The Many Faces of Lasair Gheug

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Everyone has heard the story of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves," made popular in the mid 20th century by Walt Disney Films. The cartoon fairy tale is littered with happy songs and cute, helpful animals which give the illusion of a care-free, innocent heroine persecuted by her evil stepmother. Disney presented an amalgamation of a currently socially acceptable re-telling of a cultural folktale with the Grimm's version of events. The tale changed in the mid-century in much the same way that fairy tales have been changing across culture and time for centuries. In fact, one of the common characteristics of a fairy tale is its ability to maintain universal themes across cultural boundaries. Fairy tales like "Snow White" can be told all over the world under different names with changing cultural aspects depending on the arena in which they are told. A version of Snow White told in the Scottish Highlands, "Lasair Gheug, the King of Ireland's Daughter" (Bruford and MacDonald 98-106) contains all of the common motifs which have made the tale pertinent on a universal level, but it remains uniquely Gaelic due to the presence of many specifically Scottish motifs. An examination of this Scottish Gaelic version of the tale as it compares to the Grimm's version of "Snow White," will show the psychological and social importance that the tale retains as it crosses cultural bounds, while a close look at "Lasair Gheug, the King of Ireland's Daughter" will show how the folk tale remains specifically Scottish.

The tale "Lasair Gheug, the King of Ireland's Daughter" is a version of the international wonder tale most commonly known as "Snow White," but it contains many elements which identify it as specific to Gaelic Scotland. In this version of the tale, the relationship between the stepmother and Lasair Gheug does not begin poorly. The stepmother is manipulated into trying to have Lasair Gheug killed by the *eachrais ùrlair*,

a witch known in the highlands for her meddlesome ways (John F. Campbell 492). In this version of the Gaelic tale, this witch appears to the queen of Ireland and informs her that if she helps to kill the daughter of the king of Ireland, she will help the queen gain plentiful riches. The eachrais ùrlair tells the queen "I have a little saucepan, I only put it on occasionally: I want meal enough to thicken it, and butter enough to thin it, and the full of my ear of wool." When the queen asks "how much meal will thicken it?" she is answered with "The increase of seen granaries of oats in seven years." She receives a similar answer for each of the three products required by the spirit. The numbers seven and three are important in Gaelic tradition. The fact that the fairy requires butter, meal and wool for her saucepan is important because the fairy is obtaining examples of the cooked aspects of society. All of the ingredients that she requires are things made by civilized society and which fairies cannot obtain as members of the wild Otherworld.

The number three appears throughout the tale especially in the occurrence of important events. This occurrence of events in groups of three is a stylistic difference in the telling of the Gaelic version of "Lasair Gheug" that does not occur in the Grimm's "Snow White." In this version of the tale, the queen and the eachrais ùrlair try to trick the king of Ireland into killing Lasair Gheug three times, each time forcing Lasair Gheug to "swear three baptismal oaths, that she will not be on foot, she will not be on horseback and that she will not be on the green earth the day that she tells of it." A grouping of three emerges again when the king of Ireland cuts off Lasair Gheug's fingers as punishment for killing the greyhound, the palfrey and the heir of the king. Each time he asked her "Does that hurt you daughter?" and each time she replies "It doesn't hurt me father, because it is you who did it." The last grouping of three that occurs is the event in

which Lasair Gheug rides on the back of the wild boar to tell her tale to her unchristened children. This is an important event because she is able to tell her tale without breaking any of her baptismal oaths made to the queen. By making both the oaths and the telling of the wrongs done to her occur in groups of three, the teller of the tale is able to emphasized the importance of these events.

In the Grimm version, none of the events occur in clusters of three. Even the point at which the queen asks the mirror "who's the fairest of them all?" occurs seven times. Though this is also an important number in the telling of folk tales, it is much less prevalent in other areas of the world. The clustering of events into groups of three is an important stylistic difference in the telling of the Scottish Gaelic version of "Lasair Gheug" and the Grimm version, "Snow White."

