

THE WRITING OF *THE RED QUEEN*

MARGARET DRABBLE

This paper is an attempt to explain what compelled me to embark on the foolhardy enterprise of trying to write a novel inspired by my reading of the memoirs of Lady Hong, the Crown Princess, and why the novel took the form it did. This project was fraught with difficulties, and I am grateful for an opportunity to try to explain myself.

My first disclaimer and my first apology concern my difficulty with pronouncing and even memorising the names of the historical characters of the memoirs. I know that the Korean memoir is called the *Han Joong Nok*,* and that this title is familiar to all Koreans, but to me this remains the very first enigma. Being entirely self taught in anything to do with Korea, I do not even know how to pronounce the syllables of *Han Joong Nok*, and I know that their meaning has been translated variously. I have few sounds in my head to accompany my readings of Korean works in translation, no classroom knowledge of the language, no conversational experience. I have now been to Korea three times, and I have tried to supply my deficiencies by watching Korean films, but I am a poor linguist, and too old to learn much. It is too late for me to learn a new language. So why, you may well wonder, did I take the great risk of trying to use Lady Hong's memoirs as a starting point for a work of fiction?

I first came across this work, in an excellent translation by Professor Haboush published by the University of California Press, in the year 2000. I had been invited to a conference about the globalisation of literature in Seoul, sponsored by the Daesan Foundation, entitled 'Crossing the boundaries: literature in the multicultural world'. I was scheduled to speak on post-colonial literature from a British perspective. Before I left for Seoul, I did a little homework about my destination, and talked to a few scholars, one of whom loaned me her copy of the memoirs. I did not read it before I went, but I read it soon after my return, when images from Korea and curiosity about its history were still fresh in my mind. And I was completely transfixed by it. It had an overpowering effect on me. I was gripped by this narrative of intrigue and violence and survival, which seemed to me to have a Shakespearean tragic power. It leaped

* *Ed.* Also romanised as *Hanjung rok*.

across the borders of time and space, from past to present, from East to West. I felt as though I were reading *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* for the first time, without knowing the ending. The story unfolded for me with obsessive power, and would not leave me. I felt it belonged uniquely both to its writer, and to the world. It was a universal drama. How could this be, when its author during her long life was virtually imprisoned within the palace compound? How had she managed to communicate so directly with a reader who knew nothing of the culture in which she had lived? My novel explores these issues, and attempts to discuss the proposition of the possibility of universal human nature, and of the universal story.

I think the idea of writing a novel based on this theme came to me when I was re-telling the princess's story to an old friend of mine, a sociologist, with a particular interest in memoir, life-writing and autobiography. We were walking along a river bank together, and eventually we sat down on a rock by the water to finish the tale, and she then cross-questioned me about the narrative techniques, the point of view, the overlapping versions of Lady Hong's life, her purpose in writing. And I noticed that in re-telling the story, although I had given full value to the horror and pathos and violence of the events of two hundred years earlier, I had also been questioning the narrator's account from a contemporary perspective. What would Lady Hong have felt now about these events, and about women's lives, and what had changed in history—and, as importantly, what had not changed? I felt I had a theme which was demanding my attention, a character who was asking for another voice.

I told my friend about the way in which Lady Hong mentions that when she was a child she envied her cousin's red silk skirt. That little splash of colour illumines her narration brilliantly. It is a stroke of narrative genius. Why did she mention it? Did she know that it would authenticate her voice and her witness for centuries to come?

(Some readers have objected to my stating, in my novel, that Lady Hong 'envied' her cousin, and indeed in her own account she does insist that she was not envious: but one of the most intriguing aspects of her narrative style is the way in which her insistence at times suggests its opposite. She protests too much. She tells us repeatedly of her respect for her father-in-law the king, but it is not always respect that emerges from her summary of events. She was a very shrewd observer, and a very careful recorder, writing in dangerous times: an unreliable narrator, who cannot always tell the facts as they are, and it was my sense that many of her statements needed de-coding, and would have been de-coded by her contemporaries, who were very familiar with courtly language and courtly euphemisms.)

