

REVIEW

**Karen Armstrong,
*A Short History of Myth;***

**Margaret Atwood,
*The Penelopiad: The Myth
of Penelope and Odysseus;***

**Jeannette Winterson,
*The Weight.***

(Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne:
Canongate, 2005)

By Bridie Lonie

China-Blue is a film that critiques the exploitation of labour in China's blue-jeans factories through following a small group of girls as they work toward a delivery deadline.¹ The central girl in this group supports herself – until she becomes too tired even for that – by thinking of herself as the heroine of one of the myths she was brought up with. She re-tells herself myths of strong warrior women and tries to make a form of play of the hard details of her life. In a world where the desire for material objects provide the impetus for most of the narratives we live by – marketing, war, love – the word 'myth' might seem atavistic: it implies something regressive, counter to this age's imagination. But of course it isn't. As structuralist anthropologists pointed out in the 1950s, we are drawn into our desires and ideological positions by the connective tissues of cultural beliefs. This girl's strategy was wise in its time. But other myths – presented in the forms of advertising – support the industry that exploits her.

The Myths is a series of novella-sized rewritten myths with an introductory text on myth by Karen Armstrong. The following writers will participate in the series: Chinua Achebe, A S Byatt, , David Grossman, Milton Hatoum, Victor Pelevin, Donna Tartt and Su Tong. To date two have been published, those by Margaret Atwood and Jeannette Winterson. The series has been reviewed wisely and wittily by Claude LaLumiere who likes Atwood's take, dislikes Winterson's and argues that Armstrong's biases are (in my summary) ivory-towered, classist and Euramerican-centred.²

Armstrong's previous works engaged with the histories of different world religions and her concern is with the myth as explanatory text. She cites the work of Karl Jaspers, who proposed a historical sequence that moved from creation myth to myths which dealt with increasing civilisation and the need for codes of behaviour, the "Axial Age" to the "Post-Axial" period, in which mythic and historical characters met in the figures of the Abrahamic religions. She characterises today's thought as based on "logos"; a desire for a pragmatic truth and logic which alienates myth. She conveys clearly and swiftly a movement from stories which deal with relations between humans and animals, land, food and death to those which consider – and are increasingly implicated in – the power structures of the societies which live by them. Myths provide those structures with their motivational force. The movement from pantheons of gods to monotheistic religions is explained. Her discussion ends with the novel positioned as today's primary form of mythic communication.

Perhaps the novel is the primary form in which mythic narratives are *written* but it is certainly not the primary form in which they occur. Visual forms have to a large extent overtaken

the written work, though the latter remains significant with regard to mythic narrative. Visual reworkings of mythic structures include most digital games, in which a hero tracks through various kinds of dangers and is pursued by various kinds of opponents. Film, television, reality television, computer games – they all operate using the kinds of standard tropes familiar in mythic forms. They are also very frequently explicitly referenced as tales of origin from any number of cultures finding themselves on screen. And histories such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – wherein animals and humans morph into one another – remain useful for screenwriters. What the *written* text does is to enable the reader to populate the images presented with their own imagined forms, bringing the unfamiliar to the familiar.

Characteristic of play in film, television, reality television and computer games is the use of a persona or avatar and their movement into a story line. Discussions of narrative concerning issues such as metaphor and desire in contemporary writing on these media suggest that there are templates or programmes for stories that succeed. Cultural narratives have – for example – tended to be aligned to religion, with love and war coming soon after. Armstrong explains this sequence clearly and it could be seen as encapsulated in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (frequently re-translated and filmed). However, these are virtually ignored as they do not deal explicitly, or in the correct time-frame, with a re-thinking of religion; instead they recall earlier histories, rewriting in themselves what were already archaic oral traditions.

Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* retells the story of Odysseus from his wife's position. Odysseus went to war for ten years and then spent ten years on his return in punishment for his role in the siege of Troy and for tricks he

played on the progeny of the gods. Today it is customary to describe 'Homer' as a composite character. However, the two texts attributed to his name are consistently concerned with the driving force of events and the interventions of the gods in them. They convey the idea of actions and consequences through the delineation of typological characters, whose chief attributes become in a way their entire character. Odysseus is cunning, Penelope is faithful. His heroes' concerns are equally generic: love, war, fighting for one's home, exile and return. Events are described with a focused realism that explains the stories' durability. The characters are placed against clearly described situations, with details of land and harvest, war technologies, and navigation.

Not surprisingly, Margaret Atwood rewrites the story of Penelope from a woman's point of view. After her death, Penelope speaks from Hades where the shades of the protagonists are visible and occasionally communicative. She describes her birth as the child of a naiad, and her father's attempt upon her life, based on a misreading of a prophecy around the weaving of a shroud. Then there is the long wait for her husband's return, her strategies for putting off the suitors who would claim her inheritance and her life among the women in the women's quarters. Atwood focuses her text on the horrific incident of the hanging of twelve handmaidens on her husband's return, killed at the same time as Odysseus had the unwanted suitors who had used her wealth for years killed. What did this horrific incident, clearly described but with scant comment, mean in the wider context of the myth?

Homer describes in unpleasant detail how Telemachus, their son, loops these women up on a single chord and hangs them, their feet twitching. Atwood's slightly dry analytical

style is appropriate: Penelope's grief at the hanging of the maids is a sentence long, her grief real but her next action being her real concern. The maids never achieve individuality, but are moved to the function of the chorus line, which offers alternative readings. Were the maids the witnesses of Penelope's unfaithfulness or were they the victims of her calculated but necessary strategies of deception? Attwood's text also acknowledges the argument that the story holds within its weave the destruction of the matriarchal religions, and that the twelve maidens were Penelope's priestesses. The myth's strength: its vivacity and in some ways its very ambiguity, allow a new reading that makes it relevant for today's concern with motivation and with the complexities of women's ambiguous relations with their roles within marriage.

Taking a different approach, Jeannette Winterson risks the exploration of the subjective voice, that very element which tends to take a narrative too close to the individual response to function as a generic or universal tale. Atlas holds up the world, but Herakles needs him to pick the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, and he escapes once, but is tricked into assuming the burden again. The rewriting explores the gradual lightening of that burden in the context of the exploration of space: emotional, metaphorical and actual. Unlike Attwood, Winterson allows herself to move into the introspective, analytical narrative voice that is almost entirely absent from what is usually characterised as 'myth'. I liked this, though Claude Lalumiere found it self-indulgent.³ However, as Winterson engages with relations between people; the ethics of using animals for experimentation; and the ways in which scientific description can also be understood imaginatively, her concern

with different kinds of moralities and with re-inventions of world-views do partake of the qualities of myth.

Karen Armstrong's position is astonishing in its lack of acknowledgment of the persistence of the mythic in the world of the media. The startling thing about stories is their recognisability and the listener's ability to insert her/himself into them, through what was in childhood called 'play' and what adults call 'culture'. That is what the young protagonist of *China-Blue* was doing as she worked to sustain her spirit through identification with the persona of a young warrior who supports her parents. Unfortunately, it is what most advertisers also do when they ask us to identify with the beautiful home-maker, the warrior, and the seeker after 'quality'.

- 1 *China-Blue*, directed by Micha X Peled, Teddy-Bear Films, 2005, see <http://www.teddybearfilms.com/> last visited on 27 August 2006.
- 2 <http://www.locusmag.com/Indexes/OnlineBkMagReviews.html> last visited on 26 August 2006.
- 3 <http://www.locusmag.com/Indexes/OnlineBkMagReviews.html> last visited on 26 August 2006.

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