

## The Lady of the Rings: Female Resistance, Female Containment, and the Magical Circus

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Circus scholar Yoram S. Carmeli has written that the enduring popularity of the circus is rooted in society's reaction to a postmodern existence, which is characterized by a fragmentary, disenchanting, and industrial social order. To Carmeli, circus literature in particular "reiff[ies] for the readers an illusionary totality, a totality lost in an era of fragmentized order" (Carmeli, "Books" 214). Through the circus' consistent exclusion from mainstream society, which symbolically reoccurs every time it opens, "lost community and biography are nostalgically disclosed" (Carmeli, "Lion" 87). However, society is also fascinated by the circus because it occupies a precarious social position. It can be conservative and nostalgic, as it is to Carmeli, full of wholesome, family-friendly entertainment. However, it is also a place of death-defying acts and monstrously weird bodies—a dangerous, carnivalesque space that does not follow the rules of ordinary life. Paradoxical and not quite definable, circuses are characterized by an inherent duality, and this dual nature is exemplified in magical circus novels *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* and *The Night Circus*. These novels present a fascinating look at the circus as a space of resistance as well as of containment, and the magical circuses therein either question or uphold the dominant social hierarchy and, in particular, rigid gender roles.

*Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* by Genevieve Valentine and *The Night Circus* by Erin Morganstern are two novels vastly different in plot and tone that might, in other circumstances, never be compared. However, because they were published in the same six months of 2011, and because they feature magical circuses and circus performers, they have understandably been discussed in relation to each other. Abigail Nussbaum, in her review for *Strange Horizons*, asserts that there is “a sense in which these books are the same” as well as “another sense in which these books are opposites.” There is also, she concludes “a sense in which *Mechanique* and *The Night Circus* work better as a paired reading than individually.” She means they complement each other in terms of the flaws and strengths of their respective authors, but pairing these novels also creates an opportunity to discuss the ways in which they conceptualize competing visions of the circus’s role in society. Evoking the conflicting qualities of resistance and containment, the magical circuses in these novels transgress or uphold the existing social order. Because established gender roles are a very important part of social hierarchies, the relationship between these circus and their societies can be best seen through the ways that these circuses resist or reinforce the prescribed position of women in society. In *Mechanique*, circus women are afforded opportunity and power outside the dominant society, while in *The Night Circus* they are contained and imprisoned.

Although historically representing wholesome family entertainment, the circus is in many ways a transgressive space and offers many opportunities for resistance. It is a “powerful cultural representation of a form of otherness, of an irreducible strangeness”

(Parker 556)—a space that celebrates difference and deviation. In contrast to everyday city life, full of restrictions, the circus functions as a “space of freedom” (557), where even the laws of nature (and gravity) need not apply. As an “institutionalized questioning of stability and classification” (Parker 560), the circus can be located as a reiteration of the Bakhtinian carnival, which was itself “an embodiment of the liberated communality of people in perennially renewed rebellion against the social and spiritual restrictions of the official order” (Lindley 17). Carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 10) and allowed the common people to embrace concepts such as “community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (9). Carnival was an equalizing force, allowing the ordinary person to be “reborn for new, purely human relations,” which were experienced and “not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought” (10). Rebirth is implicit in Bakhtin’s carnival, as well; carnival, more than anything else, is about “becoming, change, and renewal” (10) and the “pathos of change and renewal” (11).

Carnival promises this change and renewal for society itself. The creation of a space freed from the constraints of official order and control, Bakhtin believed, would also create a venue for communality and rebellion:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure... Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterpoised to the all-powerful

sociohierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. (Bakhtin, "Dostoevsky" 123)

Thus, carnival exists in order to forge "a new mode of interrelationship," one that, for at least a small time, possesses a power that rivals that of society's ruling institutions. For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival turned upside down the official order, offering "both an escape from and a critique of the static, oppressive hierarchy of class and economic relations" (Lindley 18). Like Bakhtin's notion of carnival, the circus has been linked to the simultaneous promise and threat of cultural transformation:

The circus freely manipulates a cultural system to such an extent that it leaves the audience contemplating a demonstration of humanity freed from the constraints of the culture within which the performance takes place. Circus tradition . . . is . . . a set of rules for cultural transformations, displayed in a ritualistic manner that tempers this transgressive aspect. (Boussiac 8)

