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Rapunzel in The Silent Rooms: Inverted Fairy Tales in Anne Hébert's First Novel

by ARNOLD E. DAVIDSON

IMMUREMENT is the human condition in the fiction of Anne Hébert. The darkly lyrical novels of this major French-Canadian author chart, in symbolic fashion, the physical and metaphysical dimensions of different entrapments. In *Kamouraska* (1970), for example, Elisabeth d'Aulnières Tassy Rolland, shut up in the house with her dying second husband, attempts to escape that imprisonment by returning to the climactic event of her earlier life—her attempt to free herself from her brutal first husband by arranging for his death at the hands of her lover. Yet her reliving of the first marriage, of the murder, of the eluding of the law, only affirms Elisabeth's double imprisonment in her desolate present and in the even more disastrous memories of her past.¹ And the subsequent *Children of the Black Sabbath* (1975) is an even bleaker portrait of the trapped protagonist. Sister Julie would avoid the consequences of being the daughter of a witch by getting herself to a nunnery. Yet she finds there no refuge from evil, but encounters, instead, the same forces that shaped the life and death of her mother, that made their seventeenth-century ancestress a witch. The convent becomes the model of the world; the black mass the obverse of the white.

The paradigm that shapes the later fiction also informs Hébert's earliest novel, *The Silent Rooms* (1958). The main character in this work, is, first, a prisoner in her own home who labors ceaselessly to keep her foundering family intact. The mother has died, "the father was at work and the sisters at school," so Catherine, the eldest of four daughters, was "forced to struggle alone and endlessly . . . against the blackness of the land, and the malignant dampness that clung to the linen, the furniture, the corners of the house, the father's heavy boots, and even to the bitter lines of his face."² She is a Cinderella waiting for rescue. But when Catherine does escape from the silent tyranny of her grim father, from the grime of the factory town, it is only to enter another captivity

1. For a fuller discussion of this novel see my "Canadian Gothic and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XXVII (1981), 243-54.

2. Anne Hébert, *The Silent Rooms*, trans. Kathy Mezei (1974; rpt. Don Mills, Ont.: Paper Jacks, 1975), p. 8. Subsequent references to this readily available translation of the novel will be made parenthetically in the text. Because Anne Hébert is a major poet and novelist whose style infuses her work, readers fluent in French are referred to the original edition, *Les Chambres de bois* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1958).

more demeaning than the first. She marries Michel, the son of a wealthy *seigneur*, only to discover that he does not find her suitable. The two stay locked in his two-room Paris apartment while the wife now labors to a different end and attempts to cultivate the proper aristocratic graces (mostly a superior boredom) required by her husband. A princess-in-training, she finds, is a far cry from a princess.

The fairy tale conclusion promised at the end of Part One when Catherine finally weds her prince is inverted in Part Two, the account of her life with Michel. But the reversed fable is reversed again when, in Part Three, Catherine is saved from her unhappy marriage by the love of a common laboring man. Those three parts do fit strangely together. Part One, what we might call "The Plight of Cinderella," is succeeded by the pivotal second section that could well be titled "Princes Have Their Problems Too." Her prince's problems—a continuing almost incestuous love affair with his sister, an aversion to sex and to Catherine too, for that matter—render the marriage a farce. The woman, wed, must still wait for rescue, and the final section of the novel does give us "Catherine's Escape." She leaves her husband to seek happiness with another man. This other man, Bruno, is everything that Michel was not—alive, sensitive, sexual. Best of all, he is in love with Catherine. Yet Hébert's apparent affirmation of redeeming adulterous passion is undermined by a problematic question implicit in the conclusion to the novel. Can a man of the earth and a former would-be princess really find happiness together, or will Catherine now play Michel to Bruno's Catherine?

In approaching that question I would first like to consider briefly the manner in which Catherine plays Catherine. All along she attempts to conjoin contradictory roles. In Part One, for example, the self-sacrificing Cinderella who is servant to the whole family also soon sees herself as a princess in disguise. So even here Hébert slyly undermines the very fairy tale around which the novel first revolves. A Cinderella confidently awaiting her prince and certain that the slipper will fit is only a charade Cinderella. We also see that Catherine plays this self-contradictory Cinderella on the basis of dubious evidence. Lost once in the country, she and her sisters encounter the local *seigneur* who is out hunting with his son and daughter. One of the younger girls asks directions of the father while Catherine listens to the son: "The little boy said he had a fever. He raised his frightened, tearful face to Catherine, adding in a whisper that his father was making him carry the heavy bag of wounded birds. Catherine was so close to him that she could have traced the path of his tears with her finger as they trickled down his bony cheeks. An acrid smell of bloody game emanated from the boy, like the odour of his own misery" (pp. 5–6). It is this pathetic concatenation of sickness and sorrow that soon becomes the prince of Catherine's imagined future. The reader should note, too, that the hunter's crude sexual innu-

endo in his response to the lost girls as well as the unflattering facts that are soon revealed about the *seigneur*—"the entire countryside had been ravaged. . . , wounded animals left rotting in the brush and reckless young girls ruined in a night" (p. 6)—also undermine in advance the "dream" that Catherine presently elaborates as the vision of her necessary happiness.

