

Through (With) the Looking Glass: A Reflection

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The first ‘moment’ of our critical reflection, following the conventions of standard Jungian interpretation, explores the fairy tale as an expression of the human psyche.¹ Although the archetypes, as C. G. Jung points out, have in fact been subjected to “conscious elaboration” by the time they appear in fairy tales, nevertheless the external events and characters of both myth and fairy tale can be seen as valid expressions of internal, psychological dynamics. “In myths and fairytales, as in dreams,” Jung states, “the psyche tells its own story. . .” (CW 9 (1) pars. 6, 400).

Our story (based on Grimms’ “The Twelve Dancing Princesses”) begins in the realm of the traditional fairy tale, with its magical potions and secret passageways—and with its obligatory King at center stage. As happens often in fairy tales, we know almost immediately that the King’s world is in a state of mysterious disarray. He is finding it impossible to sleep, and thus we are given the first suggestion of imbalance in the (masculine) psyche between the conscious and unconscious realms. The King’s twelve daughters, who represent here the unconscious feminine or collective anima function, have recently begun to protest their confinement.² Until now, they have kept their dancing secret, hidden under cover of night. But their pleasure and desire have only increased under their father’s repressive regime, and what has been forbidden suddenly seeks an outlet, careening wildly, dangerously, into view, demanding to be acknowledged. Daylight anxieties disrupt the King’s rest; nighttime obsessions intrude on the tasks of the day. The natural rhythms are out of synch.

From the perspective of the dominant masculine force, the sudden appearance of the collective feminine is viewed as a potential threat, a disturbance needing to be managed and contained. In his essay, “Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype,” Jung warns against being cut off from one’s unconscious roots:

[When] it is no longer possible to maintain contact with [the archetypes, “the primordial images of life”], then the tremendous sum of energy stored up in these images. . . falls back into the unconscious. . . . In this way man is delivered over to his conscious side, and reason becomes the arbiter of right and wrong, of good and evil. I am far from wishing to belittle the divine gift of reason, man’s highest faculty. But in the role of absolute tyrant it has no

meaning—no more than light would have in a world where its counterpart, darkness, was absent. (CW 9 (1) par. 174)

In contrast to his many daughters, whose lives are defined by relationship, the King appears isolated and withdrawn. His interactions with his daughters are conducted mostly at a distance, and thus it is no surprise that he has nothing but an empty suit of armor to keep him company. In light of these realities, the mutiny being fomented in the castle's underground can also be seen as a positive force, potentially able to renew a world become rule-bound and spiritless under the King's one-sided domination.

If fairy tales reveal the psyche, then, we have before us both emotional crisis and spiritual opportunity. The resources of consciousness, embodied by the King, are clearly inadequate. Because the goals he has attempted to impose on his daughters have become life-denying limitations, he is now experiencing a growing awareness of his own sterility and weakness. Life as he intended it is not working out, and he is at an impasse.

The difficulties experienced by the King can be said to apply to him both as an individual and as a carrier of collective cultural attitudes. Thus, the King comes to represent in our story the rigidity of rule by the fathers, or patriarchy. According to Marie Louise von Franz, consciousness—rarely capable of staying attuned to “all that is going on within”—“always tends to be too narrow, or to stay too long on one track. . . . In mythology, there are so often impotent or sickly or helpless and aged, rather than brilliant kings, for these represent the unadapted collective attitude” (80).

The failure to remain in touch with the unconscious can precipitate the kind of crisis (individual as well as cultural) that, for Jung, often occurs when the sense of entitlement assumed by consciousness must give way to necessity. Such crises can, in turn, become catalysts for the development of a larger psychic center, one that incorporates both consciousness and the unconscious—a center that Jung calls the *self* (CW 9 (1) par. 315).

Recently, postmodern critiques of the idea of the self have called into question the desire for wholeness at the heart of standard Jungian interpretation, thereby permitting exploration of new psychic paradigms. Feminist theory especially has enabled a move away from the problematic gender assumptions characteristic of earlier systems by transferring the feminine from margin to center. Working within this theoretical construct, we have in this essay allowed the feminine to claim subject position and take center stage. “Through (With) the Looking Glass” was written to interrogate these possibilities.

The Second 'Moment'

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Our focus moves to issues of gender as the second ‘moment’ of our critical approach begins with the King’s descent into sleep. A traditional Jungian approach to fairy tales often defines *masculine consciousness* as the hero and *feminine anima* as the hero’s counterpart.³ When the central figure of a fairy tale is female, it is often the case—as von Franz points out—that she continues to represent the anima in masculine psychology. But at the same time, such figures can also reflect the psyches of real women. “It is a fairly good guess,” von Franz concludes, “to say that some fairy tales illustrate more the real woman and others the man’s anima, according to the sex of the last person who wrote down the story, thereby giving it a slightly different tinge” (3). Since the King remains comatose for the rest of our story while Little Grace steps forward to assume the role of consciousness, “Through (With) the Looking Glass” can be said to function as an intentional female narrative, with female transformation its primary focus. Thus, our fairy tale, to use von Franz’s terms, comes to “illustrate more the real woman.”

