

Margaret Drabble

THE RED QUEEN

A TRANSCULTURAL
TRAGICOMEDY

HARCOURT, INC.

Orlando Austin New York San Diego Toronto London



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www.HarcourtBooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Drabble, Margaret, 1939–

The red queen/Margaret Drabble.-- 1st U.S. ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-15-101106-0

1. British—Korea—Fiction. 2. Princesses—Homes and haunts—Fiction. 3. Women—Books and reading—Fiction. 4. Loss (Psychology)—Fiction. 5. Women—Korea-- Fiction. 6. Women scholars—Fiction. 7. Korea—Fiction. I. Title.

PR6054.R25R43 2004

823'.914—dc22 2004009665

First published in the U.K. by Viking

Text set in Bulmer

Designed by Linda Lockowitz

Printed in the United States of America

First U.S. edition

K J I H G F E D C B A

PROLOGUE

THIS BOOK WAS INSPIRED by a volume of court memoirs written in Korea more than two centuries ago. Unlike the heroine of the second half of this volume, I did not read the memoirs of the Crown Princess on an aeroplane at a cruising altitude of 36,000 feet. I read them sitting in the sunshine in a London garden. But, like my fictitious heroine of modern times, I was utterly engrossed by them. I have tried to describe the nature of the impact that they had on me and on Dr Halliwell. It is sheer chance that the Crown Princess came my way at all, but, once I had met her, I could not get her out of my mind. She insisted on my attention. She made me follow her, from text to text, from country to country. She seemed to be making demands on me, but it has not been easy to work out what they might or could be. Several times I have tried to ignore her promptings and to abandon this project, which has been full of difficulties, but she was very persistent.

I have turned her story into a novel, of a kind. This is because I am a novelist, and, for better and for worse, writing novels is what I do. I do not know if this is what she would have wanted. She wanted something, but this may not have been it. It may well

be that she would have utterly deplored the liberties I have taken with her story. Being dead, she has not had much say in the matter. She has had no control over how her readers interpret or adapt or translate her story. All I can say is that my efforts are a homage to the power of her narration and to the bravery of her long life.

They are also, of course, a homage to the most recent and most scholarly translator of the memoirs, Professor JaHyun Kim Haboush, who has rendered the original into a vivid English, and whose pioneering studies of this period of Korean history are an invaluable resource. She has devoted many years of her life to this subject, and has succeeded in giving the Lady Hyegyŏng a new voice in our time. She too, I think, has been somewhat haunted by the Lady Hyegyŏng.

I feel some anxiety about the way in which I have appropriated this strange material. But appropriation is what novelists do. Whatever we write is, knowingly or unknowingly, a borrowing. Nothing comes from nowhere.

I have not given a detailed account of all my deviations from and elaborations of the original material. In some aspects I have been faithful to it; in others, not. I have supplied some invention, and added some interpretations, most of which are overtly displayed as interpretations, rather than facts. There are (and have been) many possible interpretations of the story, and mine is only one of them. You will find details of sources and a bibliography at the end of this volume. I must emphasise that Professor Haboush, whose work first introduced me to this material, does not endorse my interpretation, and has had no influence over the point of view or overall tone that I have adopted, though she has offered various editorial suggestions, some of which have been followed. The responsibility for any historical mistakes or anachronisms, whether they be intentional (as some are) or inadvertent (as some will no doubt prove to be) rests with me alone. My admiration for her work is great, but I appreciate that she may wish to dissociate herself as a historian from this work of fiction and fancy.

What struck me most forcibly about the memoirs, when I first read them, was the sense of the clarity of the individual self, speaking clearly and directly and personally, across space, time and culture. This seemed even stranger to me than the sensational nature of the events described, and made me ask myself questions about our modern (and postmodern) doubts about universalism and essentialism. The Crown Princess speaks with dramatic urgency, as though willing posterity to listen to her. After death, she is no longer confined by the culture that imprisoned her. She speaks out from it. She represents a peculiar version of the phenomenon of life after death. Like Dr Halliwell, I do not believe in ghosts. But I do believe that in some sense the Crown Princess is still alive.

I think I am saying something more than the obvious, which is that some books outlive their authors. I do not think that I am speaking here of narrative skill, or of literary talent, although the Crown Princess had both. I believe that she was a prescient woman who lived out of time. In this postmodern age of cultural relativism, that should be an untenable belief. Nevertheless, I have felt the need to investigate it, and this book is the result.

