

A MEDIEVALIST WATCHES PAN'S LABYRINTH: A REVIEW
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Mexican film-maker Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) has recently been released onto DVD. It is an exceptional film, notwithstanding its first-rate reviews. (Yes, I meant that.) *Pan's Labyrinth* was received very well, but largely for political reasons. The film is apparently about oppression, patriarchy, and the evils of right-wing thought. A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* (12/29/06), for example, decried the militarized patriarchy of the film's well-dressed fascists, and praised the easy-going egalitarianism of its ragged communists. Like so many others, Scott saw this film as a political fable. Perhaps, but I'm not convinced it is. One needs to ignore too much of the film to arrive at Scott's conclusion. Instead, del Toro seems to portray politics as spiritually limited and socially corrupting. His critique is clearest when one considers the film's traditional Christian symbols. And perhaps because these symbols are no longer obvious to the public, Scott mistook them for an anachronistic "pre-Christian body of lore and belief." He's not alone. Most reviewers seem to have had trouble understanding the role of magic in the film and ultimately ignored it. But magic is central to the story. To understand it, one first needs to distinguish symbol from synecdoche.

Movies and television assail us daily with only the most obvious synecdoches: a black character represents all black people, a white character, all whites, and so on. Race, gender, and ethnicity are either too compelling or too facile a set of subjects to abandon, so our public square is slowly denuded of its

spiritual sensibility. In its abject materialism, our intelligentsia sees no further than the invisible mechanisms of social oppression. *Pan's Labyrinth* offers us far more than superficial political commentary; it appears to offer a fable of the spiritual blindness of both nihilistic materialism and political ideology. For, not only does *Pan's Labyrinth* speak to the terrible hypocrisy of Spain's political violence, on both the left and right, but it is also a profoundly Christian movie. And like Christianity, it makes its points through sets of symbols impregnated with significance by millennia of European tradition.

Del Toro's stunning film portrays a little girl, Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), caught between a fascist army unit and a communist guerrilla band. As the movie begins, Ofelia meets a fairy, who leads her into the midst of an ancient labyrinth. There she meets Pan, a faun. He stands next to an ornately carved portal to a magic realm (a map of the labyrinth is carved into it). On top of the portal sits an obelisk. And on top of the obelisk is carved a father embracing a mother and child. We are given here a tableau of representations. They suggest at the very least that the film we are watching offers us entry to an otherworldly realm. (Pan's labyrinth is both the setting and the name of the film.) But the prominent carving of a father, mother, and child suggests that whatever entry we gain to the mystery of the labyrinth, the mystery will not be political, but domestic. Yet the film's symbolism takes us further.

Pan sets Ofelia three tasks, which she must divine from a magic book. The first is to kill a toad who gnaws at the roots of a fig tree. She must feed it three stones and remove a golden key from its belly. The second task is to retrieve a

knife from an ornate chamber containing a sumptuous feast. While there, Ofelia must avoid a monster. Her third and final task is to open the labyrinth's portal with innocent blood.

Symbolism requires allusion, not bald statement. So, it can be ambiguous. We ask why Ofelia must find her tasks in a book, rather than have them explained aloud. Why use a book? Is the book a symbol? If so, does it show the role of literature or art in revealing the mysteries of life? Remember, Pan's obelisk sits on top of a *representation* of the real-world labyrinth—perhaps that symbolizes the fact that we achieve understanding, not through things, but through abstract representations. (You find your way by contemplating a map, not by contemplating a chunk of asphalt.) We must start somewhere, so let's ask why Ofelia's toad gnaws at the root of a *fig* tree rather than an oak, pine, or beech tree. One might object that it's a fig tree only because it had to be some kind of tree. But such an objection is the vapid folly of a literalist who would do better absorbing documentaries than reading fictions. No, Horatio, there is more in Heaven and earth.

