SNOW WHITE

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NZIPP Cineforum 15/03/19

**There were several versions of the tale of Snow White by the brothers Grimm. It’s thought some of these tales have their origin in true stories – as indeed there was a magic mirror owned by an envious and unpleasant stepmother of a kind and beautiful girl in Lohr in Germany. Lohr was famous for glass work, and particularly accurately reflecting mirrors (mirrors that told the truth). The mirrors were also painted with aphorisms describing the person who had commissioned them.**

A magic mirror, 1.60 meters in height and ornately decorated, proven to be a product of the Lohr Mirror Manufacture around 1720, is closely linked to Snow White’s stepmother. It was likely a gift from Snow White’s father, Philipp Christoph, to his second wife Claudia Elisabeth. The mirror can still be viewed in the Spessart Museum in the Lohr Castle – a highlight of the exhibition of the Spessart glass manufacture. The upper right corner of “The Talking Mirror” contains a clear reference to her self-love (“Amour Propre”). You can imagine the rage of Snow White’s stepmother when this mirror constantly reminded her of her jealousy and pride.

**In the first version, published in 1812, the real mother of Snow White does not die - she becomes the malignant mother of the beautiful child. At some point in the history of literature, the malevolence of the envious mother was rejected. In the 18th and 19th century, the archetypal mother figure was adoring, self sacrificing, all loving and all giving. She was often promoted to sainthood by her early death in childbirth.**

**In the 1856 version, the real mother is portrayed as such a saint, who died in childbirth at the beginning of the child’s life. Before giving birth and dying, she had prayed for a child with a skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood and hair as black as ebony. It sounds like a dead child. Snow White, as a child in the Grimm’s fairytale, is little more than a doll, with no identity of her own. She is loved and indulged as a little girl by her wealthy father.**

**The stepmother archetype was seen as greedy, self-centred and often cruel; an interloper who was eager to have her husband’s material wealth, but not the care of his children.**

**When Snow White’s stepmother arrives in the castle, she is sublimely uninterested in this little girl, until there comes a day when her enchanted talking mirror tells her that Snow White has surpassed her and become the most beautiful woman in the land. In this movie version of the story, we see a mirror playing a part immediately as the Lady Claudia sets foot in the castle, showing a distorted and ugly reflection as she walks past.**

**In the book “The Madwoman in the Attic” (subtitled The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination) published in 2000 by Yale Nota Bene, feminist writers Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar speak of the glass prison theme in Snow White. The original mother is sewing at an ebony framed window when she pricks her finger and blood drips into the white snow. The Stepmother is imprisoned in the mirror’s reflection. Finally Snow White is put into a glass coffin. The woman’s power is sealed off from the world outside.**

**“To be caught and trapped in a mirror rather than a window is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self images as if seeking a viable self.” (Gilbert and Gubar)**

**The Mirror in Cohn’s version of Snow White is a heavy gothic closet, held together by a carved pair of hands. When the hands loosen and it swings open, it contains not just the mirror, but the spirit of the Stepmother’s mother. It is this spirit that conducts Claudia’s power and allows her to perform toxic magic. The witch mother begets the witch.**

**In her book “Understanding the Borderline Mother” (2000 Jason Aronson), Christina Lawson describes the witch mother’s terror of vulnerability and loss of control.**

**“Portraying the enemy as weak, incompetent or worthless reduces the threat to her. Thus, she is pleased when others feel diminished, vulnerable and powerless. The Witch’s children sense her sadistic enjoyment at their expense”.**

**Later in the movie, we see Claudia with another glass prison - an hourglass in which a tiny bird is trapped – which she turns with malignant glee. As the unveiled repulsive old witch who offers the poisoned apple that has been conjured from her own body, she is triumphant and joyful.**

**At the base of all envious feelings is intense self shame, and a sense of insecurity and inadequacy. Claudia’s precarious self esteem waxes and wanes in a flurry of narcissism throughout the first part of the story, sometimes soaring as high as her beautiful voice, other times plunging as her secret mirror reminds her of her shortcomings. When her self esteem is attacked, by the mother in the mirror and the attention given to her stepdaughter, she becomes full of murderous intent.**

In 1656, a murder ballad called “The Fairest Flower of Serving Men” was published – it was by prolific balladeer Laurence Price. It started like this:

My mother did me deadly spite

For she sent thieves in the dead of night

Put my servants all to flight:

They robbed my bower, they slew my knight

They slew my baby in my arms.

They left me naught to wrap him in

But the bloody sheet that he lay in.

They left me naught to dig his grave

But the bloody sword that killed my babe

And all alone I dug the grave

And all alone the tears I shed

And all alone the bell I rang

And all alone the psalm I sung.

My head I leaned against a block

And there I cut my lovely locks.