We are hereby tracing a movement that occurred historically within Jungian thinking itself. As Susan Rowland points out in her excellent study, Jung: A Feminist Revision, “A defining feature of Jung’s treatment of gender is his placing of the feminine at the centre of his psychology while at the same time displacing women as social, material and historical beings” (44). In the last half of her book Rowland documents the thinking of recent feminists working within the Jungian tradition who are elaborating theories of gender designed to be used in the service of women’s material lives. Our fairy tale, however, takes as its focus the salient moment, during the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement, that served as the necessary precondition for this later work.⁴ Von Franz, whose major study, The Feminine in Fairytales, was originally published in 1972, draws our attention to the Women’s Movement, allowing us to see the process of female transformation as having both psychological and historical expression:

This slow movement of development is probably the sum of thousands of individual reactions which in the course of centuries has mounted and suddenly broken out as a movement in time. Possibly the bitterness resulting from being rejected and insufficiently appreciated, experienced by many thousands of women, brought forth the collective outburst of women’s emancipation. . . . It slowly developed in many individuals, and then suddenly appeared on the surface so that people became aware of it. Previously reactions had taken place underground. Thus there are movements which have a psychological background and are the sum of many individual experiences. (3)

In our fairy tale, when Little Grace recommends the upcoming Women's Convention as an opportunity to break the spell that "makes us think we're perfectly happy—even though we're trapped behind locked doors," she is preparing to escape the confines of The Story, the androcentric narrative that has defined and limited the princesses' roles. Though, as Rowland's work illustrates, masculine bias in Jungian thinking can be mitigated by a more deconstructive reading, nevertheless Jungian psychology often appears to fit women with what we might call the anima's glass slipper.⁵ Some of Jung's pronouncements, for example, when taken at face value, seem to suggest that woman—whose "consciousness is characterized more by the connective quality of Eros"—is by definition a more primitive, relational, and instinctual being. In women, Jung states in his essay on anima and animus, "Eros is an expression of their true nature, while their Logos [discrimination and cognition] is often only a regrettable accident" (*Aspects* 171).

Theorists working during the time of the Women's Movement to integrate Jung and feminism began the important task of revising and extending these limiting assumptions.

Stirrings

As representative of the initial liberatory stirrings within the Jungian paradigm, Little Grace, who arises as an individuating force to embody our story's transformative consciousness, must differentiate herself from her sisters and emerge from her immersion in the collective anima.

The subterranean world the princesses enter every night can be seen as a dream from which they find it impossible to wake. The King has, in effect, buried them alive. But it is the combined force of their own addictive pleasures and their collective insistence on conformity that makes it impossible to consider escape. Thus, unless subjected to outside intervention, they are doomed as the Dancing Princess Collective to move back and forth between morning and night, between upper- and underworlds in an endlessly repetitive cycle of descent and return, without ever being able to reap their journey's potential rewards. This is the psychological equivalent of the curse, the spell that could dance their shoes to pieces to the end of time.

But the subterranean world has another side, and escape is in fact possible. It's a place where hidden things can be nurtured until they're ready to assume the light of day. It's a place where personal space can be carved out for resisting obligation. The book Little Grace has secured under her mattress is such a secret thing, the first of several hidden stories whose collective power will eventually combat the King's dominant narrative.

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Little Grace's appearance in our story signals a growing resistance to her sisters' imprisonment in unthinking conformity. Though she too dances in the subterranean depths, the feminine does not simply happen to her as a kind of fate. Instead, she has begun to 'read' her woman's life, a skill that allows her a "room of her own," a separate psychic space where she can trust, and follow, her own intuitions. Her skill also permits her to look beyond personal concerns to read the signs of the culture. She sees into the larger milieu with its promise of 'meetings,' where outmoded psychic configurations can potentially arrange themselves in new ways.

In these readings she has the added support of the trees of silver, gold and diamonds. The World Tree, frequently associated with the Mother archetype, often appears in goddess-centered stories as a source of abundance, its fruit offered generously to any human supplicant (Campbell 627 – 8). In our story, the 'fruit' produced by the trees in the underworld provide a valuable light, by means of which Little Grace is able to foresee the individuation process beckoning just ahead. Our story suggests, then, that the collective gift offered by these trees takes the form of promised enlightenment, a state of being potentially more satisfying than the seductive pull of safety and conformity.

