



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 11

Life is a Dream: Once Upon a Time

Hosts: Mikaela Hanrahan and Cait Redman

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Episode Resources

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Episode Transcript

[Mikaela plays a ditty on the guitar for some intro music]

Mikaela: Hello everyone! My name is Mikaela Hanrahan!

Cait: And I'm Cait Redman!

Mikaela: And today we will be talking about Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *Life is a Dream*.

Cait: is it?

Mikaela: what do you mean Cait?

Cait: I mean, is life a dream?

Mikaela: Way too meta Cait.

Cait: If you say so. I thought it was funny. Hmm, so, *Life is a Dream*... can you remind me what that play is about again?

Mikaela: Ahh yes! De la Barca's play is a Spanish Golden Age classic set in Poland. It follows Segismund, a prince chained in a tower in the wilderness because it was predicted by an oracle at his birth that he would bring destruction to Poland. As Poland questions who will succeed King Basilio, the people decide to bring back Segismund and manipulate his sense of reality in order to compensate for his trauma and anger accumulated in his life in the tower. Meanwhile there is also this subplot where Rosaura comes from another country in order to get revenge on Astolfo, who took her honor and refused to marry her.

Cait: Ahhh yes, this is all ringing a bell now. You know, that plot reminds me a lot of a fairytale.

Mikaela: Well Cait, it's funny you say that because I was thinking the same thing!

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Cait: Really? What am I thinking now?

Mikaela: No Cait, we are not playing a game right now.

Cait: I was thinking about how much I don't like games! Ok, mind reader. Right! Well, and since *Life is a Dream* is written by a Spanish playwright and set in Poland, I am wondering if there might be some connection between Polish and Spanish folktales and *Life is a Dream*.

Mikaela: OOOO, I was just reading this book from the Project Gutenberg that laid out the most popular Polish folktales. That might be a good place to start! We have *The Frog Princess*, *Princess Miranda and Prince Hero*, *The Eagles*, *The Whirlwind*, *The Good Ferryman and the Water Nymph*, *The Princess of the Brazen Mountain*, and *The Bear in the Forest Hut*. Right off the bat something that sticks out to me about the titles and what I know of *Life is a Dream* is the nature imagery. *The Princess of the Brazen Mountain* evokes the character of Rosaura and her journey through the barren, mountainous wilderness. Let's look first at this fairytale and how elements of it may have informed de la Barca's writing.

Cait: Then for the Spanish fairytale I can discuss *The Enchanted Castle*.

Mikaela: So when we are talking about folktales and folktales, what is the difference exactly?

Cait: Great question! According to the Oxford English Dictionary, or the OED, the definition of a fairytale is "A tale about fairies; a tale set in fairyland; esp. any of various short tales having folkloric elements and featuring fantastic or magical events or characters." Which is honestly, not an incredibly helpful definition. Obviously a fairytale is going to be about fairies! No kidding OED. However, I'm intrigued by the mention of "folkloric elements" within the fairytale definition.

Mikaela: Right, that stuck out to me too.

Cait: The OED defines "folklore" as "The traditional beliefs, legends, and customs, current among the common people; and the study of these." It is also defined as: "popular fantasy or belief." So, a fairytale can be a folktale, but a folktale does not have to be a fairytale.

Mikaela: Interesting. It's like how a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle isn't a square.

Cait: Yes! The study of fairy tales and folktales is pretty limited. Some of the most influential work on folktale is in categorizing them. This is seen in Valdimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, which sought to analyze the structure of Russian folktales. Props to Propp for his work on structure. Propp's work is expanded and commented on by Alan Dundes in his essay, "Meaning of Folklore." Here Dundes discusses some of the difficulties with structuralism as it applies to folklorists: "The question of whether structure is "knowable" raises yet another important theoretical issue in structuralism. Structural analysts claim that they have identified structural patterns in myth, fairy tale, or some other genre. In short, they say they "know" what the underlying structural patterns are and that they can articulate them." It is reassuring that sometimes you just "know" something. When it comes to folktales and folktales they seem to go together structurally hand-in-hand. So what folktales are we looking at again?

