

Girl Into Woman: Growing Strong

A View of Pan's Labyrinth

by Arlene Kramer Richards

On one level the film Pan's Labyrinth is a political statement. Set in the 1940s, it deals with the bitter end of Spanish civil war, Basque separatism, and Franco fascism. On another level it is a fairy tale about a princess who has to accomplish three tasks to get back to the father who loves her even though he has lost her. At a third level it is a nature story about how plants and animals interact with each other and with people. But the fourth level that is about female development is the one that I would like to focus on for this evening. It is interwoven with the other levels, yet it functions as the thread that pulls them all together.

The three major female characters in the film are three ages of woman. The youngest is Ofelia, the child heroine. Next in age is Mercedes the young woman heroine; next is Ofelia's mother, survivor and bearer of new life. The fourth age is represented by the women who work in the kitchen. Each of these stages of life has its own form of heroism and each has its own weaknesses. The tension throughout is whether each of the women will survive the perils of her age and whether she will keep her own vision of who she wants to be intact. Will she live up to her ideals? Will she give up her ideals and cave in to those who threaten her life? But most of all the film is about Ofelia who appears before the titles, The visual title of the film is her image.

The film begins with sounds: wind, breathing, singing. The first image of the film is the head of a young girl; blood flows from her nose and mouth; she is dying. The film can only be a tragedy. Miraculously the blood flows backward to symbolize going backward in time. Behind this image the narrator tells the story of a fairy tale princess who decided to see the real world. The second

image is a journey, a metaphor for life. In it we see Ofelia, the young girl of the first image, but now traveling with her mother in an official looking car. Ofelia reads fairy tales. Her mother suffers through the journey burdened with her pregnancy, nauseated and vomiting. She blames her symptoms on the baby being too active. Only in the fairy tales can people live without vomiting, suffering the pain of having a real living body. At this point Ofelia's living body is still intact. She chooses to live in the fairy tale world.

The fairy tale world appears in the form of rune stone, a message from the world of the past when fairy tales were true. The stone is not pretty even though it is beautiful. It is scary and yet familiar, it is uncanny. Like the stone, the faun she encounters is part of the natural world. But he does not look like a faun in nature; he looks more like Pan, the mythical, goat who stands for joy, sexuality and mischief. At first sight he scares Ofelia and the audience. Sexy is scary. That we are meant to see the faun as Pan is clear from the title of the movie, yet he is always referred to as the faun. The contradiction unsettles and frightens; Pan is uncanny. Like Pan, menstruation enters the world of a girl as both natural and unfamiliar. Throughout, the movie identifies fairy tales with nature, visually depicted as dragonflies as fairies and a mandrake root as a fetus. Ofelia enters the world of the labyrinth to find that she is now a child of the moon. The menstrual imagery continues--the fullness of the moon will bring the crucial event. The entire movie is thus set in the premenstrual part of her first menstrual cycle. The first menses is the crucial moment.

Once arrived at the end of their initial journey, mother and Ofelia are greeted by the Captain, a strict man who orders the mother into a wheelchair and scolds Ofelia for greeting him with her left hand. Patriarchy incarnate, the Captain will not allow any female initiative. He enforces

passivity on the mother; he sets the rule of relating for the daughter. But the Captain also introduces her to Mercedes, a young servant woman who runs the household. When Mercedes warns Ofelia not to go into the labyrinth, she seems to be enforcing the passivity that the Captain and patriarchy demand of women. Ofelia does not heed the warning; she enters the labyrinth, thus listening to the call of her body rather than accepting social constraints that would have her deny her new sexuality. She chooses Pan over the subservient woman.

Ofelia settles in as her mother's companion and protector when she sees her mother's fetus and tells him a story to make him less active. She calms him down with a sad tale of a rose living alone on a cold hostile mountain top where no one can reach her: the story of female latency. Here again the image of the ideal woman is one who desired by others, has no sexual desire herself.

