

Franková, Milada

Marina Warner's Sibyls and their tales

Brno studies in English. 2003, vol. 29, iss. 1, pp. [117]-122

ISBN 80-210-3346-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104370>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MILADA FRANKOVÁ

MARINA WARNER'S SIBYLS AND THEIR TALES

In 1994 Marina Warner published an extensive study on fairy tales entitled *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, which clearly represents the sum of her long-term scholarly interest in the genre and its history. All of Marina Warner's novels, too, reflect that interest in a variety of ways: fairy stories are told in them; the novel characters remember their favourite childhood tales; even aging characters are still able to recollect the pleasure of the fear they always experienced with the scary ones; the novels are plotted to evoke fairy-tale patterns or at least individual episodes or characters recall well-known and well-loved fairy stories whether of European or wider-world heritage. Warner's historical study of the fairy-tale genre is equally concerned with the storyteller who, more often than not, as Warner claims, has been female. Pride of place among them belongs to Sibyl, or the many Sibyls of different times and places or the many sibylline voices, including that of the Queen of Sheba. Warner believes that 'the Sibyl, as the figure of a storyteller, bridges divisions in history as well as hierarchies of class. She offers the suggestion that sympathies can cross from different places and languages, different peoples of varied status. She also represents an imagined cultural survival from one era of belief to another' (*From the Beast to the Blonde*, 11). It seems to me that the narrators of Warner's novels take over many of those features and it is therefore the 'Sibyls' in the female narrators of Marina Warner's novels that this paper will be about. The novels in question are *The Lost Father* (1988) and *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992).

Marina Warner's conception of fairy tales resolutely refutes the view that they traditionally served didactic purposes and she also rejects the feminist claim that they are essentially misogynic. On the contrary, she believes that the fairy tale 'opened an opportunity for (women) to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas' (xix). It empowered the woman, whether young or old, by giving her a voice or allowing her silence if that was the weapon of her choice. The fairy tale survives because there is nothing child-like about it. It survives because of its capacity for daydreaming and wonder and because of the pleasure that it gives. The remoteness of traditional fairy-tale settings, the anonymity of their sources, and also the anonymity of the characters, which Warner sees in names like

'Beauty' or 'Fair with the Golden Hair', underpin, in Warner's view, 'the stories' ability to grapple with reality' (xvi). That is why she favours a historical interpretation of fairy tales to psychoanalytic or mystical approaches, not least because the former 'holds out more hope' (xviii). The sense of hope resides in the overall mood of the tales, which Warner defines as 'optative—announcing what might be' (xvi). The genre is thus characterised by a "heroic optimism" that precedes and goes beyond the wondrous happy endings with a promise that things might change. That they do not change much in reality is of little consequence. The historical overview of fairy tales and their tellers in motion over centuries and across continents that Warner offers in her study yields a fascinating picture of all-encompassing uninterrupted continuity.

The nature of the genre is promiscuous and omnivorous and anarchically heterogeneous, absorbing high and low elements, tragic and comic tones into its often simple, rondo-like structure of narrative. Motifs and plotlines are nomadic, travelling the world and the millennia, turning up on parchment in medieval Persia, in an oral form in the Pyrenees, in a ballad sung in the Highlands, in a fairy story in Caribbean. (xvii)

In her analysis of fairy tales Warner assigns a significant position to the storyteller. As the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the heyday of the genre as a literary form, she gives credit to Charles Perrault, a distinguished French scholar, courtier and poet, for becoming the pioneer teller of fairy tales in the late seventeenth century, although he was outnumbered and even preceded by women enthusiasts. Not forgetting other famous male names from Aesop to Andersen, Warner still insists that throughout history women must have been by far the most frequent tellers of tales. In spite of the fact that for a long time the 'Silent Woman was an accepted ideal' (29), and the evil tongue of the old gossip was its direct opposite, there have been a few women figures who were accorded the status of acknowledged story tellers. Among them, even the old, traditionally much despised, woman was given a voice. Perhaps surprisingly for us, Warner taps our traditional Czech sources for one of them—our much beloved figure of Granny, whom she traces through Karel Čapek and his views on the origin of fairy stories (17). Another female story teller—the old nurse—Warner connects with the time-honoured passing on of erotic knowledge. The English Mother Goose appears relatively more recently, as late as the end of the eighteenth century, and with fairy tales exclusively meant for children. Still older than all three, the Granny, the Old Nurse and Mother Goose, are the Sibyls, whether young or old, known from Classical cultures, adopted by Christian cultures and accorded the honourable attributes of wisdom and truthfulness.