Mikaela: *The Princess of the Brazen Mountain* and *The Enchanted Castle*.

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Cait: Fantastic! Let's get into them. You go first Mikaela.

Mikaela: Great! OK, so here's a quick rundown of what happens in *The Princess of the Brazen Mountain* just so we are on the same page. So our prince is walking by a lake in the evening where he sees these three beings with wings bathing in the lake. The women cast their wings to the shore while they swim and the prince decides to steal one of them in order to get the youngest sister alone and ask her to marry him. Then, this happens, take it away, Cait.

Cait: "When they had been long enough in the water, the beautiful damsels came again to land, and dressed themselves quickly. Two of them soon had on both their white dresses and their wings; but the youngest could not find hers. They held a short consultation, and the result was, that the two elder flew away in the shape of birds, as fast as they could, to fetch another pair of wings for their younger sister. They soon vanished in the blue sky; but she remained alone, wringing her hands, and crying. "What are you crying for, you lovely maiden?" asked the prince, emerging from the bushes. "Oh! I am so unhappy!" she replied. "I am a princess of the Brazen Mountain; my sisters and I came here to bathe in the lake; and somebody has stolen my wings; so I must wait here, until they bring me another pair."

Mikaela: The princess then agrees to marry the prince if he gives back her wings once they are married. As soon as they are married she flies away from him and goes back to the Brazen Mountain, where she says he will never find her. However, the prince, being in love, decides to find her at all costs, with the aid of this magical, invisible whip. When he finally finds the mountain, this happens:

Cait: "At first the prince was overjoyed at having reached the goal of his wishes; but when he looked more closely at its smooth perpendicular sides, hard as adamant—its summit lost in the clouds—he was in despair; for how was he ever to get to the top of it?"

Mikaela: He then surprises her and they realize they are both still in love and ride off into the sunset.

Cait: Well do they ride off or fly off?

Mikaela: This isn't crucial to the story, Cait.

Cait: I beg to differ. You said she had wings, why are they riding?

Mikaela: It's an expression! Anyway, not only does this scene have similarities between the relationship of Astolfo and Rosaura in *Life is a Dream*, where Astolfo and Rosaura are in a relationship before the play, but then he leaves her right before it begins. And thennnn, at the end of the play, they realize they are both still in love and get together. This fairytale also draws interesting similarities in the use of nature imagery. The princess, a pure, beautiful creature with the ability to fly and transform into a bird has more of a command of nature and its dangers because nature is on her side.

Cait: Oh so now you want to talk about her ability to fly?

Mikaela: Yes, and how it ties into ecocriticism! The prince is daunted by the dangers of the brazen mountain and describes it as "hard as adamant." He does not have the command over nature that the princess does, because she has lived among it all of her life, and he has been confined to palace life. The prince is daunted by the brazen

mountain because of his disconnection with nature and his venturing into a land he does not belong. This is similar to how Rosaura is intimidated by Poland's landscape when she first ventures into Poland, a place she does not belong and wanders into in order to seek revenge. Segismund, on the other hand has an intimate, beautiful relationship with nature because he has lived among it his whole life and he uses it for pure intentions- to learn about human nature. A character's language about nature can tell us a lot about if they belong in the place they are describing and if their intentions are good or bad.

Cait: For some context, let's take a look at an excerpt from the first scene of the play with Rosaura and Clarin, where we see them wandering the landscape and stumbling upon Segismund's tower.

[Scene #1 from Life is a Dream:]

Cait: CLARIN: Let us approach more near, For long enough we've looked at it from here; Then better we shall see If those who dwell therein will generously A welcome give us. [The sound of chains is heard within.] Heavens! what is this I hear?

Mikaela: ROSAURA: Clarin!

Cait: CLARIN: My lady!

Mikaela: ROSAURA: Let us turn and fly The risks of this enchanted tower.

Cait: CLARIN: For one, I scarce have strength to stand, much less to run.

