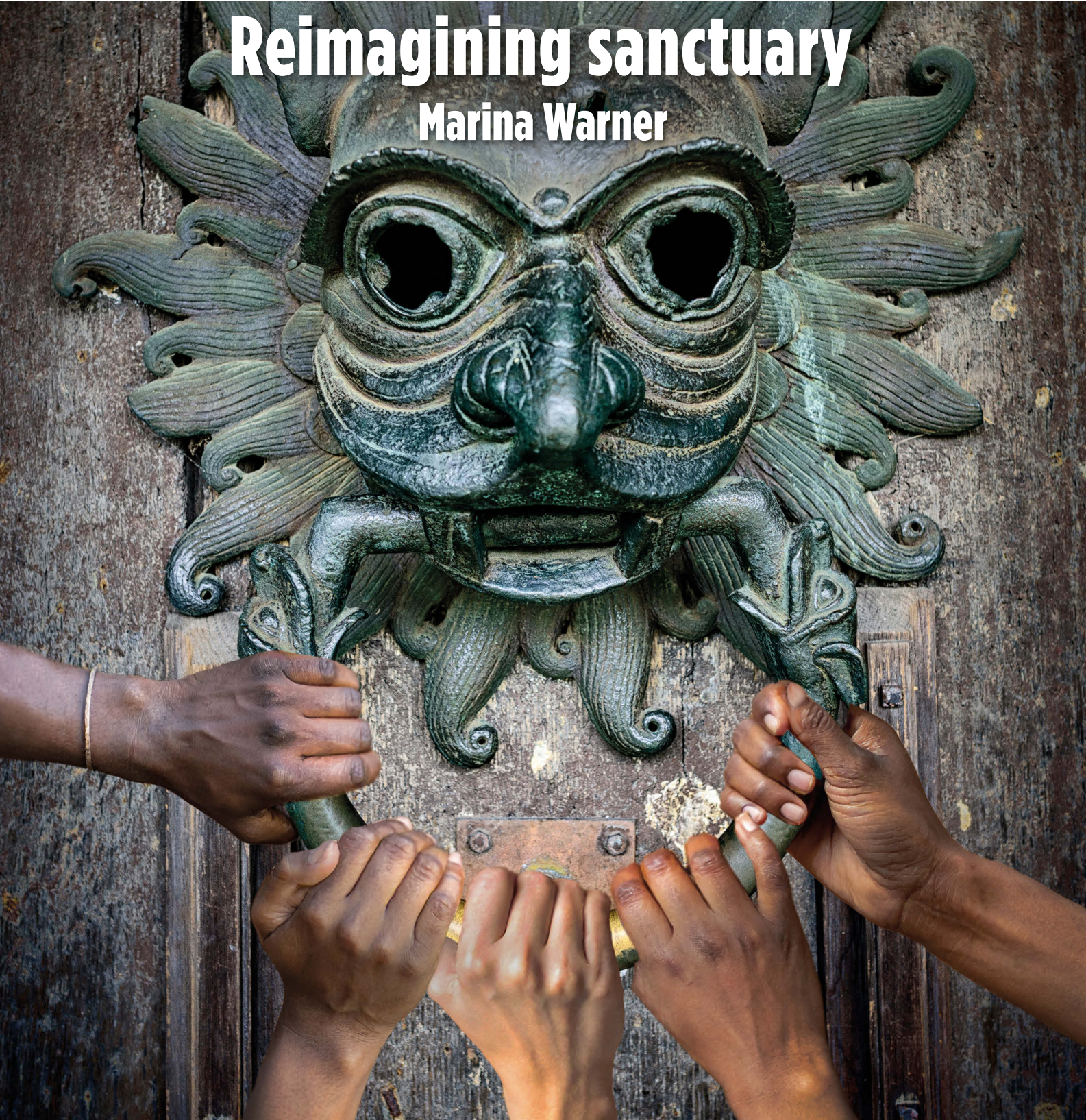


Reimagining sanctuary

Marina Warner



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Sanctuary is not just a place of safety for those fleeing violence and danger – it is a state of mind and a structure of feeling / By MARINA WARNER

