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LANGLEY ROBINSON

Abuses of Enchantment

Winner of the Quarante Club Prize

In the many variations of fairy tale narratives, elements of magic and enchantment are nearly always present in one form or another. Sleep and dream enchantments are especially prevalent, typically befalling young female protagonists as they reach the cusp of adolescence. Tales like *Sleeping Beauty* conjure up romantic images of virginally beautiful princesses reclining unconscious upon bowers of roses and silks. These beauties passively await the arrival of a “Prince Charming” to awaken them and carry them off to a fairy tale ending of true love and domestic bliss. In *Sleeping Beauty* and similar stories, the narratives play out over, around, and in several cases “onto” the unconscious princess. Her total lack of agency and awareness makes her the stereotypical passive heroine. The inaction of these so-called “heroines” does nothing to deter young girls from idolizing these princesses and dreaming of finding their own “happily ever after”.

In fairy tale narratives there is a thoroughly romanticized glamor attached to states of enchantment and the resulting female passivity. By examining the literary treatment of these enchantments, it is possible to gain some insight into the male fantasy of female passivity and the enduring allure this fantasy holds for both men and women. Malinda Lo’s *Ash* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane* subvert the intrinsic allure of dreams and fantasy to illustrate the dark reality of female passivity and loss of self. In doing so, these texts provide a psychological examination of the dangerous power of enchantment and escapism.

Enchantment in fairy tales can take many forms. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s story, *Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane*, the author makes direct reference to the *Sleeping Beauty* tales with his title. In doing so, Garcia Marquez ensures that his subtle references to the original fairy tale will be instantly recognizable to his readers. While it is the beautiful young woman who spends most of the story unconscious, it is the male narrator who experiences an enchantment. From the first moment he catches sight of her in the airport, he is entranced. While she slumbers beside him during the flight, his imagination runs wild. The mysterious beauty consumes his thoughts. He is, in effect, under her spell. He confesses this to the reader saying, “I have always believed that there is nothing more beautiful in nature than a beautiful woman, and it was impossible for me to escape even for a moment from the spell of that storybook creature who slept

at my side”(Marquez 90). By explicitly referring to the beautiful woman as a “storybook creature”, Garcia Marquez emphasizes that she does not exist in reality but rather as a character in the narrator’s personal fantasy world.

In Malinda Lo’s novel, *Ash*, the protagonist encounters enchantment of a different kind. Lo dedicates the first half of the novel’s second chapter to explaining the role of magic in the world of *Ash*. The brief history she provides tells of a land that was once filled with magic. As time went on, the people grew further from the old ways, and the magic faded. An ideological battle took place between the witches with their magic and the philosophers with their reason. The people clung to the magic but eventually the philosophers won out. Ash, the novel’s protagonist, grew up with a mother who “had some magic in her”(Lo 4) and who told her little daughter tales of the fairies and their magic world deep in the woods. We are told that the fairy stories are an important part of the region’s culture and that they are meant to serve as a warning of the dangers of interacting with the fairies and their intoxicating realm. As the village Greenwich tells Ash, “Fear will teach you where to be careful”(Lo 14).

Ash’s first encounter with the fairies takes place after the death of her mother. She visits her mother’s grave at night and it is there, at the edge of the woods, that she first experiences their magic. As the story continues, Ash finds herself overwhelmingly drawn to the escapism of fairy enchantment. Ash is aware that in order to live in the fairy realm she must give herself over entirely to the beautiful and inhuman Sidhead. Even though she understands that this surrender amounts to a death of her humanity (her *self*), she struggles to resist the appeal of the dream world.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that enchantment is an important tool for reaching psychological maturity. While this is often true, the appeal of enchantment can also be analyzed as a form of escapism. This interpretation lends itself particularly well to Lo’s novel. The book begins with the death of Ash’s mother. We are told that prior to this loss, Ash had a happy childhood with two loving parents and few worries. Shortly after her mother’s death, Ash’s father remarries. It is after receiving this news that Ash first sees Sidhead the fairy prince (Lo 21). Lo describes Ash watching the woods from her window and contemplating a tragic story she read as a child, “She watched the darkness gathering in the nearby trees with equal parts dread and anticipation”(Lo 29). In the story, a man sacrifices his life to rejoin his beloved who has been stolen by the fairies and trapped inside their world. Here, Lo is foreshadowing Ash’s attempts to pursue the fairies in order to escape from the pain she experiences in life. Ash’s final tie to the human world is broken by her father’s death: “now, I am all alone”(Lo 45). As her home life becomes increasingly painful and lonely, the fairy realm becomes increasingly tangible. She becomes enamored with Sidhead and begs him to allow her to remain with him, though he refuses and sends her back.

Lo demonstrates Ash’s desire for escape at all costs with a recounting of Ash’s favorite fairy story. In the story, a young girl named Kathleen gets lost in the woods and

follows twinkling lights to the edge of the fairy ring. Though she knows she should not enter it, she is seduced by a fairy prince and pulled in. In the morning Kathleen awakes in her own bed, but she is consumed by a longing to return to the fairies. The village witch teaches her how to get back to them in her dreams and so Kathleen wastes away “for she only truly lived when she slept at night” (Lo 77). At the end of the story, Kathleen is lost to the fairies — “They say she did not die; instead she simply slept there, her mind lost, her body still and empty...” (Lo 77). The story of Kathleen harkens to the Sleeping Beauty tales and exemplifies the risk of losing oneself to the magic of sleep and dream enchantments. Ash’s growing self-destructiveness and desire for any escape from reality, regardless of consequence, is illustrated by her reaction to Kathleen’s story. Lo writes, “Ash read and re-read the story as if it were a map to her own future. Though she knew it was meant to be a cautionary tale, now that she had seen that fairy, she thought that Kathleen’s fate was not so cruel after all” (Lo 77). This quote is a perfect encapsulation of the immense power Sidhead’s enchantment has over Ash and the increasing desperation she feels.