So, what does a fig tree symbolize? A major source of Western symbolism is the Bible. In the New Testament, Jesus famously cursed a fig tree. Christian commentators such as Augustine of Hippo tell us that the fig represents faith, and that if one fails to have faith, one will be eternally damned. Faith is not inconsequential. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia is the only character to show true faith. She believes like a child. This means that she believes in the very reality of otherworldly magic. Other characters "believe" in the conclusions of

philosophical doctrines and political orthodoxies. They are enraptured by the materialism of earthly utopias: specifically, communism and fascism. From them we see only suffering. Their perspective is summed up by Ofelia's mother in a heart-wrenching scene. She tells Ofelia that life is pain and suffering, and there is no respite.

Not for Ofelia. She has been promised respite. Ofelia's first task, like that of her Greek namesake, is to descend into the underworld. Like Orpheus, we follow her down. We see Ofelia confront the toad and kill it. Now the fig tree can flower. Del Toro has given us a symbolic narrative in the medieval and renaissance tradition. We are bound to ask about the importance of a flowering fig tree to the synecdochal political struggles around it. It is of no practical importance whatsoever. But it is of tremendous *symbolic* importance. In the Gospels, Jesus stands before the once-cursed fig as it, too, flowers. He tells his disciples that when the fig "putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near" (Mk 14:28). Summer signifies redemption.

The flowering of faith and the promise of summer's redemption are prevented in Christian tradition by sin. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent represents sin. The serpent was also pictured in European artistic tradition as a salamander, or a toad. The toad in *Pan's Labyrinth* thus represents the temptations of the world that gnaw at the roots of faith. (Such temptations include the desire to establish an earthly utopia, which aims at the glory of man.) The only way to overcome temptation is to feed it the reality of God. And so, Ofelia feeds it three magic stones. Not one, or two, or five, but three. A trinity of stones.

With the toad dead, Ofelia can now retrieve the gold key. What does the gold key symbolize? In European artistic tradition, two keys represent Peter's ability to bind and to loose; one binds on earth, the other in heaven. (These two keys are pictured on the Vatican standard.) The golden key binds the spiritual world. The other key, of iron, binds the physical world. The iron key was also portrayed in the film: it opens a larder of medicine and food that will feed the hungry partisans. Importantly, the deadliest struggle in the film is over possession of this key. The iron key feeds the body; Ofelia's golden key feeds the soul.

In Ofelia's second task, she approaches three panels, each with a keyhole. She must decide which panel to open, and is directed by fairies to the most sumptuous panel in the center. She stands at this moment next to a food-laden table under a gorgeously carved ceiling in a beautiful room. Ofelia is surrounded by aesthetic overindulgence. But she refuses to indulge. By instinct, she chooses the left panel. If the three panels represent the Crucifixion, she has chosen the path of the repentant thief on Christ's right side. Symbolically, she has chosen humility. The panel she opens is plain, not sumptuous—shades of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and the carpenter's cup.

Nevertheless, perhaps prideful from her success, or merely in order to illustrate a principle of salvation, Ofelia breaks a rule. She takes two grapes from the feast. We are led to think that she has failed. But just as Jesus forgave the thief, so does Pan soon forgive Ofelia. The Gospels say, in Mark's story of the disciples stealing corn, that it is grace and faith, not subjugation to rules, that gets a

Christian into Heaven. In the aftermath of Ofelia's second task, grace stands in marked contrast to the doctrinal obedience demanded by communists and fascists.

Once Ofelia takes the grapes, she wakes the monster. In European tradition, and not unsurprisingly, monsters represent spiritual and psychological obstacles. Ofelia's monster has its eyes in its hands, perhaps indicating that it looks only for what it can grab. We often see monsters in the fairy tales of the Middle Ages. The captive princess of these tales can symbolize the *anima*, the soul—a feminine noun in Latin, thus portrayed in stories as a woman (as *sapientia*, wisdom, is portrayed as a woman by Boethius). When Ofelia (a fairy princess, we quickly learn) runs from the monster, we see the embodied soul fleeing from the sumptuous temptations of worldly pleasure. The same scene appears in the fourteenth-century English romance, *Sir Orfeo*, also based on the Orpheus/Ophelia myth. There, Sir Orfeo finds his wife (his soul) in the castle of the dead, which is plated in gold and precious jewels, but which contains only the damned. The body, the image of the jeweled castle suggests, is only an outer decoration. To give life, it must be united with a soul. Orfeo escapes with his wife, and together (body and soul as one), they return home happily. Del Toro's Ofelia must escape this monster just as we must escape the lure of soulless, physical overindulgence.