The Matriarchate

It is no accident that exploration of the psychology of real women, which the transition to Jungian feminism⁶ has made possible, should take us into the realm of the matriarchate, specifically that of the mythic figure known as the Kore. Originally arising within pre-patriarchal Neolithic cultures as the 'Maiden' aspect of the Great Goddess, the Kore finds later expression in the Demeter / Persephone story, as well as in the Sumerian tale of Inanna's Descent to the Underworld. In both cases, the Kore figure, after descending to the underworld, experiences a subsequent rebirth. Persephone, as the 'seed' that has been buried in the earth for the winter months, comes to life again in the spring. Likewise, when Inanna, having been sentenced to death and forced to hang from a hook for three days and nights, takes her place once more in the upper world, she has been initiated, through her sufferings, into the mysteries of transformation.⁷ Though Jung insists that the Kore figure is still partially representative of the anima, he states that "in the formation of the Demeter-Kore myth the feminine influence so far outweighed the masculine that the latter had practically no significance" (*Aspects* 145).

Her Fears

Like Inanna or Persephone, both of whom undergo a descent into the unknown, Little Grace enters the murky arena of death and rebirth willing to

experience the trials of transformation. Here, taking on substance directly in front of her, are her greatest fears. In the world of the fairy tale, the women at the Convention represent the rejected ones.⁸ In the realm of the psyche they represent the shadow or what has been disavowed: undesirable patterns and habits projected onto 'others' to keep them from being recognized or assimilated.

Jungian feminism further defines the transformative process as it occurs for women by suggesting that the shadow should be taken as a cultural as well as personal phenomenon. Irene Claremont de Castillejo, for example, includes, as a necessary part of female individuation, the task of making conscious the shadow elements that have collected around women as participants in patriarchy (Knowing Woman 41 – 43). If we examine the development of Near Eastern mythology from an historical perspective, for instance, it is clear that the collective female shadow first materialized when various god-centered nomadic tribes began to conquer and control settled goddess-centered communities around 2500 BCE. Eventually, the mother / daughter configuration that had originally characterized the Great Mother became split into distinct entities. As the upperworld aspects of the Great Mother were differentiated into individualized figures and subsumed under patriarchy as the wives and daughters of the father gods, the mother aspect, as a representative of the old chthonic order, was forgotten or relegated to the underworld. Here she took up residence as Hecate, Medusa or Ereshkigal, powerful female figures associated with the earth, with darkness and, in some cases, with evil.⁹

This mythological development has its psychological counterpart. According to traditional Jungian thinkers such as Erich Neumann, the archetype of the Great Mother carries a negative underside. This dark aspect of the Mother, whose effects are seen by Neumann as paralyzing to the developing (male) consciousness, has found its way into masculine mythology and psychology as the female dragon, the Stone Mother, the castrating terror, whose powers must be destroyed once and for all to enable the male hero to attain maturity.¹⁰ From a female perspective, however, the 'witch' can now be seen as a cultural shadow-construction that embodies male fears of female power. In settings where female power is feared, the figure of the witch has often been used to keep women in their place, and women have traditionally acquiesced in the face of its threat. Instead of either destroying or disavowing this shadow, however, Jungian feminism suggests that it be brought to consciousness where its energies can be affirmed and utilized.¹¹

Thus, in our story, instead of running away from what she has been taught to despise, Little Grace stands her ground. An enormous challenge faces her: to see these women not as a monolithic evil presence but as interesting and powerful aspects of herself. To break the spell, this is the mirror she must confront, accept, and eventually step through. What has been disguised by The Story as ugly, dangerous, and life destroying, becomes something else as Little Grace faces the looking glass. Suddenly feminine self-assertion, including all those parts of the self

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considered ‘unacceptable’ by conventional culture, is no longer something that must be hidden away, repressed or denied. Instead it can now be seen as a source of personal power that allows body and spirit to inhabit the world freely, without shame or apology.

The Door

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.
--Adrienne Rich¹²

The looking glass stands as a door between two worlds. On one side is the timeless realm of fairy tale, characterized by unreflective repetition, in which women are expected to adhere to narrowly defined domestic roles. On the other side is a world marked by time and history in which strong women are increasingly able to act as self-defining agents of change. Peering into this world, Little Grace sees for the first time real women who can serve for her as models of wholeness and self-determination. For a moment she stands suspended between opposites. Loyalty to the old teachings and fear of disobeying the fathers pull her in one direction, while the call of the wider world, with its promised journey of individuation, beckons in the other.

One of the most important factors in allowing her to break this impasse are the stories now coming to light, stories whose collective power is ultimately strong enough to shatter the old one-way mirrors and their deceptive reflections. These new narratives, whose plots are shaped by feminist thinking, lay the groundwork for transformation by calling into question essential assumptions of the old oppressive Story. One by one, the women at the conference employ the revolutionary power of consciousness-raising. As they tell the truth about their lives, previously hidden, sometimes ‘shameful’ experiences begin to inhabit a larger space. No longer associated with personal inadequacy or weakness, these experiences can now be considered effects of a culture intent on shaping women in limited, often damaging ways.

