REITH LECTURES 1994: Managing Monsters

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Lecture 2: Boys Will Be Boys

TRANSMISSION: 2 February 1994 – BBC Radio 4

As I was going to the Future Entertainment Show held in Olympia last year, I soon found I was the only woman waiting for the Tube. The station was unusually full for the middle of the morning, with scattered young men in jeans and trainers, gaggles of young boys, one or two fathers. When the train came and the carriage doors opened, a rather dazed looking London pigeon fluttered out. A man near me laughed. “Don't worry,” he said, “it's only a virtual reality pigeon.”

I streamed in to the show with the crowd, clutching my razzle-dazzle, hi-tech, impossible-to-forge ticket, and plunged into the roaring hall. The video games industry has grown in value from almost nothing to 700m pounds over the past four years. On multiple screens the season’s new offerings in interactive play and 3-D simulation were being triggered by the very latest in ergonomic joypads to keep bleeping, scrolling, beaming up, blasting, crashing, bursting into flames and starting up again. I wasn’t the only woman any longer: there were one or two grannies, one or two mums. And the marketing staff on the stalls were almost all women - “skirt power” to the trade - and they were selling and busking in green bug costumes as zools or zoozes or other technological gremlins. But we were interlopers. It was a man’s world. The customers and players were almost all boys.

In the “chill-out zone” in the gallery, at stands and on platforms, the players at the banked consoles of games were busy zapping and slicing and chopping and head-butting and dragon-punching. Popular culture teems with monsters, with robots, cyborgs and aliens, fiends, mutants, vampires and replicants. Millennial turmoil, the disintegration of so many familiar political blocs and the appearance of new national borders, ferocious civil wars, global catastrophes from famine to Aids, threats of ecological disasters, of another Chernobyl, of larger holes in the ozone - all these dangers feed fantasies of the monstrous. At the same time, scientific achievements in genetics, reproduction, cosmetic surgery and transplants have also raised tough and unresolved ethical anxieties about the manufacture of new beings. These are reflected in myths at every level of our culture: in the plots of books, in films, advertisements, song lyrics, and games. These monsters are made actual; they seem to surround us. The manuals accompanying the role playing game of Dungeons and Dragons illustrate the ghast or the ghoul, the flail snail or the dimensional shambola with diagrams of their thumb grib or their bite and provide maps of where they roam. And in games like Streets of Rage, Mortal Combat, Instruments of Chaos, Night Trap, Canon Fodder, Street Fighter, Legacy of Sir Asoul, The Rise of the Robots, Zombie Apocalypse, Psycho Santa, Splatterhouse, the hero slays monsters - just as Jason and the Argonauts did and Hercules at his twelve labours. Indeed some of the games even quote classical adventures in their pantheons. But the computer’s capacity to proliferate means that in video games there are many, many dragons, many monsters, many enemies, many aliens one after another, and they all have to be shot and blasted,

hacked and slashed level by level as the player works through the stacked platforms of the plot. Some maze puzzles, some role playing games require strategy, but mostly the hero busts his way through. A review described the contest between Robocop and Terminator. “It’s total cyberpunk ultra violence, the kind of game where you just kill everything. It’s great.”

Myths and monsters have been interspliced since the earliest extant poetry from Sumer: the one often features the other. The word myth, from the Greek, means a form of speech; while the word monster is derived, in the opinion of one Latin grammarian, from monestrum, via moneo, and encloses the notions of advising, of reminding, above all of warning. But moneo, in the word monstrum, has come under the influence of Latin monstrare, to show, and the combination neatly characterises the form of speech myth often takes: a myth shows something, it is a story spoken to a purpose, it issues a warning, it gives an account which advises and tells, often by bringing into play showings of fantastical shape and invention - monsters. Myths define enemies and aliens, and in conjuring them up they say who we are and what we want. They tell stories to impose structure and order. Like fiction, they can tell the truth even while they are making it all up.

