

My Mother Raised a Wolf

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“My mother raised a wolf to become her (but I grew up to be an English major)” is the full title of this integrative comic project, the culmination of a lengthy investigation into scattered themes of divinity, responsibility, and the spiraling feeling that nothing is under your control. This 16-page comic peeks into the wandering narrative of the wolf-girl Winnie and her unnamed mother, in the lineage of capricious, destructive and extremely powerful forces that are not born of the world – they just live in it. Despite the earth-shattering power the characters inherit and wield, they are conscripted into roles and routines that they must continue to play out for no other stated reason than “that it must be.”

Overview and Context

I found myself hiking in the Asturias region of Spain June 2019 following an immersive study abroad experience in Madrid, where I had studied theater, myth, and literature. During this time, I became fascinated with *El señor de Pigmalión* by Jacinto Grau, an avant-garde theater adaptation of the classic myth of Pygmalion written in 1921. In this adaptation, Pigmalión is a playwright of some renown whose actors are living puppets that inhabit fully the roles that are written for them – some based on the Italian *commedia dell’Arte*, some based on stereotype and archetype. The puppets, literally referred to in the text as *muñecos* or dolls, carry on facsimiles of lives when not on stage, operating a strange adaptation of their assigned role as best they can¹.

The most fascinating of these characters to me was the lead actress Pomponina, the character that serves as the object of Pigmalión’s eventual affections. Her role as lead actress is largely that of an object of affections both in the plays written for her and the play she inhabits – both the playwright and her counterpart lead actor, Don Lindo, are completely head-over-heels in love with her.

This setup would be fairly average were it not for Pomponina’s own character: rather than the beautiful and idealized woman character, she is rude, vain, and self-centered to the point of absurdity. A phrase she repeats often (“*¡Rabia y rabia!*”) would be recognizable to

¹ Jacinto Grau, *El señor de Pigmalión: farsa trágicómica de hombres y muñecos, en tres actos y un prólogo*, vol. 248, Teatro Español: serie A 4 (Madrid: La Farsa, 1928).

contemporaries as a common complaint heard from young children. The play goes so far as to feature as part of Pomponina's costuming a large, bulky mirror strung on a necklace that she uses to check her appearance almost constantly. This contrasting of a character – the actuality of a person – with the role they are meant to fill was an instigator for much of this integrative project's obsession with role and duty.



Image 1, 2: Early designs of what Pomponina might look like, emphasizing her inhuman doll-like nature as well as a sense of girliness.

Without thinking much of it, I devised and wrote a piece of flash fiction that debuted the character of the wolf mother. In this case, she was a purely antagonistic force – a voracious, destructive beast that methodically decimated cities seemingly without rhyme or reason. An unnamed protagonist recognized that the wolf was in pursuit of some part of her that was taken, and upon reuniting the pieces, the beast transformed into a weeping middle-aged woman. I wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean, in all honesty, so I continued hiking and put it out of my mind.

I'd never had the elementary obsession with wolf-related media that many of my peers had at that age (I was far too busy being enamored of cats and bats and owls instead), so it

wasn't immediately apparent that my fixation on the creatures as a myth in my own work had a potential to be much more than a postponed juvenile fascination.

At the suggestion of one of my peers, I began reading a 1970s manga titled *Lone Wolf and Cub*, a longform mythos about a rōnin, or wandering samurai, who uniquely traveled with an infant son. The protagonist, a shōgun's disgraced executioner named Ogami Ittō, travels the countryside in search of those behind the complex plot that killed his wife and family. Due to his comparatively independent methods, he earns the moniker of "Lone Wolf," his accompanying son Daigorō as his "cub."



Image 3: Ittō urges his one year old son to choose between a ball and a sword: if he should choose the sword, he would accompany Ittō on his quest for revenge; if he chose the ball, he would be killed to spare him from the misery of the assassin's path.²

² Koike, Kazuo and Kojima, Goseki. *Lone Wolf and Cub*, Issue 1, page 5.

Typical to samurai stories, Ittō is a skilled swordsman, taking down considerable numbers of enemies with technique and trickery (in one instance concealing spring-loaded spears in his baby cart³). In a similar vein, the son Daigorō is preternaturally skilled, wielding a sword as a toddler and proving capable of withstanding considerable strain, as shown in Chapter 2, “Pitiful Osue.” The role of the son fascinated me, specifically the way that he is defined entirely in relationship to his father. The story relies on the social constructs of feudal Japan, specifically loyalty to one’s lord, and in Daigorō’s case, the only lord he understands is his father’s insistence on the “assassin’s path.” He is not a child, not even really a student to Ittō – he is the calcification of his crusade, the seeds of a legacy that he is nurturing specifically to outlast him.

