

Lee Bloxom

MATX 601: Texts & Textuality

Dr. Marcel Cornis-Pope

September 4, 2008

### **Intertextual / Intermedia Analysis of *The Briar Rose***

Robert Coover published *The Briar Rose* in 1997 as a postmodern work of fiction in which he rewrites the Briar Rose / Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. Robert Scholes later took Coover's *The Briar Rose* and republished it through Brown University as a hypertext novel with additional lexias of images and sound. Coover considered his print version of *The Briar Rose* hypertextual and, because the lexias work well independently, *The Briar Rose* naturally lent itself to a digital version.

The lexias in [\*The Briar Rose\*](#) can be read in any order. I chose to read them in the most linear fashion (from one to forty-two). Then I tried to reread them in a more random order, but in the digital version the choices were not as flexible as I would have liked. Each lexia gave me the following choices: going to the next numbered lexia of text, going "onward" to a visual and auditory lexia, going to a "comments" lexia, going to another lexia of text in another portion of the text, or going "home". The first two lexias gave me the option of moving to lexias 41 and 42; those pages returned me to the beginning in a sort of circle. A more fluid web of connections between the lexias might have allowed for more unusual juxtapositions within a reading and a less controlled reading.

Scholes sandwiched visual and auditory lexias between Coover's lexias in the digital version of *The Briar Rose*. I assume that he intended the visual / auditory lexias to interact with

Coover's text and therefore with the original fairy tales. My first impression was that most made shallow connections to Coover's rich and layered language and that they detracted from the writing. They struck me as either gratuitous or intentionally dissonant.

Although I can move randomly between text lexias, I can only reach the visual / auditory lexias between specific numbered text lexias. The "back" button allows me a little flexibility, but the visual / auditory lexias are tied referentially to specific text lexias and they seem designed to be read in tandem. Some work more effectively than others. For example, the visual / auditory lexia that follows lexia 29 puzzles me. It's an image of a hound dog in brilliant colors, accompanied by the Elvis song "I Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog." Lexia 30 follows with the prince now resenting the sleeping princess. He doggedly ends the lexia with an interesting thought: "Could it be that, in struggling against the briars, he might in fact be struggling only against something in himself, and that therefore, if he could come to understand and accept the real terms of this quest, the briars might simply fade away? Or is that what all these other clattering heroes thought?" How am I meant to read the hound dog image with the Elvis song? Is the fairy supposed to be a hound dog who can't catch a rabbit? Or is the prince the one who is most like a hound dog? Or is this a DaDa moment in the text? Am I trying too hard to make meaning that isn't there?

In Coover's lexia 8 the fairy tells Rose who she is, naming her in a complicated way. "You are that flame, flickering like a burning fever in the hearts of men, consuming them with desire, bewitching them ..." and, like the spider in the castle window, "you are that still creature, waiting silently for your hapless prey." The fairy ends the lexia by reassuring the child Rose that her prince will indeed come. I hit "onward" and there's a hand-tinted image of Leonardo

DiCaprio (famous for his starring roles in *Titanic* and *Romeo + Juliet*); what I hear is the Disney song “Someday My Prince Will Come” from *Snow White*. If I interpret this as a postmodern ironic statement, I can see how this might layer and enhance Coover’s text. It’s followed by a lexia in which the prince, forever trapped in the briars, is beginning to question his quest. Lexia 9 ends with a question “is this what it means ‘to make one’s name’? In reply, all around him, the pendulous bones whisper severally in fugal refrain: I am he who will awaken Beauty! I am he who will awaken Beauty! I am he who will awaken Beauty!” Are the image and song supposed to be a commentary on how we allow popular culture to name us? Is DiCaprio the celebrity a postmodern prince? Is Snow White’s passive song juxtaposed with this celebrity image an ironic comment on the myth the song propagates? If so, both Coover’s lexias and the image / song call into question the myths our culture has used to help young people form their identities or name themselves. It takes thoughtful engagement on my part to create this level of meaning with Scholes’s visual /auditory lexias and I’m not sure all his choices deserve this level of attention.

Within the text lexias, the point of view shifts between the prince, the princess, and the fairy. In the earlier lexias, it is clear whose point of view is being expressed and usually only one viewpoint is expressed. As I moved further into the text, whose point of view I was reading became less clear. The three characters began to have conversations. The distinction between what I had assumed as a reader was “reality” and “unreality” blurred and mixed together. The lexia would begin with the prince, but as I read, it would become clear that the prince was a part of the princess’s dream. Exactly where I was in the map of the story was no longer clear. Was I with the prince in the thicket of thorns or with the princess in her restless, sexual dreams or with the fairy telling one of her stories? As a reader, I experienced the claustrophobic despair of the

thicket and the confusion of the dreamer. The fairy's voice gave me perspective on the reality of being trapped in the story. She gave me the best overall references and as a character, that makes sense. The fairy was not only trapped in the story, but was aware of being trapped in the story and could reflect on it. In many ways, she was responsible for creating the entire story with her spells and her magical manipulation of the other characters' destinies. She, however, alludes to an auditor and there is the intimation that she is not the creator of the story, but is trapped in it as surely as Rose and the Prince.

*The Briar Rose* works as literature I might return to because I have the original map of the fairy tales in my imagination as a reference. Without that map, I might be too lost to enjoy reading *The Briar Rose*. My enjoyment comes from the intertextual references between the original stories and Coover's version. My enjoyment was enhanced when I reread the originals and realized the details Coover has included. For example, even the flies are sleeping in the Grimm Brothers' version and Coover references this level of visual and sensual detail from the original in his version. Much of his sensual detail are elaborations from the originals.

