

Boreal Magic: Snow Queens, Frozen Landscapes, and Restoring Equilibrium in Paranormal Romance [1]*

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The Northern landscape of Manchester, drenched with perpetual rain, has its own kind of Gothic horror. But I'll be looking at a different kind of Gothic Northern landscape, more bleak even than that of Manchester, and I'll look at the forbidding figures who rule there.

[2] In the early Gothic novels of Anne Radcliffe, it's the picturesque and sublime landscapes of Southern Europe, with their sensuality and lawlessness that was counterpoised against the English spaces of a Northern, Protestant Enlightenment. Later novels of the genre found their Gothic realms in the isolated wastes of the North. Thus Frankenstein pursues his creature through the icy deserts of the Arctic; Dracula haunts the bleaker mountainous regions of an uncivilised Northern Europe—though the East/West divide is obviously very significant. Snowbound landscapes cursed by an eternal winter have their own chilling power.

[3] The motif of the malevolent Winter Queen, ruling over these Northern lands of perpetual ice and snow, is also familiar in literature of the fantastic. Most famous are the Snow Queen in Hans Andersen's tale and [4] the White Witch in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, both unambiguously evil, eventually overthrown by the forces of light, love, and goodness. Radcliffe had defended a moderate Enlightenment against the luxurious irrationality of the South. In Andersen, the domain of snow represents cold-hearted rationalism; Christian love and a Romantic aesthetic confront a bleakly icy utilitarianism. In Lewis, it stands for Christian Sin, rejection of the light and warmth of salvation. Both Andersen and Lewis have a Gothic tinge to them, but it is that strand of Gothic which is against Enlightenment, with the North figuring a cold instrumentalist rationalism. At the same time, they contain a critical utopian outburst against the inhumanity of modernity.

Paradoxically, the threat from the North can also suggest sexuality. The White Witch offers temptations to the senses—the luxurious Turkish Delight she gives Edmund, for example (in her earlier incarnation as Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*, she is a sexual temptress). In Andersen's tale, the Snow Queen seems to flatter Kai's latent masculinity.¹

In some recent narratives, however, a more complex drama emerges of a

dialectic between winter and summer, where neither side is without moral defects or redeeming qualities and where the movement is towards reconciliation rather than simply the defeat of winter.

[5] In Disney's *Frozen*, the monster, Elsa, now has psychological reasons ascribed to her behaviour. There is also a glimpse of utopia, of a transfigured world, in the marvellous powers she has and the truly enchanting aesthetic transformations she can conjure up (reflecting the transformative powers of technology that lie behind the filmmaking). Here, the Norwegian-styled landscape again represents emotional repression.

[6] Here's Nicole Kidman as the icy-hearted Mrs Coulter in the film of Phillip Pullman's *Northern Lights*. She's very much a modern avatar of the Snow Queen. In that book, the North is ambiguous; though it's the scene of Mrs Coulter's appalling application of instrumental reason to human subjects, it's also an exotic place of wonder and adventure.

[7] You all know *Twilight*, I'm sure, but the genre of paranormal romance—where mortals have love affairs with supernatural creatures—is vastly prolific. The demon lover can be vampire, werewolf or other shapeshifter; there are affairs with demons and angels, [8] zombies, ghosts. [9] I have to include the merman—he's very popular. [10] And even gargoyles. There are questions about how these affairs are consummated here, though I'd rather not know the answers.

Paranormal romance involves the dramatic mating of the Gothic horror genre with that genre of romantic fiction. Each modulates the other in productive ways that the tension between them enables. So this new genre is not simply a continuation of Gothic but, in some ways, it's a restoration of the original Gothic of Horace Walpole, which had at its heart another fusion of two genres—the newly minted novel, with its emphasis on the quotidian, on character, and contemporary life, and the romance of old, with its magic. And the type of supernatural lover can serve to explore various ideas of Otherness—animality, for instance, where werewolves are involved. But I'm going to focus on faerie lovers. The faeries of paranormal romance are not twee little creatures with gossamer wings—they are dark and often vicious, but also powerfully attractive to mortals.

