

PEACE: The Princess and her Four Suitors

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 18 Oct 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Oct 2000, 16:12

This is the first case of a fairy tale story in PEACE that clearly and obviously relates directly to Den's life: "The Princess..." is parallel to Olivia and her suitors.

In brief, the tale tells of a strange prophesy regarding the infant princess (a paraphrase: earth, sea, air will try; but fire will win her), for which reason she is placed in a tower at sea. She grows to marrying age, and a series of suitors brave the dangers to attempt to win her. Three suitors try and fail, then the story breaks off.

Princess Elaia . . . (Greek "of the olive") . . . Olivia
Prince of Gnomes . . . Earth . . . Professor Robert Peacock
Young merchant . . . Sea James Macafee (dept. store owner) Prince of Clouds . . . Air
Stewart Blaine (banker)
_____ Fire Julius Smart (alchemist)

Peacock is assigned to Earth, fitting with his archaeological field trips; his troglodyte fantasy expounded to Olivia (almost a courtship song).

Macafee is assigned to merchant/Sea, not too bad since his department store has things from around the world (transported by sea), and his courtship involves that Chinese egg.

Blaine, whose courtship remains unrecorded (but the princess makes her third suitor do all sorts of dirty, degrading work).

Smart, who married Olivia (and alchemists traditionally created their products through fire).

So far, so good.

The story itself seems to be one taken from Andrew Lang's fairy books (based upon the context it appears in; the style of the story; the illustrations it has), and since the text of PEACE mentions THE GREEN FAIRY BOOK, we might reasonably assume it to be there.

It is not. Nor is it in any of the many other Lang books.

Nevermind research--intuitively we know that the structure itself is unusual: we expect there to be three suitors, with the third one successful; we also worry a bit about the grimm side of "fire will win her."

This common sense is buttressed by research in fairy tale index: never a case of four suitors.

Three suitors: princess offered to correct guesser (3 caskets); princess won by the combined efforts of three suitors, so to whom is she awarded? (these stories feature a judge who is neither princess nor suitor).

Five suitors: "The Lady and Her Five Suitors," a comedy in THE ARABIAN NIGHTS where the adultress wins.

Six men: "The Vampire's Fourth Story: A Woman Who Told the Truth" (in VIKRAM AND THE VAMPIRE, another Burton translation, this one from India).

And yet, the pattern of four suitors is not all that unfamiliar to us, since it appears in TBOTNS.

Princess . . . Foila (armiger's daughter)

First . . . Hallvard (the seal hunter)

Second . . . Melito (the farm boy)

Third . . . Loyal to the Group of Seventeen (Ascian officer P.O.W.) Fourth . . . Foila/death by fire

Yep, there's that "bride burning" thing again.

So for the time being, let's consider this a Wolfe story that we have seen at least two times.

Within the context of PEACE, it amounts to another subtle forgery (amid countless forgeries); just as the later story of "ben Yahya and the Marid" amounts to an ARABIAN NIGHTS forgery.

So the "Princess" fragment reflects and explains the fragment we have of Olivia's courtship, marriage (to Julius Smart, the fourth suitor), married life (adultress and glutton), and later fate (killed by a car while crossing the street). Combining these two fragments, we can guess at the parts missing to both: the courtship of Blaine, for example; and how the fairy tale would end.

But wait: Olivia's life after marriage seems like an odd match to the fairy tale beginning, doesn't it? (The poor little princess morphs into a destructive sow goddess?) Well, it did to me, at least, until I looked at the fairy tale more closely.

If the princess is a virtual prisoner, we would expect the king to act more like her jailor, but instead he asks after each vanished suitor, and the princess gives vague, elusive answers. This suggests that the princess has the power, and is living apart by her own design and desire (which certainly seems to fit Olivia); and it almost seems as if the princess has actually _consumed_ the three men.

Well! This puts a different spin on things: the princess is perhaps less Andromeda than she is a siren. Her exile is perhaps less for her safety than the safety of the kingdom. In short, she is a monster-bride.

Ah, but she is also the bride of Frankenstein. <g>

=mantis=

Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Oct 2000, 16:12 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

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Adam Stephanides — 22 Oct 2000, 12:29 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

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Macafee is assigned to merchant/Sea, not too bad since his department store has things from around the world (transported by sea), and his courtship involves that Chinese egg.

In a way, though, Peacock's and Macafee's courtships are inversions of the fairy tale. Peacock discovers rare, hidden things but (presumably unlike the prince of gnomes) keeps them for himself. And in the Chinese egg affair, Olivia tries to maneuver Macafee into using his trading prowess for her benefit, like the merchant; but her plan backfires somehow, and she ends up buying the egg herself.

Blaine, whose courtship remains unrecorded (but the princess makes her third suitor do all sorts of dirty, degrading work).

And the inversion also applies to Blaine: he makes out that running a bank doesn't interest him and is beneath him, but from his overheard words to Ricepie (p. 91 of the first edition) we know this is a pose.

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Are any of the many embedded tales in Wolfe's works taken directly from (as opposed to being modelled on) an earlier work? None spring immediately to mind.

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Cute; but Weer explicitly attributes the princess's exile to the king's jealousy of the princess's future husband (62). Nor does his questioning strike me as inconsistent with his role as jailor: he wants to know if the unwelcome suitors are still threats.

It's true, though, that neither the princess nor Olivia are portrayed as very likeable: both try to milk their suitors for all they're worth (the princess more successfully). Certainly Olivia, at least as portrayed by Weer, comes off badly compared with the principal women in Weer's pre-Olivia life: her scheming around the Chinese egg contrasts unfavorably with Weer's mother's generosity with her father's gift, and her cosmopolitanism comes off as shallow and artificial compared with Hannah's "roots". (On the other hand, the paragraph on p. 68 beginning "Nor death, but only once" seems to be Weer's tribute to his aunt.)

Incidentally, there's an odd parallel between the princess's suitors and the imaginary races Weer describes in the course of describing his knife, in one of the most enigmatic passages of an enigmatic book. (16-17) The orange people worship sundails, and the first suitor has a shield that looks like a sundail; the scarlet people are skilled in reatil merchandising, and the second suitor is a merchant. The parallelism is less clear with the third suitor, but his bodyguard may reflect the russet brown people's skill at soldiery. What, if anything, this means I have no idea.

--Adam