

ALLAN MASSIE

Character Building

Fabulous Monsters: Dracula, Alice, Superman, and Other Literary Friends

By Alberto Manguel

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How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? This was the title of a celebrated essay by the university don L C Knights, founder, along with F R Leavis, of the austere critical periodical *Scrutiny*. The question isn't, as I recall, actually put in the text. It is there in the title as a rebuke to the critic A C Bradley, whose book on Shakespeare's tragedies to the high-minded Scrutineers made the vulgar error of treating fictional characters as if they were real people about whose unrecorded lives one may speculate. Actually, Bradley never asked this question himself either, but he did allow himself to wonder where Hamlet might have been at the time of his father's murder.

Such speculation was frivolous in the opinion of Knights and Leavis. Characters in Shakespeare exist only in the words on the page and the correct way to read *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and so on is as 'dramatic poems'. Well, I found this argument quite impressive when I was young and high-minded, but it has seemed silly for a long time now. If these plays are to be read only as dramatic poems, why were they written for the stage? Why do actors puzzle themselves about the characters and their motivations instead of being content simply to speak their lines? What, indeed, is the relationship between characters in plays and novels and what

we choose to call real life? Aren't they often drawn from the writer's experience and don't they then become part of our real lives too?

Kipling, of course, knew this. In 'The Craftsman' he has Shakespeare speaking to Ben Jonson and recalling, among other things, 'How at Bankside, a boy drowning kittens/Winc'd at the business; whereupon his sister -/Lady Macbeth aged seven - thrust 'em under,/ Sombrely scornful.'

Alberto Manguel has no truck with the Scrutineers. He wonders, for instance, about Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, as she worries about Hamlet. 'Being a mother is always difficult, but with an only son who's always moping about, there are times when Gertrude wishes she could take a long, long holiday somewhere warm and sunny.' And what of Hamlet himself? 'Maybe he's gay. That would explain his annoying "To be or not to be". Gertrude wishes he would make up his mind.' All this casts a different light on life at Elsinore. Indeed, Manguel wonders if Gertrude really wanted to be a mother at all. His tone is light, but these aren't light questions. They invite you to think about the play in different ways, something that's possible only if you start by accepting that fictional characters have their own demanding reality - that Gertrude,

for instance, is as real as Queen Anne, who, after all, is remembered chiefly for being dead.

Even real historical figures are often best known through their appearances in fiction. Shakespeare's Richard III, especially as played by Laurence Olivier, has a reality to us beyond the version of the king offered up by revisionist historians, however unfair on the historical Richard this may be. But there's a twist in that tale: our idea - Shakespeare's idea - of the historical Richard derives in large part from what purports to be a biography written by Thomas More in 1518, but which is, one may say, really a work of fiction.

Manguel is a literary magpie whose beady eye falls on unconsidered trifles, and he ruminates delightfully here on a rich variety of characters from books, plays, films, fairy tales, comics and pseudo-histories like the Book of Genesis. They are his guides on the 'long fool's-errand to the grave': 'Chesteron's Man Who Was Thursday magically helps me cope with the absurdities of everyday life ... Little Red Riding Hood and Dante the Pilgrim guide me through the dark forests ... Sancho's neighbour, the exiled Ricote, allows me to understand something of the infamous notion of prejudice.'

That last subject comes up in an excellent and disturbing chapter on *Huckleberry Finn*. Hemingway said that all American literature came out of that book, a pardonable exaggeration. In Manguel's chapter on it, we are told that Jim, the black slave, 'is defined not by who he is as he knows himself to be but

by an imposed state of fugue, forced by the outside world to light out “mighty quick”. In Trump’s America, ‘Jim is still on the run’. In this context, Manguel discusses Tocqueville, who in his *Democracy in America* concluded that in the USA ‘a multiracial society without slavery was ... untenable; he was convinced that the deep-rooted prejudice against black people would increase were they to be granted further rights’. After all, Huck’s Pop believes that a white man who is a good citizen should have more rights than ‘a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger’. Now, Manguel writes, ‘Pop’s words gush back into the public forum’.

Manguel dwells happily on chimerical monsters. They haven’t gone away, you know. Our age is ‘both credulous and skeptical,’ he writes. ‘The Saint Lawrence Insurance Company of Altamonte, in Florida, offers a policy against alien abduction.’ These aliens come, one assumes, from outer space, not Cuba or Somalia; one also assumes that the pol-

icy finds takers. Why not? We all believe and trust in things we do not begin to understand.

Naturally Manguel has his favourites, among them Kafka, who thought the Tower of Babel might have been permitted so long as nobody climbed to the top, and Dante, as well as the poets and fantasists who gave us the Old Testament – there are excellent enquiring essays here on Lilith, Jonah and Job. Cervantes, of course, is another favourite. ‘Cervantes tells us plainly that he is not his book’s father but its stepfather: the receiver of the story, not the inventor.’ (Every novelist worth anything hopes to receive a story rather than be compelled to invent one.) ‘Throughout the centuries, readers have chosen to disbelieve him. Cervantes composing his book in prison rings truer to us than Cervantes finding a manuscript written by Cide Hamete Benegeli’ – as he assures us he did. ‘And yet both statements are fiction and both are true. Cervantes’s world (like ours today) is one in which made-up roles are played and

masks are worn.’

And then there is Alice. Well, there is also Dracula and Superman and Mr Casaubon and Long John Silver and a host of others. But chief of all there is Alice, in Wonderland and through the looking glass of life. Alice ‘is armed with only one weapon for the journey: language’.

It is her questioning which brings out the madness of Wonderland, hidden, as in our world, under a thin coat of conventional respectability ... Words reveal to Alice (and to us) that the only indisputable fact of this bewildering world is that under an apparent rationality we are all mad ... Our system of justice, long before Kafka described it, is like the one set up to judge the Knave of Hearts, incomprehensible and unfair.

One could go on quoting Manguel for a long time. There’s something eye-catching on every page. Literature, he tells or reminds us, can be simultaneously disturbing and consoling.

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