In 1852, at Sydenham in south London, Queen Victoria opened the first dinosaur theme park. She presided over the unveiling of 29 full-scale models made by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, who was the draughtsman Darwin himself had employed to depict the animals he found on his voyage in the Beagle. The word dinosaur - dread lizard - had been coined in 1841 by the leading palaeontologist of the time, Richard Owen, and Hawkins made his dinosaurs to Owen’s state-of-the-art specifications.

They’re still there. Spick-and-span signs in gold and scarlet paint direct visitors to the “Farmyard”, “Boats”, and “Monsters”. Monsters, not dinosaurs: the distinction between natural history and myth wasn’t drawn then. There, on an island in a lake, crouching under mixed plantings of large trees, the concrete creatures come into view: the pterodactyl spreads its wings like a large heron, the snout of the mosasaurus emerges from the water like the toothy maw of Jonah’s whale in a medieval illumination; ichthyosaurus, with daisywheel eyes, seems to waddle on fins as comfortably as a walrus. Their inertia in the suburban London park is pastoral, reassuring: dinosaurs spending the afternoon at their club in St James’s.

A hundred and forty years on, in a much more famous park, the dinosaurs are living, moving, crying, talking - almost. The simulations and models in Jurassic Park give a glow of genuine wonder to the film. The dinosaurs are presented as authentic forerunners in time scientifically accurate, but at the same time their character has evolved to embody contemporary fantasies. The velociraptors as they hop and scurry and pounce and give chase suspend disbelief even in the most cynical of viewers. Small, mobile, quick on their feet, hunting in pairs, and even articulate, they represent rather a change from the lumbering dinosaurs of Sydenham Park. Dinosaurs, even when called monsters, seemed benign then, but today they’ve become cunning, voracious, nippy - and female.

Voracious, cunning girls. Lethal - and fertile, as well. Michael Crichton’s clever plot, for all its air of scientific fidelity, reveals vividly the presence of myth today. Originally grown as everyone knows from the DNA in blood found in a mosquito preserved in amber, the park’s dinosaurs epitomised the chaotic natural energy of fertility governed by the secular priests of the temple of science.

Female organisms in the film prove ultimately uncontrollably fertile, resistant to all the constraints of the men of power. The story can be reduced to a naked confrontation between nature, coded female, with culture, coded male. Is the terror the velociraptors inspire in any way connected to their femaleness? It isn’t emphasised as
such though the book calls the park a matriarchy. Yet popular films of this kind often refract widespread concerns in metaphorical terms and then reinforce them, and no director of the contemporary cinema rivals Steven Spielberg’s ability to touch a common cord. He broke all records with the takings on E.T. and now a decade later has outstripped them with Jurassic Park which has made 800 million pounds worldwide.

The accelerating pace of change since the 50s has magnified the influence, the power and the dissemination of myths. As everything changes from the political map to the distribution of wealth, as human ingenuity leads to scientific breakthroughs which offer salvation and at the same time destruction, as strains on the family grow, the imagination hunts for stories to explain the pervasive malaise.

One of the stories in mass circulation today is a very old one, but it’s taken on new vigour: women in general are out of control, and feminism in particular is to blame. It is odd to think that misogynist jokes used to attack women for wanting to trap men into marriage. Now the attacks run the opposite way. The tabloids bitterly quote young mothers who say: “So who needs men?” Feminism today has become a bogey, a whipping boy, routinely produced to explain all social ills. Women struggle for equality of choice in matters of sex, their grasp of sovereignty over their bodies; are blamed in particular for the rise in family breakdown, the increase in divorce, and the apparently spiralling delinquency and violence of children. In these lectures I will be looking at the mythic accretions clustering stickily to these themes: men are no longer in control, mothers are not what they used to be, and it’s the fault of Germaine Greer, Cosmopolitan and headline stars who choose to be single mothers like Michelle Pfeiffer. By holding up to the light modern mythical nodes of this kind I hope to loosen in some cases their binding grip on our imaginations. Replying to one story with another which unravels the former has become central to contemporary thought and art, text as well as image. The idea of a kind of cultural kontakion, the Greek antiphonal chorus across the nave of response and reply, invocation and challenge opens a new angle of view.

