in their own *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*. We are paradoxically soothed by thinking that violence, aggression and cruelty are ‘natural’ at the same time as we are made wary and defensive. We are rendered paranoid – about animals and people. The Monster is going to return. There is always the Monster. One of the most appealing – most passionate – aspects of *Managing Monsters* is Warner’s plea for recognition of the falsehood of the objectified ‘Monster’. The Monster is ourselves. Efforts to exterminate the brutes will only increase our pathetic monstrosity. The more fear and anxiety we feel, the more stupid and cruel we become.

We loudly lament certain social problems without desiring to connect these with other aspects of our lives. Warner tries, if somewhat too hastily, to urge us to connect. The myths that we apply to try to operate our ‘commercial society’ are producing problems that we lament in another part of the wood: ‘the culture that produces irresponsible fathers openly extols a form of masculinity that is opposed to continuity, care, negotiation and even cunning – qualities necessary to make lasting attachments between men and children, men

and women.’ One may question whether cunning is always desirable in relations between sexes and generations while agreeing that boys are being trained for a heroic and brutally lonely role that may assist them in the cultural work of policing and terrifying women, but at the same time urges them to take no responsibility for the children they’ve fathered. They are supposed to imagine themselves in a heroic and dominant role that the working world will not award them in adulthood: ‘they’re bit players training to be heroes in a narrative which can proceed only by conflict to rupture.’

Keeping women under control used to be a major, if mythical and mythicised, occupation for men because it could be assumed that women (mythically) represent untamed nature, brutishness, base matter. Woman is Animal. Yet, as Warner points out, Woman functions in the myths as the animal self more effectively where there is a belief in the value of the ‘civilised’. When ‘nature’ is seen as aggression, and aggression is to be highly valued – in the dog-eat-dog world of the Stock Exchange and in Robert Bly’s drum-beating – then Woman is made to correspond with tameness. Woman becomes despised, dull domesticity. Woman is too much civilisation, the doilies and anti-macassars of Home.

Yet commercial mythology cannot get rid of the myth of Home. For one thing, images of home sell a lot of products, just as another good marketing wheeze is the representation of fierce animals (dinosaurs, lions, bears) in plush toys. If the world ‘out there’ is a jungle, we want to come to a refuge in a Home. Warner suggests that the myth of Home explains why the English get so cross with the Royal Family, who are supposed to represent Home as security and static peace. Action on the part of the Royals, such as generational conflict or sexual activity, evidently renders the sweet dull world of Home too much like the pulsating jungle realm of Nature.

The myth of Home is itself translated into a mode of aggression. For ‘our Home’ means that there are others who are outsiders, not of the family. These are Aliens, the Invaders of our Home. We must be protected against Aliens, whether Space Aliens (as in films or video games) or mere newcomers from a geographical space on the known globe, from, say, Pakistan or the Caribbean or (in the case of the USA) from Mexico or Haiti. The Welsh sense of Home, one might add, includes the wounded sense of having been already invaded; hence the importance to the Welsh of their language, which might be eradicated (it nearly was) but cannot be colonised. It is not only not spoken by the usurpers: it is not supposed to be spoken by them.

The American sense of Home is different from the English; it involves complex ideas of moving through space over a number of frontiers. Part of the appeal of Ronald Reagan as President was that he played the mythical roles of both grandfather and cowboy, the patriarch from the West who could cross all the frontiers and keep the aliens out. The English myth of Home (which is what Warner deals with) cannot include spaciousness or moving frontiers. Instead, it is well wrapped up in an English idea of self-sufficiency. England is an island – as Shakespeare put it, working out one of the chief national myths so very well that politicians have long been borrowing from the speech of that (failed) politician, John of Gaunt in *Richard II*. With Warner’s constructions and strictures in mind, we can see in Gaunt’s speech worrying formulations of peculiarly English forms of paranoia. The English are meant to be leaders and warriors abroad, but they are supposed to live in Edenic peace at home. Any disturbances to peace must therefore be wrought by aliens of some kind. ‘Infection’ and ‘the hand of war’ are to be kept out by the Channel. If the plague comes, some dirty foreigner brought it in. The fear of rabid dogs seems like a handy excuse rather than the ultimate reason permitting ritual enactment of such a belief. It could not suit British trade or tourism to keep foreign human beings in quarantine for six months, but the foreigner’s animals can be ritually kept at bay. As Shakespeare himself knows perfectly well, war is not kept out by the Channel; the English are particularly ingenious and determined in fighting civil wars – after Shakespeare’s time as well as before. The Channel is ‘a moat defensive’ – the aliens are stopped in their tracks by this ha-ha. The fuss over the Channel Tunnel indicated how much this mattered to a general perception of Englishness.