Undeterred by any other considerations, Catherine adheres to her unlikely expectations. For example, when the family decides that the oldest daughter should be wed, and puts her out on the doorstep to be appraised by the workmen of the town as they go home from the factories every evening, "her dream" allows her to "remain aloof" from the passing laborers, "as defiant and mysterious as a woman secretly in pursuit of a barbarian prince" (p. 11). Catherine, however, is obviously in pursuit of her prince, which is hardly the role that the fairy tale heroine should play. "Everyone in town," she is soon told, talks about "a silly little fool chasing after the nobility" (p. 31). And neither should the heroine gain her prince through the assistance of a meddling, middle-aged aunt, an *entremetteuse* who vicariously participates in the affairs of others because she has none of her own. Neither does the fairy tale prince propose in angry retaliation to his sister's taking a lover.

In Part Two Hébert also contradicts time-honored fairy tale conventions. Most obviously, "they" do not "live happily ever after." To begin with, "they" are soon three—husband, wife, and husband's sister. The members of this odd threesome also conspire against each other in combinations that only emphasize their divisiveness. We are shown all three possibilities: husband and sister against the wife (this is the most common alignment), husband and wife against the sister, and even wife and sister against the husband. As in Sartre's *Huis clos*, no combination can endure and no one can be happy. In short, all interaction devolves towards stasis and ennui. Caught in the two-room apartment as hermetically sealed as an hourglass, Catherine finds she can only drift from one room to the other, an endless process that measures but never changes the condition of her captivity.³

Trapped in this fashion, Catherine comes to mourn the loss "of the black land where the furnaces flamed in the sky, day and night"; to lament "the shame she shared with Michel, of being able to sleep at leisure, without ever wanting bread" (p. 51). But one sorrow especially sums up her incongruous plight. When she grieves over "her white hands and her nails, that were lengthening like the claws of a captive animal" (p. 51) she implicitly acknowledges that she is imprisoned in her earlier dream of freedom and debased by her intended elevation. Responding to that reversal by simply reversing the previous poles of

3. The comparison between the hourglass and the apartment is clearly supported in the novel. Michel's Paris apartment is first described as "two single, wood-panelled rooms" connected by "a narrow, gloomy, bare corridor" (p. 59).

constraining circumstance and envisioned escape, the apprentice princess now longs to scrape vegetables.

Catherine, moreover, is not the only character who plays a contradictory role. Lia, we soon see, is not such a model princess either. Michel's sister can haughtily expostulate on her superiority to Catherine and claim that she left her lover because of an unintended and minor offence, prompting Michel to insist that his wife "remember the tale of 'The Princess and the Pea'" (p. 87). Yet Lia, Michel's standard of high princessly perfection, soon has to confess why and how she has disposed of the manor that had been jointly left to the two of them. "Subjugated" by her former lover and reduced to "a whipped bitch," she has traded "the only thing that's still close to [her brother's] heart, the estate" (p. 99), for a few more nights of demeaning love.

Lia's undoing undoes Michel and he castigates her for his loss. At which point the two triangles (of the paired brother and sister opposed to the other's other partner) both collapse. In the face of their present defeats, Lia and Michel jointly retreat to the comparatively happy sorrow and loss of their childhood. They huddle before the fireplace, clinging to one another, weeping, reminiscing. Remembering their past—"two children, alone, crouching by the wood fire in the abandoned house make a pact swearing fidelity to each other!" (p. 102)—they re-enact that past in the present. Their regression redefines Catherine's role in the household and returns her to her past too. She must wait on the sorry pair who cannot even light the fire before which they crouch; the would-be princess wife is reduced to servant girl again. Furthermore, when Catherine covertly rebels through illness—and illness almost to the point of death—she discovers that her husband would prefer her dead. Part Two ends with her realization that one further loss would render Michel's sadness happily complete: "She was struggling for her life against the strange love of this man" (p. 118).