The she-monster is hardly a new phenomenon. The idea of a female untamed nature which must be leashed or else will wreak havoc closely reflects mythological heroes’ struggles against monsters. Greek myth alone offers a host - of Ceres, Harpies, Sirens, Moirae. Associated with fate and death in various ways, they move swiftly, sometimes on wings; birds of prey are their closest kin - the Greeks didn't know about dinosaurs - and they seize as in the word raptor. But seizure also describes the effect of the passions on the body; inner forces, looser, madness, arte, folly, personified in Homer and the tragedies as feminine, snatch and grab the interior of the human creature and take possession. Ungoverned energy in the female always raises the issue of motherhood; fear that the natural bond excludes men and eludes their control courses through ancient myth, which applies various remedies. In Aeschylus’s Oresteia, when Orestes has murdered his mother Clytemnestra, the matriarchal Furies want justice against the matricide - but they find themselves confronting a new order - led by the god Apollo. Orestes is declared innocent, and in a famous resolution which still has power to shock audiences today, the god decrees:

The mother of what’s called her offspring’s no parent but only the nurse to the seed that’s implanted.
The mounter, the male’s the only true parent.
She harbours the bloodshot, unless some god blasts it.
The womb of the woman’s a convenient transit.

In this brutal act of legislation, the god of harmony declares that henceforward, in civilised society, only the father counts. The mother is nothing more than an incubator.

The spectre of gynocracy, of rule by women, stalks through the founding myths of our culture: both Theseus and Hercules fight with the Amazons - and vanquish their queens. The Amazon’s separatist queendom made them tantalising but also monstrous in the eyes of the Greeks; the terrible massacres of their army depicted on stone reliefs and vases redounded to the fame of the Greek heroes as surely as cutting off Medusa’s head.

In the folklore of the past, classical and medieval, the female beast, like the velociraptor, was also sometimes cunning and purposely concealed her true nature: the Sirens lured men with their deceitful songs, and later tempted fierce anchorites in the desert, approaching St Anthony for instance, with honeyed words, hiding their diabolical nether parts under sumptuous dresses. Male beasts, as in Beauty and the Beast, or male devils, as in the temptations of St Anthony, don't possess the same degree of duplicity; you can tell you’re dealing with the devil on the whole, but when evil comes in female guise, you have to beware: the fairy queen may turn to dust in your arms, and poisonous dust at that. This is a trope that sends thrills through stories as disparate as Wagner’s Tannhauser, in which the knight loses his soul to the carnal goddess of the Venusberg, and Rider Haggard’s She, where, as you might remember from the film, Ursula Andress cracks open like a speeded-up earthquake and reveals beneath the image of loveliness, nothing but a crumbling hag. But none of these dissembling serpents and she-monsters can compare with the vision of Lamia in Keats’s gorgeous romance noir:

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson-barred;
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
Dissolved, or brighter shone, or interwreathed
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries
She seemed, at once, some penanced lady elf,
Some demon’s mistress, or the demon’s self
Her head was a serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!
She had a woman’s mouth, with all its pearls complete
Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake
Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love’s sake.

But when Lamia woos Lycius, she doesn’t, of course, reveal her snaky shape and nature. Only at the last minute, at the wedding feast, she is unmasked. “And with a frightful scream she vanish’d” - while the poor bridegroom expires in a swoon. Such fairy wives don’t only make a pretence of being women; they also contradict all ideas of proper womanly conduct. Of the throng of mythical and monstrous
enchantresses, one of the most famous and most fascinating of all is still Medea.

Medea embodies extreme female aberration, from the tragedy by Euripides in the fifth century BC to the fictional translation of her story in Toni Morrison's recent masterpiece, Beloved. It is through Medea’s sorcery that Jason wins the Golden Fleece: she lulls the snake, its guardian, with a potion obtained from Hecate, Queen of the Night. But she also uses her magic powers to cheat her father, boil an enemy in oil, cut up her brother into little pieces, and eventually, when Jason has abandoned her, to murder her own children by him.