**No reason is given for the mother’s deadly spite, but one may assume that extreme envy is behind it – and it is the mother, not the stepmother who is murderous. The daughter’s desperate grief, suffering and isolation caused by the mother’s bitter hatred is palpable. Like Snow White, the hated girl must disappear to save her own life. She cuts her beautiful hair off and lives as a man, avoiding her mother’s future malevolent interest in her by changing gender.**

**The competition between mother and daughter for the attention of the father has long been a subject of psychoanalytic literature. The classical Freudian standpoint is that this rivalry derives from the ambivalence towards the mother as a love/hate object following the child’s babyhood idealization, and then denigration of the mother. The daughter’s love then focuses on the father; the son’s remains with the mother. Between a son and mother, this has become known as the Oedipus complex. Taken from a Greek myth, it is the story of a son, Oedipus, who kills the parent of the same sex, Laius, and proceeds to take his mother Jocasta as his partner. In “Jocasta’s Children” (1980, Routledge), Christiane Olivier examines Jocasta’s part in the Oedipus myth – in other words, the mother desires the son as a partner as much as the son desires the mother. Much has been written since about the mother’s powerful part in the interactions between herself and her children, and the variety of ways in which her own primitive desires and projections play out in those intense relationships.**

**Thanks to the much read and filmed version of the classic fairytale and the frills, jolly dwarves, batting eyelashes and sugar coating of Mr Disney, most of us know that Snow White is threatened with death more than once by her stepmother. The first attempt on her life is by the huntsman sent to kill her and bring back her liver and lungs, so the stepmother can eat them. In Cohn’s version, the stepmother’s mute brother is dispatched to take her heart and bring it back. Gustav is one of several impotent men in the tale. His attempt fails, and he kills a boar instead. Claudia’s triumphant and sensual delight at eating what she thinks is her stepdaughter’s heart is one of the most shocking moments of the movie and a tribute to Sigourney Weaver’s acting.**

**Snow White, (or Lily as she is called in the movie), escapes to be taken in not by seven dwarves (more impotent little men), but seven men who have varying degrees of power. There is a dwarf amongst them – the others have a range of mutilations and damage from previous trauma. When Lily follows them to the gold mine and they are stripped to the waist, she sees an energized and sensual picture of manhood. They are also authentic and real people who suffer and care and love – a stark contrast to the superficial artifice of the castle.**

**Lily’s father, up to that point, is verging on the powerful but never quite makes it. His inability to find his daughter in the forest and his subsequent fall from his horse make him completely helpless – even more so when Claudia mixes her poison into the pot of soup in the kitchen to incapacitate him further.**

**Dr Guttenberg, the character who represents the Prince, is also weak and disabled by his desire for Claudia and he is easily seduced by her. In a surprising twist, it is one of the potent ruffians who rescues Lily and performs effective CPR on her to get rid of Claudia’s toxic apple chunk in her throat and it is he who becomes the true prince as Dr Guttenberg plunges to his death from the castle battlements.**

**Bruno Bettelheim in his psychoanalytic text on fairytales “The Uses of Enchantment” (1976 Thames and Hudson) suggests that the Stepmother and Snow White are locked in an Oedipal struggle for the love of the father. The movie certainly doesn’t avoid the sexual relationship between Claudia and Baron Hoffman. At one point, the child watches their passionate embrace and Claudia triumphantly watches the child watching. After Baron Hoffman’s injury, however, he disappears into the shadows of the castle and the intensity of the conflict shifts back to the mirror, between woman and woman, mother and daughter, self and self.**

**Unlike the Grimm’s tale, in Cohn’s version the stepmother/witch becomes pregnant as instructed by her mirror mother, and gives birth to a stillborn son. Diane Purkiss, in her wonderful study “The Witch in History” (2003 Routledge), writes of the myriad of superstitions, rituals and beliefs around the birth of a baby. In mediaeval times and onwards, witches were thought to be capable of influencing the outcome of any pregnancy and killing the baby in the womb. Witches could turn breastmilk into blood, making it toxic to the child.**

**Mother and baby at the time of delivery were thought to be in a liminal stage – in other words, at the threshold of life and death – and therefore vulnerable to the dark maleficence of the witch. Claudia in Cohn’s movie is in intense physical and emotional distress at the time of the birth of her son. One way we can make sense of this is that her own witch mother has intruded from the enchanted mirror into the delivery room and killed her baby to punish her for her failures. The mirror is liminal – a threshold between reality and the supernatural. So Claudia sees herself, after her traumatic childbirth, as ravaged ugly and exhausted – the reality – and her mother as young, immortal and eternally beautiful. The baby also remains in the liminal state, alternating between life and death, almost discarded and burnt then rescued and brought back to his mother.**

**Eventually it is the mirror itself that sustains a lethal wound as Lily stabs it over and over again. Claudia’s image becomes unstable and all the repulsive elements of her, her age and ugliness and envy that once were hidden are now visible to all. The mirror shatters and fragments; becomes a set of jagged arrows that fly at Claudia and lodge in her head.**

**I’d like to leave you to watch the movie with a verse from the wonderful Anne Sexton’s poem in her collection “Transformations”:**

Suddenly one day the mirror replied, Queen, you are full fair, ‘tis true,

but Snow White is fairer than you.

Until that moment Snow White had been no more important than a dust mouse under the bed.

But now the queen saw brown spots on her hand and four whiskers over her lip.

So she condemned Snow White to be hacked to death.

Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter, and I will salt it and eat it.

The hunter, however, let his prisoner go and brought a boar’s heart back to the castle.

The queen chewed it up like a cube steak.

Now I am fairest, she said, lapping her slim white fingers.