

Angela Carter's critique of phallocentrism in *The bloody chamber and other stories*

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ABSTRACT. An analysis of three rewritten fairy-tales from Angela Carter's *The bloody chamber and other stories* is provided. In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', 'The Tiger's bride' and 'Puss-in-Boots' patriarchal structures are exposed and denounced as containing strategies to curb female sensuality and freedom. The beast, a synonym of sensuality, is relativized and de-constructed through the reciprocal gaze and equal relationship. The fearless approach of the female towards it and her dominion over it empower her to a new world order without phallocentrism.

Key words: Angela Carter, empowerment, fairy-tales, feminism, phallocentrism.

RESUMO. A crítica de Angela Carter ao falocentrismo em *The bloody chamber and other stories*. Neste trabalho analisam-se três contos de fada reescritos no livro *The bloody chamber and other stories*, de Angela Carter. Em 'The courtship of Mr Lyon', 'The Tiger's bride' e 'Puss-in-Boots' as estruturas patriarcais são expostas e denunciadas em suas estratégias para conter a sensualidade e a liberdade femininas. A fera, sinônimo da sensualidade, é desconstruída através do olhar recíproco e do relacionamento em nível de igualdade. A aproximação destemida da mulher em direção à fera e seu domínio sobre ela lhe dão o poder numa nova ordem mundial sem falocentrismo.

Palavras-chave: Angela Carter, contos de fada, feminismo, falocentrismo, poder.

In the rather mysterious world of orature the contents of the European fairy-tale have been a constant vehicle for the transmission of patriarchal ideology and feminine submission. The movement towards fantasy and dreams incorporated by many British authors (Stevenson, 1987, p. 185) includes an approach towards the fairy-tale as a reflection set for adults in the time context of the late 20th century. Even if one discards its catharsis (Grixti, 1989, p. 81), the return to fantasy in a feminist (and postcolonial) milieu invites the reader to "probe unsuspected facets of our own individual and collective identity" (Parrinder, 1987, p.113). It not only tries to translate the known into the unknown and lets the old magic pour back into the rational world but, especially with regard to the fairy-tale, enhances the crucial passage from a sex-role stereotyping to subjectivity.

Although Angela Carter (1940 - 1992) is not unknown in Brazil (Rio's Editora Rocca has translated some of her "magic" novels), generally she is best recognized because of her rewriting of fairy-tales from a feminist point of view. Elements of magic are sprinkled throughout her novels from *The magic toyshop* (1967) to *Nights at the circus* (1985). In an

interview in *The Guardian* (25th Sept 1984 p. 10) she admits her admiration and affinities to Latin American magic realism and to Gabriel Garcia Marques in particular. Support for the affinity statement is flimsy since Carter's magic is an intrusion, an uninvited and malevolent visitant while in the fiction imbued with magic realism reality itself is magical. Her success in fairy stories comes with *The fairy tales of Charles Perrault* (1978) and *Sleeping Beauty and other favorite tales* (1982), her translation of French and European fairy stories from the seventeenth century author and her publication of the two *Virago book of fairy-tales* (1990,1992). However, the feminist potentiality of fairy-tales is revealed in *The bloody chamber and other stories* (1979), a rewriting of Perrault's and de Beaumont's stories from "a feminist perspective imbued with psychoanalytic insight" (Wilson, 1991, p.115). *The bloody chamber and other stories* may be placed midway in Carter's literary career. It seems to stand between her fierce denunciation of patriarchy with its analytic and demythologising impulse achieved in the 1960s and 1970s (Palmer, 1987, p. 179) and the ironic, mocking triumph at the male enticement by women, the defeat of female containment, themes of

liberation and a woman-centered perspective of the 1980s and 1990s (Makinen, 1992, p.3).

