

SPINNING A YARN: MYTHIC STORYTELLING IN ISABEL GREENBERG'S ONE HUNDRED NIGHTS OF HERO & NEIL GAIMAN'S THE SLEEPER AND THE SPINDLE

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The Quest: An Inherently Serious & Responsible Adventure

Narrative is everywhere. We shape narratives based on our lives, and our lives are similarly shaped by the narratives that we mirror ourselves in. As noted by Peter Brooks in his seminal study *Reading the Plot*, however, the modern period is also characterised by a deep suspicion of plot, based on an awareness of its artificiality and arbitrary relationship to time (Brooks 1992: xii). Another such suspicion is anchored in an awareness of the degree to which narratives are drenched in ideology, and the way in which they also seek to govern, steer and dictate the lives of the reader in certain political, dogmatic or cultural directions.

The following article takes its point of departure in two literary works: Isabel Greenberg's graphic novel *The One Hundred Nights of Hero* (2016) and Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell's modern fairy tale *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014). Both of these works display a simultaneous allegiance to, and a defined resistance towards, narrative, something that is particularly apparent in the way that both make use of the traditional topos of the quest, simultaneously placing us in a mythical and a social, political, and ideological landscape. Within this landscape, moreover, both texts concern themselves particularly with how narrative always stands in the danger of regurgitating the social and cultural misogyny that has traditionally been cast over women and with which feminist criticism—by necessity—is still concerned. As Christina Bacchilega postulates in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, narratives remain 'magic mirrors' that conflate mimesis, refraction, and framing in order to produce subjects (Bacchilega 1997: 10). A practice which, as will be discussed, takes place for better or for worse, especially as far as gender is concerned.

Tradition & The Individual Hero

In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), M. H. Abrams sees the quest, or the pilgrimage plot, as one of the most useful tools for discussing human life. He points to Augustine as one of the originators of such

a practise, saying that he fathered the enduring genre of literal spiritual histories while also pointing the way towards the form of Christian fiction where the significance is not literal but allegorical, and where the 'action is a journey in quest of a land or city which is the dwelling of a woman of irresistible erotic charm' (Abrams 1971: 167). In this topos, moreover, the conclusion is often signalled by a betrothal or a marriage, and the protagonist is frequently universalised in the sense of being referred to as Christian, Pilgrim, Everyman, or Mankind (ibid).

Mankind in this instance, however, does not necessarily mean humankind. The quest, rather, is a typically male narrative, which, as we can see in the narratives involving the Fisher King, typically ends up not only with marriage, but with a kingdom to come with it. For female questers, the paradigm is somewhat different, as can be seen in the archetypal narrative of Persephone and Demeter.

Traditionally, Persephone's encounter with Hades and subsequent separation from Demeter has been interpreted as a mythical representation of the life of a woman who, from the moment she reaches maturity, must replace her mother's home with that of her husband. In *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, however, Holly Blackford notes that romantic poets started to question the arc of this narrative and to employ the myth as a point of departure for exploring a deep-set ambivalence about growing up in patriarchal cultures (Blackford 2011: 1). Such ambivalence is also suggested in the early representations of the myth, for instance in the paradoxical symbolism of growth and escape. In the same way as Everyman, Persephone grows spiritually and physically, but, unlike her male counterpart, she cannot take over the rule of one kingdom and call that her own, but must, instead, oscillate between two worlds. Hence, such fluctuation stands in contrast to the archetypal male quest narrative, where, as noted by Laurence Coupe in *Myth*, fulfilment comes when the hero finds himself thoroughly at home (Coupe 1997: 71).

What is more, the female quest fully coincides with what has, since the Victorian period, been known as 'the marriage plot.' While the male quester gets hold of the holy grail in the form of marriage, the boon is also this sense of home that Coupe refers to, which entails spiritual and physical fulfilment in the land that is his to rule. Such spoils are not available to female questers, however, who are doomed to waver between the home of their father (or, in the case of Persephone, their

mother) and their husband. Naturally, such paradigms were adopted and taken one step further in the fundamentally middle-class genre of the novel, as is explained by Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, where she says that the kind of division that is suggested in the mythical topos is consolidated in the nineteenth century, whereby men are made political and women domestic (Armstrong 1987: 2). Hence, novels that seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage simultaneously seized the authority to say what was female and, in doing so, also made it the responsibility of the virtuous woman to transform male desire into middle-class love and, ultimately, marriage (1987: 3).

