

The Case for Fairy Tales

Tradition and subversion in *Pan's Labyrinth*

Angela Qian

Magic slippers, glass coffins, witches who live in the woods, and princes with swan wings—we've all heard these stories, repeated time and time again; we've grown up with them. The versatility of fairy tales stems largely from their simplicity and ubiquitous cultural presence, which enables them to be reworked into any number of different frameworks. Out of all genres, fairy tales are, perhaps, the stories that lend themselves to the most retellings. Disney, for instance, has milked fairy tale retellings for all they are worth in a long tradition of brief, feel-good commercial successes. But on the other side of the spectrum, novelists and artists admit to drawing from a childhood love of fairy tales to produce significant works charged with cultural or political messages. Recently, for example, there's been Eowyn Ivey, whose novel *The Snow Child* sets a Russian fairy tale in a broader pioneer setting. Or there's *The Path*, an indie-art horror game that tackled stereotypes of female sexuality with a remake of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

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But the most compelling example of the fairy-tale framework's effectiveness in recent history is Guillermo del Toro's 2006 dark fantasy film *Pan's Labyrinth*, which subtly turns the traditional framework on its head to make a complex political point about finding agency in oppressive circumstances, such as under a fascist regime.

Two narratives make up the movie: Ofelia and her mother move in with her new stepfather, Captain Vidal, who supports the Fascist

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regime in Spain and is fighting against insurgents who hide in the forest around his base. Ofelia's mother, Carmen, is pregnant with Captain Vidal's son. Unhappy in her new home, Ofelia takes refuge in a magical labyrinth in the woods, where she meets a faun named Pan, who tells her that she is actually Princess Moanna of the Underworld, and that if she completes three tasks, at the full moon she will be restored to her true father, the King.

The magical elements and parallelism to traditional fairy tales are obvious. The movie's opening sequence begins with the well-recognized fairy-tale words "A long time ago," and when we first see Ofelia, in a car with her mother, she is carrying a book of fairy tales. As critic Jennifer Orme points out, Ofelia's appearance—her black hair, pale skin, dress, and pinafore—reflects that of fairy-tale heroines such as Snow White or Dorothy of *The Wizard of Oz*.¹ In a similar vein, Laura Hubner notes that Ofelia sees her first fairy in the woodlands, and it is in the woods that the fantastical elements of Ofelia's story begin to play out.² The symbolism of the wilderness is familiar from the journeys of characters like Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White. Like those characters, Ofelia must also undertake an expedition into the wilderness to complete her three tasks. The number three itself is another fairy-tale trope appearing in the film, along with that of the full moon as a bridge between the earthly and otherworldly, and—perhaps most obvious—that of an ordinary girl turned into a princess.

1. Jennifer Orme, "Narrative Desire and Disobedience in Pan's Labyrinth," *Marvels & Tales* 24 (2010): 220.

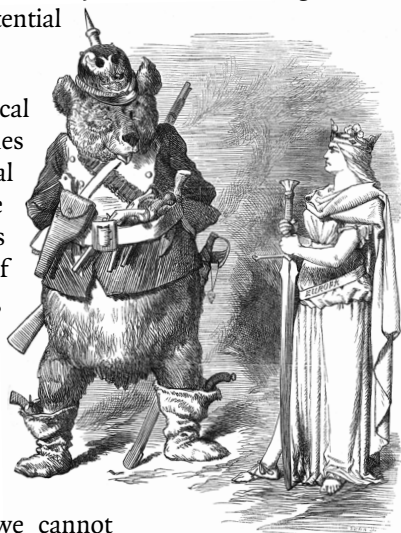
2. Laura Hubner, "Pan's Labyrinth, Fear and the Fairy Tale," *At The Interface/Probing the Boundaries* 61 (2010): 50.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Hubner argues that *Pan's Labyrinth* has a "simple," essentialist understanding of gender, citing Ofelia as the archetype of the good and innocent girl and Captain Vidal as the two-dimensional evil villain.³ But I would like to propose an alternate view: the process of subversion that allows for the disposal of the evil villain at the end of the film is a complex one. The process of undermining traditional fairy tale tropes mirrors the overt rebellion against the Fascist regime, a dual process of subversion that allows Ofelia to choose to not participate in the Fascist world represented by Captain Vidal.