The insular myth worries Warner, who shows how effectively it was employed by Churchill, and later by Thatcher during the Falklands war. As Warner points out, England has always been strongly related to other

countries; her very survival has depended – especially during World War Two – on continuous relations with ports and products overseas. Churchill's war maps show 'the ports and entrepôts of the Empire, its allies and sympathisers'. The string of harbours, 'the collaboration of many peoples and places', constitute 'the antithesis of self-sufficiency in isolation'. But it does not suit our myth to incorporate the story of co-operation in successful repulsion of the Nazi attack. 'The myth of national identity desires to forget this historical contingency, this inter-relatedness.' We have been on a programme of institutionalised forgetting, Warner suggests. 'Arguing with the past,' she observes, 'has suddenly become ... an ordinary but important act of citizenship.'

All modern nationalisms have depended on emphasising and indeed straining certain myths, certain stories and images, to the dereliction of others. The Romantic period, coinciding with the hardening of new nationalisms in a freshly stimulated imperial age, fostered the idea of a pure tribal identity passed down unsullied. This inheritance must be policed constantly, kept uncontaminated. Warner reminds us that the Grimm brothers tried to keep their collection 'pure' and German; they cast out stories which they thought too similar to French or Italian ones. Yet they could not succeed in their desperate winnowing. The stories in their collection prove to be related to the deep traditions not only of the rest of Europe, but to stories and images of India, Arabia and China. The culture that we really possess is an inter-related one. 'The hearthside crone who passes on the wisdom of the tribe,' Warner argues, 'has always been a polyglot cosmopolitan.'

Warner may be flogging a dead horse – or dead crone – here, for it is not the practice in contemporary England to admire anything produced by 'the folk'. Modern forms of Whiggism are affronted at the idea that the 'common people' ever actually did anything creative. Our Whig historians work hard at making us forget that once upon a time working people were the song writers, the actors, the designers, the artists and architects of our civilisation. Even now, popular song emanates from 'low places', despite having to be sieved through recording conglomerates. Popular music might offer Warner a better current example than folk tales of the mobility of concepts and techniques and their ability to cross national or tribal boundaries. The playing of the guitar so necessary to pop music comes from Spain, while the sliding string technique, universal now, comes from Hawaii. Even in our 'classical' music, the timpani are from Turkey. Whenever we have anything that can be called an expression of *culture*, we are looking at a dense product of a number of tribes and societies, working, wittingly or unwittingly, in combination. 'Home' itself, or 'our own place', is a dense product and can never be a stable or static one. But as Warner knows, we love the idea of stability – may even be brought to love a repressive 'law and order'. Seduced into love of stasis, we find it easy to sustain paranoia, to cast our fears outward upon the Monster.

What Warner does not say outright but is everywhere apparent is that the Murdoch press, a great promulgator of debased images and tinny myths, is at present an unstoppable fountain of prejudice and paranoia working to keep the working people, women and aliens all in their appropriate subjugation. Freedom – freedom from what Blake calls 'mind-forg'd manacles' – cannot come without questioning the myths that serve as vehicles for static and brassy untruths, and putrid explanations. Yet we cannot live without myth. Warner's enterprise is a noble project, in the deepest sense an Enlightenment project. But one of the riddles of our situation is how to create the ability to understand 'myth' when most media wish the mythology to remain invisible. Analysis is the work of the 'chattering classes', and myth-making (sometimes of a cynical kind) is at present largely the work of media-mongers. Marina Warner's examination is 'liberal' in all the splendid meanings of that much-abused word. It opens questions, offers analysis and thought, invites further discussion. *Managing Monsters* has freedom – and a noble freedom – as its objective. But how do we reach it? We need to think deeply about what myths we can (or do) live by once we have seen through the half-truths. Marina Warner herself seems mythical and heroic, like Shakespeare's Marina who stands before the haggard, filthy and lethargic Pericles and reanimates him with the 'sacred physic' of her statements. She makes him ask questions. If we could ask the proper questions, we might begin to recover from the losses we have inflicted on ourselves.