According to Bettelheim, “enchanted states” are representative of a necessary process of maturation during adolescence. He writes that the apparent passivity is masking a shift from outwardly directed action to inwardly directed reflection and “concentration on the self” (Bettelheim 225-227). While for the most part, Bettelheim views the enchanted adolescence as healthy and helpful, he warns against the dangers of narcissistic withdrawal. Withdrawing from the world that contains all of the fear, anxiety and trauma of growing up is a healthy and universal impulse. The danger arises when one adopts this withdrawal as an escape from the struggles of life, resulting in “a dangerous, deathlike existence” (Bettelheim 234).

In her essay entitled *Feminism and Fairy Tales*, Karen E. Rowe employs a feminist perspective to expand upon Bettelheim’s theory of adolescent enchantment. Rowe suggests that romanticizing pubertal enchantment, with its passive waiting and dreaming of happily ever after, causes young women to believe themselves helpless (Rowe 354). Rather than developing crucial self-confidence and internal power, these women believe freedom and happiness will be obtained by the benevolence of external powers. Rowe explains, “By portraying dream-drenched inactivity and magical redemptions, enchantment makes vulnerability, avoidance, sublimation, and dependency alluringly virtuous” (Rowe 354). It is this exact lack of ability to rescue oneself that leads Ash to pursue Sidhead and his fairy world. She believes that her only option for escape from the despair of her home life is to effectively destroy her free will and give herself over to the power of Sidhead. “Even an eternity serving him — especially him — seemed like no worse, and possibly much better, than a mere human lifetime serving Lady Isobel” (Lo 97). This statement perfectly illustrates that Ash does not consider that a third option, one in which she retains her self, is even possible.

In *Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane*, Garcia Marquez’s protagonist also wrestles

with the seductive escapism of dreams and fantasy. Because he knows nothing about the woman beside him, he is able to construct a fantasy relationship in his mind. When he notices a band on her ring finger, he ignores the likelihood that this makes her unavailable to him. "Since she looked no older than twenty, I consoled myself with the idea that it was not a wedding ring but the sign of an ephemeral engagement" (Marquez 91). Perhaps this is what makes her blank unconsciousness so thoroughly seductive for him. With Beauty devoid of her persona, her experiences, and her free will, the protagonist is allowed to romanticize wildly, unchecked by reality. She becomes a passive vessel for his fantasy and this frees him from the inevitable complications of loving an inherently complex individual. A sense of timelessness in the story highlights the urgency of his obsession:

When supper was over the lights were dimmed and a movie was shown to no one, and the two of us were alone in the darkness of the world. The biggest storm of the century had ended, and the Atlantic night was immense and limpid, and the plane seemed motionless among the stars. Then I contemplated her, inch by inch, for several hours, and the only sign of life I could detect were the shadows of the dreams that passed along her forehead like clouds over water. (Marquez 91)

Inside the airplane, reality is suspended. Beauty appears lifeless, and this allows him to objectify her completely. According to Maria Tatar, it was Charles Perrault who first cast aside temporality and slowed down the Sleeping Beauty tale. In Perrault's version, the prince arrives to find the whole palace immobile and devoid of life or sound. Tatar writes that with Perrault's development, Sleeping Beauty became the central focus of the tale, "iconic in mingling beauty and death, desire and dread" (Tatar 146).

Though the narrator seems to enjoy gazing at his slumbering seatmate and his fantasies seem pleasurable and harmless enough, we are told that he is disgusted by his obsession. "I caught sight of myself, contemptible and ugly, in the mirror, and was amazed that the devastation of love could be so terrible" (Marquez 91). Here, briefly away from Beauty's potency, he acknowledges that his fictionalized romance is not a healthy or actualized love. In the New York Review of Books, J.M. Coetzee explains that *Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane* was later expanded on in Garcia Marquez's novel, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. In reading this later work, we can gain insight into the deeper meanings and intentions of the original short story (Coetzee). The protagonist of the novel is an old man who develops an obsession with a young girl. He never engages with her, but rather pays to be beside her as she sleeps. He falls in love with her, although they never interact, and he descends into a spiral of madness and obsession. Every aspect of his being centers on her. As Jeremy Cass writes, "He is just as

much a slave to the stories he projects onto Delgadina as she is subservient to his masculine gaze" (Cass 122). The trajectory of *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* highlights the danger of obsessive fantasy that is hinted at in the original short story.

Both Malinda Lo and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, though their writing styles and literary genres differ, have attempted to revisit and reevaluate classic fairy tale narratives. In doing so, they have subverted the original meaning of the tales. Lo's novel is an empowering tale of coming of age and coming into one's own. When Ash frees herself from the shackles of her fairy enchantment, Lo changes the traditional narrative, transforming it into a powerful tale of choices made and enchantment resisted. Garcia Marquez's short story leaves the reader to draw their own conclusions, but uses the setting of the airplane to create a suspended reality in which the reader is forced to see the enchantment of female passivity play out through the narrator's obsessive male gaze. In comparing the male and female experiences of enchantment it becomes strikingly clear that an escape into fantasy, though sometimes psychologically beneficial, can pose a very serious and all-consuming threat to a person's grasp on themselves and connection to the real world around them.

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