From Courtly Love to Snow White

By Baiqing Zheng, University of International Business and Economics, China

Abstract:
In chivalric romances, courtly love often entails the love between a single knight and a married woman. This love cannot be consummated in a physical sense and, if it is, disaster and death ensue. Courtly love therefore involves the agonies of unfulfilled love. What Lacan finds of interest in these chivalric romances is its symbolic aspect. The poetic exercise of courtly love raised by Lacan has various manifestations in Robert Coover's "The Dead Queen", Anne Sexton's "Snow White" and Angela Carter's "The Snow Child", three contemporary revisions of the classical fairy tale "Snow White", where the conventional utopia ending of "Prince and Princess live happily ever after" is rarely seen. Instead, twists, suspension, revelation, confusion and subversion often accompany the plots, and complicate the relations between heroes and heroines, which can find equivalents of idealizing themes in courtly love. These three revisions of "Snow White" draw a parallel between women in love and women in language, and are committed to disenchant the constructed feminine myth.

1 In chivalric romances, courtly love embodies a whole philosophy of love and represents an elaborate code of behavior which governs the relations between 'aristocratic' lovers, turning the more bodily and erotic aspects of love into a spiritual experience and the most elevated form of passions. The courtly lover both idealizes and is idealized by his beloved and subjects himself entirely to her desires. However, there is an inherent impossibility, an obstacle to the fulfillment of love, in the very structure of courtly love. As it develops, courtly love often entails the love between a single knight and a married woman. This love cannot be consummated in a physical sense and, if it is, disaster and death ensue. Courtly love therefore involves the agonies of unfulfilled love, but the lover remains true to his beloved, manifesting his honor and steadfastness in an unswerving adherence to the code of behavior. What Lacan finds of interest in these chivalric romances is its symbolic aspect. Courtly love is "a poetic exercise, a way of playing with a number of conventional, idealizing themes, which couldn't have any real concrete equivalent" (148). This poetic exercise of courtly love raised by Lacan has various manifestations in Robert Coover's "The Dead Queen", Anne Sexton's "Snow White" and Angela Carter's "The Snow Child", three contemporary revisions of the classical fairy tale "Snow White", where the conventional utopia ending of "Prince and Princess live happily ever after" is rarely seen. Instead, twists, suspension, revelation, confusion and subversion often accompany the plots, and complicate the relations between heroes and heroines, which can find equivalents of idealizing themes in courtly love. It draws a parallel between women in love and women in language. In both cases their role is metaphoric. These three revisions of "Snow White" acknowledge the power

that such a metaphor has had, while on the other hand is committed to disenchant the constructed feminine myth.

The Lady of Inaccessibility

2 Just as Hélène Cixous claims that all mystery emanates from women being beautiful, but passive, hence desirable, "sublimation" is the word to describe the mystic lady in courtly love. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan's fundamental definition of Sublimation is a process which "elevates an object to the dignity of the Thing (*la Chose*)" (152). Lacan later claims that *la Chose* has the character of an *au-dela du sacre*. From this point of view, the exemplary form or paradigm of Sublimation would be courtly love, which is dependent upon the very inaccessibility of its object. However, the first trap to be avoided apropos of courtly love is the erroneous notion of sublimation, of the Lady as the sublime object: as a rule, one evokes here spiritualization, a shift from the object of raw sensual coveting to elevated spiritual longing—the Lady is thus perceived as a kind of spiritual guide into the higher sphere of religious ecstasy, somehow in the sense of Dante's Beatrice. However, Lacan emphasizes a series of features which belie such spiritualization. Lacan admits that the inaccessible lady itself is actually anything but sublime: "By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner" (150). That means this abstract character of the Lady has nothing to do with spiritual purification; it rather points towards the abstraction that pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner.