Everyone is sure that the fetus is a boy. When the doctor questions this, the Captain goes into a rage. A boy has value, initiative, desire; a girl is nothing. By a brutal scene in which the Captain kills a son and then his father, the story establishes the importance of the father-son relationship and the Captain's unfitness to have a son.

Ofelia disobeys the injunction not to go into the labyrinth; re-entering it she meets Pan. By contrast with the patriarchal rules for passivity in women, the Pan requires Ofelia to undertake three tasks in order to get her heart's desire. The three tasks are parallel to the classic tasks required of the hero in many fairy tales where the hero will win the love of the princess and the kingdom by completing the tasks. The faun gives her a book in which the tasks will appear. This empowers her, taking her out of the role of the passive princess who must be won by the active

male and putting her into the role of the active princess who is the only one who can save the fairy tale world by her deeds.

In Ofelia's first test she is given a party dress, an external appearance of beauty. She refuses to keep herself looking pristine, takes off the dress and follows the book's instruction that she destroy a greedy toad and get a golden key. She completes the task only to find that she and her dress are now muddy and unfit to appear at the Captain's table. Sad at disappointing her mother, she smiles when her mother tells her that the Captain is even more disappointed with her.

Ofelia's mother dies in a bloody childbirth after the Captain has killed the doctor and assigned a medical orderly to deliver the baby. Mercedes tells Ofelia that she also believed in fairies as a child, but no longer does. She soothes Ofelia with a wordless lullaby--the same song as in the opening of the movie. Mercedes tells Ofelia that having a baby is complicated. Ofelia decides that she will never have one. This refusal of motherhood contradicts what the patriarchy demands of women. It is like giving the left hand in a handshake.

At this, the faun gives her a second task. Her second task is to use the key to get a special dagger. But she must not eat anything when she is in the underworld doing her task. Fear escalates as she takes the trip into the underworld. She walks past a huge banquet displaying the tempting foods that are associated with sexual pleasure. At the head of the table sits a monster who cannot see. His eye sockets are empty: his eyes are on the plate in front of him. This uncanny image seems like the authority to whom all this pleasure belongs. It is his table. Disobeying the faun's prohibition, Ofelia eats a grape and the monster puts one eye into his empty socket. Ofelia eats another and he puts in his second eye. Now that he can see, he comes after her. She is saved only

because two of the fairies guiding her deflect the monster who eats them. The faun is furious. He tells Ofelia that she has lost her chance at immortality. The episode follows the myth of Persephone who lost her right to live with her mother by eating a persimmon when she was down in Hades. It also recalls the myths of Oedipus who put out his eyes to punish himself for killing his father and sleeping with his mother. And it recalls Odysseus feat of putting out the eye of the cyclops who ate men. By eating the forbidden grapes Ofelia is now guilty like Oedipus, separated from her mother like Persephone and barely escaped from being eaten by a monster herself.

The faun gives her a last chance. She must bring the baby to the labyrinth that night because this is the evening of the full moon. The faun takes the dagger she stole from the monster and tells her he needs a drop or two of the baby's blood. She refuses; her own blood flows when the Captain kills her. Mercedes sings her the lullaby as she dies. The bloody opening scene repeats.

But in the coda the baby goes to Mercedes who can nurture him. The Captain asks her to tell his son about him and Mercedes defies the law of the patriarchy: the baby will never know who his father was. And the faun tells Ofelia that by disobeying his order to give her the blood of an innocent she has gained the right to eternal life with her mother and father.

The blood imagery goes from the blood of life oozing from the young girl at the first shot to the menstrual blood shown in the faun's book to the mother's blood in childbirth to the infant's blood Ofelia will not allow to be shed and back to her own life blood. When the faun tells her that the blood of an innocent must be shed, Ofelia's mother's blood cannot suffice. The mother has given up her innocence by marrying the Captain (who may have killed Ofelia's father.) Her blood does

not qualify as the blood of an innocent.

