

A House of Pomegranates

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This somewhat mysterious title encompasses four fairy-tales, obviously neither suitable for children nor meant for them. To whom writes Wilde? Most likely to himself. They are in the nature of finger exercises, thus in the nature not to be publicly performed but rather left for personal indulgence.

There is little of the wit we have come to associate with the author to be found in them, instead they play up to the excessive and sentimental side of Wilde, and are to be thought of as incantations, not unlike erotic daydreams, desperately rubbing the most sensitive spots of the dreamers imagination in the hope of internal arousal.

There are as noted four of them. The first depicts a prince in love with beauty, but who has some night-mares through which he comes to understand that the beauty he so much treasures only can come about by the sacrifices by the poor and downtrodden, That the price to pay for aesthetic exaltation is high indeed in terms of suffering. Stricken with those belated insights he decides to forego all the pomp associated with his pending coronation, instead he decides to dress like a tramp. This predictably causes uproar and anger among his entourage and the bishop refuses to anoint him. But then the miracle occurs, all his rags are changed into golden elegance. In short the prince can both have the cake and eat it. Now this story reminds you of the renunciations of a Buddha, that pampered prince, who once he discovered suffering cast all his riches away to enter the world as a tramp. More to the point it also abuts the life of Jesus, another tale of renunciation and humility. The tale is told in old-fashioned language with the tenor of Biblical pronouncement, something which must have excited and pleased the author a lot. One wonders whether the exercise would not have been more effective if it had been written as a regular pastiche of the Bible, replete with short numbered verses.

The second story is an imaginative elaboration on a classical picture by Velasquez of a small princess. This allows him to extemporize on the cruelty of children, especially those spoiled by constant amusement, and to elaborate on the dwarf seen in the background of the painting. The latter is done with some aplomb, I must admit, and especially the depiction of the dwarf encountering a mirror for his first time in life (he was plucked out of his parents abode in the woods little to their displeasure) I find masterly almost memorable, although the phenomenon obviously has been explored almost to the tilt in the past.

The third story is the longest and the most elaborated. The story abounds in detail stacked upon each other, and seems to go on and on, without stopping. The fisherman encountering a mermaid, obviously harks back to the classical tale by H.C.Andersen by its reference to the people of the seas lacking souls. Wilde turns the dilemma of the Andersen's mermaid on its head. Rather than the mermaid giving up her happy long life for an immortal soul, it is the fisherman who is required to give up his soul in order to enjoy the seemingly unending delights of sensual intercourse. What use is his soul to him?

His efforts to get rid of it are initially frustrated. The priest finds it priceless, something money cannot buy, while the merchants find it priceless in another sense, as something that does not even carry a price being worthless and hence useless for commercial purposes. Finally he is able to avail himself of the services of a young witch. By dancing with her, he will in return be given the secret of how to shed his encumbrance. It turns out that by going down to the shore during a night of full moon, turning your back towards it and then with a knife cut out the pale shadow it casts, you will have separated your soul from your body, because the soul is the shadow your body casts under the full moon. Romantic. The fisherman does what he was told and lo and behold the soul materializes before him. Just as the shadow is cast, he tries to cast away his shadow, but the soul remonstrates and does not want to be cast away and wander alone in the world. At least, it pleads, allow me your heart, but the fisherman does not relent. The heart, unlike his soul, he needs for his dalliance with the mermaid. The soul has no option but to accede but promises to come to the shore one night every year. And so it does, and each time it recounts in great detail its various adventures. This is done in the opulent style of the Arabian Nights, something which must have greatly excited the fervent imagination of the author. There is a mannered abundance of archaic words strewn like jewels into the text, which by itself is heavily studded with mineralogical references. True to his words the soul three times returns to the shore. The first time to recount his exciting travels in the magic lands of the East where he has come upon the treasure of wisdom. But what is worldly wisdom compared to love (or the joys of the flesh)? The soul is dismissed, and when he returns the next year, he has a similar story of exciting adventure to retell, this time bringing with him all the riches of the world. But what is worldly riches compared to that of erotic love? Only the third time when the soul holds out the prospects of young girls dancing, is the lust of the fisherman roused enough for him to agree to a temporary reunion, just to satisfy new titillations (a mermaid has no feet and hence cannot dance). But the fisherman is aghast at the cruelty and the deception exercised by his soul, as the latter is trying to recall the city where he met the damsel. When admonished, the soul simply says that he was let out in the world without a heart, and hence became heartless. The fisherman tries to separate himself from his soul, but learns at his peril, that such an operation can only be performed once. Burdened with a soul, the way back to the mermaid is closed. The fisherman is inconsolable, and he wails for years, longing for her to reappear. Fate finally has mercy upon his determination, and the mermaid is carried by the waves to the shore dead. She is embraced by her suitor, who in the process dies, yet in dying there is some kind of consolation and a unification of hearts. As can be gleaned, the story takes some time to summarize properly.

The final story is shorter. On a very cold winter night two woodcutters find an abandoned child. One of them takes it home to be reared although the means are very short. The baby grows up into a very beautiful boy who is so proud of his beauty that he imagines it to have a royal precedent. When he finally encounters his real mother, an ugly beggar woman, he rejects her out of pride. In doing so he is turned into a toad and learn what real humiliation means. He goes out in the world to make amends, and he satisfies all the tests of trials that are posed to him. As a result he is united with his parents, who under the disguise as beggars and lepers, turn out to be king and queen. He himself

inherits the throne and reigns with great wisdom and humility, only to die young and be replaced by a tyrant.

Thus four stories written with great aplomb and mastery of words, but somehow, they do not rise above the level of cleverness, and hence leave you cold¹. Maybe stories to really make an impact need to speak directly to you and connect to some collective Jungian subconscious. You just cannot make it up, it has to make itself up. A real story has an independent force, like a river, following the gradient. It cannot twist and bend and rewind upon itself at the whims of its author. Great as the ideas for plots may be, in art execution makes for almost everything. The proof of the Pudding is not to be found in its recipe, however clever, but in its eating.

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¹ It is possible that if you would have encountered those stories as a young child they may have made an eerie impression on you and stayed with you for life, as do the classical retellings by Grimm and Perrault. Especially if they had been lavishly illustrated in the style of the pre-Raphaelites, whose guiding imagination run parallel to that of Wilde, this being typical of the fashions of the day.