Perhaps I need to spell out my intentions, for attempting to write across cultures is dangerous, and liable to misinterpretations. This is not an historical novel. The voice of the Crown Princess, which appears to speak in the first person in the first section of the novel, is not an attempt to reconstruct her real historical voice. It was originally inspired by her voice and her story, but her voice has mixed with mine and with that of Dr Halliwell, and, inevitably, with the voices of her various translators and commentators, all of whom will have brought their own interpretations to her and imposed their personalities upon her. I have not attempted to describe Korean culture or to reconstruct 'real life' in the Korean court of the late eighteenth century. Instead, I have asked questions about the nature of survival, and about the possibility of the existence of universal transcultural human characteristics. The Crown Princess was my starting point for this

exploration, but not its end. My Crown Princess is a woman who has read the works of Voltaire. It is my belief that something between the lines of her text suggests that she would have understood Voltaire's attitude to religion and the monarchy very well. But this is only my belief.

I do not know whether the Crown Princess loved her children, her husband or her father-in-law. I can only speculate. We know what custom dictated, but we do not know how fully custom was followed. I do not think that anybody knows. I do not know whether or not the court ladies kept pet cats, as my narrative has supposed, though I have found no evidence to the contrary. I do not even know whether magpies (which appear frequently in this text) were regarded as lucky or unlucky in Korea at this period. I devoted some time to the puzzling question of the cultural significance of magpies, but arrived at no satisfactory conclusion. Some authorities say one thing; some another. The general consensus is that in China and Korea they are considered the harbingers of good news, whereas in the West, traditionally, they bring bad luck. The Crown Princess seems to regard them as a bad omen. I really do not know why that should be.

In the earliest translation of the Crown Princess's memoirs, the ominous flock of birds that appears at a crucial moment in the narrative is said to be a flock of ravens, not of magpies. Ravens and magpies are related, but not identical. I do not know what birds flocked on that fatal day, but I have reason to think that the translation which described them as ravens was paying homage to *Macbeth*.

PART ONE

ANCIENT TIMES



WHEN I WAS A LITTLE CHILD, I pined for a red silk skirt. I do not remember all the emotions of my childhood, but I remember this childish longing well. One of my many cousins came to visit us when I was five years old, and she had a skirt of red silk with patterned edgings, lined with a plain red silk of a slightly darker shade. It was very fashionable, and very beautiful. The gauzy texture was at once soft and stiff, and the colour was bold. Woven into it was a design of little summer flowers and butterflies, all in red. I loved it and I fingered it. That skirt spoke to my girl-ish heart. I wanted one like it, but I knew that my family was not as wealthy as my mother's sister's family, so I checked my desire, although I can see now that my mother and my aunt could read the longing in my eyes. My aunt and my cousins were delicate in their tastes, and like most women of that era, like most women of any era, they liked fine clothes. They came to envy me my destiny, and all its lavish trimmings—well, for a time I believe they envied me. But I was brought up in a hard school, and, as a small child, I had no red silk skirt, and I concealed my longing as best I could. This hard school served me well in my hard life. My mother, too, endured hardship in her early years. I used to wonder, childishly,

whether it was my longing for red silk that brought all these disasters upon me and my house. For my desire was fulfilled, but no good came of it, and it brought me no happiness.

I was still a child when I received a red silk skirt of my own. It was brought to me from the palace, with other precious garments made for me at the queen's command. I was presented with a long formal dress jacket of an opaque leaf-green brocade, and a blouse in buttercup-yellow silk with a grape pattern, and another blouse of a rich pale foxglove silk. I had been measured for these robes by the matron of the court, and they were lifted out and displayed to me by a court official, with much ambiguous and bewildering deference. I think my response to these rich and splendid artefacts was lacking in spontaneous delight and gratitude, though I did do my best to conceal my fear.

The red silk skirt was not a gift from the palace, although it was included in the fine royal display of gifts. I was to learn later that it had been made for me by my mother, as a reward and as a compensation for my elevation. She had made it secretly, at night, hanging curtains over her windows to hide the lights in her chamber as she worked. This is how she performed many of her household tasks — discreetly, quietly, modestly. My mother liked to hide her thrift and industry, and she avoided compliments on her domestic labours. At this time, I knew nothing of this special undertaking on my behalf. I stared at the red silk skirt in ungracious silence.

My mother reminded me that I had once expressed a wish for such things, and she watched my face for smiles of gratitude. I did not remember having expressed this wish, but I confess that she was right to have divined it in me. But now I was too sad and too oppressed to raise my eyes to look at my new finery. My illustrious future hung heavily upon me. I was nine years old, and I was afraid.

I have been dead now for 200 years, but I have not been idle. I have been rethinking my story, and my history. I am not dead

enough or modern enough to adopt the word 'her-story', in place of 'his-tory', but I feel compelled to suggest that this false, whimsical and, to my ear, ugly etymology could, if ever, be appropriately invoked here, for I am a prime and occasionally quoted example of the new 'her-story'. I see that I have an honourable though not wholly adequate mention in the first *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, published in the Year of the West 2002, where I am incorrectly named as 'Princess Hong', and my memoir, even more oddly, is entitled 'In Burning Heart'. I do not know who bestowed that inappropriate title upon my work.