I'm going to concentrate further on the idea of fairy courts. Fairyland has its topographies, its regional divisions, just like our world. The faeries are grouped mostly into courts and owe allegiance to a monarch of that court. In the variant of

paranormal romance that features the world of Faerie, it has become almost an archetype that the traditional folkloric Faerie Courts—the Seelie Court (unpredictable but mostly benign) and Unseelie Court (deeply malicious) have become mapped onto Summer and Winter. And the latter has its icebound landscapes and Winter Queens that are familiar from other tales of magic. I have not been able to trace an origin for this dyad in folklore; it appears to be simply a convention of the genre. [11] It comes, I think, from a less respectable source in popular culture even than teenage fiction. It's largely a product of the non-literary fantasies of New Age mythopoeia, such as this.

Much in these narratives concern disruption between the Courts and a movement towards restoring equilibrium. Inevitably, the reconciliation of the two courts suggests that contemporary concerns with climate change are being mediated in some way, and the restoration of a lost equilibrium between the courts summons up ideas of a disrupted balance of nature. But other reconciliations take place, too: the romance plot allows mutuality between the sexes to be dramatised, for instance. The romantic theme often involves the denizens of the Winter Court being frozen emotionally (the Summer faeries, not unexpectedly, tend to have more warmth about them, though they are capricious and often cruel). The traditional narrative of overcoming coldness and evil through love is reworked in a more nuanced fashion. The Winter Court is not defeated but seen as an essential moment in a cyclical—or even dialectical—system. I'm going to have a closer look at two interesting examples of this.

Julie Kagawa, *The Iron Fey* series

[12] First, there's Julie Kagawa's Young Adult *Iron Fey* series.² Kagawa's darkly attractive, dangerous faeries facilitate some clever play with genre and ways of knowing. Faeries in paranormal romance have the viciousness, the unpredictability, and the predatory nature of vampires, together with their sex appeal. But they are associated not with death, rather with intensified life, life out of human control, and thus, in general, with nature. In the twenty-first century this material inevitably evokes the values and concerns of environmentalism, though the scary nature of faeries means that the perspectives these texts adopt is not uncritically welcoming towards nature. Kagawa neatly makes the folkloric motif of faery aversion to iron central; here, it enables a contemporary questioning of modernity.³ Kagawa conjures

up the Iron Fey, whose monarch is the Iron King and who threatens not just the traditional power of the Summer and Winter Fey, but the whole land of Faery through an ecocatastrophe that is manifested through some intriguing generic modulations.

The Iron King's heroine Meghan has a young stepbrother, Ethan, to whom she is devoted. It is his kidnapping and then substitution with a malignant changeling that initiates her quest to rescue him and discover her true identity, fulfilling, too, her aspirations of escape. She then passes through a portal into the lands of Faery.

Meghan is then taken to Oberon, 'Lord of the Summer Court' (116). This court is also known as the Seelie Court, opposed to the Unseelie or Winter Court.⁴ Here,

Fountains hurled geysers of water into the air, multicoloured lights danced over the pools, and flowers in the full spectrum of the rainbow bloomed everywhere. Strains of music reached my ears, a combination of harps and drums, strings and flutes, bells and whistles, somehow lively and melancholy at the same time. (118)

Kagawa uses this setting to explore utopian aspirations that appear both in romance proper and in romantic fiction. I mean 'utopian' in the sense that Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson have identified of that anticipation of a radically transfigured future.⁵ What Faerie offers is the vision of transformed love of romantic fiction, supernaturally intensified (as experienced by Bella Swan in *Twilight*, for example), and a transformed world that is an antithesis to the disenchantment of modernity.⁶ As an avatar of the dark lover of paranormal romance, Oberon had seduced Meghan's mother, but justifies it in terms of those utopian impulses thus: 'She wanted more from her life than what she was getting. [. . .] I gave her that; one night of magic, of the passion she was missing' (138-39). Thus, these landscapes of romance also serve as locale for the modulation into romantic fiction; 'one night of magic' is both romantic cliché and literal truth.