However, not everyone would argue that a circus is, by its very nature, subversive. Above, the ritualistic property of the circus *tempers* its transgressive aspect. The "questioning of stability and classification" noted earlier was an *institutionalized* questioning, co-opted and perhaps even welcomed by the dominant society. The Bakhtinian carnival also carries with it the sense of institutionalization, of a threat neutralized by the very act of being spoken aloud. For those who have the most to lose from unrest and rebellion, carnival represents a safe way for the common people to express their displeasure:

But the most common objection to Bakhtin's view of the carnival as an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture of Church and State, is that on the contrary it is part of that culture . . . [and] is best seen as a safety-valve, which in some overall functional way reinforces the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspension. (Dentith 73)

In this way, minor disruptions of social order such as carnival and the circus sate a very real desire for social upheaval, thus lessening the chance of actual unrest. While retaining the trappings of a resistance and transgression, they ultimately function as a method of social control and placation. The dominant culture, by positioning the circus as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or as a nostalgic event outside of "normal" life, can then attempt to manage or contain it: "It is through this positioning of circus and artist as other that the disciplinary society attempts to objectify and master them, to bring them under the control of surveillance, to make them visible" (Little 19). On a smaller scale, the circus itself, despite carefully establishing and maintaining the illusion of disorder, is a highly ordered, carefully managed event. There is an order of acts, a beginning and end, and even the clowns are safely anarchic, never causing *actual* trouble or inspiring *actual* chaos. In all of these examples, the appearance of transgression and resistance is a careful illusion, and any risk of real social unrest is mitigated by the possibility of containment and institutionalization.

The Circus Tresaulti in *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* is characterized by a resistance to social order that is anything but institutionalized. The Circus Tresaulti is a steampunk circus traveling through a grim post-apocalyptic future. The performers are

perpetual outsiders, and not only because when they join the Circus Tresaulti they are surgically altered, their bones or lungs or spine replaced with metal. This circus exists completely outside of normal, hierarchal society, resisting control, capture, and categorization. It is socially resistive, especially in terms of gender, and is even run by a female proprietor. Her successor is male, so the circus is not strictly matriarchal, but its internal social structure affords women a great deal of power. The specific ways that the Circus Tresaulti offers escape from and resistance to the dominant social order can be best seen by examining the circumstances of each of three categories of female circus performer: dancing girl, aerialist, and proprietor.

The dancing girls use the circus to travel outside of society with the goal of re-assimilating in a location and role of their choosing. Because they are still human and do not have the copper bones, they are temporary, travelling with the circus only until they find something better. Despite being called “girls,” they are all women, all former soldiers and factory workers. They are not traditionally feminine and “all muscle” but eventually they all learn “the profit in the curled hand and the cocked hip” (Valentine, *Mechanique* 10). Their performance is a performance of femininity, directly tying their gender identity to whatever opportunities they realize as a result of their participation in the circus. The transience of the dancing girls is emphasized in *Mechanique*, and to this end at least three former dancing girls are mentioned. Two stayed behind in cities where there were jobs—to become a stonemason and a baker, respectively—and one stayed behind, perhaps more traditionally, because she found somebody to marry. Each of these women joined the circus to escape the horrors of war or the drudgery of low-

paid factory work, and each of them succeeded in increasing their options in a time when opportunities are scarce.

The dancing girls use the circus in order to locate opportunities in the non-circus world, but the rest of the women in the novel embrace the Circus Tresaulti as a viable alternative to the non-circus world. Historical circuses provided their participants, especially their female participants, with opportunities that were available to them in few other parts of society: “In an era where a majority of women’s roles were still circumscribed by Victorian ideals of domesticity and feminine propriety, circus women’s performances celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary social norms” (Davis 83). While leadership roles in other industries were reserved for men, the circus was a nebulous force in which anything was possible:

[C]ircus people – many of whom were social outsiders – often found a refuge of sorts in this nomadic community of oddballs. In fact, the circus often provided a better income than was available elsewhere. (Female stars, for one, made just as much as their male counterparts or more, and a few women, such as Mollie Bailey and Nellie Dutton, became successful circus owners.) (Davis 26)

Here the benefits of joining the circus are explained in social as well as financial terms; for these women, the circus offered not only a community that would celebrate difference, but also an income and a chance to rise to a position of power or become a business owner. Like the women of the Circus Tresaulti, these historical circus women

found that the alternative social structure of the circus offered them more chance of success than would participation in mainstream society.