In Part Three we see that Catherine is victorious in the struggle. The final problematic section of the novel begins with the wife separated from her husband and living with a servant on the Mediterranean coast. Part One was dominated by the fog and the fumes of the factory town. Part Two was characterized by the stale smell of cigarettes and whiskey, by "the musty odour of closed rooms" (p. 45). So Part Three—sea breezes, clear skies, a garden filled with flowers—represents a refreshing change. This section even begins with the windows thrown open, with the sun rising and the scent of geraniums filling the room. The reader, too, is invited to enjoy light after darkness, life after life-in-death, love after the "night games of fever and anguish" (p. 69) that were the most Michel ever offered to Catherine.

Hébert, however, does not conclusively affirm the positive note that first seems to characterize the final section. Part One began with the death of Catherine's mother. Part Two culminated in Catherine's own

near encounter with death. Part Three, so different in some respects from the preceding sections, still centers on a dying. In the midst of a setting verging on the saccharine—the picturesque town by the seashore, the olive groves, the shy encounters of the prospective lovers—Catherine's faithful servant slowly expires. As she does so, she grieves how "all [her] masters had betrayed her by their lack of grandeur." Catherine too is included: "That last great lady in whom I believed, Catherine, Catherine, is false like all the rest, she's a trollop, like Lia, like Madame, her mother, my lords, a real little trollop, and a workman's daughter to boot!" (p. 151). It is the death of the servant that brings the lovers together, yet that death also suggests how regularly dreams are disappointed, how complex and how contradictory are the shufflings between high and low.

The protagonist in the novel shuffles, we are shown, throughout the final section. One moment Catherine sings to the soil: "'Here I am, as black as my father at the end of a day's work!' she thought. And she prayed that she would once again be granted the grace of living humbly and gradually through the renewal of her patient body" (p. 133). Yet when Bruno subsequently proposes she is a grand lady whose first reaction is to be appalled by his plebeian manners: "He had become confused, addressing her in a familiar tone. Catherine despised his bewildered air and wanted to mark that patient face, to brand his likeness to a wounded bull on his low forehead" (p. 158).

Bruno, we also see, embodies a few contradictions of his own. This physical brute of a man with his common name and crude appearance—thick neck, snub nose, cropped hair, and bare chest—soon plays the lovelorn princess: "Bruno stood on the doorstep, his head high, seemingly oblivious to all but the scarcely audible trill of a nightingale lost in the mountains" (p. 159). The portrait is incongruously comic—"a wounded bull" with the soul of a poet, a Ferdinand with a taste for flowers. In keeping with the fairy tale reversals already noted in the novel, one well may wonder if the tiny glass slipper will really fit on Bruno's broad, bare foot.

Is the plebeian prince more naturally believable than was the standard, older, aristocratic model? Can Bruno, viewed prospectively, obviously be trusted with Catherine's future happiness, whereas Michel, viewed retrospectively, obviously could not? Or, to ask the same question in a form that sets forth the crux of the novel, does Part Three affirm again the same fantasy that informs Part One but is then completely countered in Part Two? Hébert does not explicitly answer this question and the few critics who have previously written on the novel do not address it. In fact, Adien Thério, who specifically examines this author's pervasive, ironic use of fairy tale motifs, passes briefly over *The Silent Rooms*, noting mostly how the novel devalues its protagonist's original fairy tale dream. That devaluation, for Thério, is summed

up by the opposition between the *seigneur's* great stone chateau which partly engendered Catherine's dream of marriage to a prince and the two cramped rooms in which her marriage, tainted from the start, rapidly decayed. Thério further argues that Catherine, at the end of the novel, has escaped from two hells, one implicit in the manor house and one implicit in the narrow rooms, to become the only character in Hébert's fiction who learns that life and love do not correspond to fairy tales.⁴ But I would argue that Hébert's first protagonist is not so different from those who follow her; that the third section of *The Silent Rooms* is a continuation of and not a contrast to the first; in short, that Catherine remains Catherine to the end.⁵

Consider, first, the overdramatized terms of the passage that most betokens Catherine's new beginning and the novel's ostensibly reestablished romantic vision:

Suddenly a jubilant chorus of roosters rang out like the crash of brass and it seemed to Catherine and Bruno that they were being pierced by the very cry of a world being born.

