

REVIEW ESSAY

The wild and the defiant: perdurable stories and images of the inner spirit in women and men

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Women Archetype*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1992. xi+521 pp. ISBN 0-345-37744-3. US\$. 23.00.

Steve Wilson, *Robin Hood: The Spirit of the Forest*. London, Neptune Press, 1993. Pb xvi+117 pp. Illustrated with several [late 19th century] pen sketches. ISBN 0-9505001-5-1.

This review article comprises a series of responses to two very different works, yet each concerned with the need for (civilised) moderns to cling to old stories as enshrining the great sanities needful for personal spiritual survival at the end of this millennium.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, a very experienced Jungian analyst, is a cantadora (resident storyteller) and a maker of narrative audiotapes, including the *Jungian Storyteller Series*, *The Wild Woman Archetype*, on the instinctual nature of women; *Warming the Stone Child*, on the unmothered; *In the House of the Riddle Mother*, on common archetypal motifs in women's dreams; and *The Radiant Coat*, on the crossing between life and death. The present massive book, her first, combines well honed skills in multicultural studies with decades of experience as a clinical psychologist, one deeply concerned with knowing the soul of all women (9). Her method and insights have, alike, been much assisted by her Mexican-Spanish background, with the bonuses of considerable exposure to both Hungarian peasant culture and an unfettered response to a still vital outdoors in her earliest

years. Although she claims to have been formally paraded/manipulated to conform, when growing up after 1945, it is more than clear that this book is a distillation of her manifold traditional insights gained over more than half a lifetime.

The central thesis, the nature of which is encapsulated in the extended title, is that within every woman there is a wild and natural creature, of enormous power, filled with good instincts, passionate creativity, and ageless knowing. This being's survival has long been endangered, due to confinements psychic, domestic and spiritual. Her natural and splendid energy, the Wild Woman archetype, has been muffled and entrapped, as she has become shockingly repressed, over-domesticated, fearful and sterile. The way in which all these wise insights are now presented is not one of dogmatism or feminist political assertiveness but rather from a series of musings over numerous (peasant-style) wisdom tales of varying provenance but particularly from Central Europe and from Mexico and Central America.

The work abounds with aphorisms and gnomic remarks of Jungian profundity. Of intense morality the central prose style also owes much to sacred texts and the works of mystics such as Catherine of Sienna, Francis of Assisi, Rumi, Echhart and [to] the work of many poets such as Dickinson, Millay and Whitman (471). For her notion of "wildness" is concerned less with the man-free physical environment than with that place in the psyche where the most meaningful dreams, stories, poetry and art all meet, the mysterious habitat of the instinctual. Indeed, so much of this spiritual and healthy "wild" is found symbolized in poetry, painting, dance and dreams as the vaster absolutes.

Her second chapter "Stalking the Intruder" is concerned with identifying the natural predator, he who carries out destruction without thought, and is "the most deceitful and most powerful fugitive in the psyche" (39). In fairy tales (s)he is personified as robber, animal groom, rapist, thug and sometimes as evil woman. More subtly this force manifests itself in deleterious relationships, abusive authority figures and negative cultural or folkloric images, all such to be styled as "meeting the Death force". As is well said in one of the numerous wise footnotes or *los cuentitos* ("little stories"):

The predatory person desires that a woman not heed her instincts lest she perceive that a siphon has been attached to her mind, her imagination, her heart, her sexuality, or whatever else. (473)

Socio-cultural analogies abound in the text, the most potent of which is that between Wildlife and the Wild Woman, each harried to extinction by vicious modernism. And the title relates to Estés' conviction that:

Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion, relational by nature, inquiring possessed of great endurance, deeply intuitive, fiercely stalwart and very brave (4).

From childhood the writer had preferred the ground, trees and caves, places where she could touch "the cheek of God".

Lest this sound intensely autobiographic, it should be added immediately that all events related or mused upon are anchored very securely in the musings over (clusters of) tales, fairy stories, myths and fables. While totally free from any form of gender bias, the exploration is, nevertheless, concerned with nurturing the deeply feminine creative, the gifted, archetypal, intuitive cyclic wisdom-based aspects of the soul, the unconscious and the beautiful in the human psyche, using story as "medicine" for shattered inner sensibility—such story-telling being best described as "a healing art" (463). In another figure, such wise stories are deemed to transmit archetypal energy and to cause the hearer who is ready and truly receptive to grow in consequence.

