

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 10 Issue 1 (June 2022)

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Recommended Citation

Frejo Marañón, Verónica. "The Mare and the Maiden" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 10.1 (2022):
<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>
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THE MARE AND THE MAIDEN

In the dead of night — do you hear it too, reader? The foul silence that creeps closer every waking hour. It lingers, it abides, for the moment in which the mind will finally subside to its terrors. I had heard it, yes, many nights since my tender infancy — silence; that dreadful, all-consuming abyss was my only true companion in life. Orphaned at a young age and born of a sickly disposition which impeded my exposition to sunlight, silence was with me — in me — all along in the countless hours I spent locked away, sulking in the family estate I inherited. My only comfort being found in getting lost in reverie observing the Edenic valley the home overlooked. My only company, the shadows of servants. Shortly after my coming of age, a wealthy family moved to nearby lands in the valley I inhabited. Their daughter — Desdemona — of a similar age of my own, was the only being whose companionship I enjoyed. We became fast friends in a short time and would spend our afternoons together. She was a deeply learned young lady, radiantly beautiful and of such affable character that it was impossible for me not to develop the most fervent admiration for her. We married shortly after, and her bustling radiance did away with the silence at once. Despite my affliction, she remained at my side. The most beautiful wild lily of my beloved valley. She only ever absented herself from my presence to care for an

animal that she esteemed greatly — a magnificent cremello mare. They shared not only physical features — blue eyes and fair hair, but also a connection unlike I had ever heard of. They communicated in a way that puzzled me deeply. The beast, well behaved as it was, had a most intolerable habit. It would neigh, stomp and scratch the ground with one of its hooves until Desdemona would go ride with her. My beloved was highly amused by this, but — oh — I could barely stand it. Those appalling sounds made me quiver with rage. I detested the animal with more ferocity every time it would keep Desdemona from my side. I attempted to keep this malcontent a secret during many moons for I knew my dearest wife would find my feelings upsetting; but my passions overcame me one day the animal was being particularly intolerable and I forbade Desdemona to ever heed the foul beast again.

My most precious lady took my cruelty to heart and I — a vile fool — felt even more enamored by her devotion. I was blissful beyond measure for not only from then on we spent all our moments together, but the insufferable animal had stopped its noises at once as well. My ignorant glee blinded me to the changes in my wife's demeanor. She turned more silent by the day — her countenance sinking at a rapid pace. I only realized the gravity of her condition when it was too late. Her state of mind soon bled into her physical form and she became bed-ridden; all traces of my beloved Desdemona vanished into an unseen abyss I had sentenced her to roam.

Desperate, I called upon the best doctors in the country, but none could explain nor find a cure for her affliction. Thus, she remained in our chamber under my most strict care. Even her dear mare seemed to be aware of its master's ailment for it grew still and refused to eat despite the best efforts of the servants. This plight lasted for months — well into spring the following year. One morning, while I attended some business affairs in my office, the familiar tapping of the mare's hooves arrested my attention. Astonished, I turned to leave the room and — oh, reader— you would not believe the miraculous vision I beheld at its very doorframe. My beloved Desdemona, full of life, just like the first time I set my wretched eyes on her! I could not stand due to my astonishment, so I called her name instead; but she only stared — through me and towards the window behind my desk. Then she descended the stairs — silent, as if gliding, and exited the house. Petrified, I watched her gallop on her mare — down the valley and into the misty woods. Shaken by this, but hopeful to see my beloved in such a healthy state, I decided to await her return patiently.

Hours passed and I grew increasingly worried with every ticking of the clock. The sun was setting quickly and there still was no sign of Desdemona. At the precise instant

the twilight was ebbing away my heart jumped for I saw — faintly — the mare trotting towards the house. Upon closer inspection, however, I observed that — to my horror — the animal had no rider on it. I formed a search party immediately among my servants, and we combed the countryside over and over, well into the night. In the morning, I remained indoors due to my affliction, in a miserable state of anxiety. The search was repeated for days, but eventually all hope to find my dearest disappeared. She was presumed dead on a fatal accident, her remains carried away by the river into the sea — for the valley opened its mouth to it; or eaten by wild animals. This was too much to bear. I refused to believe it, so against my doctor's advice I kept on searching tirelessly for months.