Methodology and Creative Work

The “my mother raised a wolf” project underwent a number of drastic changes throughout its conception and execution, waffling from comics, to animation, and back to comics several times before the creation of the final comic presented here. However, this project is far from done and I expect further modulation as I continue to work in this manner.

In December, I created the twelve-page minicomic titled “Family Business” – the “debut” work for the characters of Winnie and her mother, and the conflict between them. Each page was executed in ink on paper and was eventually adapted to a dual tone risograph print book. The execution of this phase of the project was the logical conclusion from a new way of creating I had been experimenting with at the time, which involved iterative comics or “doodle-writing” – taking a concept or a character and filling a page with sometimes meandering sometimes purposeful discrete scenes, learning the way a character was supposed to speak, look, or act, and why their story was important to tell.

³ Koike, Kazuo and Kojima, Goseki. *Lone Wolf and Cub*, Issue 2, page 53.



Image 4: An example of the ideation techniques used for this comic project. Story beats are loosely related to each other using page layout and variable imagery to determine the essence of a story and its characters.

The “Family Business” comic was not a departure from my previous method of working, but more of a crystallization of my technique – the execution of a graphic narrative in a physical form, using printing techniques unfamiliar to me at the time. In adapting the comic to a two-tone risograph print, I was able to solidify a visual language with color that complemented the story I was working with already, the addition of which elevated the finished product to be more effective.

The story itself covers a short moment in time: a phone call Winnie makes to her mother to inform her of her changing academic plans. Their ensuing conversation touches on much of what I intended to discuss; however, it ultimately reflects an unsatisfactory status quo that the two characters uphold, despite claims on both sides that they were unhappy with the hands dealt to them by circumstance.



Image 5: Page spread from “Family Business” minibook.

For the final project, I originally intended to develop the story arc of the comic into my preferred medium of animation, in order to more fully encapsulate the visual style I had begun to push in the comic and perfect it with the added dimension of motion. Unfortunately, in between hand-painting animation cels and realizing the wolf mother’s movements in oil paint on glass, the COVID-19 outbreak forced me and my cohort into completing our senior projects in quarantine. Because of this, my access to the materials and resources necessitated by my project was strictly limited, and it took several days of wrestling with a jury-rigged downshooter before I realized that the film I intended to create would not be possible to realize in the circumstances I’d found myself in.

During this frustration came a moment of clarity: I wasn’t telling the story I needed to tell. The film I had planned was a retelling of my previous comic, and while the narrative had merit, it was getting me nowhere. A great deal of remodeling had to be done before I could switch back to the medium of comics.

The most recent “my mother raised a wolf” comic is the first to earn its title. Previous iterations had focused too intensely on a conflict between the character of Winnie and her mother, building up an unnecessarily contentious relationship and unintentionally portraying the mother character as a manipulative, tyrannical presence that Winnie had to negotiate with in order to secure her agency. Though the exploration of an abusive power dynamic could be meaningful, it was not the story I intended to tell, and the critique I received on the initial iterations allowed me to realize how inhuman and inaccessible the character of the mother was. Part of this was intentional – the mother is a force of nature, an ambiguous death goddess with powerful magic – however, I had been neglecting to support her as a very real and emotional character to connect with as well.

In this most recent iteration of the comic, the mother is considerably more sympathetic. The decentralized story structure gives an opportunity to look into who the mother was in the past, and why she behaves the way that she does. Toning down the absurdity of her character casts the climax and resolution into a starker seriousness that previous versions did not have, and operates well with the urgency to highlight the actual conflict of the story – Winnie’s struggle with the knowledge that she has to become something she is not ready to become.



Image 6, 7: Page spread from “My Mother Raised a Wolf.”

In the production of this latest comic as well, I made specific stylistic decisions to introduce more conventional paneling back into the page structure. In image 5, the beats of the comic are not separated from each other – rather, each beat flows into the next with more emphasis on a visual hierarchy than on readability. In confronting the shortcomings of the story I was telling, I was also forced to confront the fact that I had been sacrificing clarity in the way the pages were read for a visual style that hadn’t completely locked in. Because of this, I made the decision to use more conventional paneling and page layouts for the pages where clarity was paramount, and dip into the abstract organizational method to emphasize specific pages such as image 3 above.

Conclusion

It's not fair to say this project is about my own mother, or even about the concept of parent-child relationships at all, though they play a major role in the larger themes I attempt to break down. Rather, my focus is more on a crushed or changing concept of an identity in relation with external forces that dictate how this identity should develop. Similar to the child Daigorō of *Lone Wolf and Cub*, and the mannequin Pomponina of *El Señor*, Winnie's existence as a character is tied entirely to an overwhelming outside presence that dictates her exact role in a series of events that she has no control over. In telling her story, I am attempting to determine an "out" for these characters that have been typecast by their circumstances and adding a dimension to the obligations imposed upon them as a result of their natures.