Ofelia's refusal to hand over her brother makes hers the innocent blood. In the end Ofelia has gained true power by being true to her own moral judgement. So what is the relationship between blood, the moon and moral judgement? According to the logic of the movie, I think that it involves the advent of sexual maturity in a girl that transforms her into a menstruating woman who has the potential to bear children. It is that transformation that makes nature's moral imperative to continue the species an immediate issue. The movie deals with blood, the blood of new life in the childbirth scene and the blood of death many times over. For any young girl the first menses is the death of childhood innocence and the birth of womanhood. All of this takes place in the girl-woman's body regardless of the social circumstances and history of object relations in her life.

But it is the particulars of time and place in which the menses begins, the history of the particular girl and her particular family that determine whether the advent of menses is deflating as it is with the girls interviewed by Orenstein or empowering as it is in tribes where puberty rites allow girls to assume the responsibilities and pleasures of adulthood. Just as some societies empower the woman who experiences menses, some families celebrate their daughters' coming of age: just as some societies devalue women, so some families treat young girls more like the equals of their boys, but treat menstruating females as pariahs.

In the Spanish society of the 1940s as reflected in Pan's Labyrinth, women are valued mainly as producers of children, nurturers and cleaners. Ofelia's mother is not even given a name, she is valued as the mother by her living daughter and as the potential mother of his potential son by

the captain. Ofelia values her mother's beauty, but it is not clear that anyone else sees her as valuable in herself apart from her reproductive role. In the dinner party scene, Ofelia's mother tells her guests that the captain had been a client of her husbands and that after her husband died, the captain had come to her to start a relationship. The older women to whom she tells this story titter as if they inferred that the captain had gotten rid of her husband in order to start the relationship with her. The captain himself becomes very angry when he hears this and explains to the other women that his wife is foolish: they are not to believe why his wife's story implies. It is not to be thought that he would value her beauty so much that he would kill for her. Later the Captain tells the doctor that in the birth he is to save the baby, not the mother.

Even less valuable are the women past menopause: the women working in the kitchen. They are so valueless that no one speaks to them except through that younger woman, Mercedes. This reverses a logical order in which an older more experienced women would be likely to be the supervisor, and the younger woman would follow her instructions. But the reason the older women are less valued is clear at the end of the film when Mercedes carries the captain's baby into the future. The young woman is still beautiful, still capable of producing babies, and nurturing them. She is a carrier of life as the captain is the instigator of death. She is confident that she can deal with the captain.

Being a woman entails having within one's body a secret labyrinth of power and mystery. The opening of the vagina has two sources of power: babies come out through it and pleasure comes from both ingress and egress. The film shows how the productive power is valued in a patriarchal society, while the power of pleasure is feared.

All those societies that practice female circumcision recognize the enormous power of the female genital in motivating behavior. By physically removing a girl's power to access this pleasure, they try to ensure that the women will be subservient, will be motivated to do their husband's pleasure rather than their own. Similarly, Western societies strive to impose on girls a psychic alienation from their own genitals by forbidding exploration, naming and enjoyment of them. This enforcement particularly comes into conflict with the renewed interest in her genitals awakened by first menstruation. The blood is to be hidden, cleaned away as it comes out of the vaginal cavity, or, preferably, absorbed away as soon as it comes down through the cervix, thus eliminating the smell as well as the sight of it. More shameful even than urine or feces, it is to be kept from social reality and even from the perceptions of the menstruating woman herself as much as possible. Young women are taught to hide their menstruation, to be ashamed of it, to be "dainty", not "bloody." I believe that this shame about their bodily function contributes in a major way to the disastrous loss of self confidence and self esteem regularly seen in young girls at the age of first menstruation. The film uses the metaphor of the labyrinth to visually display the prohibition on the vulva and vagina.