Chaos threatens in various forms: the she-monster Chimera spat fire from three heads, but the hero Bellerafon flying down on the winged horse Pegasus was able to pierce her in her fiery gullet. The flames melted his spear tip and she choked to death as the lead cooled inside her. Chimera’s name came to mean illusion: the ultimate monster of monsters, who is both frighteningly there and yet a spectre, who shows something real that at the same time only exists in the mind.

Reason can be awake and beget monsters. Extreme, fantastical, and insubstantial as they are, they materialise real desires and fears, they embody meaning at a deeper, psychic level. We are living in a new age of faith of sorts, of myth-making, of monsters, of chimeras. And these chimeras define human identity, especially the role of men.

In Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein, published in 1818, one of the dominant myths today finds its most powerful and tragic expression. The book’s central figures have leapt the boundaries of the novel itself into all kinds of retellings, periodic and straight. It is no accident that it is being remade yet again for the screen this year with Kenneth Branagh and Robert De Niro. Frankenstein has become the contemporary parable of perverted science, but this reading overlooks the author’s much more urgent message. Mary Shelley grasped the likelihood that a man might make a monster in his own image and then prove incapable of taking responsibility for him. When the creature at last confronts Victor Frankenstein, the creator who shuns him, he pleads with him, using “thou”, the archaic address of intimacy:

> “I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king if thou wilt also perform thy part, which thou owest me. Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous.” “Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community

> between you and me; we are enemies. Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight, in which one must fall."

Victor Frankenstein rejects and wants to destroy the being he has generated from his own intelligence and imagination; he can only flee, and then, when confronted, offer mortal combat - in the desire to be the victor, as his name suggests. Her novel pleads on the creature's behalf: he is capable of goodness if Frankenstein would only love him and teach him and include him, not abandon him to his pariah state. The remedy for Frankenstein's hubris does not lie in destroying the monster; Shelley writes explicitly against dealing with evil by heroic, lethal exploits. Implicitly, she is recasting the monster in the image of its creator: the creature issues from Frankenstein as his brainchild who is also his double, who acts to define him. Here the beast is the one who knows this and presses his maker to accept it. Her extraordinary and brilliant book inaugurates a new breed of monster, who is not ultimately alien, but my brother, my self.

When popular myth places characters like Slugathon or Robocop centre stage, and then annihilates them until the next Avatar appears, they are conjuring up the perverted products of human intelligence. Unlike Mary Shelley's book, these plot lines almost invariably reject the offspring of science and propose the enemy monster's defeat through force. Nobody in this kind of story sits down to learn to talk, as Frankenstein's creature does so poignantly and so elaborately when he eavesdrops on the English lessons given in the woodland cottage by the old man and his family to the beautiful Arabian fugitive Safie.

Current tales of conflict and extermination never hear the monster say: "I am malicious, because I am miserable" or "Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous." The phrases sound absurd because we are so accustomed to expect the hero to have no other way of managing the monsters than slaying them.

Monsters who manifest their nature, like Frankenstein's creature, clearly present easier targets than those in disguise. Deception is a theme that runs through the history of fantasy art. It achieves a brilliant apotheosis with the replicants of Blade Runner, Ridley Scott's cult movie. Replicants are androids, impervious, almost invulnerable; but they look human and they have been artificially provided with memories of childhood. They do not know that they are monsters. As the word android implies, they are men - and yet not men at the same time. This is the ultimate, representative nightmare of this fin de siecle; 150-odd years ago, Frankenstein's creature suffered because he knew his own deformity. Jekyll and Hyde knew each other well, though the evil Hyde, as his name tells us, was already concealed within Jekyll. This is still optimistic stuff compared to Blade Runner. The film - and the book - touch a live contemporary nerve when they imagine that the robotic monsters look just like humans, that their nature is not apparent - neither to us, nor to them.

The acute, painful problem today is that these manufactured monsters are ourselves; and ourselves especially as the male of the species. A recent shift in the telling of an old, widely distributed legend illustrates rather well the new fascination and unease surrounding men: in this urban myth, a woman living alone hears a strange sound coming from her kitchen, and going in she sees a hand working its way towards the latch through an opening that has just been sawn in the door. So she takes a poker,

leaves it in the fire, waits until it is glowing, and then attacks the hand which instantly withdraws with an accompanying yell of pain. The next day the woman bumps into the child who lives next door, who tells her by the way that her father was taken to hospital the night before with a terrible burn on his hand. In the old, familiar version, the intruder was a witch; a recurrent monster in such creepy tales. But she has now turned into a man, an ordinary family man, a neighbour who - and this is crucial - does not look dangerous.