These are themes and structures that both Greenberg and Riddell/Gaiman's explicitly and implicitly comment on, explore and challenge. In Isabel Greenberg's graphic novel, *The One Hundred Nights of Hero* we encounter Cherry and her maid Hero, whose secret love is threatened when Cherry's husband's friend makes a wager that he can seduce Cherry over the course of a hundred nights. Like Scheherazade, Hero tells stories to distract him, introducing the reader to narratives that are framed—and limited—by a patriarchal world in which phrases such as 'true love' and 'happily ever after' are sinister euphemisms for imprisonment, rape, and abuse. In this, Greenberg stands in contrast to Gaiman and Riddell's *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, where the narrative opens with a female quester who is, indeed, the ruler of her own land, but who is also expected to marry in order to produce an heir to the throne. When she learns of an ominous sleeping illness that threatens her Queendom, however, she postpones her marriage in order to investigate. Similarly to Greenberg, however, we see how the Queen, also, is imprisoned by her relationships to those surrounding her, such as her subjects, her fiancée and, indeed, ideologically determined matrilinear bonds.

What these two literary works have most in common is that they query or problematise plot as an essentially gendered structure through various kinds of narrative strategies. One of these strategies is associated with the linearity of the plot. While the quest narrative, according to M.H. Abrams, is essentially a circuitous tale in the sense that the hero ultimately returns to the place from which he set out, the novel typically presents the same kind of plot as linear (Abrams 1971: 193). One example of this is the bildungsroman, which typically starts with

birth and ends up in adulthood, and, for female characters, with either death or marriage. The kind of linearity that these types of narrative rely on, however, is challenged by both Greenberg and Gaiman.

Plot versus Story: The Art of Digression

For Greenberg, one of the central strategies employed is that of digression.

Digression as a noun can be defined as ‘a temporary departure from the main subject in speech or writing,’ and is habitually seen as one of the main traits of a poor storyteller who is prone to lose the thread of the streamlined main narrative. In Greenberg, however, digression is presented as a subversive tool which can function to liberate or extend the space of movement for her characters. This is apparent already in the beginning, where we are presented with a narrator who is constantly getting ahead of herself and who chooses to tell a number of framing stories in order to be able to tell the main one. Hence, we first get the story of Kiddo, who created the world. Then we are introduced to two male characters named Manfred and Jerome, at the same time as we are explicitly instructed that ‘this story is not about those men,’ but rather ‘about two very brave women.’ In this sense, the structure of the graphic novel echoes the strategy employed by Hero, to tell a hundred stories in order to save Cherry from the hands of Manfred, the Wicked Suitor, who has wagered that he will seduce her. In this sense, Hero, then, is delaying the plot by means of digression, inserting a range of small stories into the main frame in order to ultimately prevent the enforced sexual encounter that is about to take place.

This strategy of derailing the plot also comes in tandem with other devices, one of which is the lack of page numbers in the graphic novel, signalling that Greenberg is working to counter the linearity of the plot on all levels. Another device is the choice to only let the storytelling take place during the night-time, which, as Marina Warner explains with reference to *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*, is a space where it is possible to explore and discover more about the greater complexities and subtleties of human psychology (Warner 2011: 2). In this space, moreover, women’s knowledge can flourish (as opposed to in the daytime when it is irrevocably discarded as non-existent), as Shahrazad weaves an endless tapestry of stories from her memory (ibid). In this sense, Greenberg’s scepticism towards plot can also be seen in the context of the tradition of oral storytelling which, as

Marina Warner tells us in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, was traditionally female (Warner 1995: 17). The 'predominant pattern,' Warner explains, 'reveals older women of a lower status handing on the material to younger people, who include boys ... of higher position and expectations' (ibid). In other words, the 'continuity of women's voices' that was safeguarded by the praxis of telling oral stories, was only broken when male writers and collectors started to dominate 'the production and dissemination of popular wonder tales' and, by extension, to make stories into plots (ibid).