Mikaela: ROSAURA: Is not that glimmer there afar — That dying exhalation — that pale star — A tiny taper, which, with trembling blaze Flickering 'twixt struggling flames and dying rays, With ineffectual spark Makes the dark dwelling place appear more dark? Yes, for its distant light, Reflected dimly, brings before my sight A dungeon's awful gloom, Say rather of a living corse, a living tomb; And to increase my terror and surprise, Drest in the skins of beasts a man there lies: A piteous sight, Chained, and his sole companion this poor light. Since then we cannot fly, Let us attentive to his words draw nigh, Whatever they may be.

Cait: You know, I am noticing in the first passage from *The Princess of the Brazen Mountain* we have a character who is at the bottom of a very large, daunting mountain, but decides to face the danger in order to find what they are looking for. Then, in *Life is a Dream*, Rosaura finds herself at the bottom of this tower, where she and Clarin are afraid to go further, but are persuaded to go further because of what is at the end. The structure is similar.

Mikaela: Yes, these are exactly some of the parallels I thought of too when reading the fairytale and the play. In fairytales, our main characters are always willing to face danger in order to find their true love or save the person in danger or locked away in a tower. These fairytale tropes are present in the Polish folklore as well as in *Life is a Dream*. I was also surprised in general by the amount of natural language present in this play and the Polish folklore, and, after reading about ecocriticism, I was struck by how these conclusions we came to about nature and the characters in the play are in fact very common principles in ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty, the first professor of literature and environment in the US mentions in the introduction of *The Ecocriticism Reader* that, "Psychology has long ignored nature in its theories of the human mind. A handful of contemporary psychologists, however, are exploring the linkages between environmental conditions and mental health, some regarding the modern

estrangement from nature as the basis of our social and psychological ills.” Therefore, this idea that character intentions and human nature can be tied to peaceful versus dangerous environments, is a correct assumption. Alrighttt, enough of me rambling on about ecocritiscm, I think it’s your turn Cait.

Cait: *The Enchanted Castle in the Sea* is a Spanish fairytale which follows a young boy who is in a great deal of debt. When he can’t find work to repay his debts, he is offered a job by a stranger. The stranger takes him to the castle, which is filled with and is covered in silver and gold, and has the boy fill up bags of treasure for the stranger. The stranger then leaves the boy stranded at the Enchanted castle. The following excerpt is from after the boy has been stranded.

[Excerpt from the fairytale The Enchanted Castle in the Sea]

Mikaela: “The poor boy was in despair. ” What shall I ever do!” he cried. ” Here I am stranded upon this rock in the midst of the sea! There is nothing to eat or drink in this castle, nothing but silver and gold! What shall I do! O foolish boy that I was, ever to allow myself to get into a situation like this!” He wandered through the castle, but saw nothing anywhere except the great piles of silver and of gold… He found no water. All he discovered was a rat in the wall. He rested and then went on digging, and at last he came to a heavy door. He opened the door anxiously, for he did not know what might lie behind it. What he saw was a narrow stone stairway leading down into the depths of the earth.”

Cait: I am immediately met with the understanding that this Enchanted Castle is not the most resourceful place. The boy remarks that he has no water. Which is funny giving that he is surrounded by water, because you know, the ocean.

Mikaela: Drinking water, Cait. He is 100% talking about water he can drink.

Cait: Yes, I know. It’s still ironic that he is surrounded by this natural resource, the sea or ocean, but he can’t use it. The water isn’t good to drink and that inability to use what is around him cages him on the island. In their chapter *Shakespeare and the Global Ocean* Dan Brayton argues “that the tendency to overlook the role of the oceans in shaping our understanding of nature can be traced to early modern conceptions of the sea as a space lying beyond the reach of human knowledge and control…” And that is exactly what we see the boy struggling with in the Enchanted Castle. Nature removing his control over his situation. Brayton goes on to quote Gesa Mackenthun (Mac-in-ton) and Bernhard Klein in sharing their observation that, “like the desert, the ocean has often been read as an empty space, a cultural and historical void, constantly traversed, circumnavigated and fought over, but rarely inscribed other than symbolically by the self-proclaimed agents of civilization.” There is something to be said about the role of nature and the environment in folktales that focus on forests, which is at least the environment I think of when talking about folktales. But the tales we’ve been looking at deal with an element of isolation. The ocean, mountains, these are places where the natural environment becomes an empty space, just as Mackenthun and Klein explain. Within *The Princess of the Brazen Mountain*, and *The Enchanted Castle in the Sea* themes of nature are prevalent. But there is also a theme of imprisonment within a natural environment. Prince Segismund is held captive in a tower but he claims that he is cursed, or held captive by being born. Being born is an incredibly natural process. And this mirrors the *Princess of the Brazen Mountain*, who has to wait until she can get her wings so she can go back to the mountain, and the boy from *The Enchanted Castle* being trapped in the castle. Natural causes shape the cages for these characters.