Homeward bound

IN THE 1939 FILM of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the beautiful dancer Esmeralda is about to be hanged for witchcraft on the parvis before Paris' cathedral, when Quasimodo, the bellringer, swings down on the bell ropes, snatches her up and carries her up and away, crying "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" It's a thrilling, perfect, heroic romantic rescue, with the crooked, half-blind changeling, brilliantly inhabited by Charles Laughton, in the role of knight errant. The film was screened at the 1939 Cannes Film Festival, which was abruptly closed down with the outbreak of war, and it bears the marks of the years of its making: Esmeralda is a gypsy, Quasimodo, half-blind and severely disabled, and they are despised and bullied and threatened by the authorities, who are quick to ascribe guilt and persecute them. The shadow of tyrannical power looms starkly across the story; Victor Hugo, the author of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, deflected a biting critique of Church and State in France through a drama of medieval injustice – and resistance to it; while the director William Dieterle was one of the many émigrés from Germany who later, in the US during the McCarthy years, came under suspicion in Hollywood for subversive sympathies.

Notre-Dame, Westminster Abbey, Canterbury Cathedral, are places of sanctuary. These are holy sites, ordered under a different, separate set of rules from mainstream society; earlier, the Cities of Refuge in the Old Testament, and the Acropolis, the Temple of Apollo at Delphi and the grove of Colonus where Oedipus took refuge before his death are likewise special sacred enclaves, set apart. Sanctuary is a place where a suspected witch and a stigmatised outsider can elude the oppressive reach of those who want to destroy them, ecclesiastical and political.

But even these powers acknowledged the sacredness of sanctuary – though breaches were committed, most notoriously when Thomas Becket was murdered in his own cathedral.

There is a distinction, however, between the ancient classical or Hebrew practice of sanctuary and the Christian tradition that is still familiar today: Orestes has killed his mother, and the sanctuary seekers in the Bible have committed murder, unwittingly. The holy places, and the divinity that



ALAMY/PICTURELUX/THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE; BEVERLEY MINSTER

cast a ring of protection around a suppliant, offer a place of cleansing, of lifting a pollution, of atonement. By contrast, over the very long tradition of sanctuary in Europe, the fugitive has not necessarily committed a crime and isn't looking for forgiveness, but a reprieve from harm. Like Esmeralda, sanctuary seekers may be innocent of any wrongdoing, and unjustly persecuted and pursued. The law of sanctuary offered shelter to fugitives, protecting them from the secular arm and the state or other adversary. It embodied a special, parallel authority of the Church, and it held from Anglo-Saxon to Tudor times. Henry VIII began abolishing it, as part of his larger plan to consolidate royal power, and James I completed the task.

In principle the period of reprieve lasted 40 days – a quarantine – during which the

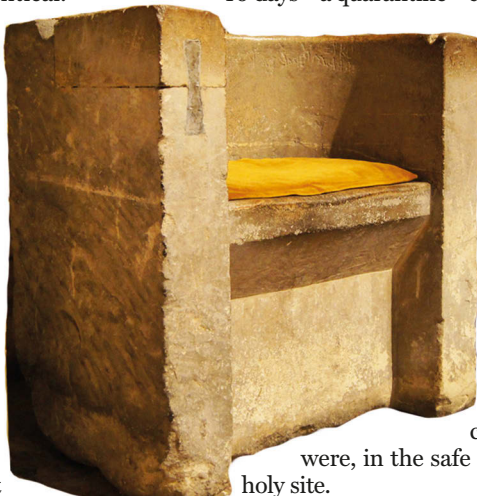
fugitive had to decide whether to face judgement in a tribunal or go into exile – for ever. Some chose the latter, while others lingered in their refuge and became "sanctuary men" (and women), permanently camping, as it

were, in the safe precincts of the holy site.