I wrote various accounts of my story during my earthly lifetime, and I must say that they were well written. I am an intelligent and an articulate woman, by any relativist and multicultural standards that you may choose to invoke. But each of those versions was written as a piece of special pleading. I have had to defend to death and beyond death the reputations of my father, my uncles, my brother, my clan. (Our clan, in our lifetime, was known as the Hong family, and we were, of course, as should go without saying, of ancient and distinguished lineage. In some versions of my story in the West, I am now given the title of Lady Hong: indeed, this name appears on the title page of what I believe to be the second Western translation of my work. This was not my name.) Above all, I have had to vindicate the tragic temperament and career of my unfortunate husband, whose horrifying end had such complex and painful reverberations for the history of our country, and for me. There were so many violent deaths in my family circle. I have even had to attempt to defend my immensely powerful yet deeply perplexed father-in-law, who seems to be the villain in some of these versions. Was he villain, victim or hero? With all my hindsight, and with the hindsight of many not always illuminating and often partial commentaries, I still cannot be certain. Death does not bring full light and full knowledge.

Many thought I was fortunate to die in my bed, an old woman of eighty years. Indeed, it is remarkable that I managed to live so

long, in such turbulent times. But how could I have allowed myself to die earlier? Many times I wished to die, and sometimes I thought it my duty to die. But in universal terms, in human terms, it was my duty to live. My life was needed. My son and my grandson needed me. I could not abandon them. I survived for them. (I could even argue that my kingdom needed me, but that would be a grandiose claim, a masculine and dynastic claim, and I do not make it.) And now, 200 years later, with the knowledge of two centuries added to my own limited knowledge on earth, I intend to retell my story. I hope to purchase a further lease of attention, and a new and different readership. I have selected a young and vigorous envoy, who will prolong my afterlife and collaborate with me in my undying search for the meaning of my sufferings and my survival.

In life, I was called arrogant by many, and devious by some. I had many enemies. I suppose I was both arrogant and devious. And indeed I cannot look back on my past life without some sense of my innate superiority. Much ignorance and much stupidity and much fear surrounded me, particularly during my middle years. I was designed to be a poor and helpless woman, in a world where men held the power—and power was absolute, in those days—but I had eyes in my head, and a quick brain, and could see what was happening around me. At times I could make others dance to my tune. I myself survived, but I had my failures. The worst of them was this.

I lost my poor husband. I tried to save him, but, despite all my efforts, he had to be sacrificed. He was too mad, too perverse, too much destroyed by his place, his heritage, his nature. He was too hard a case for me. Even today, in these advanced and enlightened times, I think I would have been unable to save him. Even today, I think he would have met a similar fate, though in a different, to me unimaginable, but perhaps parallel manner. But that is a conclusion I have reached after many decades, after two centuries of reflection. And who knows, maybe even now some wonder drug

is being prepared, a drug that could have saved him and his victims from the extremity of his terrors and the horror of his end? Medication for such diseases of the brain grows ever more precise, or so we are told. We have become expert in tracing chemical imbalances and the defective activity of our myriad of neurotransmitters. But these discoveries come too late for him and for me.

Let me begin at the beginning, with my long-ago childhood. I have discovered that childhood is now widely considered to be a social construct, and I note that my written versions of my childhood have been knowingly or charitably placed by others as 'nostalgic' or 'idealizing' or 'self-serving'. I have thought much about these comments and interpretations. I will narrate what I take to be the facts, as I have been told them, and I will add some of my memories, though I am well aware that personal memories may be reinforced or undermined to the point of disbelief by family memory. None of us has full access to even our own stories.

I am rather surprised that some of my readers seem to have missed the cautious and disclaiming note of irony that is and has ever been my dominant mode. Here, beyond death, I will attempt to dispense with it, though maybe the habit of it is too deeply ingrained by now. I do not think of myself, with plaintive self-pity, as a tragic heroine. I think of myself as a survivor.

I was born, according to the Western calendar, on 6 August 1735. This year, 1735, was known as *ŭlmyo* in our calendar, but, for simplicity's sake, I will use Western terminology for chronological terms, just as, in my own time, I chose to write mainly in the Korean *han'gŭl* alphabet, rather than in the less accessible though more literary language of Chinese. Some say I was born at noon, some say I was born at one o'clock in the morning, but all agree that I was born at my mother's family home in Kop'yŏng-dong in Pansong-bang, which was a western district of the large walled and gated city of Seoul, in the country now (and long) known as Korea, or Korea. (Korea is the older transliteration: I

believe our traditional enemies the Japanese were responsible for altering it to Korea, on the grounds of Western alphabetical precedence. For J precedes K, does it not? And Japan wished to come first.) Seoul in my day was known as Hanyang or Hansung, taking its name from the broad river Han that flowed (and still flows) past it and down to the Yellow Western Sea, but for your convenience I will call it by the name by which it is now known. I was born in the house of my mother's parents. It was traditional in those days and in our culture for a woman to return to her mother's home to give birth (though I, of course, in my exceptional circumstances, was not to be allowed this comfort). When I was born, my parents were both in their early twenties: they had been married in 1727. In 1735, the Chosŏn dynasty, of the royal house of Yi, had already lasted for three centuries, and was to survive until modern times, until the year 1910. I was born during the reign of King Yŏngjo, the twenty-first king of Yi lineage.