Unlike feel-good fairy tales, *Pan's Labyrinth* shows that magic does not provide a simple, happy answer to a story's conflict. In both the real world and the fantastical, the "right" answer is frequently ambiguous; there is no clear-cut path. Like other fairy tale heroines, Ofelia receives a guide—the faun—who, like the traditional fairy godmother or wizened wise woman, is supposed to help her navigate the pitfalls and strange logic of the magical realm. Ofelia first meets the faun at night, in the labyrinth in the forest where the rebels hide. But though he serves as a counterpoint to Ofelia's unhappiness with Vidal, the faun certainly does not seem to pose a safe or easy alternative. The faun's appearance, like those of the fairies and other fantastical creatures in the film, is eerie, even verging on grotesque. The tasks he sends her on—to go into the lair of a giant toad or the dungeon of a cannibalistic Pale Man with eyes for hands—are similarly grotesque, and certainly dangerous. In this, the film clearly draws upon the disturbing violence of the Brothers Grimm or older myths with themes of blood sacrifice and dark magic, as opposed to their sanitized Disney counterparts. The fantastical world is therefore not a means for Ofelia to escape; this realm is just as dark and dangerous as her reality, and fraught with potential pitfalls and reversals of trust.

The dangers of the fantastical realm parallel Ofelia's struggles with mentorhood in the real world. Ofelia's most obvious role model—her mother—is, as is typical in fairy tales, largely out of the picture. Sickly and bedridden, Ofelia's mother cannot effect much change; indeed, she has married Captain Vidal and borne his son in an effort to save herself and her daughter, rather than rebelling against the regime. This creates a moral complication: we cannot exactly approve of Carmen's decision to marry the cruel Captain Vidal. She made this choice in what she thinks are the best interests for her family, but by submitting to Captain Vidal, Carmen



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encourages an authoritarian regime and forces her and her daughter to conform to subdued, passive roles. The only role Carmen can serve, therefore, is that of a plot device, though the complexity of her moral decisions reflects that of the choices Ofelia must make.

Hubner points out that *Pan's Labyrinth* alludes “to the actions of fathers and forefathers...here, troubling practices are transferred onto the evil stepfather” as opposed to the trope of the evil stepmother found in stories like *Cinderella* or *Hansel and Gretel*.⁴ In those stories, the absent father allows for the degradation of his children; his crime is incompetence and obliviousness. Here, however, Carmen is the one absent, and Vidal in all his cruelty is very much present. Carmen, submissive to Vidal, cannot actively protect her daughter or unborn son; she can no longer act as a mother or a role model. Moreover, we see that Ofelia and her mother do not understand each other, despite their love. When Carmen gives Ofelia a dress, Ofelia is not enthused; she wants books while her mother wants her to stop reading fairy tales and get a hold of reality. Carmen wants Ofelia to accept her surroundings and try to live as comfortably as she can through Vidal's

4. Ibid., p. 53.



system. Ultimately, however, Carmen dies—giving birth to the son Vidal has always wanted, who will inherit his name.

Why would del Toro choose to reverse the gender roles of the stepparent and parent here, in a narrative set during a time of overt patriarchal family structures when women like Carmen were relegated to restrictive stay-at-home-wife roles? This is one example of how he twists the traditional fairy-tale narrative to illustrate a political point about gender hierarchies. Vidal, the father figure, actively creates oppression rather than passively letting it happen. But, in a crucial reversal of traditional tropes, Ofelia does not try to get out of her situation by trying to emphasize her feminine desirability.

A frequent contemporary critique of traditional fairy tales is that the heroines are saved or rescued from their situations by princes; therefore all their happiness and success is dependent on being married off, bearing children, and living happily ever after. *Pan's Labyrinth* takes this narrative in a different direction. It shows with Carmen's case that marriage often does not end happily. Rather than emphasizing the fairy-tale heroine's sexual desirability, *Pan's Labyrinth* shifts the focus to parenting (or the lack thereof); the moral takeaway of the narrative is therefore allowed a much broader scope.

