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**Dinesen's Diana: The Transformative Power  
of Symbols in *Ehrengard***

Aishwarya A. Marathe

Greco-Roman mythological symbols can give great depth to fictional works, and their role in literary tradition is equally as strong as that of Judeo-Christian symbols. Isak Dinesen channels this potential toward the titular character of her novel *Ehrengard*, whose background, characteristics, and actions echo and deviate from those of Diana, the Roman virgin goddess of the hunt. Ehrengard, a “refracted” Diana, subverts Herr Cazotte’s plan to objectify her in his art. Though Mads Bunch’s article “Ehrengard, Kierkegaard, and the Secret Note” discusses Dinesen’s feminist reversal,<sup>1</sup> Marianne Stecher-Hansen’s essay on female writing, “Both Sacred and Secretly Gay,” solidifies my view that Ehrengard’s comparison to Diana not only empowers her but enables her transformation into an artist.<sup>2</sup>

Literary and artistic works often depict Diana, known as Artemis, according to the Greek tradition, as armed with a bow, quiver, and arrows, a stag at her side, or drawing her chariot. She is the female divinity that opposes her brother, Apollo, writes William Smith.<sup>3</sup> In that capacity, she partakes in masculine activities like war and the hunt. Existing in a liminal space between the masculine and feminine realms, she presides over both as a proponent of destruction and protection, namely that of women and nature.

Despite her role in the virgin-to-woman transition and her involvement in childbirth and child-rearing, Diana is foremost a “maiden divinity” and does not tolerate violations of her prized virginal honor.<sup>4</sup> She employs her destructive power when anyone encroaches on her chastity, such as in the myth of Actaeon; in

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<sup>1</sup> Mads Bunch, “*Ehrengard*, Kierkegaard, and the Secret Note,” *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 489–523, <https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.85.4.0489>.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Stecher-Hansen, “Both Sacred and Secretly Gay: Isak Dinesen’s *The Blank Page*,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 29, no. 1 (1994): 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1316343>.

<sup>3</sup> William Smith, *Artemis*, (New York: Harper & Bros., 1884), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Artemis,” in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, ed. Hornblower & Spawforth (London: Oxford University Press, 2014).

retaliation to Actaeon's voyeurism, she transforms him into a stag, and his own hunting dogs tear him apart.<sup>5</sup>

Dinesen shapes Ehrengard according to Diana's qualities. Herr Cazotte suggests that the Grand Duchess employ Ehrengard as a maid-of-honor to Princess Ludmilla. They discuss her family; her father, General von Shreckenstein, has five sons in the army. Herr Cazotte says to the Grand Duchess:

I have seen [Ehrengard]. In a white frock. A young Walkyrie. Brought up in the sternest military virtues, in the vast and grim castle of Schreckenstein, the only daughter of a warrior clan. An almost unbelievably fitting white-hot young angel with a flaming sword to stand sentinel before our young lovers' paradise!<sup>6</sup>

Numerous aspects of her character match the goddess Diana. Ehrengard was raised in a heavily masculine environment with five brothers as company. Her upbringing in this "warrior clan" also included an education of feminine etiquette and values. Furthermore, Ehrengard is unmarried and therefore considered chaste and untainted according to social norms of purity. Her duties at Rosenbad are to be a companion to Princess Ludmilla throughout her pregnancy and, no doubt, to support her transition into a new phase of life.

Cazotte evidently venerates Ehrengard, although his suggestion, and his subsequent remarks to the Grand Duchess, are far from innocent. He wishes to conquer Ehrengard by seducing her, not in the physical sense, but the spiritual. He attributes this fervent desire to his being an artist, writing to the Countess von Gassner: "For what does seduction mean but the ability to make...*the object* upon which you concentrate your mind give forth...its very core and essence?"<sup>7</sup> Cazotte already sees Ehrengard as an object, and he aims to make her blush:

So I shall in time be drawing my young Amazon's blood...from the deepest, most secret and sacred wells of her being, making it cover her all over like a transparent crimson veil and making it burn her up in one single exquisite gasp of flame...In this blush her past, present, and future will be thrown before my feet.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood, "Artemis."

<sup>6</sup> Isak Dinesen, *Ehrengard*, (New York City: First Vintage Books, 1975), 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Dinesen, *Ehrengard*, emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> Dinesen, *Ehrengard*, 36-37.