The encounter with the male love object here is very familiar from romantic fiction. Early on, Meghan catches a glimpse of the dark stranger who will—given the generic expectations aroused here—inevitably become her lover. It is almost stereotypical: mystery intrudes into the mundane; a pale rider on dark horse materialises, anachronistic and timeless (46). This is Ash, a son of the Winter Queen to whom Meghan later becomes attracted despite his hostile intentions towards her.

The exotic beauty of the other is central to paranormal romance; thus Ash is

‘gorgeous. More than gorgeous, he was beautiful. Regal beautiful, prince-of-a-foreign-nation beautiful.’ But, ‘it was a cold, hard beauty, like that of a marble statue, inhuman and otherworldly’ (81). In this, of course, he follows *Twilight*’s Edward Cullen (though he’s not quite as sparkly). Later, the wintery aspect of the dark lover’s dual nature is revealed: ‘He wasn’t smiling now and his eyes were cold. This wasn’t the prince I’d danced with Elysium night; this wasn’t anything but a predator’ (212). (Remember, even Edward Cullen has a touch of this dangerous duality).⁷ Ash’s Winter domain is in stark contrast with the fertility of the Summer Court:

The corridor ended, opening into a massive room with icicles dangling from the ceiling like glittering chandeliers. Will-o’-the-wisps and globes of faery fire drifted between them, sending shards of fractured light over the walls and floor. The floor was shrouded in ice and mist, and my breath steamed in the air as we entered. Icy columns held up the ceiling, sparkling like translucent crystal and adding to the dazzling, confusing array of light and colours swirling round the room.⁸

This shares much of the visual aesthetic of *Frozen* and illustrations of the likes of ‘The Snow Queen’ and is not without its own kind of beauty. And here is its ruler, with a cold glamor inimical to human concerns:

A throne of ice hovered in the air, glowing with frigid brilliance. Sitting on that throne, poised with the power of a massive glacier, was Mab, Queen of the Unseelie Court.

[. . .]

Mab was the coldest day in winter, where everything lies still and dead, held in fear of the unforgiving ice that killed the world before and could again. (ID 25)

The traditional faerie world is opposed to technological modernity and disenchantment. Meghan’s guide, Puck, says:

The fey are magical, capricious, illogical, and unexplainable. Science cannot prove the existence of faeries, so naturally, we do not exist. (187)

But now, a new Iron Fey have emerged, with their own court, born from technology. As the influence of technology grows, fairyland—and thus nature—recedes: ‘Eventually we will all wither and die in a wasteland of logic and science’ (278).

The older fey are, of course, representations of ‘the natural’, with fundamental principles of Winter and Summer opposed but in an uneasy truce—an ideology of ‘balance’ is at work here. That truce is threatened by incursion from the human world and the technology of the Iron Court.

Faery is not merely Nature and the antithesis of technology. It also represents the aesthetic and the feminine (even, quite deliberately, the frivolous side of femininity); both these realms have, of course, long been aligned with nature and each other. But Kagawa, it seems, is trying to reconcile these various perspectives by assimilating diverse genres. Or, if not reconciling, she’s juxtaposing them so that we can travel across them in a voyage of exploration that is simultaneously uneasy and pleasurable.

The oscillation between modernity and the archaic world of romance allows Meghan to enjoy aspects of both. Thus it is not only technology and utilitarianism, nature and the aesthetic, that are straddled, but various roles of the modern young woman and the romantic heroine are explored.

Melissa Marr, *Wicked Lovely*

[13] Melissa Marr’s *Wicked Lovely* series is populated by countercultural teenagers, pierced and tattooed, and by terrifying and beautiful fairies; there is again a topography of winter and summer, with their presiding courts.