3 In "Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing," Slavoj Žižek pushes forward Lacan's statement: "This surface functions as a kind of 'black hole' in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible" (91). The Lady is an impossibly idealized figure. "The object involved, the feminine object, is introduced oddly enough through the door of privation or of inaccessibility. Whatever the social position of him who functions in the role, the inaccessibility of the object is posited as a point of departure" (149). "The lady as a mirror fulfills a crucial role, a role as limit. It is that which cannot be crossed" (151). Human is perpetually in a state of desire, the desire to perpetually delay, distance and defer the signifier. That is, the object of desire cannot be possibly got, otherwise it cannot be desired. Courtly love inscribes the inaccessibility as the proper form of relation between man and woman. Žižek also points out the erroneous notion of sublimation, of the Lady as the sublime object apropos of courtly love. It should be clear in what precisely consists the difference from the usual dialectic of desire and prohibition: the aim of the prohibition is not to 'raise

the price' of an object by rendering its access more difficult, but to raise this object itself to the level of the Thing, the 'black hole' around which desire is organized. (Žižek 92) It is the necessity of perpetually sustaining desire at the cost of fulfillment. The history of reading is the history of desire. It is human compulsion to read obscure object of desire, the empty center. Thus the inaccessibility makes the object sublime. It is never the happy ending in courtly love when the pursued lady condescends to the knight's courtship. Once desire is fulfilled, void and loss follow.

4 Robert Coover's short novel "The Dead Queen", a contemporary revision of the classical fairy tale "Snow White", is a vivid illustration of the concept of courtly love raised by Lacan and Žižek. It is a story about desire and perpetual diffêrance (to use the word from Derrida), and Snow White therein acts as a lady of inaccessibility. The prince who has just married Snow White the day before and now is gazing speculatively at her dead stepmother in the glass coffin, which once contained his wife, retells the novel in flashbacks. In a quasi-existentialist and reflective mode, the prince supplements the tale, as we know it with unexpected details from his magic wedding night and with a new episode at the gravesite. In this retelling, the most traumatic moment comes in the prince's wedding night, which is a perfect variation of the theme of "courtly love": After having an overwhelmingly ecstatic night with Snow White on the wedding night, the prince waked to find "the bed unmussed and unbloodied, her hymen intact" (Coover 312). She is a representation of Bakhtin's classical body: a "smooth" and "impenetrable surface" that situates itself as "a separate and completed phenomenon" in terms of both image and the story that is intertextually invoked by the image (318). Paradoxically, the prince has the desire fulfilled and meanwhile it does not violate the law of the inaccessibility of the object, the limit and the "black hole." He finds a perfect balance in this seeming oxymoron or rather a utopian vision. Since it is the nature of unconsciousness to feed on desire, on lack, the chance is that after sexual ecstasy all is void and nothingness, and therefore men are eager for the original stage of irreversible wholeness and intactness. Men are fascinated by the myth of virginity, the virgin land no one has ever reached, accessed or explored:

> A virgin body has the freshness of secret springs, the morning sheen of an unbroken flower, the orient lustre of a pearl on which the sun has never shone. Grotto, temple, sanctuary, secret garden—man, like the child, is fascinated by enclosed and shadowy places not yet animated by any consciousness, which wait to be given a soul: what he alone to take and to penetrate seems to be in truth created by him. (Beauvoir 311)

5 Virginity is one of the secrets that men find most exciting in that the girl's purity allows hope for every kind of licence, and no one knows what perversities are concealed in her innocence. Women's ambiguity is just that of the concept of the Other. The Other is evil, yet necessary to the Good. Is Snow White Angel or Demon? Her uncertainty makes her a Sphinx in the Prince's eyes, and Sphinx is also commonly represented as a woman. We find this fascinating combination and magic resolution in Snow White in Coover's version. The magic, unbreakable hymen makes Snow White a limit, the Thing whose Beyond is inaccessible despite the real or fantasized intercourse. Beauvoir thus concludes: "She is everlasting deception, the very deception of that existence which is never successfully attained nor fully reconciled with the totality of existents" (323).