Historical circus women, like the dancing girls, could leave the circus at any time, albeit with fewer opportunities available to them if they did. The other performers in *Mechanique*, however, are irrevocably, biologically changed once they join the circus. The aerialists, for example, must be given "skeletons of hollow pipe" that are "tougher than bone, and lighter, and easier to fix when it breaks" (22). Once they are transformed, they are moved permanently to the periphery of normative society, evoking the situations of some of the more traditional circus and sideshow performers. The following quotation demonstrates not only some of the moral rationale behind the lucrative sideshow industry, but also the very real ways in which these physically different "freaks" would have struggled to navigate mainstream society:

An alligator girl can't be a waitress, or a receptionist, or a nurse, or a babysitter. How many job opportunities are open to Siamese twins? How many personnel managers are looking for monkey-faced boys? Would you climb into a taxi driven by a dwarf with a pointed head, or a guy nine feet tall? (Hartzman 5)

Such rhetoric is of course problematic in terms of modern understandings of physical disability, as many people with many kinds of bodies participate and thrive in modern society. However, as previously able-bodied people, the aerialists' choice to become "freaks" does represent, on some level, a willingness to reject social norms about what bodies should and shouldn't be. As a result, the altered aerialists are forced to

completely eschew the values of the dominant society and, in fact, to *fear* the values of the dominant society. When the government man comes around, those with the metal bones are the most frightened: they “knew something the rest of us didn’t know—about Boss, about the man with the orange lion on the side of his car; they knew what might happen, without even looking at one another” (60). The performers who have the metal bones can never return to the non-circus world, not even if they are offered a well-paying job or if they fall in love. That is what they pay for entry into the new social order of the Circus Tresaulti, and what they trade for job security, for food on their tables, and for a place in a community.

The Circus Tresaulti has a female proprietor, Boss, and her position in the circus highlights one of the most important ways that it is resistive. Boss does not have the bones, but she is just as tied to the circus as the aerialists: she is the necromancer-magician who keeps the circus people in their state of not-quite-alive, repairing their flesh with mechanical parts. To the rubes, the townspeople, she downplays her role in the circus, explaining that her late husband created the mechanical people and that she “can barely oil the things” (22). Nowhere else in the novel does Boss refer to a husband, and so presumably he is fictional, created to deflect attention from Boss, to keep people from thinking too much about how powerful she must be. Those who are part of the circus know differently, and always have: Boss is the most powerful person in the circus, the Circus Tresaulti’s tough-love matriarch and giver of life. Several times throughout *Mechanique* Boss is acknowledged as the symbolic mother of the circus performers. When Elena refers to her “third time being born” (144), two out of three of

her births occurred in Boss's workshop. Later, speaking to Bird, the second-person narrator describes Boss as "your mother" (207). Later still, Boss looks down from her cell as the Circus Tresaulti unites to rescue her, and she thinks, "These are my children, this is my circus" (264). Instead of carrying her children in her womb, Boss takes them into her workshop, from which they emerge with new life.

Boss's motherhood also alludes to the gendered social conflict at the heart of the novel. Boss's power, although here magical and unexplained, is at its core a woman's power: she can give life, and unlike matters of "normal" reproduction, she needs no male involvement. Her power of generation makes her a target for the government man, who cannot, as she can, create life out of nothing. Evoking the role of women in the very male need to beget male offspring, he needs a wife-figure who can birth the soldiers he will use to restore the society that once was: "I want to make every city like the old world,' he said, 'one by one. For that I need lieutenants who won't die from gunshots. I need soldiers who can jump over the city walls and drag everyone into a world that isn't just animal colonies snapping at one another'" (185). The government men are particularly notable because they are government *men*, referred to by exclusively male pronouns in a novel full of female soldiers. The main antagonist is known to the circus and to the narrator as only "the government man," even though his troops and the people who live in the city he governs call him "the Prime Minister." Through such phrasing, the world he wants to (re)create is explicitly gendered male, a nascent recreation of the traditional, male-dominated social hierarchies of days gone by. In order for this world to come into being, the government man needs to conquer Boss, a woman

more powerful than he, and he needs to reshape the transgressive, female-dominated circus into an instrument of the very social order it transgresses. When the capture of Boss instigates a literal battle between the circus people and the government man's soldiers, the Circus Tresaulti is able to secure its transgressive status by striking a blow against society itself.