Problematising the fairy-tale within phallogentrism

The fairy-tale genre has been questioned as whether it can convey feminist subversive elements because of its heavily stereotyped patriarchal structures. "Fairy-tales perpetuate the patriarchal *status quo* by making female subordination seem a romantic desirable, indeed an inescapable fate" (Rowe, 1979, p. 237). Duncker (1984, p. 4) states that Carter re-writes "the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures... [and reproduces] the rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic". Lewallen (apud Makinen, 1992, p. 12) even charges Carter with the reproduction of male pornography since she neither overcomes the containments of the fairy tale's conservative form nor constructs an active female erotism and sexual subjectivity.

In the first place, Carter is aware of fairy stories' ambiguous position in feminist literature. She argues, however, that fairy-tales originated from the poor of Europe who in their fear of uncertainties encoded in them dark and mysterious elements of the psyche. Needless to say, Carter concedes the appropriation of these tales by the aristocratic writers of the 17th-18th century who fixed them in writing, placed a moral tag on them and reproduced them for children as behaviour patterns. On the other hand, she sees the old fairy-tales as open resources in which, through rewriting strategy, a thorough hauling could be undertaken with the containment of patriarchy and the introduction of deep feminist active elements (Carter, 1983, p. 61). *The bloody chamber* is thus "a book of stories about fairy stories" with a clear emphasis on the ironic strategy and its consequent deconstructiveness. Following the suggestion of Haraway (1989, p. 173) about irony and its importance as a "rhetorical strategy and political method", Carter does not seem to rewrite the fairy-tales by only giving a female subjectivity to the male-contained girl, but she preys upon the old misogynistic narrative by a critical ironic decoding of its patriarchy within an awareness of both stories.

Carter's strategy in *The bloody chamber* is the informing of the stories with violence and erotism. Since fairy-tales are practically synonymous with the passivity of women and the condition of the female either as a marionette (in Cixous's terminology, "coded mannequin") or as the "angel in the house", Carter's characters positively exhibit sexual activity, libido, desires and drives for pleasure and the decision to be perverse. This explosion of the stereotyped female and her standard behaviour provokes a type of women which by the standards of

patriarchal society may be called unruly, mischievous and embarrassing but which in actual fact puts the female on equality. This attitude may be summarized in the concluding pages from *Nights at the circus* when Fevvers remarks that "all the women will have wings, the same as I ...The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed ..." (Carter, 1984, p. 285).

The structure of *The bloody chamber and other stories* consists of ten tales: a rewriting of the Bluebeard story; three stories about cats: lion, tiger and puss-in-boots; three tales on weird beings: the erl-king, the snow child and the vampire; the last three tales deal with werewolves. In my articles on Carter's wolf stories (Bonnici, 1998, p.272; Bonnici, 1996, p. 118) the conclusions reached feature an ambiguous reply to Freud's "Was will das weib?", or rather, a mixed feeling towards the violent potentiality of the female libido, subjectivity and autonomy of female drives.

The three stories under analysis from *The bloody chamber and other stories* are "The courtship of My Lyon", "The Tiger's bride" and "Puss-in-Boots". The first two are different representations of Beauty and the Beast, a tale originally adopted by Madame de Beaumont from the *Conte marin* of Madame de Villeneuve and from Straparola's *Piacevoli notti* (16th century). The third story is an adaptation of "Le chat botté" from Perrault's *Histoires et contes du temps passé: Conte de ma Mère l'Oye* and from the Straparola book. They were translated from the French into English by Robert Samber in 1729 as *Mother Goose tales* and became extremely popular in England as tales for children inoculated by patriarchal ideology and standards of behaviour.

The aim of the present investigation dealing with the three cat stories is to analyse whether Carter succeeds in decoding the female as a passive being and encoding the female subjectivity, or rather, whether in the rewriting of these fairy stories there exist the polymorphous potentialities of female desire or a confirmation of the same old female stereotypes.