Interestingly, the intertextual framework for such a masculine/feminine, plot/story binary is signalled already through the reference to the Gospel of John in the prologue of Greenberg's graphic novel, where we are introduced to a black page with speech bubbles asking, 'are you ready?' another saying, 'yes' and a third stating 'let's begin.' On the following page, the words 'in the beginning was the world' are printed. What we see here is a subtle reformulation of the opening verse of John 1:1. In the Biblical context of John 1: 1, the 'Word' refers to Christ, connecting him with the philosophical idea of the Logos and Hebrew Wisdom literature. In the Wisdom tradition, moreover, Logos as the Word is that which creates all things, and Christ is Logos (God's word) become flesh. Here, however, it is not the 'word,' but the 'world' which already exists and this, moreover, has been created, not by a word, but by a young girl named Kiddo, who is the daughter of a god referred to as BirdMan and the sister of a boy named Kid. Unlike Christ, Kiddo is not the word made manifest. Rather, she imagines and creates everything silently from within her own head, in the tradition of Shahrazad.

What we learn in this beginning, then, is that origin is a fickle thing. This is not only signalled by the fact that the beginning of the universe is shown to be in the imagination of a young girl rather than in the word made manifest as a male being, but also in the ambiguity suggested by the slight difference between 'in the beginning was the world' and 'in the beginning was the word.' This slight difference, which almost emerges as an instance of mishearing, also holds a sense of ambiguity in it. While the difference between signifiers 'world' and 'word' is a missing consonant, the difference in signification is really a challenge of the theological concept of *ex nihil*, that is, the idea that God created the world out of nothing.

Such small twists, hints and attention to detail are examples of a consistent strategy used by Greenberg to upend, disturb, and jumble, as is also suggested by the declaration on the next page that Kiddo and Kid are the children of BirdMan and that the three of them are, indeed, a family. This piece of information points back to Greenberg's debut graphic novel *The Encyclopedia of Early Earth* (2013), where we first encounter the Eagle God BirdMan, who dwells in the Cloud Castle with The Ravens, individually known as Kid and Kiddo. On the one hand, the verbal signifiers declaring that we are dealing with a family does not necessarily contradict the concept of ex nihil in a Christian context, as it can be seen to reflect the Holy Trinity whereby the divinity shows itself in three aspects. On the other hand, the drawings create an ambiguity here. While the literary text presents Kid and Kiddo as Birdman's children, the biological relation between father and children appears muddled. While BirdMan is drawn as an eagle with anthropomorphic features, The Ravens are portrayed as human beings who wear bird-beak-masks fastened to their faces with string. The visual lack of familial resemblance between father and offspring (which is never mentioned in the text) creates a strong sense of suspended undecidability, which is strengthened through dialogue and interaction. To the reader, the origin of The Ravens seems doubtful and enigmatic, and since it is never questioned or problematised by the characters themselves, we are left to wonder whether the origin of Kid and Kiddo is one of the stories that have, indeed, been suppressed by BirdMan or some other narrator with authority. This impression is strengthened by the portrayal of the BirdMan as a parodic version of the vengeful, self-absorbed, egomaniacal God from the Old Testament, whose primary interests lay in being worshipped by all of creation and to create conflict, strife, and antagonism for his own amusement. The latter characteristic also functions as an allusion to early Jewish texts, which regularly note that YHWH spends a part of each day playing around with the terrible beast known as Leviathan.

In total, this muddled sense of biological kinship between BirdMan and the Ravens, along with the opening statement that 'in the beginning was the world' that we encounter in *The One Hundred Nights of Hero* is evocative of *Beginnings. Intention and Method*, where Edward Said explains the difference between origin and beginnings, saying that one is 'divine, mythical and privileged' the other is 'secular, humanly produced and ceaselessly re-examined' (Said 1985: xiii). In his

deliberations on Plato's *Timaeus*, Jacques Derrida similarly asserts that in order to tell how the world was born, we 'will not begin again at the beginning,' but 'go back behind and below the assured discourse of philosophy, which proceeds by oppositions of principle and counts on the origin as on a *normal couple*' (Derrida 1995: 125-126). *The One Hundred Nights of Hero*, it can be argued, contains a postulation that the origin does not exist in narrative, possibly because language is too immersed in ideology to contain it. This is signaled in numerous conflicts, divergences and clashes between words and illustrations similar to the one where we are presented to a family who does not physically look like one or where the Ravens are presented as birds in writing but made to look like humans in the illustrations. This suspicion towards language, moreover, might also be one that is founded in the awareness of the limitations of language. In 'Différance,' Derrida declares that 'the origin did not even disappear,' but that it was never even 'constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin?' (Derrida 1981: 61). This assertion, which takes place within the metaphysics of language, renders the origin as that which is forever deferred. By poking at beginnings and origins, however, Greenberg simultaneously rejects the monocentric dominance of Christianity and searches towards the origin that is always placed in the structures of the *before* in the multifariousness created by the co-presence of words and illustration.