In addition, the new feminist narratives encourage a woman-centered perspective. This point of view requires a redefinition of the feminine, one that, in Virginia Woolf’s words, asks women to “think back through [their] mothers” (79) in order to discover in their collective survival a legacy of female strength.

Construction of this new paradigm has the power to move women away from a 'home' that has become increasingly inadequate and detrimental, to a 'strange new country': a journey that can be compared to an evolutionary leap. Acceptance of this potentially transformative paradigm occurs in our story just as our protagonist embraces her larger, more powerful name. She will now be called, simply, Grace.

Once Upon a Time: The New Stories

Our fairy tale does not end with a simplistic, one-dimensional happily ever after. The castle world we return to is in disarray. Grace resists enclosure within the marital union (*conjunctionis*) offered by Jungian theory as the goal of individuation, and thus, construction of the integrated self, which Jung speaks of as the ultimate end of psychological development, has been at the very least deferred. What might be seen in a modernist context as 'failure,' is in fact consistent with the deconstructive insights developed by the French thinker Lacan who claimed that such a union with the unconscious "is impossible (except for brief moments of ecstasy) and is a focus for a person's desire" (Rowland 109).¹³

The Story has been superceded on several different levels. Within the old essentialist paradigm, Grace would have stood for all women everywhere, her story the dominant and overriding narrative. But Grace has not simply traded positions with the King. Rather, she now embodies one of many female subjectivities, each poised to discover, and tell, her own story.¹⁴ Refusal of the pressures of traditional narrative closure has allowed in to our fairy tale the more open-ended possibilities available to the new Jungian feminist narratives.

Thus Grace is underway, setting off into a world released at last from the rigidity of The Story, whose paths are (thankfully) no longer straight, and whose skies are no longer cloudless. While retaining her loving connection to her father, she has gained, through her trials, a psychological strength that will protect her as she sets out on her travels. We also suspect, as she watches the upperworld trees dancing before her, that she has assimilated the 'food of enlightenment' offered by the Tree of the underworld and will now bring to her travels the gift of a wise, imaginative seeing. Outside the castle door, where the plots and narrative lines remain unwritten and where human lives can at last be self-defined, Grace will be given the opportunity to discover, and write, her own stories, her own account of history as it unfolds before her.

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Notes

- ¹ In much of traditional Jungian thinking, the *masculine* psyche is assumed as the standard.
- ² See Marie Louise von Franz's extensive discussion of the anima in fairy tales in The Feminine in Fairytales (Irving, Texas: Spring Publications, 1972).
- ³ See Jung's discussion in "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," in his Collected Works 9 (1) / The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1959), especially par. 433; see also von Franz, The Feminine in Fairytales 13.
- ⁴ Though these terms are contested, the First Wave of feminism is usually thought to encompass the women's suffrage movement of the 19th and early 20th century. The term Second Wave usually refers to the period of feminist activism that began during the 1960s.
- ⁵ Rowland states, "Jung seemed to model many of his pronouncements on women and femininity upon his notion of his own unconscious anima" (19).
- ⁶ This is Rowland's term.
- ⁷ For the tale of Demeter and Persephone see Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, Classical Mythology, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1971). For Inanna's story, see Diane

Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

⁸ The women at the conference include Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Adrienne Rich, Bella Abzug, Gloria Anzaldua and/or Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer. We like to assume that the conference included many others.

⁹ See Karen Elias-Button, "Athene and Medusa: A Women's Myth," Anima 5 (1979), 118. For a more extensive overview of these changes, see also Elias-Button, "Goddesses of the Light and Dark," Anima 5 (1978), 26 – 33.

¹⁰ See Erich Neumann, The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1955), 54 – 95, *passim*. See also Elias-Button, "Journey Into An Archetype: The Dark Mother in Contemporary Women's Poetry," Anima 4 (1978), 6.

¹¹ See Elias-Button, "Journey Into An Archetype," 5 – 11.

¹² Adrienne Rich's poem, "Prospective Immigrants Please Note," comes from her collection, The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New: 1950 – 1984 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 51 – 52.

¹³ Rowland asserts that because of "the priority given [by Jung] to plurality and androgyny in the unconscious. . . positive potentials for a number of feminist approaches exist" (45). One such approach includes seeing some aspects of Jung's thinking as similar to that of Lacan. Jung too, Rowland believes, would affirm Lacan's point due to his belief in the slipperiness of the unconscious.

¹⁴ As Rowland puts it, feminism "developed into an alliance of 'differences' rather than a single body designed to represent one category of 'women'" (27).