Exploding patriarchy

If "The courtship of Mr Lyon" begins with patriarchy and ends in marriage, what happens in between and under the lines? Confined to the kitchen, doing her house chores, waiting anxiously for her father and depending on his wheel of fortune are Beauty's role and position told by a heterodiegetic narrator. To enhance containment the narrator insists on her distant unattainable beauty. The girl is lovely and "her skin

possesses that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow". Compared to the snow-covered road, her virginity is "white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin" (p. 41). This conventional patriarchal representation of woman with its symbols of transcendence and aloofness (Palmer, 1987, p. 199) has already been proved to be a disguise for male domination. This fact is corroborated by the worries of the father who would like his fortunes changed so that he could give a decent living to his daughter or, at least, the white rose she asked for and thus maintain intact his fatherly domain. Opportunity to reverse his fortunes is given in the male bonding between the father and the yet invisible inhabitant of the house. The ease and comfort of the male in the house of another foretells a reinforcement of patriarchy, the establishment of pacts and a united front against feminine pressures. Although the theft of the white rose seems to be a breach in male bonding, there is a disguised and an implicit will of transference of property within patriarchy. "Take her the rose, then, but bring her to dinner", he growled; and what else was there to be done" (p.45). In this manner the narrator seems to shift the solution of the father's financial problems and Beauty's desire for richness to the girl's acceptance of confinement by the future husband.

Paradoxically it is here that Carter invests in irony. The forced acceptance of staying in the lion's house is a consciously active act. There is an ironic gap (p.45) when the narrator mentions the object of exchange, symbol of "male domination ... rooted in a struggle for recognition between men in which women are mere objects or tokens". (Benjamin, 1984, p. 300) This gap signifies willingness and fearlessness in the face of sexual desire. If the narrative teases that Beauty "stayed, and smiled, because her father wanted her to do so" beside being "the price of her father's good fortune" and the Beast suggested "that she should stay here...[and she] forced a smile ... [for she knew] it would be so" (p. 45), this apparent patriarchal outer layer is subverted by her self-conscious attitudes in the lion's presence: she knows his otherness, she guesses his thoughts, his likes and dislikes, she evaluates the pressure he produces, his shyness, his fear of being refused and his weaknesses. Her subjectivity exists and subverts patriarchy together with its male-dominated milieu of sensual containment.

Much have been written on the male gaze not only as a symbol of sexual domination but also as power exertion and control by the male (Kaplan, 1984, p. 325) However, in "The courtship of Mr Lyon" there is an inversion of the gaze. It is Beauty who gazes at the male and analyses his body attributes. This reversal turns the Beast into a spectacle. "Then, without a word, he sprang from the room and she saw, with an indescribable shock,

he went on all fours" (p. 47). It seems that Carter is introducing the openness of gender roles and the possibility of their flexibility. Such a parodic inversion of roles has also imbued the masochistic element in male-female relationship present in "The courtship of Mr Lyon". The overt display of male sexuality, an almost jubilant offering up of the self, exhibited in the prostration of the Beast with his head in her lap and the kissing of her hand (p. 47) reveals the de-mystification of sexuality and transgression of patriarchal values (Siegel, 1991:10). A tongue in the cheek attitude is also perceived in Beauty's display of female sadomasochism. "When she saw the great paws lying on the arm of his chair, she thought: they are the death of any tender herbivore. And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial" (p. 45). This heavily intertextualized passage of the "female position" (Bono and Kemp, 1991, p. 90) actually denotes the elimination of tyranny, the subjectivity of the female, an aversion towards sadomasochistic exhibitionism and fearlessness of sexuality.

In all Carter's stories dealing with animals metamorphosis is a constant. Through magical metamorphosis as a product of sexual desire and initiative, Carter wants to symbolize the possibility of release of the female from conventional and stereotyped modes. The return of Beauty to the lion's home may be simply interpreted either as sheer female subjection, or as "a sense of obligation [to her father]" (p. 45), or even as a humble prostration to the male benefactor in financial and sexual matters. Once more irony imbues Beauty's actions. The transformation words "If you'll have me, I'll never leave you" (p. 51) are sexually and actively, albeit ironically, coded. On the other hand, the text's immediate vocabulary (lips, face, pelt and flesh) highly connotes the female acceptance of sexuality and its validity, as Carter herself explained in *The sadeian woman*. "The pleasures of the flesh are vulgar and unrefined, even with an element of beastliness about them, although flesh tints have the sumptuous succulence of peaches because flesh plus skin equals sensuality. But if flesh plus skin equals sensuality, then flesh minus skin equals meat" (Carter, 1979, p.137-138). In choosing the Beast Beauty is actively choosing the dangerous, the unexplored, the perverse and the unusual. When the lion turns into Mr Lyon at the touch of the female, the old gender roles have exploded, female sexuality does not signify passivity anymore and femininity can face masculinity as an equal.