Have You Lost the Plot?

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks defines *plot* as 'a structuring operation peculiar to those messages that are developed through temporal succession, the instrumental logic of a specific mode of human understanding' (Brooks 1992: 14). He also contrasts it to *story*, which equates the events in an unstructured version. In other words, '[a] story is *made out of* events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story' (ibid.). Greenberg seems to operate with a similar comprehension of plot and story, with the latter forming the substructure of the former. For Greenberg, however, this means that plots are suspicious contrivances that are deeply linked with the politics of patriarchy, domination, hierarchy, capitalism, scheming, violence and, in sum, a phallogocentric world order. Throughout the narrative, in

fact, plot is associated with the male characters, or those in power, who state things like 'have you lost the plot?' while women are members of what is referred to as 'the League of Secret Storytellers' who tell stories of revolution, freedom, hope.

This is already problematised in *The Encyclopedia of Early Earth*, which details the life and fate of a single storyteller, who is on a quest for Enlightenment and True Love. Here, we are placed directly in Joseph Campbell's monomyth of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, whose narrative is that of everyone, and whose story is traditionally seen as one of absolute truth and meaning for the universal human being. Greenberg, it seems, buys into such an understanding, stating that narrative can set us free and give us more knowledge, understanding and insight. At the same time, she also seems to warn us of narrative structures, in the sense that they are ideological creations whose clear and predetermined trajectory is not necessarily liberating. Such an insight is found in the chapter 'Matters of the Heart' in *The One Hundred Nights of Hero*, where we encounter five sisters who share the secret skill of reading and writing. On a spiritual level, this emancipates them because it enables them to increase their knowledge and liberate their imagination, but Greenberg shows us that these books simultaneously mislead and deceive them. The sisters' bookish knowledge of love, for instance, leads them to misread a suitor who comes to woo the youngest sister, Rosa. What they fail to see is that the courtship is a plot that has been manufactured by the establishment and is solely designed to uphold the hierarchical power relationships between men and women. This plot also prevents the suitor from seeing Rosa for what she is: a funny girl 'with a smart tongue and a quick mind' who laughs all the time. Instead of what is in front of him, he sees what he expects to see, based on his expectations of a potential bride. Thus, when the two are married and Rosa reveals to her husband that she can, in fact, read and write, his first reaction is that he has been deceived. And too late, Rosa realises that '[t]here was no such thing as True Love, except for the love she had for her sisters, in the dark winter nights when they read to each other.'

While plots imprison, then, stories seem to invite a greater sense of freedom and openness. Towards the end of *The One Hundred Nights of Hero* we are introduced to the previously mentioned League of Secret Storytellers who bear strong ties to the anonymous females who upheld the oral tradition long before the Grimm Brothers

and Charles Perrault took hold of their yarns, and long before Caliph Haroun al-Rashid commanded the written version of Shahrazad's stories in letters of gold and placed them in the palace library. In *The One Hundred Nights of Hero*, the League of Secret Storytellers is presented as the counterpart to these male keepers of written plots. And while the power structures in the novel are all permeated by maleness, the League represents female political power, which is slower, subtler, and more silent, but which can be equally strong. For a long time, spinning the yarn was the only opportunity that women had to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas in societies where they were otherwise held in contempt, as signalled by Plato when he in *Gorgias* refers disparagingly to the old wives' tale—*mythos graos*—told by nurses to amuse and frighten children (Warner 1995: xix; 14). Through their stories, however, women are able to set their own seedlings and plant their own flowers. This is also the case in *The One Hundred Nights of Hero*, where The League of Secret Storytellers play the part of Penelope and Shahrazad, delaying the plot and their own fates by weaving an endless tapestry of stories—and waiting for still more stories to come their way. This mode of storytelling is also carried on by the eponymous Hero, as she proceeds to draw on the vast store of stories encased in her memory—every night for one hundred nights, in order to save her beloved Cherry from the grip of a rapacious, nasty, powerful man.