6 At the wedding, the prince is troubled by the true meaning of bride's name. The prince's questions about Snow White challenge the truthfulness of the process of female initiation as the traditional tale presents it, and ask us to re-examine the meaning of her name. Marriage, which plays an important role in folktales—particularly if they are tales of female development—is certainly a climactic moment of revelation in "The Dead Queen," but it does not function as a symbolic reconciliation of oppositions which arise out of social and psycho-sexual conflicts. Rather, it intensifies differences and magnifies the "frozen" and ideological nature of Snow White as a metaphor. Consequently, Snow White is exposed as an empty and frozen signifier: completing the cycle of initiation always involves a loss, while Snow White has "suffered no losses, in fact that's just the trouble, that hymen can never be broken, not even by me (the prince), not in a thousand nights, this is her gift and essence" (53). She is cold, distanced, inhuman, inaccessible from outside, and corrupted from within, as the Prince meditates: "I could vouch for her hymen from this side, but worried that it had been probed from within" (52). She is static, she is always there, and because of it, she can see neither fore nor aft. She is the Other, she is other than herself, other than what is expected of her, and other than what she should be. She is in no way a warm, compassionate, understanding fellow-creature. She is a hazy enigma. The perplexity of her being rejects the Prince's decoding. If the Lady of courtly love can be said to act as a mirror upon which the male lovers project their idealized images and fantasies, then this can only take place if the mirror is there already. In other words, she is exactly the kind of figure that one can have no empathetic relationship with whatsoever.

7 In order to be Snow White whose image the mirror reflects and cherishes, she must be paradoxically denied the normalizing process of growth the tale overtly proposes; if Snow White were to become "whole" and experience her sexuality as reproduction, she would

undoubtedly become like her stepmother. Thus, in order to preserve the wholeness and innocence of Snow White, she becomes a unified subject who cannot grow or change, reflected in her impenetrable hymen, inaccessible virginity and unbroken femininity. This patriarchy's ideal daughter is actually a phallic construct. Coover's tale confronts us with the ideological, and therefore entropic, nature of the metaphor: to conform to a humanist authoritative idea of what woman "is," Snow White is condemned to be a heartless and unconscious child who cannot change, a unified subject who cannot grow. She is as "dead" as the dead queen. In bed with his bride, the prince gazes "into the mirror to see, for the first time, Snow White's paradigmatic beauty" (310). It is significant that only through the mirror can the prince find out the essence of Snow White. Since the mirror reflects the patriarchal gaze, it reveals the prince's complicity with that ideology in defining woman as 'paradigmatic beauty,' even without his own consciousness. The Queen has lived and died in full awareness of the authority of the mirror, while Snow White has been unconsciously framed by it, and she is frozen into an aesthetic object erotically gazed by the mirror. Puzzled by Snow White's passionate and anything but innocent lovemaking and then by the realization that her hymen cannot be broken, the prince is moved to believe that the evil queen has plotted the whole story to free herself from the mirror. Through the use of a self-conscious and inquisitive narrator, Coover uncovers the ideological implications of sexual and narrative production in the tale of "Snow White".

Woman as Thing

8 The tendency to reduce a woman to an aesthetic object, inert and passive, contributes towards the dehumanization of women as Thing. Men are fascinated and enchanted by cold, freezing, static and silent female body as art, object and the Other. Even if women are not like an object, men make them "perform," to use Judith Butler's term, in an artificial way to satisfy their desire. It is actually a highly symbolic act which signifies women's existential condition under male erotic gaze. Man's pursuit of woman leads him to the love, worship and elevation of woman as Thing. The male gaze is constructed according to structures of control inscribed by sadistic voyeurism and / or fetishistic scopophilia (looking as a source of pleasure). In Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she gave fresh impetus to the debate about the male gaze and voyeurism, masculinity, power and subordination. Mulvey employed Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyze how the cinematic gaze is organized like a language, according to patriarchal codes and conventions, where

masculinity is empowered through the act of looking, while femininity is disempowered by being reduced to passively being looked at.

9 In *Woman Hating* (1974), one of the most aggressive fairy-tale critiques, the American radical feminist Andrea Dworkin focuses on Snow White and Sleeping Beauty as the embodiments of passive beauty: "For a woman to be good, she must be dead, or as close to it as possible" (42). The Brothers Grimm, gazing at Snow White through the prince's eyes, seems to be fascinated by the beauty in the coffin, cold and dead. Snow White, or rather her body, becomes the prototype of passive, cold and distant woman without desire, but functioning as a mirror projecting man's desire. Snow White is the impossible and inaccessible object of desire that inaugurates the movement of desire itself. In "The Dead Queen," the Queen is regarded as a vicious monster when she is alive, but once she is dead, she has the dim possibility of mimicking Snow White in the coffin and arousing male desire. The dead Queen in the coffin is just like the former "dead" Snow White, sublimed or rather "debased" to be Thing.