Approaching sensuality

The autodiegetic narrator of "The Tiger's Bride" also posits the passage of an unnamed girl from the

patriarchy of a profligate father to that of The Beast represented by the Tiger. What happens to the victimized girl of the gambling father so that at the end of the narrative she feels she is at liberty for the first time in her life? The answer Carter gives through the narrative focusses on similar but deeper items in feminism. Firstly, patriarchy is experienced more harshly: as first person narrator the girl feels more poignantly she is property, subjected to the whims of the male, be he called father, grand seigneur, Milord or La Bestia. Her sketching of the male environment from the gambling room (p. 52) to the "half-derelict façades" of the Beast's palace and its "bereft landscape" (p. 62) culminates in its being tagged a "spurious Eden" (p. 57). The power of the Beast lies in his mystification represented by the seclusion of his home and the hiding of his physical features: "he wears a mask with a man's face painted most beautifully on it ... Oh yes, a beautiful face; but one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human" (p. 53). Even though this post-lapsarian situation in its physical and human embodiment is haunting, the girl utilizes irony to subvert this "vast man-trap" (p. 57). Not only is she fully conscious of how she "had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand" (p. 63) and calls her father's gambling game "folly" (p. 52), but she ridicules his alleged devotion to her. "My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards" (p. 54). Moreover, the Tiger's masculine strength and authority vanish into thin air with the girl's statement that "he is a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair" (p. 53).

Carter builds the surface structure of an innocent virgin girl and paradoxically imbues it with desire and autonomy. From the very beginning of her conscious life the daughter is aware of the prettiness of her rosy-cheeked face, her curls and her body. Even the old hag exclaims "Che bella!" (p. 52). She is therefore aware of the Beast's gaze coming from "the still mask that concealed all the features of the beast but for the yellow eyes that strayed, now and then, from his unfurled hand towards myself" (p. 52). The detailed description that the girl gives of The Beast (p. 53) proves that, reciprocally, the female gaze is an element to be taken into account and does not permit itself to be passive. When the Tiger proposes the single condition of seeing "the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress" (p. 58), the "raucous guffaw" of the girl is actually a "clamour of mirth", not reducible to a symbol of modesty but the subtle "negation" of something actually desired. The role-inversion of the gaze and its reactions may be seen in the context of the tale's climax when the Tiger took off his clothings and stood there naked for the young girl to gaze at. Besides showing that culturally adopted

masculine and feminine roles are flexible, male authority and menace are zeroed when the young girl ironically remarks: "I therefore, shivering, now unfastened my jacket, to show him I would do him no harm" (p. 64). If Carter is thus hammering on a world of equal opportunities, as it seems she does, the reciprocity of the gaze and nakedness both in the wilderness and in the Beast's house is a reaction to the stereotyped vision of the exclusively male gaze. Equality and reciprocity are a reaction against phallocentrism that has differentiated the female all her life. "I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason" (p. 63). Some authors such as Andrea Dworkin, Susanne Kappeler and Patricia Duncker claim that the stripping of the girl's skin at the end of the short story amounts to "the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography" in the latter's words. If one understands the Tiger as the projection of the feminine libido, the last paragraph does not boil down to pornography but to women's appropriation of autonomous desire proper to them, the very thing that has been suppressed by patriarchy.

