Peake

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Fuchsia's Origins

G. Peter Winnington

SEEING MERVYN PEAKE'S DRAWING OF FUCHSIA on the front cover of the Penguin edition of *Titus Groan* (from 1968 until the mid-1980s), some people – often those with only a hazy idea of the content of the novel – speculated about her ethnic origin. And it is true that her heavy features, particularly her full lips, make her look as though she might have some African blood, or more probably Tahitian, since her hair is straight, rather than curly. What's more, quite a few of the Tahitian girls painted by Gauguin are depicted with a similar bearing of the head, in three-quarter profile, with the eyes looking to the right. Yet nothing in *Titus Groan* suggests that the inhabitants of Gormenghast are anything but European.

The Penguin cover drawing (see page 18) was reproduced from the manuscript of *Titus Groan*, dated October 1940. The sketch comes at the moment when Steerpike first climbs into Fuchsia's attic, and she is deeply hurt by this intrusion, this violation of her secret domain. Clearly, it was her surly mood and sultry character that Peake was expressing, with no thought of an implied ethnic origin. He must also have had a very clear idea of what Fuchsia looked like, for at some later date, when he made pen-and-wash portraits of Gormenghast characters (possibly with a view to having them reproduced in the published book), he made an almost identical picture of her (see page 19). In fact they are so alike that he must have worked from his manuscript sketch (which he tore out of the notebook and preserved separately): the mouth is much the same in shape and expression, but the lower eyelids are less full, and the hair is more abundant, with two bangs on the forehead. None of his other (identifiable) sketches of Fuchsia – and there are not many of them in the manuscripts – depart substantially from this impression of her.

Some time ago, Mike Kemp acquired an early portrait by Peake

which was catalogued as ‘Mabel with Black Coat’ (see facing page). On the back of it there is a label from the Leicester Galleries, where Peake exhibited in February 1939. Checking the exhibition catalogue, Mike found a portrait, item 37, entitled ‘Model with a black coat’; the spidery handwriting on the back had been mis-read. The work was bought by Stephen Allen, who at once observed a similarity between the features of the sitter and Fuchsia’s face on the front cover of *Titus Groan*.

Apart from its presence at the 1939 exhibition, we have no information about the ‘Model with a black coat’. Given the armchair on the very edge of which the girl is so uncomfortably perched, the underwear and dress thrown over the back of the chair, and the carpet on the floor, she is unlikely to be a model sitting at the Westminster School of Art, where Peake began teaching early in 1936. The setting looks much more like one of the run-down rooms that Peake rented between his return from Sark and his marriage in December 1937. That would situate the painting in 1936 or ’37. As he continued to use his room in Battersea Church Road as a studio well into 1939 (see the reminiscences of Eric Drake in *MPR* 9, pages 9 and 10), it might equally well have been done during the following year, at the latest – pictures were submitted for the exhibition at the Leicester Galleries before the end of 1938.

The posture of the sitter is hardly that of someone accustomed to modelling. She may well be one of those girls whom Peake spotted in the street and asked to sit for him, attracted – who knows? – by those features that he knew from Gauguin’s paintings of Tahitian girls. (Maeve recalled that when she was a young bride, ‘the girls he stopped always seemed to have good “bone structure”, which eased the small green seed of jealousy’ (*A World Away*, p.18).) At any rate, her downcast gaze and the position of her hands suggest embarrassed self-consciousness, as does the fact that she has kept her coat round her shoulders and is using it to hide her right breast. The attention that Peake paid to her face in this portrait suggests that he was much more interested in that, in its bone structure, than in her body.

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Mabel/Model with a Black Coat. Signed, but not dated.
Pastels with ink heightened with gum arabic. 30 x 33.5 cm.
Exhibited: London, The Leicester Galleries, February 1939, item 37,
and London, New Grafton Gallery, October 1969, no.459.
Photographed for *Peake Studies* by Peter Ashley.

I hate
hate
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+

her simplicity
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despised
Something to
hate to be

This concords with the portraits of Fuchsia, in which Peake showed only her face. There are marked similarities between them: the thick eyebrows, the slightly squashed nose, and the full lips. So we might hypothesize – and it can only be speculation – that, as he imagined Fuchsia’s face when surprised in her attic by Steerpike, Peake remembered this portrait from three or four years before, in which he had recorded the defensive posture of a girl unaccustomed to being seen unclothed, and her refusal to make eye contact with the painter. To these he added Fuchsia’s passionate, adolescent character in those petulant lips.

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My thanks to Stephen Allen for sharing his thoughts about this portrait, and to Mike Kemp for his input.

Sources

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