The Oil Fountain

Tales by Basile and Gonzenbach

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Basile's frame narrative for *The Tale of Tales* and Gonzenbach's 'The Beautiful Maiden with the Seven Veils' offer alternative versions of a story in which the protagonist is cursed to find love only in the hand of a seemingly unattainable match. In both cases the trouble starts at the site of a fountain of oil and ends when a villainous black woman is punished for her manipulative social-climbing schemes. Here we shall discuss the different emphases of these two versions of the tale.

The inciting incident of both tales centers on the oil fountain, but the different reasons for the fountain's existence immediately demonstrate the different focuses of the two tales. In Basile's version, Zoza's father orders its construction 'as a last resort' in his attempts to make her laugh (Basile 4). According to Rak, oil fountains were standard in seventeenth-century festivities, causing precisely the sort of 'incidents' for which the king hopes (Basile 4). In Gonzenbach's telling, the fountain is an offering to the Virgin Mary in exchange for a child. Gonzenbach combines the oil fountain—in Basile's text a non-magical phenomenon familiar to the contemporary context—with the common wonder-tale trope of an infertile couple achieving a miraculous pregnancy. Crucially, where Basile's tales are largely devoid of religious elements—miraculous occurrences have magical, rather than divine sources—the pregnancy derives from a religious covenant, rather than a bargain with fairy or other supernatural being. Jack Zipes ascribes the 'religious aspect' of some of Gonzenbach's tales to 'the influence of the Catholic religion in Sicily' (*Beautiful Angiola* xxi).

In both tales, the significance of the fountain for the protagonist is their observation of those who use it. Zoza's father hopes she will derive amusement from watching them while 'sitting at the window', and indeed it is the 'spectacle' of the old woman revealing her genitalia that finally brings Zoza to laughter (Basile 5). In Gonzenbach's telling, '[t]he prince liked to stand at the window and observe the people who came [...] to fetch some oil' (*Beautiful Angiola* 387). The narrator in fact reiterates that he 'observed everything'.

However, neither is cursed because of their observation. Zoza's crime is an involuntary reaction to the unidentified old woman's antics when another nameless character breaks her jar. Gonzenbach instead casts the protagonist as the stone-thrower, and the breakage itself the crime to be avenged. Basile provides very little information about the 'court page' or his motivation for throwing the stone, and he never figures in the story again. Gonzenbach identifies the perpetrator, the prince, and the cause, his 'arrogance'. Basile's passive female character, innocent of the actual crime and guilty only of an involuntary reaction, is replaced by an active, spiteful agent who must redeem himself over the course of the story.

In fact, Gonzenbach's prince has an experience more similar to Zoza's later on, when he 'laugh[s]' at an 'ancient chambermaid who was so old that she could no longer speak correctly'

(*Beautiful Angiola* 394). This behavior demonstrates progress of a kind: the prince is no longer actively spiteful so much as reactively tactless and discourteous. His search for the maiden, during which he must be 'kind' in order to pass by the ogress' minions, has softened him to an extent, but the second curse he receives—for his unpleasantness towards the chambermaid—returns him to his quest, as he still has much to learn and a bride to win (*Beautiful Angiola* 392).

I would argue, therefore, that Gonzenbach adds a moral dimension in the growth of her protagonist that is absent from Basile's tale. Zoza reacts with an amusement to a spectacle set up to be amusing, and is punished with a lengthy quest to find love. This quest does not correct a behavior she exhibits at the beginning of the story, but is simply a series of trials caused by happenstance, and from which she emerges largely unchanged as an individual. Gonzenbach's prince, as we have seen, has active transgressions to atone for.

Common to both tales, however, is the black, female antagonist, to whom the greater part of the fault in each story is ascribed, and who alone is punished at its conclusion. Basile's preamble to the tale explains that it is the story of 'she who deceitfully took from others what was theirs' and consequently 'tumble[d] down' (Basile 3). Lucia is not named, but the story's conclusion demonstrates that this description can apply only to her: Zoza is 'honored as [Tadeo's] princess and wife' while Lucia is 'buried alive' (Basile 456).