Cixous's metaphor of the "coded mannequin" (Marks and Coutivron, 1980, p. 97) or the robotic state to which the female is reduced by a process of psychic repression is overcome in Carter's text by a new vision of the female. The girl is aware that in the realm of patriarchy the clockwork doll given to her by the valet has been and still is the simulacrum of the female. "This clockwork twin of mine" (p. 60) states the girl; " 'Nothing human lives here', said the valet" (p. 59) and the narrator describes the soubrette as "a marvellous machine, the most delicate balanced system of cords and pulleys in the world" (p. 60). Besides being fully conscious of the metaphor, when the mutual gaze occurs and the subjectivity of the female is enhanced, the girl sheds off the mannequin and the true woman is restored. "My maid, whose face was not longer the spit of my own, continued bonnily to beam. I will dress her in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter" (p. 65). With alienation set aside, Carter seems to have envisioned the utopia of the female's limitless freedom and autonomy.

In the original fairy-tale the Tiger and the bride's marriage chamber resounds with male masochism and female sadomasochism. Carter's story seems to end in marriage but not in freedom. Once more an intertextually encoded text and a keen irony subvert this patriarchal ideology and create a different world vision. The filth, nervousness and presumed anger of the Beast, an exhibitionist showing his fear in losing the girl and overtly displaying his fondness,

are counteracted by the narrator's parody: the thought of being devoured is dealt with as nursery fears (p. 67); the Beast's nervous pacing around his room is subverted by the fact that "he was far more frightened of me than I was of him"; his snuffing of the air to "smell [the girl's] fear" boils down to nothing because the girl was fearless. Consequently, the radical transformation which Carter tries to convey is a change of mentality symbolized by the crushing down of the house. Patriarchy is outrun by the girl's utopia of the acceptance of sensuality which amounts to "the peaceful kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction" (p. 67).

Humour, comedy, freedom

If in the previous two short stories Carter wants to identify the beast with female sensuality which has been continuously inscribed to be a woman-gobbler, in "Puss-in-Boots" the insistence seems to be on a new awareness of the female with its strength and power. If "The courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's bride" are constructed to defeat patriarchy which has always insisted on the convenience of women in suppressing their desires and forcing them to curb their sensuality, the present *commedia dell'arte* marks the triumph of sensuality and the recovery of female prerogatives. "Puss-in-Boots" has the same elements analysed above: patriarchy represented by the impotent husband and the old governess; the transcendence of the lady's beauty; the physical confinement and the sexual containment of the lady, the poor but lecherous officer's masochism, the reciprocal gaze. The tale is told by the elegant Puss who in his bragging and artful nature analyses human love and desire. The sexual transgressions of the lovers and the elimination of female objectification produce the "fragrant air ... [and a] vernal hint of spring" (p. 82) or rather, a pre-lapsarian type of relationship between the sexes.

The charge of pornography, however, hovers over Carter's version. As in many features of the stories in this collection, it "verges dangerously close to pornography" (Palmer, 1987, p. 190) and to "obscenity in the classic, Aristophanean sense" (Kendrick, 1993, p.71) in which violence in the sex scenes is very explicit. Puss narrates the first meeting of the lovers which he himself has prepared.

Then their strange trance breaks; that sentimental hawering done, I never saw two fall to it with such appetite. As if the whirlwind got into their fingers, they strip each other bare in a twinkling and she falls back on the bed, shows him the target, he displays the dart, scores an instant bullseye. Bravo! Never can that old bed have shook with such a storm before. ... [With my shouts I] drown the extravagant screeches that break forth from that

(who would have suspected?) more passionate young woman as she comes off in fine style. (Full marks, Master.) (p. 78).

The second meeting occurs on the death of the old husband and near the bed to where the corpse has just been removed:

As soon as they are left alone, no trifling this time; they're at it, hammer and tongs, down on the carpet since the bed is occupé. Up and down, up and down, his arse; in and out, in and out, her legs. Then she heaves him up and throws him on his back, her turn at the grind now, and you'd think she'll never stop (p. 82).