One final way that *Mechanique* and the Circus Tresaulti evoke resistance and social change is through the presence of grotesque bodies. Grotesque imagery involves blending seemingly disparate elements with the goal of questioning the absoluteness of the disparity:

The grotesque is a representational practice fitted to distinctions between natural and artificial. By definition, something appears grotesque if it contains an apparently unnatural mixture of elements... the grotesque causes "the perception that something is illegitimately *in* something else." The grotesque mixes domains typically thought of as separate, such as human and animal or man and woman.  
(Oliver 238)

In *Mechanique*, human beings are blended with metal, with clockwork lungs, bones of pipe, and wings made of metal and (actual) bone. The bodies of those who have gone into Boss's workshop are neither human nor nonhuman, neither dead nor alive, in a constant state of flux. To Bakhtin, a grotesque body "is a body in the act of becoming . . . never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (317). Grotesque bodies are pitted against "classic images of the

finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 25). The classic body is static and completed, but the grotesque refers to the changes implicit in birth, digestion, conception, and death. The grotesque body is one that “builds and creates another body,” locating all female bodies firmly within the realm of the grotesque. Bakhtin frequently discusses the social role of the grotesque in reproductive terms. To degrade the high and the spiritual is, for example, “to hurl it down to the reproductive stratum, the zone in which conception and new birth take place” (21). Additionally, by linking death and birth using the image of a pregnant hag, Bakhtin repeatedly seeks to establish a cycle “in which the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one” (318). This cycle of life proceeding from death features heavily in *Mechanique*: to transform the circus performers Boss must kill them and, once she has (re)built and (re)created their bodies, she brings them back to life using her singular magic.

The preoccupation with conception and birth directly links grotesque imagery to carnival. Like carnival, the grotesque functions as method of renewal and replacement:

[The grotesque] has political consequences, enabling a radical intervention in the common people’s sense of identity. The representation of what breaks the surface or extends from the body specifically combats the version of identity propagated by those in power to maintain social order... This rather triumphalist image of the grotesque’s communalism is tempered, however, by how it

functions, namely by replacing the 'official' order of society with this new openness. (Oliver 240)

By celebrating the grotesque body, *Mechanique* creates a world, within the Circus Tresaulti, that privileges bodily and social difference. The bodies of the circus performers are the result *and* the cause of their exclusion from mainstream society. Their bodies enable them to thrive in the non-traditional social order represented by the circus and to upset the social order outside of the circus through the war against the government men. Within the novel, this conflict is framed in terms of gender; it is waged between the grotesque, female-owned, self-reproducing Circus Tresaulti and the male, male-dominated, traditionally-ordered government. In "The Finest Spectacle on Earth," a story set in the Circus Tresaulti universe, the point-of-view character Little George, acknowledges that the circus is a potentially dangerous threat:

A little sideshow could come and go, neither a thrill nor a threat. A circus, I could tell, would be a different thing—a circus was something real, something united.

My hands were shaking. I pressed them to my sides.

"Some people won't like it," I said.