How does the patriarchal refusal to allow the young girl pride in her body come about? Greek myths deal with the power of the labyrinth. Ariadne shows Jason how to find his way out of the labyrinth. Thus she saves him from the fate of many other young Greeks. In most versions of the myth, he has promised to marry her if she saves him, but after she does he reneges on his promise and in one version he marries her sister Phaedra instead. The message to the young girl is clear. Do not give a guy instruction on how to manage your labyrinth. He will take the knowledge and use it with your sister instead of you. Sexual knowledge and open sexual desire in

a woman are scorned, not rewarded. In one version, Ariadne's pride in her female knowledge is punished by a goddess who turns her into a spider. Better not to know, but if you know, better to hide it than teach it and better to hide it than to take pride in it. The movie *Pan's Labyrinth* underscores the sexual meaning of the labyrinth by connecting it with Pan, the god of sexuality. It thus brings two myths together to create new insight into the dangers of sexual life.

Myths explicate the dilemmas humans face. While Freud held up the myth of Oedipus as the universal conflict, others have questioned how widely it applies. Jung was the first analyst to seriously question its universality and to propose a diverse and gender differentiated mythology as the key to human dilemmas. Kulish and Holtzman (2008) propose as the female universal myth the story of Demeter and Persephone. For them, Persephone faces the conflict between love for her mother and love for the man who takes her away from her mother and introduces her to the pleasures of the underworld: sex. They argue that Persephone resolves her conflict by eating the seeds of a pomegranate. Since she eats six seeds, she will spend six months of the year with her lover. Since she ate only six, she will spend six months with her mother. This compromise formation allows her to experience sexual love without losing her mother entirely.

I think that the Persephone myth sheds light on both the movie and the dilemma that young girls face at menarche. In the movie, Ofelia must die. She died in the opening scene. The movie only traces how she comes to die. Unlike Persephone, she cannot choose both. She chooses to save the baby and therefore loses her life to live eternally with her mother and father in heaven; she chooses to remain a daughter. That choice rings true in a Catholic Spain where remaining in a convent is a viable choice, but also rings true for some feminists, some lesbians, and some career oriented women who choose their passion for their work over having a family. Ofelia has chosen

and pays the price for her choice. This myth is another open to girls and young women. I think we need to go in a different direction than Freud in that we need to see the possibilities of more than one myth to support more than one choice.

Tolman (2006) has shown that young women in the United States still overwhelmingly believe that they are good when they do not engage in sex and bad when they do. Further, they believe that only bad girls experience desire and that to be good is to "just say no." I believe that the revulsion at menstrual blood and the demonization of female sexual desire are related. Both keep the girl away from her 'labyrinth.' If guilt over sexual desire and shame over the blood of fertility contribute to female depression (Jack 1991), this has clinical implications. To know that she has the power to give herself pleasure is to wean a girl from patriarchy. To know that her menstrual blood is the badge of her ability to give life is to give pride in her power. Both pleasure and power counteract depression.

So what do the identifications Ofelia makes in Pan's Labyrinth tell us? She can identify with several women: her mother, Mercedes, and the women of the kitchen. From the beginning she is shown refusing identification with her beloved mother when she refuses to call the captain "father" or to show any real or pretended good feelings for him. She refuses to obey Mercedes when she warns Ofelia not to enter the labyrinth. She identifies with Pan, trusting him and accepting his help and advice. She refuses identification with both her beautiful mother and the female chorus of older women, both the kitchen workers and the society ladies invited to the dinner when she soils her beautiful dress and shoes. She refuses to identify with the abstinent self sacrificing Mercedes when she enjoys the fruit she takes from the monster's banquet table. She identifies with the lovely fairy who leads her into the labyrinth and partly identifies with the

three who lead her into the monster's dinner party.

The film contrasts harsh reality with the parallel world of the fairy tale. For our patients and for women in our lives, the role of identification with fictional heroines both in fairy tales and in other art forms is crucial. Choosing to identify and partially identify with traits and values associated with real people is part of the story, choosing to identify with citizens of the fantasy world is another and to my mind, most helpful part in constructing a self of one's own choosing, a self that feels authentic, a self that can integrate new experience without losing touch with the earlier versions of oneself.