Euripides dramatised with powerful empathy Medea’s tragedy: when Jason decides to take another wife more useful to his current ambitions, Medea, who after all had betrayed and killed so much on his behalf, turns on those she loves in revenge. Her maternity is the terrain of her authority, or rather of the authority left to her. And so she strikes at Jason where he is most vulnerable, and where his reach - and all men’s - is weakest. Among bad mothers of fantasy she is the worst; and as such she speaks to our times, when the bad mother is always present as an issue, as a threat, as an excuse, as a pleasurable self-justification and as a political argument. Women still use, and abuse, the authority they are allowed as mothers, because it is what they have, or, as in Medea’s case, what they have left.

Euripides’s tragedy introduced Medea the child-killer, and has made this side of her much more familiar than other texts, which stress her enchantments and, in some cases, her humanity. We pick and choose bad mothers to suit our times just as we pick our dinosaurs. Apollonius Of Rhodes 200 years after Euripides in the Voyage of Argo doesn’t mention Medea the Murderer. In his story her crime, for which she weeps piteously, consists only in eloping with Jason and cheating her father. But Medea the child murderer contravenes the most fundamental criterion of femininity - maternal love. She shares this with many fantasies of female evil: the inquisition condemned witches for cannibal feasts on children; in Judaic myth, the succubus Lilith was believed to haunt cradles of new-born infants to carry them off, and the classical Lamia was a child-stealer as well as a bloodsucker. Amulets against these harmful powers were worn in medieval Europe; Satanic cults today are held to practise the same gory rites. Myths of female aberration predispose the mind to believe in these monstrous crimes; but the same myths have also stirred resistance. An antiphonal response of women’s voices who have sometimes claimed the wicked heroines as foremothers sometimes disclaimed them as slanderous fictions. In 1405, the poet and historian Christine de Pisan, a young widowed single mother, and one of the earliest women to support her family by writing, compiled a riposte to the circulating tittle tattle about women, in her Book of the City of Ladies.

She set up an array of heroines, geniuses, leaders, and saints, and portrayed them building a heavenly city. Among the paragons, without turning a hair, she included Medea: “Medea was very beautiful, with a noble and upright heart and a pleasant face.”

Later, in a passage on the dangers of love, Pisan relates that Medea unfortunately fell in love with Jason, and listened to her passion, only to find that he abandoned her. This turned her “despondent”, writes Pisan. Again, no memory of the remarkable form Medea’s despondency took.
When I first read this, nearly 20 years ago, I thought Pisan was absurdly coy, and felt that feminism could not proceed without facing women’s crimes as well as their wrongs - the ills they did as well as those done to them. This is still my position - when it comes to historical events; but with regard to myths which shape thought and action - and history - the question becomes much more complicated. Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth: there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account. Pisan’s Medea is as mythically true as Euripides’s Medea; Pisan is important because she is one of the first women writers to tell stories against the grain of tradition. Hers might tend to whitewash; but the tradition she inaugurated tends more to accept, even revel in the darkness.

The mythical she-monster’s allure spellbound Sylvia Plath, for instance, who in the Ariel poems often contemplates atrocity with narcissistic pleasure. The phantom of Medea herself materialises in Edge, one of Plath’s most troubling and potent poems, when she invokes the triple death of mother and children as if it were a female calling meeting a need, matching a desire.

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.
Each dead child, coiled, a white serpent.

Here Plath peels away the horror which greets the sight, to uncover the voluptuous shiver it inspires. Plath herself didn’t make a recording of Edge but in 1963 she read here on the radio Lady Lazarus, another of her poems in which she claims a she-monster for her own. She resists incrimination and victimhood in this poem, moving through despairing holocaust imagery to conjure the return of a Lilith-like demon. Plath defies her audience to deny her transgressive appetites - nocturnal, man-eating, child killer. She turns to fantasy and projection to increase her own powers of verbal enchantment.