Boss said, "Then they can be afraid of it." (Valentine, "Spectacle")

The social resistance enacted by the Circus Tresaulti is best traced through *Mechanique*'s female characters, and likewise the social containment represented by Le Cirque des Rêves in *The Night Circus* is best seen through the situation of Celia, the novel's female protagonist. *Mechanique* is set in a fragmented, post-apocalyptic society with ample opportunity for an alternative social order such as the Circus Tresaulti's to thrive, but the events of *The Night Circus* take place in 19th century London. The setting alone implies highly-ordered, firmly-established social hierarchies, and for Celia the circus Le Cirque des Rêves becomes an integral part of that order. Celia begins the novel lacking agency, a female object in a male world. She arrives at her father's dressing room with her mother's suicide note pinned to her dress. Described as a "package" (Morgenstern 9), she is delivered by a lawyer, passed on to the male theater manager, and left in the dressing room of Hector Bowen, the father who does not want her. From her first meeting with her father, it is clear that he is not invested in having a child; only once she displays a natural talent for magic does he declare her "interesting" (11). Hector's interest manifests in control rather than care and nurturing; he contacts old friend and fellow magician Alexander to propose a competition between Celia and whatever child Alexander chooses. In this competition, Celia will represent innate magical skill and, consequently, emotion, and Marco, the orphan adopted by Alexander, will represent intellect and the ability to learn magic through study. At six years old, Celia is drafted into a battle that will define and engulf her life, and she is bound to complete by a magical spell that to her is an extension of her father's power.

In a binding ceremony, Celia and Marco both receive a ring that, when placed on their

fingers, burns away into nothingness, leaving only a scar, a physical, lasting reminder of powerlessness:

Her momentary glee at the adjustment is crushed by the pain that follows as the ring continues to close around her finger, the metal burning into her skin. She tries to pull away but the man in the grey suit keeps his hand firmly around her wrist.

The ring thins and fades, leaving only a bright red scar around Celia's finger. (18)

The boy tries in vain to pry the ring from his finger as it dissolves into his skin. . . .

The boy only nods and does not question further, but that night, when he is alone again and unable to sleep, he spends hours staring at his hand in the moonlight, wondering who the person he is bound to might be. (29)

The binding is “permanent” (29), physically unpleasant, and Celia and Marco will later discover that even thinking about abandoning the wager causes a great amount of pain. Because the children are opposite-gender, the binding strongly resembles a betrothal or marriage, a fact which is evident to at least one of the characters: referring to the scar, Celia scornfully describes herself as “already married” (63) well before she meets or falls in love with her opponent. Marco feels resentment about being bound as well, but he doesn’t describe it as marriage, because for him the action is not gendered. As a dutiful daughter, Celia must obey her father even when his wishes are contrary to her own; that would be true even in the absence of magical wagers, and she identifies the ring-binding ceremony with the social mores that allow and expect her father to choose

her a husband. To Celia, her forced participation in Prospero and Alexander's competition is directly related to the lack of power she holds as a young woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As an orphan adopted by a presumably rich benefactor, Marco does not seem to possess much more social power than Celia in terms of class and privilege, but *The Night Circus* very clearly establishes that he and Celia are not equal. Le Cirque des Rêves, which becomes the venue of the magical competition, is built not by Celia but by Marco and his employer. Celia later comes to have undeniable power over the circus, but she is denied participation in its creation only because she is female and cannot, as Marco does, secure a position as assistant to the wealthy Chandresh. Because Marco has an active role in establishing the circus itself, his role within it is guaranteed, but Celia, as an outsider, must audition for it like anyone else. She is bound to compete, powerless against the wishes of her father, and her powerlessness is emphasized by the fact that she must *ask* to be part of the circus, as well as that her male rival is one of the people who views and judges her audition. Chandresh, and by extension Marco, allow Celia to join Le Cirque des Rêves, but only after making it clear that the circus is a male production with only minor roles for women: "We're auditioning illusionists, my dear girl. . . . Magicians, conjurers, etcetera. No need for lovely assistants at this time" (75). Even Celia and Marco's roles within the circus are gendered. Like other female performers Tsukiko and Isobel, Celia is constantly on display, dressed in elaborate and brightly colored dresses, while Marco, his face concealed by a magical mask, machinates behind the scenes; for this reason, Marco knows Celia is his opponent far

before Celia does. Additionally, Marco is located in London for most of the novel, absent from the circus, while Celia has few opportunities to leave. Celia is a powerful magician who adds many beautiful tents to the circus, but she does not seem to gain any social power from it.