Mikaela: That's an interesting connection. Within *Life is a Dream* nature and natural cycles act as a way to imprison characters into a set reality. These fairytales highlight similar themes. When looking at how *Life is A Dream* feels like a fairytale, it's interesting that the darker themes are what connects the two.

Cait: Right? Nature always begins as being depicted as a beautiful thing that surrounds a world, but ends exposing and trapping aspects of characters that we may not like.

Mikaela: Fairytales typically have someone trapped within them who needs to become free. We see this through Segismund.

Cait: If Sigismund needs to be saved, and then changes for the better of the community, does that make him a Disney princess?

Mikaela: No, Cait. But it does show himself to be similar to the archetype of the damsel who saves herself. But anyway, back to Sigismund. In the following monologue, we can see how nature, depicted as a beautiful, free entity to Segismund, furthers his entrapment and torture in the tower.

Cait: Must not other creatures be Born? If born, what privilege Can they over me allege Of which I should not be free? Birds are born, the bird that sings, Richly robed by Nature's dower, And with so much more of soul, Must I have less liberty? Beasts are born, the beast whose skin Dappled o'er with beauteous spots, As when the great pencil dots Heaven with stars, doth scarce begin From its impulses within— And with instincts better far Must I have less liberty? Fish are born, the spawn that breeds Where the oozy sea-weeds float, And with so much freer will, Must I have less liberty?

Mikaela: Here Sigismund, through repetition of the phrase, “must I have less liberty” clearly communicates that he feels trapped. By comparing himself to birds, beasts, and fish he shows how other living creatures are given more freedom in life than him. They are not caged, or confined to a tower, they are in their element.

Cait: Those creatures Sigismund refers to live in the empty spaces he cannot understand. Birds take to the air, beasts to forests, and fish to water. These ecological environments are not accommodating to Sigismund. Interesting that the thing that is caging him, his environment, is the thing he sees other creatures be free in.

Cait: Despite the fact that there is so much nature language within the text and thematic similarities with Polish and Spanish folktales, exploring *Life is Dream* onstage through an ecocritical or fairytale lens is not something that is done very often.

Mikaela: That's what I found too! In research on recent production history, most productions have chosen to approach the play through a feminist lens, focusing on Rosaura's agency, or with really emphasising the idea of dreams versus reality.

Cait: And while those lenses are extremely valid and applicable to the text, I think a lack of delving into the magical, fairytale, and natural aspects of this play limits the possibilities of productions. Incorporating contrasting views of nature through scenery based on character and location could be very interesting and another element to further your storytelling. Focusing on *Life is a Dream* as a fairytale really highlights the magical and fate elements and explores how these elements challenge and further character relationships.

Mikaela: What I have found quite interesting is the nature language in *Life is a Dream* is present regardless of translation. I have read several different translations now, and each one has had very prevalent natural language, despite it being different words.

Cait: So the natural elements that cage characters are always present in the various translations you've read?

Mikaela: Yes!

Cait: Wow. Someone should really get on a production that highlights that.

Mikaela: I know, maybe a project for the future?

Cait: We'll see. Looking at Life is a Dream through the lens of a fairytale made the connection to ecocriticism a clear connecting element. I'd be excited to see where a concept like that could go in the future.

Mikaela: Thank you for listening to this episode of Writ in the Margins, I'm Mikaela.

Cait: And I'm Cait, we hope you will join us for future episodes.

[Mikaela plays guitar]