Oddly, *this* world knows no global warming but, as the Winter Queen Beira gleefully tells us, instead it suffers ‘the lovely chill I’ve had growing these past few centuries’.⁹ And this chill accompanies urban decay and economic sterility; entropy is mapped onto the social: ‘Mortals starve more every year. The cold. . . Crops wither. People die [. . .] They need more sun. They need a proper Summer King again.’ (WL 60). But this frozen landscape, this domination by the Winter Queen is not shown explicitly. It’s more a suggestion. The faerie world is more integrated here; rather than the portal fantasy of Kagawa, where the heroine passes into another land, our own world has been invaded by magic.¹⁰ The generic variant here is more novelistic, with the mundane and the magical blending. Here, the Summer King visits the Winter Court:

He paused, watching silent figures in the thorn-heavy garden move fluidly as the shadows that danced under the icy trees. The

frost never melted in this yard, never would, but the mortals passing on the street saw only the shadows.

[. . .]

Behind him, car drove by on the street, tires grinding the frozen flush into a dirty grey mess, but the sound was muted by the almost tangible chill that rested like a pall over Beira's home. It hurt to breathe. (WL 42-43)

Here, the disequilibrium is manifested as struggle between mother and son. It's interesting that the love object in Kagawa is also a rebellious son of the Winter Queen. Pullman's Mrs Coulter is yet another Snow Queen with a distorted sense of maternity.

It's tempting to decipher these polarities as allegory. And in high epic fantasy, you're more likely to find that sort of thing. But the strand in these novels that draws on romantic fiction humanises and particularises such abstractions. Marr's Winter and Summer Courts are not over-schematic; they do not resolve easily into allegory. The temperaments and attributes of the courts shift in nature and the fairies change allegiances, with the Summer King even abdicating eventually to take up the winter heritage from his mother to be with his true love, the new Winter Queen.

Summer is characterised as impulsive, hedonistic, and passionate. Marr's Summer Court takes us back to the Southern landscapes of Radcliffe's Gothic. But Winter is not a simple negation of that as you might expect. It's not the emotional repression of *Frozen*, although there are suggestions that it has a restrained and calculating aspect, with gratification deferred. Yet it's as dominated by passions as is the Summer Court. There's a tangled plot that allows an interesting exploration of romance and changing expectations of masculinity and femininity.

But balances and shifts to maintain equilibrium between the courts are central to the plotting and talked about explicitly: '*If we are to survive, we need balance*' (DM 30).¹¹ This striving towards harmony is just not reducible to something obvious and serves more as a chorus to the shifting relationships among the sets of lovers, who are carefully and persuasively delineated. There *is* a movement, it seems, towards a modernisation of the relationships between the sexes, with the centuries-old Summer King having to temper his arrogance to accommodate the newly-immortal Summer Queen, Aislinn's autonomy.

The relations between the characters are complicated and easily characterise

the kinds of conflicting impulses among young adult lovers. (Or not so young, for that matter.) These impulses are rationalised in terms of magic and destiny. And part of the modernity (the word is explicitly raised) consists on disrupting the ancient predetermined and ritualised dramas that have controlled the sexuality and ethical lives of the fairies and their human associates. Part of this modernity concerns relationships between the sexes, obviously; part of it is the disenchantment of royalty itself—Aislinn treats her role as the new Queen very much as a ‘job’; a career move (WL 286). And there is a promise of a utopian transformation of the world once the correct balance between all the Courts has been achieved; Keenan tells Aislinn:

‘You rouse the earth when the winter needs to lose its grip, you dream the spring with me.’

[. . .]

And she could see it – the world stretching like a giant beast too long asleep, shaking off the snow that had kept it dormant too long. She felt her body glowing, knew that she was glowing, and she didn’t want to stop. She could see the white willow that she’d heard rustling in the breeze when she’d first seen Keenan; she could taste that fragile scent of spring flowers. Together they would stir the creatures, the earth itself. They would look on the waking world and rejoice (WL 294-95).

This orgasmic restoration involves reconciliation between the sexes and a transformed natural world. So there are some curious moves towards a precarious equilibrium, one that isn’t quite spelled out but that involves modernity and some disenchantment in the modern world that is suggested but not made explicit and which is aesthetic in nature. And alongside this disenchantment is a powerful *re*-enchantment of the world. Marr’s novels—which are powerfully and lyrically written at times—cast a glamour over contemporary urban life which is, of course, one of the pleasures that this kind of fantastic literature offers.