In 1735, in Europe, the Enlightenment was gathering its strength, but few of the Western texts about the universality and perfectibility of human nature had reached us in Korea. News of Roman Catholicism and its Jesuit missionaries had reached us, but not, I believe, the works of Voltaire. Nevertheless, something of the spirit and the wider perspectives of the Enlightenment informed, I trust, my earlier texts, as they do this posthumous revision. It is my belief that the universal exists, and that in the end of time, in the fullness of light, we shall see it, and know all things. This is a foolish belief, but no more foolish than the temporal beliefs of many dynasties and many multitudes. If I continue to seek, I may yet find. If my belief can be justified, I shall find others who will collaborate in my quest.

Several members of my family were executed because they were suspected of sympathizing with Catholicism. Catholicism was violently repressed, and there are many Korean saints and martyrs recognized by the Catholic Church. I, in those years, had no religion. Outwardly pious, I prudently paid lip service to the

ancient dogmas and tenets of Confucianism, but my mind went its own way. It went the way of survival. I make no apologies for this.

Were the early years of my childhood as happy as I once claimed that they were? No, of course they were not. They were overshadowed by anxiety, by strain, by fear. It is only in comparison with what was to follow that they could be described as happy. It is true that my grandfather petted me and predicted a great future for me, and that my aunt—herself a very highly educated woman—taught me to read and write, and praised my mental abilities highly. But the burden of all these expectations lay heavy on me. I had an older sister who died when I was very small. I have no recollection of her, but I sensed that after her death my parents had invested many worldly hopes in me. But hopes of what? Were they already plotting my destiny, my downfall?

I was indulged as a small child. Was this in prospective recompense for the later sorrows, which they could hardly have fully foreseen? My older brother was brought up very strictly and coldly, but I was often permitted to share my mother's room at night. This was not usual, and perhaps it was not wise. I think First Brother resented the favours that he thought were shown to me.

From childhood, I was acutely conscious of family resentments. I was unnaturally attuned to them, to my sorrow. But this awareness kept me on my guard. And I was to have need of my guard.

My father claimed he had dreamed of a black dragon the day before I was born. It had appeared, or so he said, entwined about the roof beam of my mother's bedroom. My father had therefore assumed that I would be a boy, for a dragon portends fame and distinction in public life. Was it this dream that dictated my fatally favoured upbringing? I can hardly think so. Our legends and histories are full of dragon dreams. (Even today, Koreans claim to dream auspicious dragon dreams.) My father may have invented that dragon. Our dreams do not lie, though they may deceive us, but we may lie about our dreams. In our culture, even so late in

history, dreams could be cited in justification of or in explanation of strange acts. We had left behind the rites of our distant forebears, who superstitiously sought meaning in the cracking of turtle shells, but we dwelled still, when it suited us to do so, in the dark ages of the mind. We toyed with dragons and yarrow stalks and hexagons and magic books of jade; we saw messages written on stones and etched on leaves. We listened to oracles; we invoked spirits; we consulted geomancers and shamans. (As, I note with some surprise, you do today. There has been little progress there.) And some of us cast our minds forward, though perhaps not very successfully, to the more interesting speculations and interpretations of Jung and of Freud.

My father, during these years of my early childhood, was exhausting himself by preparing for his state examinations. Mysteriously, he at first failed his examinations at the Confucian Academy, but he received an official appointment nevertheless, as custodian of a royal tomb, and redoubled his intellectual efforts. Our society—or perhaps I should say our section of society—was obsessed with academic success and with the passing of these time-honoured examinations. Even those who did not seek public life, even those who became scholars of the woods and the mountains, were obliged when young to share the obsession with examinations. You may think that your society lays too much emphasis on grades and tests and examinations, and some of you may argue that they cause much psychological damage—well, all I can say is that I believe that our society, in this respect, was even worse. You inherit only a shadow of the oppression. It was impossible to rise or even to survive in our world, if you were a man, without passing through a rigid sequence of military or civic examinations. You had to pass through them before you could escape from them by achieving the respected status of mountain-scholar—a path which one of my brothers was obliged to choose. But my father did not wish to retire. He was a very ambitious man,