Further there is omnipresent the notion of the numinous in story-telling, the need for the relationship between teller and receiver to be "right", with self-sacrifice from both sides. This emphasis on the instinctive nature of true women—and evolving men—"encouraging, enabling, enlightening", is linked with the dedication's stress on the necessary life of the senses:

to the smell of good dirt, the sound of unencumbered water, to the spirits of nature who all rush out to the road to see who is passing by ... (469).

While it is not practical to wrench various story clusters from the Sheherezade patterns of the whole vast tapestry, it may be stressed that the fifteen great epic book-like chapters handle, sequentially: the resurrection of the wild woman; the tragic common initiation into soul-dead zombyism; the retrieval of intuition as initiation; the hymn to the other (or the necessary mate for the soul); a woman's need to understand the Life/Death/Life cycle and the Nature of Love; the blessedness of truly belonging;

the joyous language of the body and the flesh; the return to oneself after apparent loss of (sense of) soul; the limits/boundaries of rage and forgiveness; and a ritual initiation in the underworld into love after much wandering and harrowing. The concluding chapter is a psychic rejoicing and a brief restatement of the principles necessary for "fructifying the wild and natural aspects of women, of life, of men, of children, of earth" (459) and of living as close as possible to the numinous in all aspects of life.

Like all the carefully organized sections its arguments are reinforced by reference to (already discussed) fairy tales—the courage shown in "The Crescent Moon Bear"; the foolish fantasies of the Little Match Girl; or the unstoppable quest, of the Ugly Duckling, for the ones where one belongs. While the underpinning philosophy is concerned with a Jungian quest for one's true soul—and so very close to Volume Fifteen, *The Spirit of Man, Art, and Literature* (1966) in C.G. Jung's *The Collected Works*—the present volume can and should be used as a guide to codifying the old stories that can assist so powerfully the achievement of (neglected) artistic personality in the face of our drear Zeitgeist, and, particularly, to assist the attainment of what Jung called the "spirit archetype".

While there are certain un-evennesses in the language and style, these should not detract from the pleasure in reading and using the volume/compendium. For the homely simplicities are all to be accounted for by the wise-woman role which takes over from the scholar when the appeal is to the heart.

Whether one enjoys the style or not, it is clear that the book *Robin Hood: The Spirit of the Forest* has a place—as a sort of *vade mecum* to outsider stories, particularly from mediaeval England. For it is filled with somewhat unlikely and even sensation thought leaps, as the writer puts his mind to parallels in received English story, echoes of much more ancient myths, and the plausibility or otherwise of the stories from the English countryside of the (early) Middle Ages. Much more engagingly—and plausibly—he then shows how minstrels, early playwrights, morris dancers, novelists and finally film, and television producers have been able, with their own violent associated leaps/speculations, to have even more amazingly directed the legend into new channels where it runs so powerfully and sustainingly.

This volume is remarkable for many reasons—its abundance of ideas; its numerous cultural analogies; its plethora of staccato

speculation; and the fact that, in all possibility, it should have been a much vaster work, with more carefully explained arguments and at least some fairly precise footnotes. Yet, as both its "Select Bibliography" and "Index" alike indicate, it ranges over many general themes and fields, such as ancient cults and religions—Osiris, Buddhism, Norse mythology, Druidism; popular Hollywood heroes—Errol Flynn, Flash Gordon, Tarzan, Mel Brooks, etc.; (modern) esoteric groups—the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Society of the Golden Dawn; "analogous" regions—Ceylon, Belgium, the Congo; British mythic/archaeological sites—Avalon, Avebury, Catal Huyuk, New Grange, etc.; ballads and chapbooks; tales of "Greenwood" exile; and many stories of regional/national defiance.

Read on its own, its greatest strength is probably the sympathetic and helpful "Foreword" (xi–xvi) by Alan Moore which explores with wit the links/contrasts between such fields as Fiction, History, Mythic Truth, and the notion of the Avatar. Also it is filled with such throw-away gems as

Recognizing that in commercial television and mass pulp literature there exists a strong link with the ballads, broadsheets and oral traditions of old, Wilson extends the examination of the [Robin Hood] myth into the present day... [xvi]

It is perhaps an enforced yoking to put the two books together. Yet they have much in common in their essential plans and stances, even though the force of the feminine quite certainly subsumes all the notions of political defiance of folk heroes in its concern to empower all women by keeping them in touch with the sources of creativity, humour and strength. Clearly all men, too, can learn from the mellow advice of Dr Pinkola Estés how to recapture imaginatively and so personally "invent" that which is longed for and which wisdom stories, fables and myths encapsulated for us so long ago.

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