Fear of men has grown alongside belief that aggression - including sexual violence - inevitably defines the character of the young male. Another myth shadows the contemporary concept of male nature: that intruder could be a rapist. Alongside the warrior, the figure of the sex criminal has dug deep roots in the cultural formation of masculinity. The kids who kill a series of ghouls or aliens can tell themselves they are not like the monsters they are killing. But the serial killer - the very term is of recent coinage - has a human face like theirs. He has dominated contemporary folklore, a figure of thrill and dread, for 100 years. The terror of Jack the Ripper gripped the Victorians, and present-day murderers are now interviewed on television from prison. The partwork magazine Real Life Crimes, giving details and methods, sells around 60,000 copies an issue. The London Dungeon features life-size mannequins of murdered prostitutes lying bespattered with blood; autopsy photographs of mutilated bodies; and a café, brightly called Ripper's Rapid Snacks.

Films - and the books they are based on - often mete out punishment to sexual women, in the same way as spectators of the Ripper's victims in the London Dungeon enjoy the horror even as they shudder at it. But video games are more scrupulous about current taboos: most of their heroes cannot be seen to attack and murder women as such - with the result that women have pretty much disappeared from the plots altogether. There is the occasional dewy-eyed girl hoodlum or pixie-haired hell-raiser or salacious spider woman, and there are some female street fighters - all active, assertive types and good examples of how positive imaging can backfire. But the effect of the almost total absence of women from this all-engulfing imaginary world of boys is to intensify the sense of apartness, of alienation, of the deep oppositeness of the female sex.

Modern myths still approach the enigma of sexual difference using very old, simple formulae - and if the girls are getting tough, the tough get tougher. In this emphasis on warrior strength, the new stories conform to very ancient ones, stories which were grounded in the different social circumstances of a military, or pastoral archaic society - the heroes of Greece, the samurai of Japan. Slaying monsters, controlling women, still offer a warrant for the emerging hero's heroic character; this feeds the definition of him as a man. But this narrative is so threadbare, it has come away from the studs that held it to the inner stuff of experience: warrior fantasies today offer a quick rush of compensatory power, but pass on no survival skills - either for a working or a family life.

When the young Achilles is hidden by his mother in women's clothes, because she knows from the oracle that he is to die in the Trojan war, it proves child's play to winkle him out. Odysseus, the crafty one, disguises himself as a merchant and goes to the court of Lycomedes, among whose daughters Achilles has been concealed. Odysseus devises a kind of Trojan horse, a chestful of gifts overflowing with jewels

and trinkets and textiles - and precious weapons. The king's daughters bedeck themselves, of course, but Achilles girds himself over his frock with sword and buckler and is unmasked by a triumphant Odysseus and carried off to win the war for the Greeks. Pika Baroque paintings exist of the warrior revealed, grasping his weapons while the girls primp; and the subject inspired a baroque tragi-comic opera by Metastasio, which in turn prompted the English version called Achilles in petticoats.

But the mighty Greek heroes are not the only models of the male. Achilles might choose a mighty sword and Hercules use muscle power and a big stick. But in the fairy-tale tradition, by contrast, heroes develop other skills. In the Arabian Nights a poor fisherman finds a bottle in his nets and when he opens it a huge angry ogre of a genie rises up and threatens the fisherman with instant death. The fisherman responds that he cannot believe that anyone so awesome and so magnificent could ever have fitted into such a little bottle, and he begs the genie to show him how he did it. The genie obliges and gradually winds himself into the vessel. The fisherman jumps on it and stoppers it up in a trice. He then refuses to let the genie out again until he has granted him fabulous riches.