We then come to Ofelia's third task. Fearful for her life, she is pursued by her sadistic step-father, who is also the fascist leader. Ofelia escapes with her infant brother into the heart of the labyrinth. In European tradition, labyrinths can symbolize a way to guard a sacred secret—in this case, immortality.

Traditionally, a labyrinth is impassable until one adopts the necessary qualities to overcome *spiritual* obstacles. One must valorize the feminine part of one's own personality (the *anima* or soul). Ofelia grapples with magic (the spirit) throughout the film. If she is successful, her soul will pass through the portal and join her true father and mother. Indeed, Ofelia keeps faith in the world of magic, even when her mother tries to shake it out of her, and even when her step-father tries to murder her.

Women seem to be the film's noblest characters, although a few are callow and mean. The only man worth a fig, so to speak, is the doctor. (It isn't lost on Christians that Christ is sometimes called the physician of the soul.) Men are generally ignoble. Ofelia's step-father, a caricature of a fascist, is as manly as one can get, obsessing over his own *sang froid*, his son, and his unshaven face. Even the male priest is shockingly icy. In the symbolic tradition, manliness is physical, femininity spiritual. But the gender line doesn't run true: Ofelia's female nurse is a bloodthirsty communist, notwithstanding her many kindnesses to the little girl. Whatever the underlying tensions here, they are decidedly not sexual, nor political. *Pace* the film's left-wing reviewers, no political faction is lauded here. The communist men execute the wounded fascists as casually as the fascists execute communists. If there is a line to be drawn, it is between ideological commitment and humane faith.

For her third task, Ofelia is told to sacrifice her innocent brother. She refuses. She gives up her life for his. Her selfless act wins her entrance to the kingdom. And as her body dies, we see her soul (her *anima*) flourish in the kingdom

of her spiritual father. The point here seems to be that every soul is fathered by God, as it were. Redemption will never come by fighting the utopian battles of one's earthly fathers (such as the utopian cause of Ofelia's step-father), but only through the spirit.

Back in the world, Ofelia's communist nurse weeps over the child's dead body. Perhaps she realizes in her vale of tears that like the fascists, the communists have sacrificed innocent blood for their own illusory gain. But likely not. Her response is not political, and gives us only a glimpse of the redemptive power of sympathy even in so hardened a partisan. As uncompromising as are the political ideologies portrayed here, so is Del Toro uncompromising in his portrayal of violence. It is not stylized, and the camera never flinches from it. One wonders whether he intended to imply that such violence is the wages of utopianism, and ought never to be idealized or romanticized.

The *nachleben* of the Spanish Civil War is nothing if not romanticized. Like the ubiquitous image of Guernica, Picasso's monochrome wound of grief for Spain's plight, the unrealized promise of revolution is far more compelling than its bleak reality. Perhaps the stylized rigidity of the fascists makes their enemies appear a better option, but this is only a superficial quirk of fashion. One must never forget the lethal rigidity of communist dogma. The often willful ignorance among western intelligentsia of communist atrocities fails to incite in them the same moral outrage we see exorcized daily over right-wing politics. Neither wing is guiltless. It is del Toro's anguish at the ideological battle itself that offers his viewers hope for some worldly respite.

It is counter-intuitive that there should be more peace in anguish than in anger, but Spain and her former empire have lived too long among the wages of anger. Del Toro's film addresses audiences from Cartagena to La Paz to Santiago to Havana. And in the end, what makes this film so philosophically compelling is the quiet promise of its final scene. The fig tree flowers. Summer is coming. Del Toro's narrator explains that Ofelia is alive to those who can understand the significance of the world around them. When Peter pointed to the blossoming fig tree, Jesus told his disciples: forgive. If we do not forgive one another, God will not forgive us. Ofelia's flowering fig brings the promise of redemption as it calls us to forgive one another. In mutual forgiveness, del Toro seems to be saying, is our only earthly salvation. Nothing good comes of either political extreme. In the long and horrible history of Spain's self-inflicted suffering, this is a promise both profound and generous.