Injustice in motion (above): Charles Laughton and Maureen O'Hara in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1939); and (inset) sanctuary stool in Beverley Minster

The memory of the right to sanctuary lived on – it has been reactivated at times of crisis, during the civil rights marches in the US and the war in Vietnam, for instance, when certain priests opened their doors to protestors. In the UK today there are cities, universities and colleges of sanctuary specifically declaring support to refugees and providing means, within the limits of the current laws on visas, to help them towards their studies and to foster that elusive state of feeling at home. This movement represents valuable opposition to the dominant exclusionary drive of current migration policy.

WHILE THE prime meanings of sanctuary remain a literal *place* of safety and a legal state of indemnity, the word opens on to many figurative states. The use of the term describes a huge arc, running from a special, private reserve (my study, a health spa, a bird sanctuary), to a far broader ethics of mutuality and a public concept of *xenia*, hospitality, shown towards the stranger. The question of what "home" means, and how that term leaks into "homeland" or "nation", underpins the whole sweep of this arc: sanctuary seekers today have left home, mostly unwillingly, and are seeking to enter and make a new home, while many countries are ferociously raising walls and barriers, patrol boats and watch-towers, in order to defend an idea of homeland.



One aspect of traditional sanctuary fascinated me from the start of my research for my latest book: these sacred sites were not fortified. It was forbidden to carry a weapon in a sanctuary (which is why the murder of Becket was such a sacrilege, and why, watching the news, I still feel particular horror when a church is bombed or the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is invaded). The power of the holy precinct is imponderable, like a chalk circle in a children's game of "It" which marks out a haven where the chaser can't lay hands on you.

At a great shrine such as Beverley Minster, the area of sanctuary extended far beyond the church itself: boundary crosses marked the perimeter, at different intervals, and King Athelstan decreed different penalties for breaching sanctuary at each different stage – with, finally, capital punishment, for seizing a sanctuary seeker at the high altar. Beside the altar inside the Minster stands a Frith Stool, an early medieval squat stone throne, which if a runaway could reach and sit down on, would afford him sanctuary. This magical effect, a kind of spell cast by the place and its story, seemed to me to offer a thread to catch and follow regarding the current state of fear and antagonism to immigrants. A sanctuary is demarcated an inviolable place of the sacred

not through ramparts and ditches, bales of barbed wire and lookout posts. But its aura is instilled by the story of its founding, often directly attached to a history, a relic, a trace, a memory which a community accepts as somehow intrinsic to its origin and identity: fragments of the Holy Cross for Christendom, for example. The sanctuary might

be a surpassingly beautiful artefact – like Notre-Dame – but the aesthetic magnificence arises as a homage to the story the edifice tells. Sanctuary is a location, but not only. It is above all a way of thinking, a principle, and a state of mind – a structure of feeling. I hoped, as I dug deeper into the phenomenon, that if its workings in the past could be understood, it could perhaps be revived, reconfigured, to help the present situation of refugees and of those receiving them, their hosts, ourselves.

My enquiry led me back to earlier research I had done on Catholicism, when I wrote about the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc. There are shrines in Upper Egypt which commemorate the Holy Family's flight from Herod, a gospel story that resonates very powerfully with the refugees from war and terror today (Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo even imagines Joseph and Mary and the baby crossing the Nile to reach safety in a small boat). The shrine of the Santa Casa at Loreto encloses the house where the angel appeared to Mary and where she brought up Jesus. This sacred relic is a tiny shack of rubble, encased in a magnificent Baroque masterpiece; it struck me powerfully as a symbol of the home that is lost. It surprised me how piercingly this relic speaks to the homeless, as well as to those who, like me, have always had a home. The story, that the Holy House

was brought by angels to Italy, promises that a home can be transplanted and remade elsewhere. As one child in a refugee camp remarked, "Oh yes, we have a home. We just haven't decided where to put it."