At the conclusion of the novel, Celia's metaphorical imprisonment, symbolized by the scar and embodied in her forced participation in the circus, becomes a literal imprisonment. Slowly, Celia learns that she and Marco are not the first students Alexander and Hector have bound, and that in all previous wagers one of the two participants had to die. The competition is a "test of endurance" (317) and, rather than being declared, the winner is "the one standing after the other can no longer endure" (300). Tsukiko, for example, won her competition only because her opponent, a woman she loved, killed herself in a pillar of fire. Only in the heat of the moment do Celia and Marco discover a way to end the wager that does not involve Celia committing suicide or Marco trapping himself within the magical fire that fuels the circus. In a feat of ill-explained magic, Celia anchors herself and Marco to the circus. The magic she casts is understood to be a reworking of Hector Bowen's attempts earlier in the novel to "remove himself from the physical world" (260). Whereas Hector had "had trouble pulling himself back together again" (260), however, Celia uses the circus as a touchstone, so that she and Marco are immaterial but tethered. They are "liberated from the world and reinstated in a confined location" (352): ghosts who will forever haunt the circus they created. To the outside world, Marco and Celia are dead, and for Hector and Alexander the terms of the challenge have been fulfilled.

Earlier in the novel, Celia explained her father's actions as both an attempt to escape the realities of his approaching death and an attempt take to control of his own destiny:

“If I had reason to, I think I could [do the same],” she says. “But I am rather fond of the physical world. I think my father was feeling his age, which was much more advanced than it appeared, and did not relish the idea of rotting in the ground. He may have wished to control his own destiny, but I cannot be certain as he did not consult me before he attempted it. . .” (261)

Hector's desire to shed the physical world is cast as negative, the folly of an old man with megalomaniacal tendencies. Later, Celia's actions will resonate with her father's wish to “control his own destiny”; by removing herself from the wager, she too is attempting to control her own destiny. For her, to do so is to attempt self-actualization, to become a part of the game rather than a pawn on the board. While Celia's successful defiance of her father and his influence over her life could be seen as an empowering act of rebellion, a woman standing up to decide her own fate, this interpretation is problematic for two reasons. First, as seen in the quotation above, Celia obviously views her father's decision as negative, and says that she herself would not choose the same. She is “rather fond of the physical world,” after all, and goes on to say she is “not certain” she wants “to be stuck in a tree for the rest of eternity” (261). Secondly, and far more worryingly, the result of Celia's attempt at self-determination is that she has replaced her father's prison with another—or, because in both cases it is the circus that restrains her, with itself.

As referenced above, when speaking of her father, Celia states, “But I’m not certain I’d want to be stuck in a tree for the rest of eternity, myself, would you?” Marco replies, presciently, “I think that would depend on the tree” (261). In this exchange, Celia and Marco unknowingly echo an earlier conversation between Murray twins Widget and Poppet. When Poppet asks Widget about his retelling of the Merlin myth, he expresses a sentiment very like Marco’s:

“Is it not that bad to be trapped elsewhere, then? Depending on where you’re trapped?”

“I suppose it depends on how much you like the place you’re trapped in,” Widget says.

“And how much you like however you’re stuck there with,” Poppet adds, kicking his black boot with her white one. (175)

In Widget’s story, a powerful wizard tells his secrets to a girl, and she uses his own magic against him, enclosing him in a tree forever. Ultimately, this imprisonment is positive for the wizard and allowed him victory over the girl who had tricked him: “by losing his secrets, the wizard gained immortality. His tree stood long after the clever young girl was old and no longer beautiful, and in a way, he became greater and stronger than he had ever been before” (174). Through Widget, then, *The Night Circus* depicts imprisonment as acceptable and even desirable, at least if one likes one’s

prison and fellow inmates. Later, Widget also argues the positivity of Celia and Marco's fate even when the other characters disagree:\

"You think being imprisoned marvelous?"

"It's a matter of perspective," Widget says. "They have each other. They are confined within a space that is remarkable, one that can, and will, grow and change around them. In a way, they have the world, bound only by his imagination. . . . So yes, I think it's marvelous." (379)

Like the wizard, Celia and Marco gain immortality, and as Widget says their prison cell is much more "remarkable" and exotic than a tree. They may also, like the wizard, be "in a way... greater and stronger," but that distinction means little when they are unable to use their increased power in any meaningful way.