10 In Anne Sexton's poem "Snow White" collected in *Transformations*, Snow White is described as an artifact, a doll, a "plucked daisy," a dumb bunny, an Orphan Annie (making the dwarfs "wise / and wattled like small czars"). This poem is preceded by a prologue on virginity which provides both context and interpretative clues for the ensuing tale. The word "virgin" in this poem does not have the "great primal sense of the word" it has for Adrienne Rich, denoting "the woman who belongs to herself" (Rich 96). "The virgin" is, rather, a commodity prized by men, whose voices blend to create the persona of the speaker of the prologue. We meet the huckster who calls her a "lovely number," the connoisseur who itemizes her features in terms of fine tobacco, porcelain, and wine, the pimp who points out that she is "unsoiled," and the sportsman who observes that "she is as white as a bonefish." In the Grimm version of the tale, the dwarfs put the "dead" Snow White in a glass coffin so that they can see her. In Sexton's retelling, they enclose her in glass and put her on a mountain "so that all who passed by / could peek in upon her beauty." Their patience is rewarded when the prince arrives and covets "the glass Snow White." (Sexton 152).

11 In "The Snow Child" included in *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter employs the strategy of indirectly subverting the classical fairy tale, which means to follow the logic of the original, go one step further and push that logic to the extreme, thus making people reflect the validity and absurdity of the traditional ideology. In the story, the Count expresses the wish of having a girl as white as snow, as red as blood and as black as a raven's feather. "As soon as he completed her description, there she stood, beside the road, white skin, red mouth,

black hair and stark naked; she was the child of his desire" (Carter 91-92). As an inhuman, cold and distanced creature, Snow Child is a transparent puppet without self-consciousness, whose existence is utterly at the disposal of the desire of her male master. Thus, by substituting the Snow Child as the result of male desire for the mother's desire in the original story, Angela Carter's version exposes the fallacy of the patriarchal construction of traditional fairy tales.

12 The socially prescribed characteristics of femininity are silence, immobility, and beauty of Snow White displayed in a glass coffin. Thus, Gilbert and Gubar point out that culturally we often seem to inhabit a misogynistic realm that wants to return women to reification in the coffin: "Dead and self-less in her glass coffin, she is an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy's marble 'opus,' the decorative and decorous Galatea with whom every ruler would like to grace his parlor" (41). It is decided that the nature of woman is passive, that she is a vessel waiting to be filled. Elizabeth Wanning Harries talks about this passivity of women in *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of Fairy Tales*: "Rather than design a life for themselves, women 'in thrall' to fairy-tale patterns wait for male rescue or at least something to happen" (137). Feminist literary critics argue that most popular fairy tales, like "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Sleeping Beauty" had heroines who were passive, apparently dead or sleepwalking, dependent on the arrival of the prince for any animation and for entry into a real life—though a real life that never was given any contour after the obligatory royal wedding. As the earliest feminist critics of fairy tales all agreed, women in the best-known tales were either beautiful, slumbering young girls or powerful, usually wicked and grotesque older women. Though there might be a muted tradition of tales in which women were admirable, active, clever, and self-assertive participants, the dominant tradition prescribed harmful roles for women that little girls could not help but imitate. Rather than design a life for themselves, the women "in thrall" to fairy-tale patterns wait for male rescue. They half-consciously submit to being male property, handed from father to suitor or husband without complaint or volition. It is the gender economy of the often-repeated fairy tales that has betrayed them.

13 Furthermore, the tendency to reduce a woman to an inert and passive object reveals the unrealistic simplification of human relationships. The objectification of women is fundamentally related to male fear of female power. Nancy Chodorow connects this phenomenon with the concerns of folklorists. According to her, dread of women is ambivalent: "Although a boy fears her, he also finds her seductive and attractive. He cannot simply dismiss and ignore her. Boys and men develop psychological and cultural /

ideological mechanisms to cope with their fears without giving up women altogether" (183). Thus, men create folk legends, beliefs, and poems that ward off the dread by externalizing and objectifying women. They deny dread at the expense of realistic views of women. On the one hand, they glorify and adore; paradoxically on the other, they disparage. This explains why female body is elevated or rather degraded as the Thing.