The Sibyl is a generic name and implies multiple figures although there may have been a prophetess of the name Sibylla before the legendary Sibyls of Marpeesus and Cumae. The Pythia of Delphi and Cassandra of Troy are also sibylline figures. Like the two, the Sibyl in Vergil's *Aeneid* was given her gift of

prophecy by Apollo, who also gave her a thousand years to live, alas most of the time in old age. She accompanied Aeneas to Hades, the Underworld, and although they returned to the world through a gate of ivory through which 'the spirits send false dreams up to the sky' (*Aeneid* 896 cited in Morford and Lenardon 1985: 276), the Sibyl's oracles are trusted. They come from 'a hundred perforations in the rock, a hundred mouths from which the many utterances rush' (*Aeneid* 43-5, *Ibid.*, 163) and are described as 'her terrifying riddles' (*Aeneid* 98-99, *Ibid.*, 164). The Sibylline books or oracles, too, have the aura of awe around them. The texts of the legend, allegedly sold by the Sibyl in Rome to the last Etruscan king, Tarquin, were to be consulted in difficult times. The power of such prophecies was recognised by Jewish and Christian imitators, who composed several books of them to persuade the heathen to believe. The Christians acknowledge the Sibyls for their foreknowledge of Christ, the Messiah. In this way, the Sibyl survived for hundreds of years not only in legends but in reality too, or, as Warner puts it, she has acquired a cross-cultural identity of a truth-teller (*From the Beast*, 71). The sibylline aspect of the great biblical story teller the Queen of Sheba is derived from the riddling quality of her tales and her wisdom, which concentrates, as Warner points out, 'on the mysteries of sex and the body' (*From the Beast*, 133).

Michèle Roberts uses all ten Classical Sibyls, although in rather modern guises, as characters and storytellers in her novel *The Book of Mrs. Noah* (1987). In Marina Warner's recreation the links are subtler and less straightforward. In her earlier novel *The Lost Father* (1988) the narrator and her mother style themselves as story-telling Sibyl-like figures. In the mid 1980s the narrator retells her mother's family story as she knows it from her mother's telling, while she is actually in the process of rewriting it as a novel called *The Duel*, which was supposed to have taken place in a southern Italian village back in 1912. The duel is a key event in the family history. It was fought by Davide Pittagora, the eponymous "lost father", then a single young man, to save the honour of his sister Rosalba, the present narrator's great-aunt. Passed on by the family's women folk, with some details whispered, others concealed deep in the minds of the protagonists, the family memory of the event re-emerges in the emigre branch of the family in the USA seven decades later in a somewhat different shape, but still the heroic family myth. It is of course not the Sibyl's gift of prophecy that Warner foregrounds here, but the powerful sense of women's voices transmitting stories from generation to generation, across time and geographical and cultural distances.

The sense of story-telling in the novel is underscored by young Rosalba's fantasy and her gift of recreating fairy tales to fit her own situation. She identifies with their courageous heroines to give herself the courage to attract young Tommaso's attention against her mother's will. The interplay of fairy-tale motifs and sexual attraction echoes Angela Carter's postmodern interpretations of fairy tales, such as 'Bluebeard' in the story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).¹ Warner also shows how fairy tales as well as myths and superstitions about women and femaleness passed for common wisdom:

You know too, my darling, my perfectly formed Rosalba, that what men do with women isn't worth much, not to women like you and me. It's another kind of woman, poor things, who are born with cravings, because their mothers were too much exposed to the hot wind from the south when they were carrying them, and it frothed up the liquid in their womb, and brought the baby almost to boiling just at the time when the passions are forming, in the third or fourth month. (*The Lost Father*, 24)

Moreover, the Queen of Sheba herself is evoked and the story of her club or goat's foot and its healing is about to be told in the form of a modern comic opera, when the performance is stopped by the local Fascist leaders amidst accusations of immorality, foreignness and lack of patriotic fervour. The significance of the Queen of Sheba's story half way through the novel lies in its manifold resonances: with the women's world of the immediate context as well as wider metaphorical, iconic and mythical meanings. In *The Lost Father*, more than in Warner's other fictions, the sibylline storytellers also compete with the iconic image of the Virgin Mary, whose powerful presence in the south-Italian setting also reminds us of Warner's earlier work—the novel *In a Dark Wood* (1977) and particularly her historical study *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976).