Lucia, then, is a social-climbing thief, who steals Zoza's rightful husband. She is described in thoroughly unflattering terms from her first introduction as a 'cricket-legged slave girl' (Basile 7). These racial epithets dehumanize her from the outset, with reinforcement in the very next paragraph, where she is described as a 'mass of black flesh'. The narrator explains that she 'knew about the epitaph business, since talk of it was everywhere', subtly highlighting that Lucia cannot read: she frequents the fountain where the epitaph lies, but knows what it says only through gossip. We later find that she cannot speak fluently either, confined to the 'Neapolitan-Moorish patois [...] spoken in Naples and other ports of Italy where Moorish slaves lived [...] also used in comic theater of the time', according to Canepa (Basile 7). She is comically depicted as ill-educated, and thereby rendered fundamentally other and lesser.

She is not, however, dim-witted. Rather, she possesses a malevolent intelligence, 'skilfully' swiping Zoza's bucket of tears from under her nose as she sleeps, foreseeing her fate in 'End of *The Tale of Tales*' and cunningly—if unsuccessfully—attempting to avert it: 'she had seen in the tale of the other slave the spitting image of her own deceits' and 'immediately made sure all conversation was eliminated' (Basile 454). She also successfully manipulates her husband, through the inhumanly cruel threat of infanticide, until the very end of *The Tale of Tales*: he 'had let himself be harnessed by the Moorish slave' and 'let this bitch give him the runs and pull on his tail' (Basile 9). Lucia is, temporarily, a successful social climber, and the narrator expresses frequent disgust—rarely without derogatory language of this kind—at her ability as a 'slave' to control her rightful lord.

Gonzenbach's black antagonist is not portrayed in quite such a derogatory light. She speaks fluently, the poor speech of Basile's character being transferred instead onto the chambermaid who curses the prince for the second time, making her laughable to the prince. The 'slave' even speaks verse, though she is later artistically superseded by the dove, which 'sang' her own verse (*Beautiful Angiola* 394, 396). However, the black woman remains physically repulsive, 'an ugly black slave', and a manipulative social climber who steals a beautiful white woman's rightful husband by deceptive means, stabbing the maiden under the pretext of combing her hair and posing as her in order to trick the prince (*Beautiful Angiola* 393–94). While she is spared Basile's characteristic expletives, Gonzenbach does refer to her as a 'slave' with the same consistency as Basile. She is also stupider than her counterpart in *The Tale of Tales*: she mistakes the maiden's reflection for her own, fails to recognize the maiden when she arrives at the prince's castle, 'was

blind to the truth and did not notice anything' familiar in the maiden's story, as Lucia does at the end of *The Tale of Tales*, and consequently 'sp[eaks her] own sentence' (*Beautiful Angiola* 393, 397).

Gonzenbach demonstrates less willingness to openly attack her black antagonist with racial slurs and stereotypes, but nevertheless retains much of the dehumanization of Basile's version of the tale. This may reflect a cultural shift towards a more genteel, less explicit form of racism in wonder tale narratives, without dispensing entirely with the figure of the scheming black woman who does not know her place. The end of Gonzenbach's tale, however, is arguably more troubling from a modern perspective than Basile's. The hyperbolic horror of Lucia's punishment, sadistically buried with 'her head above ground, so that her death would be more tortured', challenges the reader, leaving us questioning the justice of the resolution (Basile 456). This is in contrast to Gonzenbach's matter-of-fact ending, in which the black woman, having 'spoken [her] own sentence'—a typical wonder-tale trope—is 'thrown into a kettle with boiling oil', a fate that recalls the oil fountain of the tale's beginning, the monument to the Virgin Mary, as though the slave's fate is not only fair, but has some element of divine justice in it (*Beautiful Angiola* 397).

Works Cited

Basile, Giambattista. *The Tale of Tales*. Translated by Nancy L. Canepa. Penguin Publishing Group, 2016. Print.

Beautiful Angiola: The Lost Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales of Laura Gonzenbach. Translated by Jack Zipes. Routledge, 2013. Print.