

# ZOOTROPIA, FAKELORE AND REMYTHIFICATION: THE GRAIL CASTLE, THE TOWER OF LONDON, THE ROCK OF GIBRALTAR AND THE CAVE OF THE SLEEPING HERO

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By *zootropia* or *zooantropologia* Roberto Marchesini refers to a special relationship between man and animals which amounts to more or less to totemism in Anthropological parlance<sup>1</sup>. Such zootropical relationship have given rise to folklore and later to what Richard Dorson terms fakelore, that is “a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification.”<sup>2</sup> Such is the myth of the ravens of the Tower of London, the apes of the rock of Gibraltar and the millennium myths of the hibernating hero. In these three cases myths were either created to transform the image of the *topos* or for nature conservation.

The gruesome history of the Tower of London had to be transformed into a positive image imbued with famous mythical narratives of the Grail legend. Though the name of the city of London remains a mystery, Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* attributes the origin of the name of the city to an exiled Trojan Brutus who was the descendant of the demi-god Aenaes, the son of Venus, daughter of Jupiter who named the newly found city Trinovantum or Troia Nova (New Troy). The city was later built by Caer Lud who renamed it after himself. The name was later corrupted to *Kaer Llundain* and later to London:

Lud, to wit, took the kingdom on his father's death. Thereafter, for that a right glorious city-builder was he, he renewed the walls of Trinovantum, and girdled it around with innumerable towers. He did likewise enjoin the citizens that they should build houses and stately fabrics therein, so as that no city in far off kingdoms should contain fairer palaces. He himself was a man of war, and bountiful in giving of feasts. And, albeit that he had many cities in his dominion, yet this did he love above all other, and therein did he sojourn the greater part of

the whole year, whence it was afterward named Kaerlud, and after that, by corruption of the name, Kaerlondon. In a later day by the changing of the tongues it was called London, and yet later, after the landing of the foreign folk that did subdue the country unto themselves, hath it been called Londres. After the death of Lud, his body was buried in the Porthlud in British but in Saxon Ludgate<sup>3</sup>.

It is clear from Geoffrey's narrative that the founder of the city of London, like in any foundation myths, is of divine origin which renders his reign sacred.

On the one hand, one can suppose that the name of London like many towns of Europe may be derived from the name of the Celtic deity Lugus or Lug (Lugh) whose name is found in many cities of Europe where he was venerated. In this instance, London may be derived from Lugdunum as in the cases of Lyon, Leyden, Carlisle (formerly known as Lugvallium), Lugo (Spain and Italy), Loudoun (Scotland) and Luganom (Switzerland). Since London was an Irish conglomeration, there is a possibility that Lug's cult thrived in the city, hence the name Lugdunum, interpreted by Pseudo-Plutarch as the hill of ravens and not the hill of Lug since these birds are associated with this god of all arts who is the equivalent of Hermes, Mercury, Thoth, Odin etc. Odin also had two ravens, Hugin (Thought) and Muninn (Memory) which he used to send to the whole world and would come back and tell him what they had seen and heard as he could understand the language of the birds.

Another character who brings us closer to the Tower of London and the ravens is Bran the Blessed whose skull was buried in the White Hill, the future site of the Tower of London. Bran's story is related in the second branch of *The Mabinogion* where this legendary king of Britain leads his army to avenge the humiliation of his sister by the king Matholwch. He is fatally wounded in the thigh during the battle and asks, before his death that his men cut off his head and carry it back to England and bury it in the White Hill facing towards the direction of France. For a number of years his men carry the head which serves them as a vessel of plenty or cornucopia. They did not realize the passage of time as they were entertained by Bran's talking head until they arrived in London and buried it as instructed. Bran also possessed a cauldron that could resuscitate the dead overnight. The attempts to bring close the Grail Castle and the Tower of London through the mysterious character of Bron or Bran the Blessed can be traced back from the Middle Ages. Since the appearance of Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Armathie or Le roman de l'estoire du graal* where the Fisher King is named Hebron or Bron medieval scholars have identified him with the legendary king of Britain, Bran the Blessed. Bran's name means "raven" in English and modern fakelore associates his name with the myths of the ravens of the Tower of London who are said to be kept in order to safeguard the well being of the British crown. Some almost verifiable events linked to this belief took place in 1992, a year decried by the Queen as *annus horribilis*, when the ravens disappeared from the Tower: in March the separation of Prince Andrew and Fergie was announced, later her topless pictures showed his male friend kissing her feet, in April Princess Royal

(Anne) divorced Captain Mark Phillips, in June appeared the book about Princess Diana: *Diana, Her True Story*, in November Windsor Castle went into flames and December the separation of Prince of Wales and Princess of Wales was announced. By the end of the year newspapers started reassuring the British that the horrible year was gone as the ravens were sighted flying over the Tower of London. Deducing from these events one can say that it seems there is some truth in the belief, hence a concerted effort is made to keep at least seven ravens in the Tower with their wings clipped so that they do not leave it and they are fed all sorts of food, meat and fish like human beings and are spoiled. They even have human names. Bora Sax has dedicated a book (*City of Ravens: London, The Tower and its Birds*) to the study of the ravens of the Tower of London where he details all the incidents pertaining to these royal pets which my time slot does not permit me to do here.