Reading this first translation was only the beginning of my quest. There are two other translations, both of which I read, and I also read as much contemporary material as I could find (including some very fine poems of the period available in English). I read histories, and searched data bases, and visited galleries and exhibitions and lectures, and became a member of BAKS. Of course my study was superficial—how

could it not be?—but it gave me great pleasure. I remember with particular pleasure a visit to the Musée Guimet in Paris in 2002 to see an exhibition of paintings and screens—this was an indulgence, and a delight. The catalogue is one of my treasures. (I particularly loved the *chaekkori* paintings, and one of them, which shows a vase of peonies and a pair of glasses open on a book, was a direct inspiration for my bespectacled 20th-century heroine, Barbara Halliwell.) I revisited Seoul, to see the palace where the princess had been immured for nearly the whole of her adult life, and I walked round the walls of Suwŏn. The mingling of past and present in Korea today—its extraordinary visual mix of ancient and super-modern—became part of my theme. I was by this stage in mid-novel, and had realised that what I was working on was a transcultural novel, a novel which would raise questions about cultural relativism, essentialism, female narrative, family dynamics, evolutionary biology and the universality (or not) of the Oedipus complex. One of my models was Mark Twain's time-travel fantasy *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889), with its darkly comic double-take on American capitalism and Camelot chivalry. My crown princess would look at the death penalty in the United States and the abuse of the Hippocratic oath in Britain with the hindsight of two hundred years of history, and pronounce her damning verdict on progress. We have moved on in some ways—in others, not at all. The casuistry surrounding the manner of the death of the Crown Prince I found particularly fascinating, as it seemed to echo some of the more elaborate objections that we hear today about the right to assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia. I was unfortunately obliged to remove some of this material from my novel, because of copyright difficulties with material from another source, and I regret that.

My character Dr Halliwell is a strong opponent of the death penalty, and so am I. I wished to make the point that the United States, which prides itself on its civilised and progressive values, still executed minors and the criminally insane. I was using the story of the horrible death of the Crown Prince to illustrate the fact that we in the West have not progressed very much.

(In fact, the US law on executing minors convicted of a capital offence while under age has in the past months been successfully challenged by the Supreme Court of the US—I would like to think *The Red Queen* contributed to this change of heart, but I think that would be claiming too much!).

I have mentioned the word 'copyright', and must devote a minute or two to this very vexed matter. I had been aware from the beginning of the dangers of accusations of cultural appropriation—dangers which were an integral part of my theme, and part of the attraction of it. Being aware, I proceeded, as I thought, in a correct manner, contacting the most recent and most scholarly translator and through her the American publishers, and declaring my interest. We met, and, as I thought, came to an agreement. I naturally offered to pay for use of any copyright material, and also

suggested the inclusion of a Foreword or Afterword written by her which could place my fictional efforts in a critical context. I envisaged, with what now seems like a childish naiveté, the possibility of shared platforms, public discussions, collaborative debates, joint publicity, mutual encouragement. I still feel that it ought to be possible to come to some friendly accommodation. In an ideal world, could it not be possible to produce a joint publication, of the original *Han Joong Nok* in English, with my fictionalised version in the same volume? Then the reader could contrast and compare and come to her own conclusions. I also think it would be immensely interesting for the general reader if Professor Haboush's *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong: The Autobiographical Writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth Century Korea* (1995) could be amalgamated with the some of the material about the death of Prince Sado from her volume *A Heritage of Kings: One Man's Monarchy in the Confucian World* (1988), and published by the same publisher in one imprint. These histories belong together, and it seems a pity to me that they cannot appear together.

To cut a long story short, when I sought approval for the first draft of my novel I ran into accusations of Orientalism and cultural appropriation, of “egregious error” and cynicism and plagiarism and ignorance. *The Red Queen*, it seemed, was full of crimes, the least of which was a reference to Korea in the 18th century as a frozen land and, by implication, a ‘hermit kingdom’. This latter phrase has been used by Koreans and Westerners for centuries, referring to the Chosŏn dynasty's undisputed policy of isolationism, but it is, I was told, no longer correct. We are now to believe that the Koreans never were and are not now hermits. They welcome cultural interchange and debate.

Nevertheless, the phrase ‘hermit kingdom’ was not to be used by me.

But it was the question of breach of copyright that frightened my publishers, and led to my revising my text—some of it for the better, some to its loss. Some passages have gone forever, and not even I now know where they are. This is a very complex matter, and the legal issues are not quite of the dimensions of those that surrounded Dan Brown and the *Da Vinci Code*, but they were not dissimilar. What copyright can be held in the translation of a factual narrative by a real woman who died in 1815? This question is not as simple to answer as I thought it was.