At the beginning of the 1990s, when Warner published the novel *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters*, it was no longer a novelty to interpret Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in the post-colonial mode. Neither was Warner the first to produce a re-writing of a canonical text in this manner. Jean Rhys and her *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1987) were by then classic examples. *Indigo* plays at two temporal and geographical levels: on the Caribbean island of Liamuiga around 1620 and in London and back on the island, now independent and called *Enfant-Béate*, almost 400 years later. At the beginning of the Caribbean story Warner demythologises the Shakespearean figures of Sycorax, Ariel and Caliban, giving them almost ordinary lives of tropical islanders who only begin to resemble Shakespeare's creatures after their cruel encounter with European civilisation.

Sycorax, her tribe's wise woman and healer, possesses the sibylline attributes of wielding powers hidden to others. She may also be related to another powerful female figure of Warner's interest, namely Homer's Circe and her magic of metamorphosis (Cf. Warner 1999). Later, Sycorax's sibylline voice comes across centuries as a powerful incantation:

—Oh airs and winds, you bring me stories from the living... HEAR ME! I once governed you (for so she thinks) and you did as I wanted... Turn back your currents in their course... so that we can return to the time before this time. (*Indigo*, 212)

What is more, throughout the novel Warner manipulates narrative voices to such

an extent that, almost in agreement with J. A. Cuddon's claim, the progression or regression of narrative voices is potentially infinite (Cuddon 1999: 572). For Sycorax's voice eventually merges with that of Serafine, who is an old black twentieth-century story-telling character. The novel opens in London, with Serafine telling stories to Miranda—a little girl then—who witnesses Xanthe's christening and the rather fairy-tale-like prophecy by her godmother. Xanthe's sorry ending in the Caribbean waters once "mapped" by her seventeenth-century ancestor fulfils the prophecy and fits the fairy-tale framework of the novel. The significance of the narrative perspective, the story teller's point of view, which Warner foregrounds even with regard to fairy tales, is demonstrated on Kit Everard's diary and letters. In their heroic rhetoric of victorious colonisers, the unglorious night when a frightened Kit Everard and his men burned Sycorax—an old woman in her tree house—becomes 'that night he took possession' (*Indigo*, 162).

A sibylline thread runs also through Warner's first novel of the new Millennium, *The Leto Bundle* (2001). It follows the history of rape, expulsion and exile from Classical mythology to the present migration. The mythological story of Leto, the Titaness, her rape by Zeus, expulsion, birth of twins and miraculous survival in a she-wolf's den is repeated, recreated and re-experienced by her throughout the ages and finally reassembled as a kind of hypertext written up by scribes, chroniclers, storytellers, archeologists and scholars, now complete with web pages and e-mail messages. Through *The Leto Bundle* Warner makes a powerful topical plea against entrenched national identities and in favour of toleration towards migrants, which she supports by driving home her lesson on what 'a mish mash of traditions', 'a tangle of paganism and Christianity, of fantasy and fact' (*The Leto Bundle*, 329) we all really come from. The novel's heroine Leto-Laetitia-Ella-Nellie draws on the stories to survive and is created by them.

To sum up, in contrast to Lévi-Strauss's structuralist claim that myths possess their own truth and logic because they are 'outside' (Cuddon 1999: 570), Marina Warner makes myths and fairy tales bear on reality both in her historical studies and her novels. The latter, in particular *The Lost Father* and *Indigo*, but not forgetting *The Leto Bundle*, employ narrative voices, characters and plots that blend with sibylline storytellers and fairy-tale motifs. Warner's Sibyls range from evocations of the Classical riddling prophetesses to the biblical Queen of Sheba to fairy Godmothers and postmodern, metafictional women writers. All of them have become part of the process of moving fairy tales and myths forward in their thousands of years of development and metamorphoses.

Note

¹ However, in her study on Carter's fairy tales, Warner traces and appreciates development in Carter's approach in a shift in her interest from subconscious and forbidden passions to the materiality of life. In Lorna Sage (ed), *Flesh and the Mirror. Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*. Virago 1994, 243-256.

Works Cited

- Warner, Marina. *The Lost Father*. London: Chatto and Windus 1988; Vintage 1998.
- Warner, Marina. *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters*. London: Chatto and Windus 1992; Vintage 1993.
- Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Chatto and Windus 1994; Vintage 1995.
- Warner, Marina. *The Leto Bundle*. London: Chatto and Windus 2001; Vintage 2002.
- Warner, Marina (1999) 'Magic and Metamorphosis: Circe's Wand, Aesop's Wit'. *PN Review* (Manchester), May-June 1999, 14–22.
- Cuddon, J. A. (1999) *Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Morford, Mark P. O., and Robert J. Lenardon (1985), *Classical Mythology*. 3rd edition. New York: Longman.