Liminality plays an important role in the Gaelic version of "Lasair Gheug," which is less present in the Grimm's version of "Snow White." The most obvious occurrence of liminality which occurs in the Gaelic telling of the tale involves the way in which Lasair Gheug tells of each of her stepmother's betrayals without breaking her baptismal oath. She tells her tale only to her three unchristened children, while riding on the back of a wild boar, and for the telling of each of the three betrayals, Lasair Gheug "went in at one door and went out at the other door." By telling the tale to un-christened children, Lasair Gheug is able to get around the fact that a baptismal oath binds her as the children are neither Christian nor pagan. They in themselves are liminal because they have not been baptized, which by Scottish custom means that they and their mother were never reintegrated into society after their births (Newton 174). This means that the three unchristened children are stuck between civilized society and the Otherworld until their

baptism, making them liminal characters. By riding the back of a wild boar, she is neither on foot, horseback nor on the earth when she told the tale, thus thwarting all of the limits of her baptismal oath. Lasair Gheug is in a liminal space by riding the back of an animal which was not restricted by her oath.

The state of being neither here nor there is further emphasized as Lasair Gheug enters through one door and leaves through another before telling her tale to the three children. Doorways serve as liminal spaces as they are the places which separate the wild external world from the tamed interior world. By crossing the threshold between these two spaces, she was able to strengthen her ability to break her bond by utilizing the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld. It is interesting to note that the process by which Lasair Gheug breaks her baptismal oath and is able to tell of her betrayal is by performing three tasks which put her in a liminal state for each of the three stories that she has to tell. The Grimm's version of "Snow White" does not contain any evidence of a similar sequence of events. In fact, their version of the tale does not make mention of any oaths made by Snow White, and there is only limited instance of liminality or reference to the Otherworld in their rendition of the tale.

Though this tale has many specifically Scottish Gaelic aspects, it shares qualities with "Snow White" stories told all over the world. One similarity between virtually all of the versions of this tale is the enchanted death brought on by a poisonous object. In "Lasair Gheug," the poison was contained in three grains, which, when embedded in her forehead and two palms, caused her to fall down as though dead. Other versions of the tale all contain some account of this event, in which the heroine either ingests the poison

through an apple, as in the Grimm version, or uses some other poisoned object such as a comb (Tartar 74).

In each tale the heroine is poisoned by her stepmother, indicating a level of conflict between the two women fueled by jealousy. Fairy tales such as this one exist in so many cultures because the common thread of discord is present regardless of culture or creed (Joosen 231). These tales are often told in a fantastical manner, but they represent real occurrences, often serving as a warning to young people (Joosen 229). The instance of the enchanted death, though obviously steeped in magic, is a warning against social discord and trusting the unknown. Fairy tales often diverge from realism in the sense that they use fantastical means in order to get a point across. Instances of magic, such as the enchanted death, are often used in tales like this to thinly veil conflict and to issue warnings to younger generations. This is one reason why tales like "Snow White" and "Lasair Gheug," endure over time and culture.

In each telling of this particular tale, Snow White, or Lasair Gheug, is preserved for a period of time after her death. In "Lasair Gheug," she is placed in a "leaden" coffin then locked in a room to which only her husband holds the key. A similar process is taken with the corpse of the heroine in each tale of Snow White. In Gaelic tradition, placing her body in a coffin made of lead was an act of protection against Otherworld spirits: the use of lead in this case can be substituted for the traditional use of iron in that it is a metal which is equally important for its protective qualities (John G. Campbell 132). The material is also an example of the cooked aspect of society, indicating that the king, by placing her in such a coffin, wished to keep her and her spirit in the civilized, human realm rather than allowing it to travel to the wild spirit world. The lead coffin can be seen

as a tool to keep Lasair Gheug in the human world until such a time as her death-like state could be reversed.

In other versions of the tale, the heroine is placed in a coffin of glass, gold, silver or is jewel-encrusted (Tatar). In all of these cases, the coffin is made of materials that are not found naturally, but must be created by civilized society, showing that the idea of the cooked exists at an international level. Precious metals, jewels and glass, are all things which must be treated and shaped by human hands before they can be used for artifacts such as the coffin. Because of this, the fact that Snow White is placed in a "cooked" coffin in each tale is an indication that even though she appears to be dead, she still remains a member of civilized society. If the heroine were truly dead in any of the tales, she may have been placed in a wooden coffin, which would have signified the raw aspect of society, and would have symbolized a return to the wild.

As an international wonder tale, "Lasair Gheug" and "Snow White" retain themes in each variation which are significant on a universal level. It has been noted that fairytales contain three core themes which help them retain their universal significance: psychology, sociology and cosmology. As Steven Swann Jones states in his book regarding the international importance of the fairytale, they "can be seen as telling us about our feelings and psyches, as instructing us how to conform to society's expectations, and as offering spiritual guidance about our place in the cosmos" (Jones). The tale of Snow White, or Lasair Gheug, is simply one example of a fairy tale which addresses these three major concerns.