Clearly, I have no access to any of the original extant versions of the *Han Joong Nok*, and indeed I have forgotten how many survive, though I was once quite well informed about these texts. All I had to work with were three English versions, compiled and arranged from these overlapping texts. These vary very substantially in many ways, and I cannot judge the authenticity of any of them. All I can tell is what rings true to me as a reader, or what is of interest to me as a writer. Let me look, briefly, at a key moment in Prince Sado's life, a moment that was essential to my interpretation of the three principal characters of the psychodrama—the king, his son, and Lady Hong. It is one of the most remarkable moments in the entire work. It

is the moment at which the Crown Prince turns on his father, in an attempt to explain his own violent behaviour. This is my own version:

According to Prince Sado, his father now asked him directly about the killings, and, being unable to lie to his father, Sado confessed to them. According to King Yǒngjo, however, Sado began to speak of them of his own accord, believing his father knew all about them anyway. I do not know which of these versions is more accurate. Whoever spoke first, the outcome was the same.

Prince Sado explained himself to his father in these words:

“It relieves my suppressed anger, sir, to kill people or animals.”

“Why is your anger aroused?”

“Because I am so hurt.”

“Why are you so hurt?”

“Because you do not love me, and also I am terrified of you because you constantly reproach and censure me. These are the causes of my illness.”

Then, by both their accounts, Sado began to outline the killings—of eunuchs, attendants, prostitutes, ladies-in-waiting—and his father listened to this catalogue of crimes in horrified silence.

(The Red Queen, 2004. Hardback edition, Viking:91–92)

This interchange is obviously crucial to my interpretation of Lady Hong’s story, and one of the clues to its impact on me. Her recounting of this incident, and the emphasis she places on it, reveal her extraordinary insight into her husband’s state of mind. When I ran into copyright objections, I became very anxious that this passage would prove unique to the version which I had been forbidden even to paraphrase. So it was with much relief that I checked with the other versions in English and discovered that the wording in all three (and in my fourth version) was almost identical. This gave me permission to use the episode, but also, I believe, indicated that these were the very words that the prince and the king used. It is a true moment of witness.

Questions of translation and mistranslation, of interpretation and misinterpretation and reinterpretation, are of perennial interest. In my post-modern novel, I clearly made use of time travel, ghostly narration, and ghostly coincidence, and deliberate anachronism. But I freely admit that I also made some unforced errors, which I tried to correct in the paperback version of 2005—for example, “brown polished floor boards” on p. 54, have become “smooth oiled stone slabs”, in response to several complaints from readers.

Lady Hong does not haunt me as she did while I was writing this novel, but I have by no means lost interest in her, she has a busy and continuing after-life. I gather she has many real-life descendants. Korean novelist Hwang Seok-Young told me that he knows family members alive today, and Chicago-based novelist and journalist Euny Hong has written a very racy novel called *My Blue Blood: A Comedy of Sex and*

Manners, published this year (2006), which takes far more liberties with the Hongs than I ever dared to do.

One last thought: several thoughtful readers have questioned my choice of a genre that I call in my subtitle ‘tragicomedy’. The original story is tragic: why introduce any comic element? I am not sure I can give a very good answer. The tone introduced itself. Maybe the long dead see life as more ridiculous than the living. Or maybe some forms of violence and excess can be approached only through a satiric distance. Listening to the radio the other evening, I heard a discussion of Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, in which the composer was said to have described his work as a ‘satiric tragedy’. I thought that a very striking phrase, and wish I had thought of it myself. It seems apposite to the story I was trying to tell.

Bibliography

- Drabble, Margaret, 2004. *The Red Queen: A Transcultural Tragicomedy*. London: Viking. [Paperback editions: QPD, 2004; London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005]
- Haboush, JaHyun Kim, 1988. *A Heritage of Kings: One Man’s Monarchy in the Confucian World*. Studies in Oriental Culture, No. 21. New York: Columbia University Press
- Hyegyonggung Hong Ssi. *Han Joong Nok: Reminiscences in Retirement: Crown Princess Hong*. Translated by Bruce C. Grant and Kim Chin-man, 1980. New York: Larchwood Publications
- . *Memoirs of a Korean Queen, by ‘Lady Hong’*. Edited, introduced and translated by Yang-hi Choe-Wall, 1985. London; New York: KPI Ltd
- . *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong: The Autobiographical Writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth Century Korea*. Edited, translated and annotated by JaHyun Kim Haboush, 1995. Berkeley: University of California Press