Cunning and high spirits are the mark of these hopeful myths which imagine a different world, which hold out a promise of happiness and transformation. Some sceptics might object that the cunning hero or the lucky simpleton does not belong in epic or tragedy where the ideals of manliness are forged, but fairytale elements are impossible to keep separate from the grandest of myths. When Oedipus meets the sphinx, it is a battle of wits. No bloodshed accompanies his defeat of her reign of terror. After solving her riddle, he just leaves her, whereupon her mystery undone, she hurls herself from a precipice.

In Homer, Odysseus tells the cylops that his name is Nobody. So when Odysseus blinds the cyclops in his one eye, the giant howls for help to his father, the God of the Sea, and the other Olympians. "That all the Gods here," is his cry, "nobody has blinded me," and so they do nothing. This trick from the Odyssey is literally one of the oldest in the book. The hero who lives by his wits survives in countless hard luck Puss in Boots style stories. Charlie Chaplin and even Woody Allen have worked this groove, the heroic pathetic. But the gleeful use of cunning and high spirits against brute force, the reliance on subterfuge have almost faded from heroic myths told today. In the prevailing popular concept of masculinity, as reflected in comics, rock bands, street fashion, Clint Eastwood or Arnold Schwarzenegger movies, the little man, the riddler or trickster, has yielded before the type of warrior hero, the paradigm of the fittest survivor.

It is striking to see from old footage of the Olympic Games how skinny and scrawny athletes used to be; the bigness of men, body building, muscle toning has never been so important to gender definition as it is today. This contemporary belief that fitness is literally embodied in physical size neglects to pay attention to the rather more important questions: what kind of way of life are the survivors defending? What society are they making? It is interesting that the doctrine of the survival of the fittest has become conventional wisdom. Opposing theories have pointed out that animal cooperation and respect for resources are rather more necessary for survival than dog eats dog. But ideas which stress thoughtful mutual arrangements and exchanges in

nature sound like marginal utopian New Age crankery.
Cunning intelligence - in Greek the Goddess Metis - has been superseded by force as the wellspring of male authority and power; in today's morality, force even feels somehow cleaner, purer, more upright. The very word "wily", the very idea of subterfuge, carry a stain of dishonour. Boys are not raised to be cozeners or tricksters; it would be unthinkable to train future men in lures and wiles and masks and tricks. They are brought up to play with Action Man and his heavy-duty, futuristic Star Wars arsenal. They are taught to identify with Ninja Turtles as crusaders, vigilantes, warriors on behalf of the planet, to flick a transformer toy from a flash car into a heavy duty fighting exoskeleton bristling with weapons: the Terminator, Robocop.

I am not advocating the conman over the soldier or the cozener over the honest gentleman. That would be absurd. I am observing a trend towards defining male identity and gender through visible, physical, sexualised signs of potency rather than verbal, mental agility.

Such signs coarse through the hardening capillaries of the social system with unprecedented fluidity, carried by a thousand different conduits in a million images and soundbites. It is so obvious, but it bears repeating: no participant in the mystery celebrating the exploits of Hercules, no member of the audience at the tragedies of Agamemnon or Jason had their stories recapitulated and reproduced and beamed at him or her again and again in a frenzied proliferation of echoes. This use of repetition combines with another new and very popular form of story-telling today: the advertisement. The principal task of an ad to persuade has altered response to the myths advertising often absorbs and reinterprets. The mythic heroes of the Greek story cycles like Oedipus, like Jason, like Orestes served as tragic warnings; their pride, their knowing and unknowing crimes, the matricides and infanticides, self-blindings and suicides, all the strife and horror they undergo and perpetrate did not make them exemplary, but cautionary. They provoked terror and pity, not emulation. The tragedies they inspired offered their heroes as objects of debate, not models. No one coming out of Oedipus at Colonus would feel he wanted to be Oedipus in the way that a spaghetti Western today excites hero worship for Clint Eastwood.

But in the arenas of contemporary culture - the tv channel, the computer game, the toy shop, the street - traditional mythic figures of masculinity like the warrior and the rapist circulate and recirculate every day, setting up models, not counter-examples. They are appealing to the group's purchasing power, shaping tastes, playing on rivalry and vulnerability. They do not cry "Beware", but rather "Aspire!"

