

SUPERMAN, JOAN OF ARC AND JESUS: TRANSGRESSIVE OR CONVENTIONAL HEROES.

----Rob Harle

In this essay I discuss the proposition, "Heroic figures only seem to be transgressive. Whatever their literary presentation, their cultural function is usually conservative because they reconcile us to the status quo". Firstly, I will look at *Superman*, who as a contemporary hero, affirms this proposition. Secondly, at *Joan of Arc*, who negates the proposition. Thirdly, briefly at *Jesus*, who both negates and affirms the proposition.

Before attempting to deconstruct the Superman myth I need to clearly define some of the terms used in the proposition. For this discussion I understand: (a) *transgression* to mean, "to go beyond either physical or cultural-social laws and to go beyond the boundaries of normality"; (b) *Reconcile us to the status quo* as, "reconcile - to bring into agreement or harmony" (Macquarie Dictionary). It "can also mean a kind of 'begrudged acceptance of', for this essay *reconcile* means, "*a maintaining and reinforcement of*". I understand *us* to mean both medieval and contemporary society. Finally, *status quo*, "the state in which anything is (or was)" (Ehrlich). It is important to note, "...is (or was).", not will or might be, this has significant bearing on my discussion of the three heroes.

Superman, the comic book and motion picture hero, may be interpreted on number of levels which I will discuss shortly. Superman is so popular and well known that I need not go into detail about his miraculous, superhuman, *not* supernatural powers, such as being able to fly, resist bullets and possess x-ray vision. His transgressions as superhero are mainly that of physical laws. The discourse Superman is "technological materialist", spawned in the most materialist, technologically orientated nation on earth. Even Superman's own origin was not in the supernatural realm of the gods but from an alien technologically advanced planet.

At the most simplistic level Superman can function as escapist, fantasy entertainment for young people. At a deeper level I attempt to show that it operates as powerful ideological propaganda, which not only maintains the status quo, but reinforces it as being the best possible way for society to exist. If, as Kirk (1974, pp.28-29) suggests, "myths are on the one hand good stories, on the other hand bearers of important messages about life in general and life-within-society in particular", we must ask; important messages for which society? Superman explicitly upholds, "Truth, justice and the American Way". We must then ask: What is the American Way? The American Way as an ideal is guided by God, especially through Christianity and characterised by a democratic, free enterprise capitalist philosophy. A patriarchal society in which evil is always seen to be overcome by the good (truth, justice and the moral *right*).

The American Way and one of its most powerful symbols, Superman, is presented to the rest of the world in Madison Avenue style corporate marketing and the sales pitch has worked. "The legend of Superman is a fantastic phenomenon around the globe, where the ongoing saga is... available in more than thirty-eight nations and printed in fifteen different languages" (Petrou, 1978. p.9).

Many countries aspire to be like America lured by the projected levels of affluence, endless technological gadgetry, Hollywood fantasy lifestyles and where everyone is happy, secure and blessed by God! What the marketing *hype* and Superman discourse *leave out* is important for our analysis. Superman reinforces the status quo and the status quo is racist, sexist and intolerant of other nations who resist being absorbed into America's imperialist, superiority complex. Black Americans, Hispanics, the poor, the sick and women are all treated as *objects* to be helped, saved, used or converted by the great Caucasian superhero with the <S> corporate logo emblazoned on his huge chest.

Superman has subtle connections with the Christ story. Superman goes about performing *miracles* and vows to be champion of the oppressed and so on. These miraculous transgressions of natural laws reinforce the Christian and American Way. Steranko points out part of Superman's success is his duality, super hero and the *inept* mortal, Clark Kent (Steranko, 1970. pp.39-41). Parallels with Jesus Christ are quite obvious in this duality. We ordinary inept mortals (from a Christian perspective) can become Christ-like by total acceptance of Christ which results in us being saved. Superman reinforces this religious concept, though in a material way.

Space does not permit a detailed evaluation of the Superman discourse at a psychoanalytical level. However, like most myths Superman may be interpreted in Freudian, Jungian or any other psychoanalytic *mode*. Superman symbolises the archetypal male protector, saving the culture from evil forces, natural disasters and so on. Superman as Edwards points out, is not slaying dragons but their metaphorical equivalent (Edwards. 1990. p.74). I must agree with Steranko that an Adlerian interpretation of Superman seems more enlightening than a Freudian one. Like Seigel and Shuster, the original Superman creators, we all have feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy (Steranko. 1970 pp39-41). Superman can allay these deep seated archetypal fears as he functions as our personal hero. The tangible presence of the Church has decreased markedly since the Enlightenment and I wonder if Superman, in a sense, unconsciously replaces Christ as the protector hero for many people?

The silence or *what is not said* in a discourse is vitally important to understanding it (Macherey, 1978. pp.85-95). The complete absence of sex in the Superman discourse arouses considerable psychoanalytical interest. I believe America projects a kind of Puritan, immature attitude to sexual matters, which despite Fiedler's beliefs, either goes unsaid or does only deal with adult heterosexual love. Again Superman reflects the status quo and provides feedback to maintain the status quo of the culture. Perhaps a
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Freudian interpretation would be instructive. I cannot imagine though what Freud would make of Superman wearing his underpants on the outside of his costume!

Various writers such as Petrou and Wertham equate Superman with Nietzsche's, *Übermensch*. This to me indicates a complete misunderstanding of Nietzsche. The whole concept of the *Übermensch* is antithetical to the American Way, and Superman as one of its symbols. Nietzsche was anti-God, anti-Christian, anti-democracy and antagonistic to the non-thinking, helpless "herd" (Nietzsche, 1957). All the values that Superman is intent on preserving and reconciling us to.