Again, the chorus resumed still closer, in shrill unison, so close that it seemed to be perched upon their shoulders. (p. 162)

It is this chorus that "summoned [Catherine] to surrender," to confess to Bruno that "she truly wanted to become his wife" (p. 162). But looked at more closely, the occasion for that confession is itself suspect. The reader should notice the carefully controlled narrative perspective in the two paragraphs just quoted. The third person presentation of the novel occasionally verges, as in the above passage, towards first person narration (and in this particular case towards joint first person narration, for both Catherine and Bruno hear and sing to themselves and the other the same song).⁶ The effect of this device of one perspective sliding towards the other is to juxtapose the author's statement of objective fact with the characters' reading of subjective significance. Thus "chorus of roosters" can represent the author reporting, but "a jubilant chorus . . . like the crash of brass" sounding a piercing "cry of a world been born" is the characters' extravagant extrapolation from a mundane occurrence. Since the cry of roosters can hardly carry the full symbolic weight imputed to it, the contrast is inescapably comic.⁷ Through

4. Adien Thério, "La maison de la belle et du prince ou l'enfer dans l'oeuvre romanesque d'Anne Hébert," in *Livres et auteurs québécois 1971: Revue critique de l'année littéraire*, no number (1971), p. 280. The key passage that I have given in summary translation reads in the original: "Si je ne m'abuse, nous sommes ici en présence du seul personnage d'Anne Hébert qui, après bien des déboires, finit par comprendre que la vie et l'amour ne ressemblent pas à ce que racontent les contes de fées."

5. For still another view of Catherine's progress see E. D. Blodgett, "Prisms and Arcs: Structures in Hébert and Munro," in *Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson*, ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), p. 121, who argues that the three parts of the novel show the protagonist in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

6. Essentially this same point on the narrative perspective of the novel is made in different terms and to a different end by Réjean Robidoux and André Renaud in *Le roman canadien-français du vingtième siècle*, Publications du Centre de Recherches en Littérature canadienne-français de l'Université d'Ottawa, No. 3 (Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1966), p. 182.

7. The distinction that I am drawing is equally clear in the French text which, in the 1958 edition,

that comedy Hébert subversively deflates a dream that remains, at the end of the novel, as unlikely as was its original counterpart and opposite, Catherine's original dream of happiness ever after with her first prince. The "prince" has changed but the dream has not.

That Catherine is still the prospective victim of her own delusive fantasy can be argued in yet another way. Bruno and Catherine, at the conclusion of the book, are each faced with the disparities between the other as a complex, inconsistent character and the other as the clear, flat stock figure that the dream requires. Because the novel has focused on Catherine, we can especially see that she is not quite the woman Bruno would have her be. As even she acknowledges, he does not know "about the secret part of her that was sometimes haunted by the desolate shadows of wood-panelled rooms" (p. 156), and neither does he admit how much a not-so-secret portion of her being has also been shaped by those rooms. "The little, uncultivated girl she had been when Michel had taken her and set her to ripen in his closed rooms" (p. 143) has finally blossomed into the "grand lady" that Michel at once recognizes when, in the final episode of the book, she cavalierly returns his ring. Only a determined romanticist, like Catherine herself, can believe that this "grand lady" will always happily abide Bruno's common touch.

Finally, the tripartite structure of the novel itself compromises the romanticism of Catherine and Bruno. As I have already argued, Hébert devalues one dream and then dangles an inverted version of that same dream before the reader's eyes. The promise of a new life is there at the end of the novel as much as it was at the beginning. Indeed, the reader is even invited to play Catherine; to believe, with Catherine and Bruno, in the climactic moment "that could change both their lives" (p. 162). But to accept this invitation is to construct, as the reader, a hypothetical Part Four that accords exactly with the standard fairy tale conclusion, "And they lived happily ever after." That projected conclusion, however, hardly accords with the novel's previous testing of fairy tales and their endings. Just as Part Two deflated the naive dreams of Part One, the missing Part Four can more probably be called upon to counter any subsequent happiness anticipated at the end of Part Three than to validate it. Admittedly both imagined endings are hypotheses, but the one is consistent with Hébert's pervasive inversion of fairy tale motifs and the other is not.

The novel, in fact, ends precisely where it began: an imprisoned maiden dreams of escape with an envisioned hero. With that ending, we also see how much her first novel prefigures the vision of the later books. The adultery and the murder of *Kamouraska* do not help Madame Tassy Rolland to escape her unhappiness but lead to only other

reads: "Soudain un grand chant de coq éclata comme une sonnerie de cuivre, et il sembla à Catherine et à Bruno qu'ils étaient traversés par le cri même du monde à la naissance" (p. 184).

forms of disillusionment, stasis, and imprisonment. The convent which Sister Julie enters in *Children of the Black Sabbath* merely reiterates the grotesque world from which she earlier attempted to flee, and we are not surprised, at the novel's end, to see her entering the world again, presumably to join another version of the father-lover who earlier destroyed her mother. Prisons, Hébert's fiction suggests, are internal, not external; they are inevitable, not accidental; and they can be constructed from the most unlikely materials, even fairy tale fantasies of flight and escape.

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