Boys will be boys, people say, when they mean aggression, violence, noise, guns. Why does an age which believes in medical and scientific intervention on a heroic scale, which works for change - and delivers it - co-exist with a determinist philosophy about human nature and gender? The point about Frankenstein assembling the monster from body parts haunts contemporary consciousness, but the book's main philosophical argument - that his viciousness is learned, not innate - that is somehow overlooked. The biological and genetic revolution already upon us can alter and save bodies, but stories which feature such bodies assume that their natures are static, determined, doomed. Rare is the character in a video game or comic strip who develops or learns to be different. Yet anthropology has shown that, in the territory of sexuality as well as other human areas, social expectation affects character.

Masculinity varies from group to group, place to place, and its varieties are inculcated, not naturally so.

Societies who expect boys to be unflinching warriors subject them to rituals of traumatic severity in order to harden them. Among the Sambia in New Guinea, a tribe in which men are warriors and nothing else, and women are feared and despised, boys are removed into exclusive male control around the age of six, and then begin a series of violent initiations to turn them into men like their fathers. Proper, cultural masculinity does not come naturally, it seems, to a New Guinea highlander. Why should it to a child living in Kentish Town or Aberdeen?

Among another rather less remote people living today in the Balkans, in the mountains of Montenegro, the birth of a daughter inspires routine, ritual lamentation. Blood feuds are handed down from generation to generation, and if there is no son surviving in a family to carry on the feud, a daughter can be raised in his place and become a sworn virgin, a warrior in disguise to defend her family like a man. Her true sex will never again on pain of death be alluded to either in her presence or out of it. When the Serbian-Montenegrin forces in the current war in the Balkans cursed the women they raped, that they would bear children who would forever be their enemies and fight against their mother and her people, they were behaving according to a particular concept of inherited social beliefs. They were speaking out of a ferocious commitment to military values, paternal lineage and a cult of male heroism.

I am not offering an excuse, a rationale, or an adequate explanation of men’s capacity to rape and kill. But I am rejecting the universalising argument about male nature that the rapes committed in former Yugoslavia are committed simply because men are rapists. This argument goes, in the words of one prominent American rights lawyer, Catherine McKinnon, “men do in war what they do in peace, only more so” and also that “similar acts are common everywhere in peacetime and are widely understood as sex”. These sweeping assertions work against mobilising change; they present as sovereign truth beyond history, beyond society, the idea that the swagger and the cudgel come naturally to men due to their testosterone, a hormone that, according to this view, is always in excess.

Delinquency among young men has provoked acute alarm recently - one man in three in Britain will have been convicted of a crime by the age of 30. And it is carelessly repeated that single mothers are specially to blame.But it is interesting to look at the problem of fatherless boys from another angle. The popular argument goes that boys brought up by their mothers alone compensate through violence for the lack of a strong male role model in their lives; that they express the anger they feel at the sole female authority at home. But this could be put the other way round: the culture that produces irresponsible fathers openly extols a form of masculinity opposed to continuity, care, negotiation and even cunning - qualities necessary to make lasting attachments between men and children, men and women. These boys are not deprived of a strong masculine role model, they are not in rebellion, but are suffering from the compulsion of conforming. They are exposed to blanket saturation in a myth of masterful individualist independence. They are bit players training to be heroes in a narrative which can proceed only by conflict to rupture. Men have been abandoning their families, and almost half never see their children again after two years.

In Mary Shelley’s later, apocalyptic novel, significantly called The Last Man, the hero exclaims: “This, I thought, is power! Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious and daring; but kind, compassionate and soft.”

It is a measure of the depth of our present failure of nerve that these words sound ridiculous, embarrassing, inappropriate; that this cry strikes one as a heap of hooey, a foolish dream, a chimera. Mary Shelley’s utopianism is too ardent for our cynical times. But we can take away from her work the crucial knowledge that monsters are made, not given. And if monsters are made, not given, they can be unmade, too.