As we can see here, the idea that underpins Greenberg's graphic novel is one where storytelling opens the mind to new realms of being. Storytelling means to use one's imagination, and is associated with wisdom, understanding of the powers of nature, and technical ingenuity. As such, it makes sense that Greenberg's text begins in darkness, signalling that the story is always already there, even though it has not yet been plucked and worded into one. Moreover, the intertextual incorporation of the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* is, in this context, a metaphor for love against death, movement against stasis, imagination against mental atrophy, and story against plot, expressed through an alliance of girls and women against men in power.

The Sleeper & The Quester

While *The One Hundred Nights of Hero* takes the more general 'story' as its point of departure, Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell's *The Sleeper and the Spindle* places itself in the vortex of fairy tale. As we know, however, both of these traditions are set in

motion by a female voice. In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner explains that the etymology of the word 'fairy' illuminates the essential role that women's speech has traditionally played. In the Romance languages, the word 'fairy' can be traced back to the Latin feminine word *fata*, which is a rare variant of *fatum*, or *fate*. In this sense, it refers to the goddess of destiny, while also holding the meaning 'that which is spoken,' signalling that 'fairies share with Sibyls the knowledge of the future and the past, and in the stories which feature them, both types of figure foretell events to come, and give warnings' (Warner 1995: 14-15). As we can see here, then, the word 'fairy' is more concerned with openness and imagination than with ordering the world in a predictable and meticulous system of space and time.

In Neil Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle* the narrator builds on the importance of such an openness, warning that while you may think that you know the story that is to come, it is, in fact, 'spun with a thread of dark magic, which twists and turns and glints and shines,' referring directly to the three fates who continuously spin and work on the thread of life (Gaiman 2014: 1). As we know, their words are magic, their spells are binding, and their prophecies are fulfilled when the princess pricks her finger and falls into a deep sleep. At the same time, as signalled by Gaiman's narrator, the hero is not always who we think and fates are not always unalterably sealed. In other words, the plot does not always correspond to the story, and while the plot is closed-off the story is irrevocably open.

Gaiman's tale, then, fuses 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty.' We are not presented with a straightforward merging of two classical fairy tales, however, which, as Jack Zipes has pointed out, would involve a reproduction of 'a set pattern of ideas and images that reinforce a traditional way of seeing, believing, and behaving' (Zipes 1994: 9). Originally, both the written versions of 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty' were included in early collections such as those of the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Giambattista Basile, and share many of the same components, such as the heroine's wondrous origin, innocence, persecution at the hands of a jealous older woman, apparent death, and accidental resuscitation (Bacchilega 1997: 31). What is more, the protagonists in these tales are passive, obedient, meek, and beautiful female characters who have very limited options, and who act in accordance with the framework that they are presented with. In their influential

study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that it is the immense passivity of their state of waiting for the prince that makes both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty appear to be dead (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 37-8). The plot, in other words, warrants passivity and waiting for the female quester to reach the goal of marriage, while the male quester is typically the active part—overcoming obstacles and fighting dragons to get to his beloved object.

Like Greenberg, Gaiman is concerned with what we might refer to as a demythologisation of the fairy tale, in the sense of exposing its traditional complicity with hegemonic power. Also, like Greenberg, he sees the potential of the fairy tale to deconstruct such dominant ideological interests. One example of this is his emphasis on fairy tales as initiation rites for female questers. In the essay 'Myth and Fairy Tale,' Mircea Eliade notes that one of the differences between ritual and romance is the role that women play, because whilst totemic initiation rites were strictly closed to females, there are many fairy tale examples of females who undergo such processes, such as Baba Jaga (Eliade 1963: 196). Eliade takes this as a signal of the relative independence of fairy tales and mythic narratives from the culture in which they originate, even though he still views them as more contaminated than the original mythic ritual (ibid.). In Gaiman's tale, he shows us the complexity of the female initiation process. Even though his protagonist is clearly an active quester with masculine traits, she is still a female character, and there is still the question of marriage to consider. And within the traditional framework of both the fairy tale and the quest, the initiation rite will only be complete through marriage.