Widget's description of Celia and Marco's existence within the circus is also troubling because of the assertion that "they have the world, bound only by his imagination." Their world is bound by *Marco's* imagination, not by Celia's imagination, and not by their collective imagination. The implication here that is that even though Celia initiated the magical spell that tied them to the circus, only Marco can manipulate their space. Celia is trapped in whatever illusions Marco creates, whether positive or negative, and the distribution of power is once again unbalanced. For Celia, being tethered to the circus with Marco includes rather than eschews a distinct gender hierarchy. Because Marco's magical skill is privileged in discussions about their life together, and because Celia's magic is not mentioned or presumed to no longer matter, their situation may even allude to an unequal marriage—a natural progression from the pseudo-betrothal of their

childhood. This reflects, albeit perhaps coincidentally, the fact that Widget's story about the wizard is strongly gendered both in terms of the "man triumphs over woman who oversteps her bounds" narrative and the reaction it garners, i.e. that Widget assures Poppet that imprisonment is not "that bad."

Celia's eventual imprisonment in the circus is far worse than the social constraints placed on her by her father and his wager. This is an imprisonment she chooses as well as one she accepts in good spirits. Celia, Marco, Widget and indeed the narrative of *The Night Circus* contend that Celia and Marco have gotten a happy ending. In many ways, this represents the ultimate form of containment. Celia, to once again evoke Widget's story, uses her father's magic against him. Even though her actions do not directly affect Hector Bowen, she is attempting to break the hold he, as her father, has on her by trying to escape the wager. She takes action to assert herself, but her reward is not freedom from social constraints, nor is it the ability to choose for herself. Instead, she ends up trapped within the circus that already symbolizes patriarchal control, with the man her father bound to her. Ultimately, *Le Cirque des Rêves* upholds social hierarchies, especially the male-female hierarchy, and unlike the *Circus Tresauti*, does not offer Celia the opportunity to successfully transgress, resist, or reshape the society that confines her.

Based on this comparison of the interaction between the magical circus and social mores in these two novels, one might assume that *Mechanique* is unquestionably the more "feminist" of the two. However, when considering whether or not this is true, the

setting of these novels begins to take on more importance. One novel is set in the magical – one might even say nostalgic – past, while the other is set in a mysterious, apocalyptic future, and perhaps it is significant that neither is set in “the present.” *The Night Circus* features problematic gender politics, but they are in some way excused by virtue of the explicit nineteenth-century setting. *Mechanique*, on the other hand, lacks a clear sense of chronology. Though the reader assumes a futuristic setting, the characters and events of *Mechanique* are almost completely divorced from “reality.” Were it not for the Western character names, the Circus Tresaulti could be travelling through an alien landscape or an alternate dimension with only a precursory similarity to modern-day Earth. By extension, the female-dominated, feminist space of Boss’s circus is also distanced from reality. There is a clear path between the hierarchical society of *The Night Circus* and “the present,” and only a vague sense of how “the present” connects to the world of *Mechanique*.

Even if *Mechanique* represents a possible future in which societal hierarchies are being broken down and rebuilt, the novel is not an entirely hopeful look forward. The distance placed between the Circus Tresaulti and the readers, as well as the generally negative depiction of life in *Mechanique*, complicates *Mechanique*’s status as a feminist work. The people of the Circus Tresaulti are constantly surrounded by war, poverty, and encroaching despots. The gender politics notwithstanding, the decadent whimsy of *The Night Circus* is far more appealing than a war-torn landscape, and some might find Celia’s romantic imprisonment more pleasant than the lifeless immortality of those whom Boss has given the copper bones. However, one possible interpretation of

*Mechanique* and its setting is that the transgressive space of the Circus Tresualti represents a fresh start for society. The Government Man and men like him, who signify the same hierarchical society that contained and imprisoned Celia, had their chance. Under their watch, society fell apart. In this reading, *The Night Circus* is a nostalgic glance backwards, at a circus that presents only the illusion of disorder and transgression while upholding social hierarchies. *Mechanique*, on the other hand, allows its readers a guarded look forward, a view of a world—and a circus—so drastically different that it only be born after a complete collapse of what came before.

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