Narcissistic Nature of Courtly Love

14 The elevation of the female body as an aesthetic object and woman as Thing is essentially narcissistic in nature. At the end of "Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing," Žižek arrives at the conclusion that courtly love bears witness to a certain deadlock of contemporary feminism:

> True, the courtly image of man serving his Lady is a semblance that conceals the actuality of male domination; true, the masochist theatre is a private mise-en-scène designed to recompense the guilt contracted by man's social domination; true, the elevation of woman to the sublime object of love equals her debasement into the passive stuff or screen for the narcissistic projection of the male ego-ideal. (108)

15 The Lady is the Other who is *not* our 'fellow-creature,' i.e. with whom no relationship of empathy is possible. This traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by the Freudian term *das Ding*, the Thing. The idealization of the Lady, her elevation to a spiritual, ethereal Ideal, is therefore to be conceived as a strictly secondary phenomenon, a narcissistic projection whose function is to render invisible her traumatic, intolerable dimension. In this precise and limited sense, Lacan concedes that "the element of idealizing exaltation that is expressly sought out in the ideology of courtly love has certainly been demonstrated; it is fundamentally narcissistic in character." Deprived of every real substance, the Lady functions as a mirror onto which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal. "It is only by chance that beyond the mirror in question the subject's ideal is projected. The mirror may on occasion imply the mechanisms of narcissism" (151). Beauvoir echoes Lacan in stating that woman as the Other is indispensable to man's self-projection:

> Woman has often been compared to water because, among other reasons, she is the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself: he bends over her in good or bad faith. But in any case what he really asks of her is to be, outside of him, all that which he cannot grasp inside himself, because the inwardness of the existent is only nothingness and because he must project himself into an object in order to reach himself. (315)

16 The patriarchal tendency to reduce a woman to an inert and passive object, contributes towards the dehumanization of women and the unrealistic simplification of human relationships. Men are fascinated and enchanted by cold, freezing, static and silent female body as art, object and the Other. When the Prince in “The Dead Queen” gazes at the dead Queen in the glass coffin, the coffin that once contained Snow White, a sudden revelation comes to him that “maybe the old Queen had loved me, had died for me!” (A narcissistic vision) Then he wrenches open the coffin, throws himself upon her, and kisses the dead queen’s rubbery and cold lips twice, hoping to disenchant her, and when nothing happens, he leaves wounded in his pride and as nauseated as his spectators are. It is a postponed “prince’s magic kiss.” In the previous context, when the prince kissed Snow White on the wedding, he had pondered: “Why hadn’t I been allowed to disenchant her with a kiss like everybody else?”(59). “Everybody else” certainly refers to other princes who wake up entrapped beauties with true love’s magic kisses.

17 Male identity is established through the process of negation, and by the negative knowledge of the existence of woman as the Other, of what man is not. If she did not exist, men would have invented her. “Man has created woman — out of what? Out of a rib of his god — of his ‘ideal.’” said Nietzsche in *The Twilight of the Idols*. He projects upon her what he desires and what he fears. Woman sums up the World for him and upon her he has imposed his values and his laws. She is the source and origin of all man’s reflection on his existence. The very semblance of courtly love provides woman with a fantasy substance of her identity, with all the features of so-called ‘femininity’ and defines woman not as she is in her *jouissance feminine* but as she refers to herself with regard to her relationship to man, as the projection of the male ego, as an object of his desire, and as the Other.

18 However, the new myth of women deprived of pure ‘femininity’ is various and even contradictory, whose inner realm is beyond man’s comprehension and penetration. Behind the angel lurks the monster: the obverse of the male idealization of women is the male fear of femininity. Gilbert and Gubar mention characters like Shakespeare’s Goneril and Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, as well as the traditional array of such terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom “possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy” (34). The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell. The duplicitous woman is the one whose consciousness is opaque to man, whose mind will not be penetrated by masculine thought. Thus the Queen in “Snow White” becomes a paradigmatic instance of the monster woman in the male imagination, and the double for

feminists to release their anger and contrive their rebellion against the narcissistic nature of "courtly love".

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