One day, by chance, he sees Ehrengard undressing for a bath and is transfixed by her beauty. Here, Cazotte's transgression of Ehrengard's chastity parallels Actaeon's. However, Cazotte goes one step further than Actaeon. He concocts a plan to paint "The bath of Diana," a portrait of Ehrengard masked underneath a mythological symbol, to possess her without anyone else knowing, save for her. He will place Ehrengard on a pedestal, equating her to a goddess before spectators, while her blush dethrones her:

In what possible way could he more fully and thoroughly make the girl [Ehrengard] his own than by capturing, fastening and fixing upon his canvas every line and hue of her young body, her complete, carefully hidden beauty...and no one but he and she would know the truth.<sup>9</sup>

Ehrengard's blush represents Cazotte's underlying objective: a relinquishment of her virginity. He goes so far as to juxtapose her blush with the Alpen-Glügen phenomenon of lights. This indicates that he desires to control nature, which itself is an extension of Diana's domain.

Prior to this, Cazotte brings Ehrengard to a fountain representing the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan, and he reads from a poem that alludes to the myth to arouse her fatal blush. Mads Bunch explains that Ehrengard's "slight" blush arises "in discontent and anger, since she realizes that her friend and confidante...has so far been doing everything he could to manipulate her."<sup>10</sup> This blush is the beginning of her transformation. Ehrengard does not "discover her own sexuality," but rather, she realizes that Cazotte is blind to her existing knowledge of it.<sup>11</sup> She begins to take baths at the lake intentionally to incite Cazotte to paint her.

That Cazotte sees Ehrengard as an ownable incarnation of the goddess Diana is his pivotal misconception. Cazotte imagines Ehrengard as incapable of self-change unless he bends her to his will. In turn, Ehrengard uses this very presumption as an opportunity to deviate from her mythological model. I consider

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Bunch, "Ehrengard, Kierkegaard," 505.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

her a “refraction” of Diana because she both mirrors and diverges from the goddess. She first diverges at the end of the “second part” of the novel, when she and Cazotte are on an evening excursion:

Ehregard slowed her steps, stopped and stood for a moment with the tips of her fingers in the clear water of the basin from which the breast and the proud neck of the swan rose towards Leda's knees. As she lifted her head, turned and faced Herr Cazotte, she was a little pale, but she spoke in a clear voice.

“My maid tells me,” she said, “that you want to paint a picture. Out by the east of the house. I wish to tell you that I shall be there every morning, at six o'clock.”<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Diana, who would defend her honor to a fault and severely punishes Actaeon for violating her privacy, Ehregard renounces the goddess’s virginal honor by acting like no offense has taken place. She turns her sexuality into a prolonged strategy to punish Cazotte later.

During the final rescue scene at The Blue Boar Inn, Dinesen completes Ehregard’s manifestation of Diana while also straying from it. Ehregard sets off on her horse Wotan, in a vengeful search for the Princess Ludmilla’s newborn, who has been kidnapped by Matthias, the nursemaid’s husband. Dinesen writes, “She was Ehregard, no one could take that away from her... She had the hunting instincts of her breed...” Ehregard is the huntress incarnate; she even begins her “hunt” in the evening, which marks the beginning of the goddess Diana’s auspicious hours.<sup>13</sup>

Cazotte follows her. At the Inn, she severely attacks Matthias. Once Ehregard has control of the situation at the inn, her fiancée Kurt arrives, and in response to his questions about the infant’s parentage, she executes Cazotte’s punishment:

The girl's glance was strong and direct, like *an arrow's course from the bowstring to the target*. [author’s emphasis] In it she flung her past, present and future at [Cazotte’s] feet...

"It is he," she said. "Herr Cazotte is the father of my child."