In the same way as in the original versions of 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty,' marriage is linked to the metaphor of sleep. As I have pointed out, what spurs the Queen to adventure in the first place is the report that a mysterious sleeping sickness has befallen the neighbouring realm. When she hears this, she immediately calls for her mail shirt, her sword, provisions, and a horse, and sets off to the east with her loyal companions, who are dwarves and consequently unrestricted by the socio-economic bonds that govern human communities. As we have already suspected through the reference to the spindle in the title of the story, moreover, the illness is a spell. Typically, the spell would be something that lies ahead for the protagonist, but as the narrative unfolds, we learn that it is one to which she

succumbed in the past. This, we are told, means that she will probably be able to withstand it, but only partly, and as they enter the land, we are shown how, when she lays down to sleep for the night, the dwarves are uncertain whether 'she would ever wake to see another morning' (Gaiman 2014: 28). Sleep, it seems, cannot so easily be withstood.

The suggestion here, is that the quest is undertaken to overcome or conquer a certain kind of sleep which affects both the inhabitants of the land and the Queen herself (albeit to a lesser degree). Unlike 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty,' then, *The Sleeper and the Spindle* aims to wake its protagonist from the sleep of culture, ideology, and politics, as opposed to immersing her in it. Such a thematisation is evocative of *The Birth to Presence*, wherein the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the symbolic meaning of sleep, saying that it is a state without difference and, as such, stands in contrast to awakening which is characterised by the soul finding itself 'in what is most characteristically its own' (Nancy 1993: 14-15). In order to exemplify this, Nancy refers to Freud's reading of the myth of Psyche, as one which sees 'the psyche ... outstretched, without knowing it' (1993: 393). A similar awareness is found in Gaiman, where the spell enables the annulment of difference. In sleep, all the individuals become one living being, dreaming the dreams of the one who has cast the spell (Gaiman 2014: 28). In this state, there is no room for autonomy or individual being.

As the story unfolds and the Queen and the dwarves finally reach the tower, we realise that the sleeper is the one who has been governing the land in secret. In sleep she has been feeding on the sleep of others, creating a world of sleeping slaves by just lying in the bed and looking young and beautiful (Gaiman 2014: 56). This is the kind of insidious power attributed to the passive woman that we find in the traditional version of 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Snow White.' It is, moreover, also the kind of insidious workings of ideological structures in general. In his study of ideology, Terry Eagleton reveals it to be an 'inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness,' and the most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades her underlings to love, desire and identify with her power (Eagleton 1991: xxii). At the same time, however, we also see that the witch herself is both a victim and an accomplice of patriarchal power, to the extent that she identifies with the demands of beauty and youth that such a system ordains. 'I have

my youth,' she states, 'I have my beauty. No weapon can harm me. Nobody alive is more powerful than I am' (Gaiman 2014: 59). This statement recalls the metaphorical mirror, which is so central to the traditional version of 'Snow White' and which Gilbert and Gubar deem as synonymous with the 'patriarchal voice of judgement that rules ... every woman's self-evaluation' (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 37-8). Significantly, Gaiman and Riddell do not incorporate a single mirror in their narrative. What takes the role of the mirror, however, is the text itself, which, from an oblique angle, reflects both the classical version of the tales and the socio-cultural context that surrounds them and—by extension—us. In this sense, the mirror has been transformed from something that enforces to something that challenges the reigning ideology.

Towards the end of the narrative, the dwarves and the Queen are able to break the spell and awaken the land. As they light a fire of twigs, however, they notice that the wood chips give off a 'noxious smoke' and a smell of 'old magic' (Gaiman 2014: 66). The suggestion here is that patriarchal ideology is not a framework that will be eradicated in one blow. Unlike what the traditional fairy tales tell us, there is not one quest that must be fought, but many. This is also signalled further on in the text when the Queen reaches the decision that she will not return to her own land to marry. 'There are choices,' she thinks as she sits under a tree, 'there are always choices' (ibid.). This represents another instance of awakening, similar to the one that she experienced after the long sleep that took place in the past, signalling that ideological somnolence is something that one should constantly be mindful of and fight against.