Conclusion

[14] Of course, I’ve cheated here. These frozen polar wastes are only Northern if you’re in the Northern hemisphere (though the writers I’ve discussed do, in fact, all originate there). Thus it begs certain questions about geopolitical ideologies that could

be explored more. In Lewis, for example, a temperate, civilised North (Narnia and Archenland), implicitly English, is contrasted with a threatening, barbaric extreme North on the one hand and a luxurious and equally uncivilised South (Calormen). But we'll just have to let it go.

So, to conclude, this apparatus of Northern landscape positioned against the South, Winter against Summer, allows quite complex patterns of equilibrium and dynamic tensions to be represented and explored. What is cultural and what belongs to nature; reason, sensuality, imagination, and restraint; ideas of gender all have been played with in these far from superficial writings. I'd also add that this fluid navigation between oppositions is enabled by the hybrid *form* as well: paranormal romance has the Gothic mode in balance with, or in dynamic opposition to, the brighter, summery tendencies of romantic fiction.

Angela Carter, in justifying her own use of fairy-tale Gothic (which also plays significantly with northern landscapes), said, 'We live in Gothic times'.¹² We also carve out Gothic spaces in ways that provide arenas for the conflicts of these Gothic times to be acted out.

Notes

* The numbers in square brackets refer to the slides in the presentation.

¹ This is made explicit in *Cold Spell*); the Winter faery lovers of Julia Kagawa and Melissa Marr are strongly sexualised.

² Julie Kagawa, *The Iron King*, The Iron Fey, 1 (Richmond: MIRA Books, 2011). All further references are to this edition and are in parentheses in the body of the text. The archaic spelling, ‘faery’, is almost universally adopted by the writers concerned, invoking an authenticity and otherness that ‘fairy’, with its connotations of the unthreatening and the twee, does not have. I have mostly followed this usage in my essay. ‘Faery’, when capitalised is also used to refer to the other world where these beings originate—that is, Fairyland.

³ See Katharine Briggs, ‘Iron’, in *A Dictionary of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and Other Supernatural Creatures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 234. Both Holly Black’s Modern Faery series and Melissa Marr’s *Wicked Lovely* books among others employ this device. Briggs is fascinating and informative on this and many other aspects of fairy lore.

⁴ Thus the Ancient Greek Arcadia, as transmitted through Renaissance romance, merges with the Celtic Seelie Court and the ‘Summer Court’.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, ‘Conclusion: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology’, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 281-99. Jameson draws on Ernst Bloch’s monumental work, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, *Studies in Contemporary German Thought*, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986-96).

⁶ Where, according to Max Weber, ‘The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.”’ (‘Science as a Vocation’, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *Routledge Classics in Sociology* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 129–56.)

⁷ The demon lover has a separate heritage: ballads and folklore distantly, but primarily Richardson’s *Lovelace*, with his touches of Milton’s Satan, filtered and ameliorated variously through the likes of Austen, the Brontës, and Daphne Du Maurier. See the

analysis of this archetype in Toni Reed, *Demon-Lovers and Their Victims in British Fiction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

⁸ Julie Kagawa, *The Iron Daughter*, The Iron Fey, 2 (Richmond: MIRA Ink, 2011), p. 22.

⁹ Melissa Marr, *Wicked Lovely*, The Wicked Lovely Series, 1 (London: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2008), p. 44. All further references are to this edition and are in parentheses in the body of the text.

Beira is a Winter Queen in Gaelic mythology, according to the folklorist Donald Alexander Mackenzie.

¹⁰ After Farah Mendelsohn's classification; see *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Melissa Marr, *Darkest Mercy*, The Wicked Lovely Series, 5 (London: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2011).
p. 30.

¹² Angela Carter, Afterword, *Fireworks: 9 Profane Pieces* (London: Quartet, 1974), p. 122.