The three voices or points of view woven together give Coover's interpretation an emotional depth and imaginative range that are lacking in the shorter early versions of the tales. I find myself imagining what it would be like to sleep and dream for one hundred years, or to be trapped in a magical hedge of briars that won't let me pass. Early on Coover involves my physical senses with his evocative language. On lexia 5, the fairy points out that "a century of collected menses alone should stagger the lustiest of princes." The fairy is the voice of "reality" if there is one in this story. The "scurry of restless vermin" is how Coover describes the princess's longing; she is trapped in the "reality" of a dream. She "remembers very little"

although “she does remember remembering” (lexia 17). It is the fairy who gives me the best internal map of the narrative. On lexia 31, the fairy says “Rose imagines this ancient spinning room in the tower to be an impossible distance away, through hidden corridors and up rickety stairwells, not realizing that it is, so to speak, just behind her left ear.” An imagined reality, like the one I am reading in this story, is only in my head after all, “just behind [my] left ear.”

In both the Grimm’s Brothers’ version and Perrault’s version, the briar hedge parts for the destined prince and he walks through without harm to the castle. In Coover’s version, the claustrophobic labyrinth of thorns that capture this prince never ends. His character evolution within the lexias is particularly interesting in that he moves from a lusting, confident, but shallow hero to a very human man desperate to make a name for himself, but eventually realizing that he is going to die a horrible death trapped in the briar hedge. He is not the one. Or maybe he is, but chooses not to complete the tale? On lexia 28, he imagines scaling the walls of the castle and reaching Rose’s bedside. As he’s about to kiss her “coral lips,” he stops. He thinks, “What is happily ever after, after all, but a fall into the ordinary, into human weakness, gathering despair, a fall into death? His fate to be sure, whether he makes his name or not (what does it matter?), but it need not be hers.” He imagines “the disfigurements of time, the draining away of meaning and memory, the ensuing silences, the death of dreams; and, enrobed in pain, willfully nameless, yet in his own way striving still, he slips back into the briars’ embrace.” In this ending which is not an ending, the prince looks at “happily ever after” and decides to remain “willfully nameless” out of compassion for Rose. He chooses to die nameless in the magical briar hedge.

This postmodern story is conscious of itself. The characters are trapped in a story. There is no happy ending. Even the imagined happy endings aren’t happy-ever-after. The princess and

prince grow old and tired of one another. An existential loneliness pervades Coover's version of this story. Even the fairy is alone. She resides in Rose's sleep to tell her stories, both to distract her and to torment her. Coover stresses the fairy's otherness in ways that make her more sympathetic than the evil, petulant fairies of Grimm and Perrault. On lexia 26, Rose questions the ending of one of her stories and the fairy says, "It is not easy, keeping this going for a hundred years." Rose doesn't back down; she says, "Real stories aren't like that. Real princes aren't." But what is the reality of this story? After being told another story on lexia 32 in which the prince, searching in vain for an invisible castle in the desert dies "raisined up like a dogturd out there in the sun, my pet, a worshipful sight. They would have made him a saint, but they didn't know what to call him since he had failed in his quest and so had never made his —." Rose "insists from the doorway, backing away. You can't do that. That's not how stories are." But Rose is wrong — this is how stories are — at least it's how this one is.

The Perrault version has the additional story of the evil Ogress queen mother who tries to eat the princess and her children Morning and Day. In the Perrault story, the clerk of the kitchen saves the children and then the princess by tricking the queen. He is found out and the queen mother plans to eat them all — the princess, her children, the clerk and his wife and maid — when the prince / king returns from his adventure just in time. The evil queen mother leaps head first into a broth of "toads, vipers, snakes, and all kinds of serpents" and is "instantly devoured by the ugly creatures." Coover incorporates cannibalism, particularly the eating of babies, into his story through the fairy's storytelling.

The final lexia is not an ending. Whether or not the princess awakens isn't entirely clear because of the number of awakenings within the dream reality. As a reader, I'm left with the

impression that the prince is forever trapped in the briar hedge, that the princess never awakens, and that the fairy is trapped telling endless variations of the same stories over and over again. If the prince has managed to reach the princess, there will definitely be no “happily ever after” in this postmodern tale. That much is clear. Babies seem to bring the only happiness. They appear in the fairy’s stories where they begin to bring a brief comfort to the princess, but they are frequently boiled or else they disappear. Ultimately the characters are existentially alone and there is no redemption. Even when the prince has compassion for Rose in lexia 28 and returns into the briar hedge to remain “willfully nameless”, he assumes he is doing Rose a favor by sparing her from what he imagines is her fate. Her fate, however, in that scenario, is to be trapped dreaming and tormented forever. He does not know her reality. She does not know his reality. And the fairy, who is other, does not understand either the prince or the princess. In alienation, there is no comfort and no “happily ever after” ending. Death, in this story, would be a welcome relief.

By contrast, Perrault writes that the prince turned king “comforted himself with his beautiful wife and his pretty children.” At the end of the Grimm Brother’s tale, “the prince and Brier-Rose got married, and they lived long and happily until they died.” Perhaps the last line of the last lexia in Coover’s tale is what I am to take away about the nature of stories. “And now, tenderly if you can, toothily if need be, take this spindled pain away.”