It could also be seen to signal, moreover, that true freedom cannot be achieved within the framework of society. On the final page, the iconography shows us the Queen and the three dwarves moving away from the reader and continuing 'into the night' to slay dragons, something that could be read as a suggestion that women's stories are still relegated to the night-time. On the other hand, the choice to travel into another realm could also be seen as hopeful in the sense that it reflects the postulation made by Maria Tatar that fairy tales present a world where 'ideas become matter' (Tatar 2003: 80). When the protagonist travels away from the familiar and the known, she simultaneously 'escapes the tiresome clichés of reality by entering a world where the figurative or metaphorical dimension of

language takes on literal meaning' (ibid.). Unlike Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, who are awakened to difference only to have it eradicated through communion with a prince, this queen goes out to slay dragons and outwit giants—just like any hero would—while simultaneously recognising that the battle of difference and autonomy will never be fully or decisively won.

The Spindle & The Yarn

As we can see, both Greenberg and Gaiman/Riddell show us how narrative functions to both imprison and liberate. Jack Zipes points out how the spindle was once thought a threat because it used to represent female productivity. As a result, it was placed in the realm of *muthos*, in order to remove its relevance to reality and society and, instead, place it in the realm of fantasy and fancy. Interestingly, this was the case up until the spindle was solidly established as a machine during the Industrial Revolution and the thread was taken out of the hands of women and put into the safe hands of men (Zipes 1994: 60).

The One Hundred Nights of Hero and *The Sleeper and the Spindle* both show a close awareness of such socio-cultural mechanisms, while at the same time placing a great deal of faith in the power of narrative. Gaiman and Greenberg remind us that the function of myths and fairy stories is to encourage us to go into the dark night and the deep forests, and to question our assumptions and presumptions instead of expecting a clear trajectory where something specific is unveiled towards the end. They teach us that few things are as dangerous in life as certainty, and that the moment we are sure of something we close our eyes to other possibilities. What we think we know, after all, might just be a matter of habit, of cultivation, of ideological nurturing. Similarly, a tale that remains the same, that is never challenged, never questioned, never transformed, is unnatural. A tale that is allowed to evolve, however, can have the effect of change and transformation, and can help to expand the framework into one where everything and anything can happen.

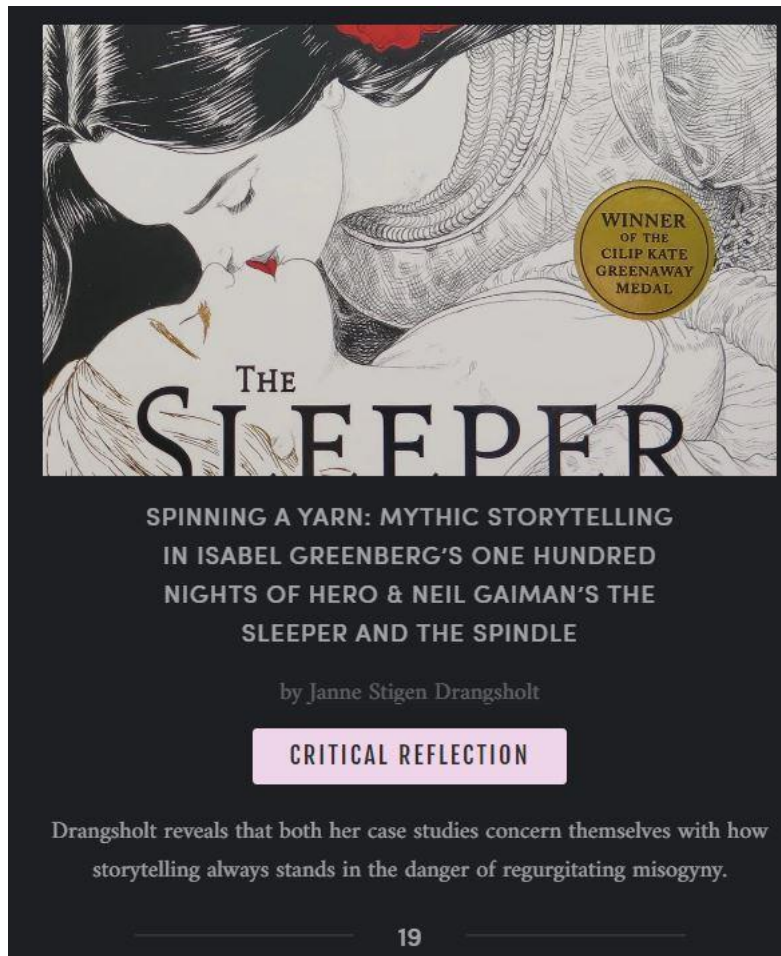
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