Perhaps the most prevalent of the three universal themes discussed by Jones is the psychology of the protagonist. Lasair Gheug and Snow White represent a female

protagonist who struggles in her relationship with her mother-figure. Though the variations do not agree on the exact details, they all share certain common psychological themes which are stylistically consistent with the folklore Law of Contrast. Jones calls these contrasting motifs "binary opposition," and enumerates them as being contrasts between birth and death; expulsion and adoption; and jealousy and affection. In every version of this tale, the heroine is born, dies and is then resurrected. She is also cast from her home in order to protect her from a murderous stepmother, and is taken in by amiable strangers; be they the dwarfs in the Grimm's version, or the one-eyed cat and his twelve followers who turn into the prince and his followers in the Scottish version. This casting away from the home may be a way for cultures to prepare females for the eventuality of leaving the home and beginning a new phase of life, usually in marriage. The recurring theme in the tale, in which the female protagonist is cast from the home and finds happiness in marriage to a prince, is culturally symbolic of women leaving their families in order to marry and start a family in a new home. Jones accounts for the recurrence of this event in each variation as a way for cultures to deal with typical problems that people will encounter in life, such as separation from nuclear family.

The contrast between jealousy and affection which occurs in each telling of this tale can be explained on both a psychological and sociological level. Psychologist Carl Jung noted in his examination of the Grimm's version of this tale that the jealousy of the stepmother, which causes her to turn a wrathful gaze on her stepdaughter, is symbolic of stages of female development (Barzilai). During this development, the female learns from a mother-figure, is enslaved, or forced to cooperate with such a figure, and eventually breaks free of this enslavement. This type of female development is identified as a

"negative mother complex," which is a prevalent human problem discussed worldwide through this tale. This negative mother complex described by Jung explains the universality of the jealousy and affection contrast. Each variation of the tale begins with a loving mother-figure, starting the cycle of affection. In "Snow White," the female protagonist never knows her mother, who loves her daughter, but who dies after childbirth. In the tale of "Lasair Gheug," the stepmother begins as a loving mother who always treated her stepdaughter kindly, but who is turned by a mischievous spirit. In the Gaelic version of this tale, the mother is first manipulated into harming Lasair Gheug, but later develops jealousy towards her stepdaughter. This is different, because the initial cruelty of the mother figure in this case, is triggered by an external force. Jealousy catapults the story forward in each variation, showing a universal repulsion to the damaging effects of letting such an emotion rule actions. This is both a universal psychological and social continuity because it not only shows the damaging effects of jealousy on relationships, but indicates a social need to condemn behavior which stems from this emotion (Tatar 75).

A more modern interpretation of this particular tale is the idea that versions of "Snow White" and "Lasair Gheug" can be seen as manifestations of the consequences of the value placed on female beauty. It has been argued by feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Bronfen, that the beauty of the young heroine, which inspires jealousy in her stepmother and is the cause of her trials, represents the patriarchal importance placed on feminine beauty, especially in pre-feminist times (Tatar 77). These tales show the detrimental effects of patriarchal societies which de-value women as people and trade them as commodities made more valuable by their external appearances. The heroine's

beauty inspires such jealousy in her stepmother because it makes her more valuable to society than the aging mother figure (Barzilai). Especially in the instance of the Grimm's version of "Snow White," can one observe this societal importance placed on female beauty with the examples of the mirror and the glass coffin. Both of these images magnify the importance of being able to see the woman in all stages of life (Tatar 77). The lethal jealousy that the stepmother feels for her daughter is fueled by the patriarchal value placed on female beauty which was, and still is to an extent, present in cultures throughout the world.

International wonder tales are interesting in that there is an outrageous number of variations for certain tales, such as "Lasair Gheug, The King of Ireland's Daughter." Each version maintains important universal motifs, yet each one contains motifs specific to its culture, like the Scottish motifs found in "Lasair Gheug". The universal motifs are important because they show what values and social norms are shared by cultures around the world. In this case, the motifs found in all versions of Snow White discuss the important psychological battle fought between a mother and her growing daughter. They also show the sociological importance of a woman leaving the home and starting a new life separate from her family, a rite of passage that exists for women in every culture. No matter how different cultures may be, the conflict between mother and daughter always exists, the warning to be wary of enemies is prevalent, and the psychological development of the female remains important. By examining the international wonder tale of "Snow White," under the many different titles, one can come to understand the people of other cultures and the way in which the world is unified on a psycho-social level.

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