These scenes are not set up for the exclusive male gaze and they do not simply represent the objectification of the woman by the male desire. It seems that they do not fit in definition of pornography as "the sexual spectacle, its reproduction or its representation, the discourse on sexuality and not sexuality" (Hans and Lapouge, 1979, p. 24). Discarding both what she wrote on an autobiographical stance about her "colonialization of the mind" (Carter, 1983, p. 71) and the somewhat unconvincing arguments on masochism and the liberation of women in *The sadeian woman*, the above sex scenes are a positive reaction to the notions of female castration she gives in the same theoretical book. If "female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of man's attitude towards women ... that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures" (Carter, 1979, p. 23), then the satisfaction of desire of the lady and her active participation in it are actually signs of freedom. Needless to say, the scenes are meant to be comic and exhilarating in which reality is celebrated with wonder, but they produce the serious objective of women's emancipation. It seems that this variety of "pornography" is introduced to criticize male-centered ideology (the containment by the husband and the hag) which has actually caused it. The fact that Puss distinguishes his master's previous sexual adventures (divorce between sexuality and interpersonal love characteristic of a male-dominated world) from the present communicative love introduces a non-phallic strategy characterised by non-domination and equality.

The utopian manifestation of the above is present in the counterpoint of Puss-in-Boots and Tabs (the female cat and helper of the narrator Puss). While the narrative shows the artful schemes and ingenious devices of Puss and Tabs so that the husband and the hag might be removed and the Master and the young lady could achieve their suppressed desire, throughout the story the love encounter of the animals is represented with gusto in all its natural state and without any hindrances whatsoever. The representations of sexuality between Puss and Tabs

are a matter of fact business without much ado and without the psychological interferences that patriarchy has developed in humans. "Grasping the slack of her neck firmly between my teeth, I gave her the customary tribute of a few firm thrusts of my striped loins" (p. 73). The hilarious but direct sexual language used by Puss is continuously repudiated by the young man, making transparent the inhibition of human desire and denouncing his cowardice to manifest it. " 'Convince her her orifice will be your salvation and she's yours'. 'When I want your advice, Puss, I'll ask for it,' he says, all at once hoity-toity" (p. 74). Puss's comments on the hesitant moment at the first instances of the lovers' meeting are very significant either in their contrastiveness or about the havoc humans produce in their conscious expression. "Accustomed as I am to the splendid, feline nakedness of my kind, that offers no concealment of that soul made manifest in the flesh of the lovers, I am always a little moved by the poignant reticence with which humanity shyly hesitates to divest itself of its clutter of concealing rags in the presence of desire" (p. 78). Puss concludes that love in its pristine condition surpasses the more sophisticated but heavily conditioned human interrelation system. "The old buffoon briskly bundled in the coffin and buried; Master comes into a great fortune and Missus rounding out already ... But my Tabs beat her to it, since cats don't take much time about engendering" (p. 83). Humorously Puss suggests the end of containment, the facing of sensuality by the female and a simple communication system between humans.

Conclusion

In her essay "Notes from the front line", Angela Carter shows the critic the motives of her fictional analyses. "Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends on new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (Carter, 1983, 69). By means of the time-battered and problem-ridden fairy-tales Carter has tried to denounce patriarchy and its containment ideology. She may not have succeeded entirely owing to the ambiguity of the die-hard binary system and the ever-present female victim. On the other hand, the introduction of the reciprocity of the gaze, equal sexual relationship and appreciation of female desire produces a world vision, if not fully woman-centered, at least, of poise and balance. If the formula of beast equals female sensuality is correct, then Carter has struck on the much debated elements in feminist trends. Patriarchy has created such conditionings on the female that the free

expression of sensuality and voice became impossible and differentiated her from the male in her most inherent rights. Through Carter's fiction and especially through her rewriting of the old fairy-tales, the reader in feminist thought succeeds in visualizing the fearless approach of the female towards sensuality, her recovery of subjectivity and a new empowerment. In spite of the ambiguous existence of violence and sex in all her fiction, Carter's all-embracing relish "offers a chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 34).

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