In contrast to Superman's conservative role, *Joan of Arc* I believe, challenged the status quo in almost everything she did. To understand this we need to realise just what constituted the status quo of the fifteenth century. In general terms both England and France consisted of monarchies, together with a powerful feudal structure, which was of course patriarchal. Combined with the all powerful, all pervasive Church, these institutions dictated the way society and its individual members existed. Joan believed fanatically in the nation of France, to the extent that God would favour France over England in battle. Even in this seemingly conservative patriotism Joan had to reinvigorate or restore the patriotic status quo which had slumped into lethargy and apathy (Shaw, 1957).

Two aspects of the status quo most relevant to our discussion are, firstly, the patriarchal nature of the fifteenth century and secondly, the incontrovertible power of the Church. Joan dressing as a man, wearing armour and living with soldiers and acting as one, has very few comparable precedents in history. Particularly when we add to this that she never denied she was a female and insisted that she was chaste and a virgin. Charges of being a whore could not be upheld.

Joan's transvestism was transgressive in the extreme and it threatened the very core of the status quo because she usurped the *male role* and transcended that of the woman. "To Joan, her transvestism permitted her to transcend the destiny of womankind; it meant she could usurp the privileges and power of the male" (Gunew and Rowley, 1990. p.86). Today transgenderism and unisex dressing is only barely tolerated and definitely does not reinforce the status quo. Joan's transvestism would not be accepted today as it was not in her own time. The furore regarding the acceptance of "gay" men into the American Armed Forces, not many years ago, attests to the gender "straightness" of the status quo of most Americanised societies.

Joan had no respect for the various secular hierarchies which she challenged, not content with usurping the *male role* she also usurped every chain of command with total disregard for both her own *farm girl* origins and the aristocratic origins of those she ordered about "Joan of arc defied all prescribed boundaries" (ibid.). Again far from reconciling us to the status quo she transgressed the structures that held her society together.

Her "voices", the very thing that enabled her to rise above the normal
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conventional roles expected of her, were also her downfall. Her insistence, when it suited her, of bypassing the Church to get her instructions, inspiration and so on directly from God (via her mentor Saints) amounted to a most serious cultural/social transgression which resulted in the charge of heresy and the resultant sentence. The Church and the feudal hierarchy created the culture of Joan's time, she transgressed the core of both institutions and together they tried and executed her. Joan of Arc brings about feelings of ambivalence in different nations at different times, the status quo, political and religious changes; one day an heretical 'witch' the next day a Saint (ibid. p.83).

For me Joan does not fit neatly into any psychoanalytical mould. She, perhaps as the ideal androgyne has risen above Freudian analysis and maybe, just maybe, is Jung's perfect being; an androgynous creature with perfectly balanced anima and animus? Perhaps she inspires us so much because she reflects our archetypal longing for psychic *wholeness* or perhaps she is an example of what one individual can achieve with unshakeable faith (in God or Oneself) against all the social forces that tend to keep us oppressed and unfulfilled.

Jesus in contrast to both Joan of Arc and Superman, whether we understand him to be divine (the Son of God) or a prophet in a succession of Jewish prophets forges a new status quo and reconciles us to an old one. He did not however, in any way maintain the status quo of his own time.

Regardless of how we perceive Jesus, I think we can safely say the numerous stories about him constitute a profound myth and that he is a male hero equal to, if not greater than, Gilgamesh, Prometheus, Superman or Arjuna of the Bhagavad Gita. Jesus, according to the myth incarnated into a human world full of sin, wickedness and ungodliness. This with the powerful, corrupt political hierarchies represented the status quo of Jesus' time. He went about preaching against these evils, performing miracles and initiating a new order. Bultmann and others have discussed this idea that the coming of Christ heralded a new era (Wardlaw, 1990. P.10). It is not within the scope of this essay to discuss this further, or the complex theological issues that Christ's coming opened up new supernatural channels for humanity.

What is clear is that Jesus' whole ministry was to create a new status quo, not reconcile us to the existing one. If the status quo is, "the state in which anything is (or was)", then Jesus as mythic hero creates a paradox in our analysis. Jesus clearly preached that humanity should repent its sinfulness and accept God again, then and only then would God's grace be reinstated. In other words, Jesus attempted to reconcile humanity to the original, state of grace (before the fall). If we understand this original state to be "the status quo" then Jesus was not transgressive at all.

As the Jesus story was written down, translated and re interpreted through time various groups appropriated the myth to support or underpin their idiosyncratic ideologies. We can see this in numerous instances such as the treatment of Joan of Arc by one particular ideological branch of Christianity. A

current example, in Australia, is the Rev. Fred Nile's ideological abhorrence of homosexuality in the name of his version of the Christian myth.

In conclusion, I have attempted to show that we cannot make general statements and propositions about myths and the heroes that live on through them. I believe we must analyse the case of each hero individually. Firstly, the myth changes with time and changes as different ideologies influence and are influenced by it. Secondly, the status quo is different in different cultures and it also changes with time. So to get the most accurate possible reading of the hero's character and influence we need to analyse the myth in context and from a neutral ideological position, or alternatively, a declared ideological position. The difficulty in doing this is why Derrida argues we cannot ever get at the *truth*. I agree with Derrida in that there is no one true reading of a mythic discourse, or any discourse for that matter. However, the more factors we take into account in our analysis, such as the author's intention (despite Derrida's belief to the contrary) the closer we will get to the best possible understanding within the declared and recognised parameters of the analysis.

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