My mental state suffered greatly in the months after Desdemona's disappearance. I barely ate and was only able to sleep — even if barely — when I was in a state of inebriation so great that I stopped being aware of my very own existence. My temperament grew irritable and explosive upon the most minute things. The mare did not aid my extreme condition. The animal — the monster — began to stomp and neigh constantly, every night. The incessant tapping bewildered me to the extreme. I had avoided the beast's presence since Desdemona's disappearance, making sure that the servants kept it well fed and cared for in the name of my wife's love for it. At this moment, however, rage and resentment towards the beast overcame me. That accursed fiend — I thought; the thief that had taken my beloved Desdemona's life. I could control myself no longer, grabbed my hunting rifle and shot once — twice — three times, then I lost count. The demon was no more. But — oh, reader — the mare was buried, and, to my horror, the stomping of the hooves did not stop. Night after night, it haunted me. I inquired all my servants if they heard it too, but none of them did. I concluded — furious — that they were playing tricks on me, so I promptly dismissed them all from my service. Alone, I attempted to rest again. But there it was anew — that horrible sound! All investigation of the surrounding areas was for naught — I found no source; yet I could hear it, the incessant banging against the ground!

I resolved that same night to leave the house. Carrying only my rifle with me, I set on travelling as far as I could — down the valley — into the misty woods, following the river towards the shore. I walked for days without stopping once — in a mad frenzy, until I reached the sea shore and discovered a small wooden shack perched on a narrow, rocky, islet nearby. The place looked abandoned and was remote enough, so I decided to remain there for the time being. I swam towards it and, upon finding it long abandoned based on the intense decay of the furniture, I climbed up

to the attic — for I felt safer there — and instantly fell asleep out of pure exhaustion. I was awoken — dazed and confused — with what I thought was a neigh; a horrible, distorted neigh like a most dreadful scream. I started up and found myself under the dim light that dripped through an aquamarine tinted *oeil-de-boeuf* window in the otherwise dim attic. I quickly realized that a storm had formed while I slept and concluded that the sound must have been a thunder mixed with a feverish nightmare, for I had gotten sick in the cold and exposure of my journey. The storm grew more violent by the minute, shaking the wooden structure incessantly. Then I heard it again — it was no thunder. I peered through the window and saw the shore shrouded in twilight. And there, standing, Desdemona! I threw the window open and cold, cutting gusts of wind and rain blew through me towards the insides of the shack. The tide was low enough to cross by foot, even if with difficulty. It could not be, my love! She spoke not a word — just stood, her eyes beaming at me, dressed in white garments; radiant. My guiding light!

I sprinted outside as fast as I could, but when I reached the shore, she was there no longer. I called her name, yet my voice was drowned by the roaring of the wind and the thick, incessant raindrops. I fell on my knees and wept profusely. And then I heard it again, that grotesque neigh. This time louder, closer. I jerked my head up and I saw it. Oh, what a terrible sight! The partly decomposed remains of a horse stood before me, only a few miles away. I screamed, and the demon returned a cry of its own. I ran for my life but on turning towards the shack I found that the tide had completely covered the passage, as it was now nighttime! Bewildered, I jumped into the sea and fought the violent current in a frantic panic until I reached the structure, which the storm shook violently. There, I placed the little furniture I could find against the door and windows and climbed back into the obscure attic, rifle in hand.

I waited — I *have* waited, and listened. Only the storm. But now, here it is — inescapably, the stomping. This time upon wood. I hear it, reader; do you? Almost like a tapping — tremulous, slow. It gets louder! A thunderous stomping, the frail wooden floor creaking under the hideous entity. Lord, save me, for this demon has come to take my soul to the very entrails of the earth! It gets closer; I feel it under me. Reader, here it comes, I can hear it coming up! But how? God — I see it — it is here! I cannot advert my eyes! The mare, the hideous skull of the accursed mare, writhing in miasma and pestilence! I am done for! Alas, not all is lost. No, no, no. Here it is — I have it. My rifle. Fully loaded! Yes, just one shot. One shot; and silence. I will have *silence*!