Instead of a knight or young farmer boy going on a quest to complete three tasks to save a princess, it is the princess herself who must go on a journey. In fact, the story of Princess Moanna focuses not on a romantic arc but on her attempt to be reunited with her parents. Indeed, the story takes the child of the fairy tale and transforms her: more than a mere journey through space, her journey becomes a psychological journey towards adulthood.

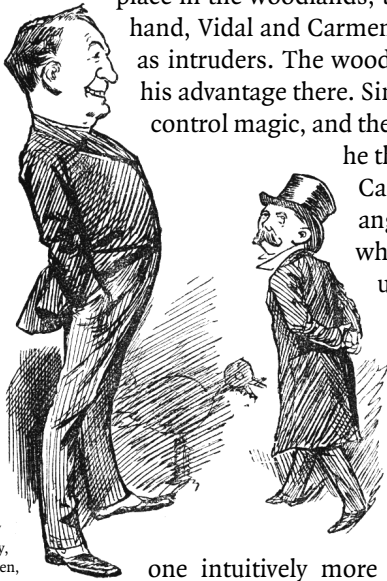
Without her mother as an active role model for Ofelia, the narrative has room for a new maternal mentor. Captain Vidal's household turns up Mercedes, a female servant who steps into the empty space of Ofelia's maternal guide—singing her lullabies, telling her about fairy tales, and including Ofelia in the secret rebellion against Vidal.

Mercedes serves as a sharp contrast to Carmen. Unlike Carmen, who, exasperated, tells Ofelia she must stop believing in fairy tales no

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matter how much it hurts, Mercedes does not refute Ofelia's belief. Mercedes plays the role of a native—someone of the land who knows the myths and legends as well as she knows the woods. It is she who finds Ofelia coming out of the woods after her first encounter with the toad, and she who goes into the woods to signal to the rebels. We are reminded again of Hubner's point, that the rebellion takes place in the woodlands, the locus of the magic.⁵ On the other

5. *Ibid.*, p. 50.



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hand, Vidal and Carmen's aversion to the woods marks them as intruders. The woods intimidate Vidal, and thus he loses his advantage there. Similarly, Vidal cannot make sense of or control magic, and therefore refutes it, as in the scene where he throws the mandrake root into the fire. Carmen never leaves the house and is angry at Ofelia for getting her dress dirty while in the woods. These characters, unlike Mercedes, do not know how to tread the line between mysticism and reality.

And of course, Mercedes is part of the insurgent movement seeking to dispose Vidal. It is because Ofelia has Mercedes that she understands another option is presented to her, one intuitively more satisfying than Carmen's choice in following Vidal, and the route she ultimately takes: rebellion.

In traditional fairy tales, growing up is usually glossed over quickly; character development falls to the wayside in favor of magical obstacles and tasks. In *Cinderella*, for instance, Cinderella doesn't need to grow up—all she needs is to have her goodness recognized via the glass slipper. Snow White never needs to learn to say no to suspicious old women selling apples and corsets; the plot will carry her through.

But this reliance on *deus ex machina* leaves little room for compelling characters. Ofelia does have to grow up, and when she does, she no longer lets the fairy tale control her. This twist in the

traditional framework allows del Toro to make a much larger political commentary on how a heroine might take control over the forces of a fantastical plot (and in del Toro's case, fascist Spain) seeking to shape her path. Ofelia's divergence from the norms of the fairy tales she herself admires reflects her departure from what is expected of her; we see her ability to deviate from the fairy-tale narrative offered to her in her rejection of Captain Vidal and his authoritarian rule. *Pan's Labyrinth* uses Ofelia's individual choices as a springboard into the broader implications of how one might question, criticize, and rebel against restraints and expectations.

Having listened to the faun's instructions for the majority of the film, Ofelia follows a path that theoretically should take her back to the Underworld. At the climax of the film, Captain Vidal, who has been surprised by an attack from the insurgents, chases Ofelia and her baby brother into the labyrinth. At the portal to the Underworld, the faun asks Ofelia for the blood of an innocent: just a little blood, he asks, from her baby brother.

But Ofelia says no. The faun, in disbelief, asks if she will give up her right to return to the Underworld for this child; Ofelia again refuses to give him up. Meanwhile, Vidal has followed her into the labyrinth. He only sees Ofelia talking to empty air. He aims a gun at her and asks her to return his son to him. When she refuses, he shoots her. Ofelia falls, dying; it is her innocent blood that is shed. Though the movie ends with a shot of her standing in front of her royal parents in the Underworld, del Toro leaves it up to us whether or not this fairy-tale ending actually happens.

