



A Monkey of Two Tales

ONCE UPON A TIME during the Napoleonic Wars, so the story goes, there was a ship wrecked off the coast of North East England, and the only survivor washed ashore was a Monkey. On encountering the Monkey, the local people, who were fearful of an invasion by the French, thought the stranger might be a foreign spy. After an interrogation, in which the creature failed to provide any satisfactory account of himself (in English, at least), the Monkey was condemned as a spy and hanged.

The legend of the hanged Monkey has survived down the years, and if anything has grown in stature. The Monkey has become connected with the identity of Hartlepool, and people from the town have become known - affectionately or otherwise - as the 'Monkey Hangers'. The term has become a nickname for the local rugby team, and a monkey character has been adopted as a mascot for the town's football club, Hartlepool United.

The original Monkey story is of dubious historical veracity, and is perhaps best described as a myth. A myth is not simply an enduring though fictional tale, but a story that somehow represents something that people

would like to believe, or at least are prepared to perpetuate. So although many untrue stories are made up, not so many gain the status of myths. If the Monkey story is indeed untrue, we may ask why it should endure as a myth, a tale almost with a life of its own, that continues centuries later?

Whatever its local significance, the Monkey story is of wider interest on a number of fronts. It deals with the issue of our own and others' identity; it is about understanding, communication, language and culture; of relations between nations (and species); it is about the transgression of boundaries, crime and punishment, and the ideas of morality that underpin them. Perhaps most of all for present purposes, the tale of the Monkey deals with the issue of an individual confronted by society; and the ultimate freedoms and dangers that go with being on the outside of society.

But before we head for that beckoning conceptual territory, there is a bit more of the 'historical' monkey story to get out of the way - an unlikely but true tale which is not without its own social and political ramifications.

A Monkey for Mayor?

Under the recently introduced system of directly elected local mayors, some towns and cities in Britain now have a Mayor who has real political power rather than just being a ceremonial figure-head. In the case of Hartlepool, a man known as Stuart Drummond, who had the purely ceremonial role of being the Hartlepool United mascot, decided to stand for election

as Mayor. Dressed up in a seven foot furry monkey outfit, he campaigned as H'Angus the Monkey, on a platform of „free bananas for schoolchildren“.

The position of His Worship the Mayor of Hartlepool commands a salary of £53,000, a staff of 3,500 and a £100 million budget. The election was a serious business, contested by all the mainstream political parties. But, in a triumph of local idiosyncrasy against the established political order, the monkey won handsomely, with over 50% of the vote.

Creatures of collective will

The monkey's victory was said to make a mockery of democracy, to make a monkey out of ‚serious‘ politicians, and make the town of Hartlepool itself a laughing-stock. But democracy, in a sense had prevailed: the people had spoken.

Perhaps the voters wanted to make a statement about their independence of mind. Perhaps they wanted to give conventional politicians a wake-up call. Perhaps they really hoped for free bananas for their schoolchildren.

But whatever the reasons, the monkey-man did not become Mayor by his own will alone, but through the collective will of the people. Indeed, neither the historical creature of H'Angus the Mayor nor the original myth of the shipwrecked simian could have prevailed if there were not something of collective significance that was being represented or expressed by their very existence.

The history of Hartlepool is an

unfinished one, written by others; and at this point we must leave behind the tale of H'Angus the Monkey and Mayor Drummond.

We return instead to the tale of the original Monkey: the noble voyager on the open ocean, the free individual who fatefully encounters a new land and a new people. More generally, he is simply a unique individual self, faced with a society of ‚others‘. From now on, his story is our story.

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