

Short Story 91: Love, Among the Corridors

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 13 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 13 Aug 2014, 15:08

"Love Among the Corridor" first appeared in **Interzone** in 1984. It is collected in **Storeys from the Old Hotel**. SUMMARY: A female embodiment of love walks through a palace of statuary, "Her own footfalls echoed after her, reverberating from stone floor to ceiling of stone, so that she felt herself pursued, though she knew herself to be the pursuer. .. She could not bear to think of where she had begun to walk (for that was nothingness) or where she went (for that was to the grave)." She brings to life the bronze statue of Harlequin with a touch: "At once it seemed the sun had broken through the ivy and the evening". He leaps from the pedestal and they converse. She says she is "Amor ?" and he responds, "I too. But who are you, and how came you to walk in this palace?" She replies that no one can answer that. She says that Chivalry was her father and Poetry her mother, and that he is now dead. Harlequin waxes into Shakespearean speech: "What" Brave Chivalry late? But Chivalry cannot be late, or else "tis not Chivalry."

Poetry "still lives — but she is old and crank and ill." Harlequin confesses that her touch thrilled him to life, and she talks of touching another to see if he, too, will be quickened. They consider touching a dragon on a vase or a painted mask upon the wall before Harlequin implores her to touch the entire palace. She says she cannot, but he insists only a single touch will work, as it did for him. ?She knelt upon the floor, embraced a column, and blew a kiss to the ceiling."

"I knew it could not be," she says, while Harlequin says that he knew it could.

"She took his hand again, and together they wandered down the many and dividing corridors that lead to the grave." The marble flushes rose and a flowers bloom, and Harlequin exclaims: "It's true! Amor, you can, you do! You did! Oh Amor, don't you see" It only took longer because the palace is so huge.

"And with trembling hand [Amor] touched her own heart."

COMMENTARY:

Wolfe insists that these types of stories are actually not simple allegories, but literary myths — here, the exploration is one of love as a real woman, with the power to quicken things to life. Since she is "real" in the story, she can be subject to the same uncertainties and frailties of all humanity, including loneliness, dread, and self-doubt. The base reading is that she overlooks all the wonderful statuary and is struck by a different, patchwork character such as the Harlequin, (whose role evolved over time from a nimble and subversive servant chasing after his love or any other woman who is being given attention to a more romantic figure) and selects him. Love's touch brings him to life, and, fearing rivals and other things coming between them, he suggests she let love bring the entire palace to life (in this case certainly the palace is a metaphor for civilization and the world, and there is one other Christian resonance which we must discuss fleetingly.) The masks on the wall are typical of the *commedia dell'art*, and Harlequin warns that they will prove false friends.

At first, it seems that nothing happens, and they march toward the grave.

The meta-commentary worked into the text, that chivalry is dead and poetry ailing, and that love can come from nothing but heads inexorably towards death and oblivion, pursuing even beautiful women whose hearts are yet incapable of love, is undercut by Amor's touching of her own heart — she has brought the entire dead palace to life, and love itself then becomes a reality.

The masks on the wall of false friends and the dragons of mythic and pagan art are threats to the Harlequin, and he warns against granting them vitality.

Since the *commedia dell'arte* originated in Rome, and, as Lydus (and the Wolfe-wiki) acknowledge, the secret name of Rome is Amor, the presence of these small details in the story hint at a very religious subtext as well (another possible secret name for Rome is Flora). When she touches Harlequin, he says that his name, too, is Amor, and in his faith (but insecurity) he asks her to touch the palace itself in which they walk, which eventually blooms with life. Beyond the idea that the philosophy of loving each other and spreading it in the world creates a vital and truly living paradise that takes time to work, we see the statuary and relics of a secular authority like Rome transformed into the center of a church which, ideally at least, is based on the concept of loving your neighbor as yourself, bringing a promise of true eternal life. When Amor touches her own heart, it is no longer certain that they are headed inexorably to the grave, for love has become real and possibly even echoes salvation.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The obvious story is that of Pygmalion and Galatea, except instead of a beloved statue coming to life at the hands of Venus, here, we have a female whose heart is not fully awake bringing to life a rather mockingly romantic statue of Harlequin. Pygmalion even had a daughter, Paphus, which came to be an eponym for the city of Paphos, and perhaps this echoes the Roma/Amor palindrome.

The second literary allusion is an equally important one, the *commedia dell'arte*, from which the character Harlequin originated. These Italian plays began in Rome in the 16th century, and eventually stock characters and masks were introduced, so that the players became tropes — thus the mention of masks on the wall. In addition, Wolfe states that his story is influenced by Kipling:

"'Love, Among the Corridors' had a different genesis. When I listened to the Just So Stories (and for many years after), I didn't know they had a precursor, 'The Children of the Zodiac.' It is a work in which Kipling did what Poe is justly celebrated for doing over and over: he invented a whole new kind of story, the modern literary myth or anti-allegory... In allegory we say 'What if a giant were despair?' Then we have the giant wrestle our hero, and so on. It has always seemed an obvious idea to me, and a rather stupid one, since a giant is much more interesting than despair... But what Kipling (and the ancients) really said was much more interesting: 'What if love were a woman?'"

Kipling's story described how the Children of the Zodiac came to appreciate the pain and sorrow of human life and become enmeshed in the everyday struggles of humanity, especially Leo and Virgo, called the Girl. They at first exist independently from the passions of man and then come to understand his love, toils, and fears. The symbols of the Zodiac that lived in the world were the Bull, the Ram, the Twins, Leo, and the Girl. Against them were the Six Houses, the Scorpion,

the Balance, the Crab, the Fishes, and the Archer, and the Waterman. At first the Children are beyond any comprehension of the fears of humanity, but then they eventually come to appreciate passion and love. The Bull and the Ram help people fulfill their farming and labor tasks, and the Twins are adopted by a woman to give her joy in her age, while Leo and Virgo come to love each other and be traveling minstrels. Eventually, they die one by one after Leo asks why they serve man so when they could be so much more, killed by their opposing house. After the Girl is killed by the Crab, Leo's songs give hope to man and inspires everyone in their work and love. Eventually Leo, too, is killed by the Crab, but his songs live on, telling humanity that "whatever comes or does not come we men must not be afraid".

The epithet to "Children of the Zodiac" from Emerson is appropriate for "Love, Among the Corridors" as well:

Though thou love her as thyself.

As a self of purer clay.

Though her parting dim the day.

Stealing grace from all alive.

Heartily know

When half Gods go

The Gods arrive.

Though Amor has the semidivine status of "love", she is still a woman, and the power to inspire love that she wields is greater and more divine than herself.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The literary myth that Wolfe credits to Kipling definitely influenced many of the stories in the brown book in *The Book of the New Sun* and other works he wrote in this time period, such as those included in "Four Wolves" and "Redwood Coast Roamer". Even "The Boy Who Hooked the Sun", "At the Point of Capricorn", and "Empires of Foliage and Flower" all seem to have this same pseudo-allegorical nature which Wolfe insists is actually the opposite of allegory.

Gerry Quinn — 13 Aug 2014, 15:15 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 13/08/2014 16:08, Marc Aramini wrote:

Wolfe insists that these types of stories are actually not simple allegories, but literary myths -- here, the exploration is one of love as a real woman, with the power to quicken things to life. Since she is "real" in the story, she can be subject to the same uncertainties and frailties of all humanity, including loneliness, dread, and self-doubt.

Reminds me of the Long Sun gods.

- Gerry Quinn