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Psyche and Cupid (excerpt)

Madeleine R. Waters

Dartmouth, Madeleine.R.Waters.19@dartmouth.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

*This piece is an excerpt of a longer work that will appear in the 18S issue in the Spring as a part of Humbug's culminating publication for the year

Psyche and Cupid (excerpt)

There lived in ancient times a princess said to be more beautiful than the gods themselves. For much of her life, there was little else said of the princess, and no one felt they had cause to discover more. Her elder sisters still had yet to marry, and as long as this was the case, the youngest princess could not be courted.

However, their father, the King in the Shadow of the Mountains, wished to have his daughters married off with all decent haste. Their kingdom, though prosperous, was small and reliant on alliances with its stronger neighbors, who might otherwise have viewed it as either prey or prize. Draped in white flags, the elder princesses left home to become queens. It was common in those days to marry out of necessity rather than love, but conventionality provides thin comfort.

It's hard to say what the king would have accomplished with the marriage of his youngest daughter, for she steadfastly refused every proposal put to her. Men from across land and sea came, drawn to the spectacle of her beauty. Rich, poor, noble, common, athletic, scholarly, handsome, and plain they proclaimed their love for a girl they had never before met, and she refused each in turn. Frustrated in their desire, the men left, and as it became clear to them that the beauty of the princess was not theirs to consume, the things said of her began to transform.

They called her cold despite her bright smile and warm skin. They called her arrogant, though she knew the names and lives of every servant in the castle. They called her cruel and temptress and bitch and claimed it had been her flaws and not their own which prevented a union between them.

The princess did not waver in the face of their ridicule. She was not swayed by the pleas of her father the king to be reasonable. She listened calmly to her sisters tell her it was natural to be uncertain, but her snobbish rejections were simply a phase that would conclude with the offer of the right man.

The princess stood firmly as though chained to the mountain rocks.

“I love our kingdom, our home. I wish to do all in my power towards its continued vitality. But to marry a man is a thing you cannot ask of me. There is no man whom I can love, and to try would be to betray my truest self, a sin of the highest gravity.”

The battle of wills between the princess and her family stood at an uneasy truce while the affairs of the kingdom began to deteriorate. A dry year left half the land hungry, and the barbarians that populated the mountains grew bolder. The sisters’ husbands increased their duties on imports to stave off their own impending poverty, and began to talk of war against the barbarians, who were levying even more devastating attacks against their borders.

The princess saw the servants grow leaner, saw the farmers carrying their goods to the castle by hand after selling or slaughtering a horse to make ends meet. The kingdom in the shadow of the mountains could barely afford peace; it could not endure a war.

“Darling, won’t you consider again the proposal of that island prince? His ships would be a boon to us if we must march against the barbarians.”

“Father, if we march against the barbarians, we will already be doomed. Our people cannot feed an army; they can barely feed themselves.”

“My daughter, in war we may count on the support of our allies. If you truly cared about our people, you would be willing to make sacrifices to bind another power to our cause.”

The accusation stabbed at the heart of the princess. The pain of being misunderstood was so familiar as to be hardly noticeable, but to hear it suggested that she did not care about her people was unbearable.

“You say I am unwilling to make sacrifices?” The princess said, calm as ever, though tears brightened her dark eyes. “My love may not look like yours, but never doubt that it is just as strong. If all I am good for is selfless sacrifice, then let it be so. I will go tomorrow to the holy mountain

and offer myself to the gods that they may grant our people a reprieve. I would give this kingdom my life, but it cannot have my soul.”

At this the king was struck too with grief, for it never occurred to him that his daughter could be unhappier in the life he imagined for her than she could be when faced with death. Yet once again he found it was not in his power to change the course of her mind. The next morning, the princess bid the people a loving farewell, and in a small company of guards, rode to the holy mountain which overlooked the castle and the whole surrounding city.

“It’s a brave thing you’re doing, princess,” said one. “Shame it has to be a pretty thing like you,” said another. The princess said nothing, and then they were at the top of

the mountain. And then the princess was left alone. She prayed, but she knew not what to ask for. Though she

did not long for death, she could not wish to return home, to the empty loneliness of being surrounded by others. Left with nothing else to do, she placed her tiara on the ground beside her and gave herself to the cold embrace of dreamless sleep.