At these words Herr Cazotte's blood was drawn upwards, as from the profoundest wells of his being, till it colored him all over like a

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<sup>12</sup> Dinesen, *Ehregard*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Artemis*, 112.

transparent crimson veil. His brow and cheeks, all on their own, radiated a divine fire, a celestial, deep rose flame, as if they were giving away a long kept secret.<sup>14</sup>

Here Dinesen reiterates Cazotte's earlier line that Ehrengard's "past, present, and future will be thrown" at his feet to reverse their roles, for Cazotte's blush marks his sexual awakening.<sup>15</sup> He becomes the victim of his own plan. Until this point, Cazotte has viewed Ehrengard as an artistic object, and his sexuality has remained dormant. Bunch claims that the sexual implications of Ehrengard's lie force him to see her "as a sexual object of flesh and blood...which ultimately leads to his fall into sexuality."<sup>16</sup>

Bunch's analysis is valid, save for one point. I do not view Ehrengard as an object—artistic, sexual, or otherwise. She subverts objectification because she draws Cazotte's blush, and therefore she influences Cazotte's sexual and spiritual nature. While she uses Diana's destructive power to punish Cazotte, she simultaneously veers from her chastity. Cazotte can no longer capture Ehrengard in his art, and as she has falsely relinquished her virginity to him, neither can he possess her physical being.

Although Bunch analyzes the feminist reversal in the blush scene, he does not consider Ehrengard's transformation, nor how she factors into Cazotte's transformation. In "Both Sacred and Secretly Gay," Stecher-Hansen analyzes another Dinesen story, "The Blank Page," whose symbols affirm *Ehrengard's* representation of Diana:

The blood-stained sheets in Dinesen's "The Blank Page" may be regarded as female writing which signifies women's most liberating erotic, empowering and joyous life experiences; the blood represents not only the blood of sexual initiation, but also menstrual blood and the blood of child-birth.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dinesen, *Ehrengard*, 109, (author's emphasis).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Bunch, "Ehrengard, Kierkegaard," 506.

<sup>17</sup> Stecher-Hansen, "Both Sacred and Secretly Gay," 9.

Because Ehrengard fabricates the truth, she transforms into an artist. She sheds no blood of her own but provokes Cazotte's blood to the surface, painting a blush that equates to Stecher-Hansen's interpretation of "feminist writing."

Cazotte and Ehrengard live in a patriarchal society that "places erotic *jouissance* and virginal chastity in deadly opposition."<sup>18</sup> Cazotte projects this binary onto Ehrengard; in her, he sees Diana's virginity but not Diana's connections to womanhood and sexuality. Therefore Ehrengard, who claims she has had pre-marital sexual relations and given birth, unites the opposing forces to foil Cazotte's seduction. By filling the space between virginity and womanhood, Ehrengard fully embodies Diana's liminality and significance in women's transitions.

It does not suffice to stop short at Ehrengard's transformation because her artistic masterstroke transforms Cazotte. He undergoes "a crucial transformation...succeeding his fatal blush...from a spiritual seducer (an artist) to a physical seducer of flesh and blood..."<sup>19</sup> Beneath Cazotte's blush is his awakening to physical desire. Sourvinou-Inwood writes, "It is possible to perceive that the core of [Diana's] personality is a concern with transitions and transitional marginal places...and marginal situations."<sup>20</sup> Rosenbad and the inn are the "marginal places" where Ehrengard, who remains physically chaste, orchestrates Cazotte's initiation into sexuality.

There is a caveat: while Diana guides women's transitions, Ehrengard transforms a man, and this is her final refraction. Diana does not spare Actaeon, but Ehrengard has mercy on Cazotte. After all, now that her *œuvre* is complete, she must present it to the world. Just as Cazotte intended to exhibit "The Bath of Diana" to make Ehrengard blush and to capture her within his art, Ehrengard creates a portrait of lies to achieve the same effect in Cazotte, not so she can trap him, but so she can send her piece of art into the world—and she succeeds. As a result of the sexuality, Ehrengard burdens him with, Cazotte is henceforth called "Casanova," which came to denote promiscuity.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Bunch, "Ehrengard, Kierkegaard," 508.

<sup>20</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood, "Artemis."

In the epilogue of *Ehregard*, Dinesen describes Ehregard as adorned with a light blue ribbon of the Order of St. Stephan, which is a military order that symbolizes her similarities to the Roman goddess Diana, in that they are both associated with valiance and honor.<sup>21</sup> Ehregard is no longer an object, as Mads Bunch suggests in “Ehregard, Kierkegaard, and the Secret Note.” She both separates herself from Diana’s virginity and identifies with her femininity, destructive power, and transitional roles. Through this refraction, and by painting her own portrait of seduction to punish Cazotte, she becomes an artist. Ehregard may not have divine powers like the goddess she personifies, but she bears Diana’s torch of subversion and transformation.

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<sup>21</sup> Dinesen, *Ehregard*, 111.



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