Many other writers and artists and performers today have also moved on to enemy territory where Medea and other monsters are pacing. Singers, dancers, even political activists have also seized myths of female danger; moving in to occupy the metaphorical objects of derision and fear has become a popular strategy. Sometimes this takes the form of ironical co-opting of a jibe or even an insult, as in the open defiance of the black rock group called “Niggaz with Attitude” or the ironic names of women’s enterprises like the famous publishers Virago. In Zagreb five writers were recently denounced as dangerous women in the Croatian nationalist press. The targets immediately accepted the label, and their supporters now wear badges proclaiming them “opasna zena” - dangerous woman. Former misogynist commonplace are now being seized by women - in rock music, in films, in fiction, even in pornography; women are grasping the ‘she-beast’ of demonology for themselves. The bad girl is the heroine of our times and transgression is staple entertainment. Madonna clutching her
crotch, flexing her thighs, singing “papa don’t preach”. But this defiance sometimes results, it seems to me, in collusion. It can magnify female demons rather than lay them to rest, for men and for women. Madonna, as she showed in her book Sex, extols her own power in wilful and mindless blindness to most women’s continuing vulnerability in sexual matters. In her case degradation is a fantasy and she is in a unique position to choose to find it sweet. Madonna plugs into men’s fear and loathing when she flaunts the insatiable pussy.

Ironies, subversion, inversion, pastiche, masquerade, appropriation - all the post-modern strategies of the last two decades are buckling under the weight of culpability the myth has entrenched. It permeates the furious response, for instance, to the increasing numbers of single mothers. Instead of inquiring into the causes of marriage breakdown, into the background to so many fatherless families, into the reasons women have become heads of households, instead of attending to the needs of women who are raising children on their own and recognising the way the work of care still stitches together the torn fabric of society, lone mothers have come under prolonged and continuing attack. Newspapers, television programmes, the Cabinet, let fly with one accusation after another: one scare story after another. Home alone children of single, working mothers, home alone children of lesbian couples, welfare swindlers, or at least leeches, are spawning child murderers, breeding monsters. And the authorities respond; a prison sentence is handed down for a woman who left her child at home when she went to work, as if sending the mother to jail would give the child the help she needed.

The recent budget allowing the vital principle that a mother can’t work without some provision of childcare was at last a small step in the right direction. But the same policymakers who deregulate, who throw employment and housing on to the mercy of market forces want to regulate the family. It would be better if they stopped their law and order ranting and looked clearly at the social revolution that is taking place. Sixty-five per cent of lone parents were once married but they are now coping on their own in almost one in five families in this country, the highest proportion in the EC. Three out of four of these heads of households are women. Like the heir to the throne, more than one in six of his future subjects are being raised by lone mothers. They are, however, rather less well off as these families are amongst the poorest in the country. One of the reasons the public isn’t especially afraid that Prince William will turn out a hooligan, but will most likely thrive, has more to do with the comforts he enjoys than the state of his parents’ marriage. Women for the most part are doing the best they can in the circumstances and learning to survive as they go. Sometimes this entails choosing to keep the family away from the father, but very few of these families have actively sought the circumstances in which they find themselves. Yet the bitter, angry, ignorant view persists that we inhabit an imaginary cosmos where women on top are somehow killing men and usurping daddy’s throne, where Madonna gyrates and strips to proclaim she is in control; that women are spearheading some feminist revolution, having it all their own way because they have been allowed to slip traditional moral restraints. I am not saying that exploitation and abuses do not happen. Nor am I denying that some women are having babies on their own on purpose. But chronic scaremongering about female behaviour, about wild sexuality and aberrant maternity distorts understanding; and matters of urgent social policy, the proper provision of childcare, tax reform, job training and retraining, nursery schools, housing, play areas all sink into a quagmire of prejudice.
A myth is a kind of story told in public, which people pass on to one another. Myths wear an air of ancient wisdom, but that is part of their seductive charm. Not all antiques are better than a modern design - especially if they are needed in ordinary, daily use. Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context - they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they are not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Managing monsters means preventing them from managing us. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, always in the process of being formed, but - and this is fortunate - never set so hard they cannot be changed again, and newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones.