LORETO CLAIMS to have the unique authentic Holy House. But sanctuaries can replicate themselves elsewhere and many times over: the pilgrimage to Walsingham, also a byword for festivity (and wealth) until it was razed during the English Reformation, centred on a copy of this sacred dwelling, its site and proportions having been dictated to the visionary Richeldis de Faverches in 1061. Walsingham was "England's Nazareth" just as Jerusalem could be builded here. Sanctuaries tap the aura of the original; in Abu Dhabi there is an immaculate replica of the Dome of the Rock, complete with gorgeous tiles and graceful arches, but a quarter the size. "The map is not the territory", Korzybski's clever axiom, captures this aspect of lived experience that where we live is filled with stories of the past, which may themselves have travelled with those rich reservoirs of stories, divine and sacred Scriptures.

However, as I pressed on, I found that identifying sanctuaries with specific places, and especially with places set apart, led to an impasse, because historically such separateness could turn a refuge into a ghetto, a haven into a holding pen (in the eighteenth century, "Alsatia", the area of London between Fleet Street and the Thames, a sanctuary for debtors, thieves and others who had fallen foul of the law, became a no-go area). Not for nothing did the word "asylum", from

Greek meaning "not to be seized", come to be used for closed mental hospitals. A sanctuary was also of limited duration – it offered a valuable truce, a cooling off period, time to take stock and calm the situation, but what next? Furthermore, sanctuaries are often denominational – non-adherents to that faith or ideology or even ethnicity may be debarred or, in some subtle way, marginalised. But most importantly, a sanctuary lies *ipso facto* outside society, and for fugitives today, that is not what they need (grimly, life in hotels, on barges, in detention, could even be presented by governments as protecting them and assuring their safety).

It became clear to me that true sanctuary entails being allowed to belong, to be recognised as part of society, to enjoy the citizen's rights to move, to work, to assemble and, above all, to speak. The idea of culture began to take shape as the central, necessary principle for sanctuary now, underpinned by the hope that shared imagination, across boundaries of race and language, could offer a commons of wonder.

Seekers of sanctuary now arrive with nothing – often "undocumented migrants", targets of much mistrust. But even stripped of everything, they are carrying memories of their culture with them. Many of the

young men and women – "forced migrants" – whom I met in Sicily fiercely rejected the image of themselves as wretched parasites and were frustrated by the appetite sympathisers show to hear of their sufferings and express their pity.

The whole immigration regime turns on the personal statements of the asylum seeker, the crossers in small boats. But first-person testimony is only one kind of story and literature holds many other possibilities. It also tends to confine the narrators to their past lives – and sufferings – and to fix their identity accordingly. For this reason, "Stories in Transit", a project that began in Palermo in 2016, set out to make up stories together, based on what the participants suggested, or starting off from stories they know (often from films), such as a tale from the *One Thousand and One Nights* or a scene from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

This approach established a way of communicating and working together and, eventually, enacting scenes, with masks, music, gesture and drawings (in the absence of a common language, mime was a prime resource). I was astonished at the alacrity and enthusiasm the participants showed (see storiesintransit.org) and the speed with which collaboration and *convivencia* were established – forms of play bridge any number of differences.

I'm hardly claiming that story workshops based on imaginative retellings or inventions could solve the present political crisis around immigration. Such a claim would obviously be absurd. But the current treatment of asylum seekers is wasteful of lives and resources; it is unjust (until the recent change in the law, to seek asylum on entering a country was not a crime, and legal means to do so are now extremely restricted). The ever-growing measures of exclusion and repression threaten our civil society, our fundamental freedoms and our rule of law. The history and tradition of sanctuary offer an alternative, brighter perspective on those fleeing violence and danger, and open the possibility of an alternative disposition to foster, protect, to shelter and to welcome, rather than to condemn and expel.

Marina Warner is a novelist, art critic and cultural historian. Her latest book, *Sanctuary: Ways of Telling, Ways of Dwelling*, is published by William Collins (£22; Tablet price £19.80).

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