Ofelia's death at the end of the movie completes a coterie of images tied to blood throughout the film. Richard Lindsay has noted the widespread use of uterine imagery and bloodletting throughout the film to argue that Ofelia's journey is one familiar to most women—that of initiation into womanhood, a passage marked by a girl's first period.⁶ For instance, the very opening shot of the film shows Ofelia lying with blood on her face; the red stands in vivid contrast to a palette otherwise subdued by hues of blue and gray. This is the first hint we receive of the importance of blood—both literal and figurative—throughout the narrative. When Carmen begins

6. Richard Lindsay, "Menstruation as Heroine's Journey in *Pan's Labyrinth*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 16 (2012): 3.

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to bleed as she is about to give birth, Ofelia sees the spreading of blood through the magical book the faun has given her. Del Toro has admitted the tree the bloated toad lives in intentionally parallels the shape of the ovaries, a feminine image; the chamber Ofelia finds the toad in looks like a womb. And the final task asked of Ofelia is for the blood sacrifice of an innocent, of her baby half-brother.

What work does creating these implicit connections between Ofelia's girlhood and her navigation of the real and fantastical worlds do? Lindsay argues that it is an usurpation of the traditional heroic narrative:

The tradition of blood sacrifice used in religion, including the Christian cycle of crucifixion and resurrection, comes in part from the attempt of men to create a 'pure' that is, non-female, form of bloodletting that has the same power over life and death as the bloodletting of menstruation and birthing...The hero's journey thus represents the blood sacrifice of the male warrior, a descent into death, and a resurrection into semi-divinity without the spiritually 'tainted' blood of a woman. In appropriating the hero's journey as a metaphor for female menstruation, therefore, del Toro transgresses the patriarchal cycle of womanless regeneration.⁷

7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Traditionally, blood sacrifices come from innocent women—that is, virgin girls. The faun, however, makes no such demand; indeed, the faun first asks for the blood of Ofelia's younger brother. Though Ofelia herself becomes the sacrifice, this decision is hers. She decides to protect her younger brother, and, in taking his place, wins passage to the Underworld.

Ofelia's choice is the culmination of her growth throughout the film. In allowing her blood to be shed, she is, for the first time, taking part in bloodletting. This could be read symbolically as a stand-in for her first period, but even if we do not take such a reading, we can see how the choice is symbolic of Ofelia becoming an active shaper of

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her own narrative. It is the first moment in which Ofelia has outright defied the rules she has been told to follow.

She has disobeyed the faun, a symbol of the magic world; she has defied Vidal, who asks her to return his son. Meanwhile, her mother, Carmen, is dead, and she gives up hope of returning to any magical parents in her decision to not give the baby to the faun. In protecting the child, she has assumed an agency in her narrative that is shared by one other female character—Mercedes. By this act of defiance, Ofelia has completed the arc of subversion of the traditional fairy tale narrative and stepped into the active maternal role herself. At the end of the fairy tale and the film, therefore, Princess Moanna returns to the Underworld and rules.



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If we look at *Pan's Labyrinth* in this way, the film becomes remarkable for its take on what could have easily become either a generic historical drama or a simplistic fairy tale retelling. Del Toro's genius lies in how he not only makes the fairy-tale framework the most accessible point into a historical conflict that some viewers otherwise may have difficulty relating to, but also in how he does not let the fairy tale overpower the political or moral takeaways (or vice versa). Even at the end of the film, the viewer remains unsure whether the magic was real at all, whether Ofelia died and went to the Underworld, or whether she died and the fairy tale is merely a last dream. Del Toro leaves us with this ambiguity, letting us, like Ofelia, make our own choices as to what to believe. The power of *Pan's Labyrinth* lies in this meeting of maturity and childhood nostalgia, of hard reality and our yearning to believe in magic. Del Toro is able to renew the timeless relevance of fairy-tale tropes in his film, but also go a step beyond that and show us, in his masterful execution, how such classic stories can be refashioned into a new breed.