There’s a beauty and the beast story that I’d like to tell you because, like many fairy tales, it shows that things are never quite as they seem and that surprises can spring from any quarter. The wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell is a verse romance written in the mid 15th century by a forgotten and nameless English poet. It reworks the familiar fairytale theme of a young man’s union with a she-monster and, by the way, produces a happy story - at first bawdy, later tender, about the possibility of mutual love and trust against the odds. King Arthur out hunting one day falls foul of a terrible warlock who agrees to spare him only on condition that the King discovers within a year the answer to that fundamental question: what do women want? If King Arthur cannot give the right answer, his head is forfeit. When his time of grace is almost up Arthur comes across a ghastly hag, a lady so foul the poet lets rip with a full-blown comic lexicon of loathliness. She knows the true answer and she will pass it on to Arthur but only if he gives her Sir Gawain for a husband. This is a bitter blow. However when Arthur tells Gawain, Gawain, that pattern of chivalry, wants nothing better than to serve his liege lord, and he agrees to the match. The loathly lady then reveals: “We desire of men, above all manner of things, to have the sovereignty. For where we have sovereignty, all is ours. Though a knight be never so fierce and ever the mastery win, of the most manliest is our desire to have the sovereignty of such a sire. Such is our crafte and ginne.”

So to the question what do women want? - which would vex Freud so deeply later - the answer is sovereignty; and womanly wiles, women’s craft and gin tend to this hidden purpose. This solution, spoken to a classical or a Christian audience where the subordination of women was considered nature ordained by divine commandment automatically conjures the sexual and political nightmare of rule by women - velociraptors doing just as they please. But the tale of the loathly lady subsequently takes a surprising turn against the grain of its own misogyny. Gawain does indeed marry the foul hag Dame Ragnell with her boar’s tusk teeth and hanging paps. And in bed on the wedding night he gallantly consents to kiss her, whereupon he finds he holds in his arms the fairest creature that ever he saw. She tells him she is bound by a spell and she then puts to him an old fey riddle: would he have her fair by night and foul by day or vice versa? It is to this conundrum that the perfect knight answers “But do as ye list now, my lady gaye”. By allowing her sovereignty at that moment Sir Gawain performs the final magic which undoes the spell and his loathly lady is transformed becoming fair both by day and night, and they live together in great happiness. But for only five years, for then the poet tells us in a line which pulls the romance oddly into history, she tragically dies young.

The story based on the same material Chaucer used for the Wife of Bath in the
Canterbury tales can be read at one level as yet another medieval joke about wilful wives, hen-pecked husbands, as a hostile parable about women on top. Or it can be taken to point towards a utopian destination of negotiated exchanges, of generosity and trust. Sovereignty here can of course be interpreted as domination, and the legend as a burlesque commentary on women’s lusts for sex and mastery, a cautionary tale about the secret will to power of all women which men must recognise and control. But the story’s sudden swerve out of comedy into romance, out of bawdy into lyricism, promises high rewards for mutual respect and extols Gawain for his courtesy towards the loathsome, despised old hag. Sovereignty over self not over others: the right to govern one’s own person, not the right to govern others. The loathly lady gives him love and Gawain brings about her restored shape. Her emancipation follows his growing understanding.

As a footnote to this look at the serpentine metamorphoses of the monstrous female, I would like to direct your notice to some scientific data about the praying mantis. “Eckehard Liske and W Jackson Davis of Santa Cruz, California videotaped the mantises’ courtship while the insects thought they were in private and found a pleasant ritual dance in place of cannibalism - and with both partners surviving. The researchers say that until now scientists have distracted the insects by their presence and by watching them under bright lights - and that they didn’t give them enough to eat.”

This most loved creature in the surrealist bestiary of misogynist folklore, this insect famous for devouring her mate alive after mating, has been vindicated. Let them alone, give them enough to eat and look] They fall into peaceful, mutual, post-coital slumber.