The belief seems to have originated during the reign of King Charles II who did not like the presence of the ravens in the Tower because of their droppings defying the telescope. During the conversation with his astronomer John Flamsteed in which the King was advocating for the disposal of the ravens, the latter suggested their link of the crown and the ravens:

“These ravens must go!” he said. “But sir, it is very unlucky to kill a raven.” Replied Flamsteed, “If you do that the Tower will fall and you will lose your kingdom, having only just got it back!” Charles, being a pragmatist, thought for a moment and said: “The Observatory must go to Greenwich and the ravens can stay in the Tower.”<sup>49</sup>

This is how the detested scavengers’ legend began and changed the bad attitude about the birds of ill-omen and became linked to crown and therefore an object of veneration.

The zootropic belief that should the ravens leave the tower, the British monarch will collapse is similar to the one that was held about the macaque apes in the Rock of Gibraltar that they should be extinct or leave the Rock so will the British.:

From the regimental point of view, the Royal Artillery’s concern over apes was buried in dry archives and was not fruitful, but in the course of his investigation Tim ran across one bit of archaic gossip which somehow seemed to link the apes with the presence of the British and their regiments. This was to the effect that if and when the apes ever died out completely, or the left the Rock, the British would be driven from Gibraltar.

Since this cheerful little curse was not exactly friendly, it was no great feat of deduction for Tim to conclude that it must have been devised originally by Britain’s enemies

To maintain foothold on this extraordinary piece of real estate the British had fought the Spanish, the French, and the Dutch. Which of these nations had fostered the happy slogan was not clear, but what interested Tim was the extent to which it had persisted in modern times, even to this day on the Rock. He thought that in all probability it had been kept alive by the Spaniards, who for all their politeness and seeming friendliness had never forgiven the British for pre-empting a piece of their territory to sit athwart the Mediterranean.

Tim wondered whether this was why the responsibility for the apes had been handed over the regiment quartered there and the Government actually provided an allowance for their maintenance. The apes not only appeared to be backed by tradition but seemed to be looked upon as mascots to an alien race occupying an alien territory. Tim was charmed to find the British Government involved in this kind of superstition<sup>5</sup>.

Like the ravens of the Tower of London, the Barbary apes had to be preserved and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had to send two directives to the authorities in charge of the promontory instructing them to make sure that the apes are safe and in good health. This myth is well presented in Paul Gallico's novel, *Scruffy* where the monkeys are so spoiled and cause so much trouble in the Rock but are protected by the Officer in Charge of the Apes like the Tower ravens who cause so much trouble and are protected by the Ravenmaster and are treated like human beings.

The theme of the well-being of the monarch linked to the good health of the fauna and flora is not only limited to the Grail legend but is also extended to the myths of hibernating heroes such as the legend of Friedrich Barbarossa according to the Grimm brothers lies concealed in Mount Kyfhausen and will come out one day, hang his shield on a withered tree and thus marking the beginning of the golden era:

Occasionally, he will talk to people who enter the mountain, at other times he can be seen on the outside. Usually, he sits on a bench at a round table, resting his head in his hand, sleeping- nodding his head and blinking his eyes. His beard has grown long, according to some, right through the stone, and when it has encircled the table three times, it will be the time of his awakening. It has now grown around twice<sup>6</sup>.

He is constantly checking on the state of the ravens flying over the cave to see if and when he is told that they are still flying, he protests: "Now I am going to have to sleep for another hundred years."

The three situations studied above underscore the importance of the animal in human life. The belief that if the ravens leave the Tower of London will take the crown with them and that if the apes are allowed to die out are used as conservation myths that promote mutual existence of man and animals. The myths about the ravens of the Tower of London are reinforced by the elements of the grail legend: the head of Bran buried in the Tower, Bran being the avatar of the Fisher King who is wounded in the thighs etc. and the name Bran itself which means "raven". In the myth of Friedrich Barbarossa the hanging of the shield on a leafless tree which sprouts immediately and heralds the new golden era is a function of the hero of the Grail narratives who is supposed to heal the Maimed King and restore life to the wasteland by posing the right question.

## NOTES

1. See pp.26-27.
2. Richard Mercer Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Towards a Discipline of Folk Studies*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 5.
3. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Histories of the Kings of Britain: London*, Dent: New York and Dutton & Co., 1912, Chapter XX, p.54.
4. Boria Sax, *City of Ravens: London, the Tower and its Birds*, London, Duckworth Overlook, 2011. P.16.
5. Paul Gallico, *Scruffy*, Hammondswoth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1962, pp.35-36.
6. *German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, Edited and Translated Donald Ward, Philadelphia, Pa, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981, p.32. Tale 23.

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