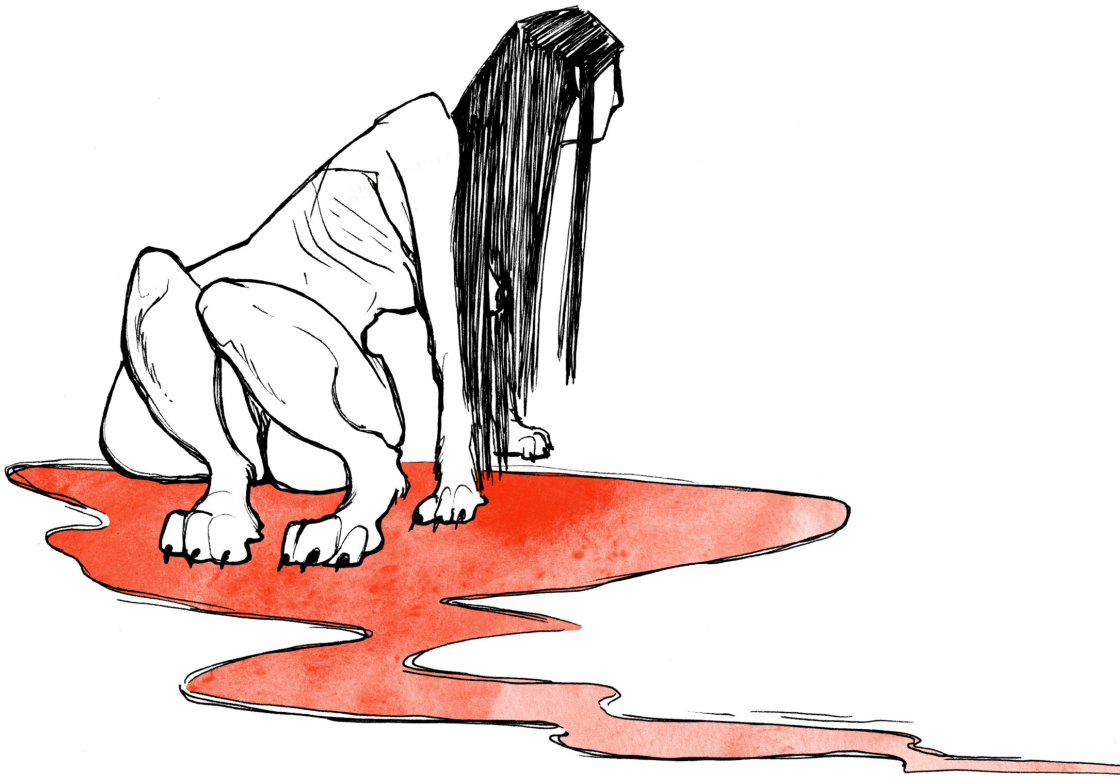


# BODIES THAT BLEED

Metamorphosis in Angela Carter's Fairy Tales

Anna Pasolini





di/segni





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**Metamorphosis in Angela Carter's Fairy Tales**

**Anna Pasolini**

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Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere

Facoltà di Studi Umanistici

Università degli Studi di Milano

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*I desire, therefore I exist.*  
(A. Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, 1972)



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## INTRODUCTION

After more than thirty years since its first publication, Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) still appeals to contemporary audiences, and a number of critical works have celebrated, criticized, analysed, contextualised and re-contextualised this astonishing and controversial collection of short stories.

This study sets out to re-signify and develop new readings of the poetics and the politics of the collection through the notion of metamorphosis, which is at once deemed to inform Carter's fiction with images and motifs linked to transformation, and recognised as an important aspect of her non-fictional writings. In Carter's work change becomes indeed the kernel of reflections as well as a fundamental part of the action required to improve social relations, develop new forms of agency for women, and reduce the power imbalance between the sexes. Metamorphosis, that is, is the primary object of representation in Carter's poetics and the main object of reflection in her politics. However, as we shall see, poetics and politics can never be really separated when dealing with Carter, therefore analysing the topic in its tangled fictional expressions also becomes an effective way of discussing its outcomes in terms of social action and engagement.

The fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber* are particularly significant to this extent, because they powerfully fictionalise the theoretical stances expressed in the critical essay *The Sadeian Woman* (which was written before, but published in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*, 1959) and because they introduce experiments with metamorphic themes, which will be expanded upon in Carter's following work. More specifically, in *The Bloody Chamber* Carter exploits the notion of – and the figurations related to – metamorphosis to fashion a new idea of change as denial of any stereotypically stable meanings. In so doing, she also moves away from contemporary feminist assumptions about a new myth of femininity, which seemed to seek

the same stability and universality of the patriarchal ideal defined in negative terms – as *other* to the masculine, as something that lacks what its opposite stands for. Starting from their representation in *The Bloody Chamber*, metamorphosis and transformations become the tools for women to build a new myth of femininity, which is grounded first and foremost in the body and celebrates flux and instability, moving forward/towards rather than achieving a definite identity profile, advocates uniqueness, independence and agency for each woman – and man – through emphasising and empowering the potential of unbridled desire in any form. Last, but not least, in her powerful use of metamorphic images and textual strategies Carter can be said to forerun the idea of gender performativity (Butler 1990).

Metamorphosis becomes the key concept through which reflections on desire, sexuality, identity, role positions, power-knowledge relations, storytelling and the materialization of the body are developed by Carter – and can be revitalised and re-signified while investigating her texts. It can be considered as a guiding principle for the analysis of the collection as a whole because it pervades the content and meanings of the tales, is a metaphor for alternative developments of female identity, and informs their structure and representation. As the heroines' bodies and identities experience physical, social or psychological change, the borders between the genres are blurred and generic narrative conventions are bent and rearranged, change itself becomes the cornerstone of the texts both in terms of content and of style. The transformations devised by Carter address first and foremost the need to rethink human experience altogether, especially as regards – heterosexual – relationships and power distribution between the sexes. They call attention to the fact that from the second half of the Twentieth century, ongoing transformation has become an essential dimension of human life, a process which characterises people's everyday lives, their identities, but above all their bodies (which undergo a series of transformations through time as a result of biological evolution, and of psychological and relational changes, unavoidably leaving some – readable and mappable – traces).

When Carter writes *The Bloody Chamber*, it is the end of the Seventies, a time when the slow but progressive empowerment of women's conditions and positions within society seemed to have emphasised the old urge to keep their bodies and the free expression of sexual desire under control. New, subtle devices refashioned those myths and ideals that virtually grant identification and recognition to women, but actually are cunningly subversive to a subordinating logic, often disguised behind the impression of being a free and/or empowering choice. Carter exploits the powerful potential of metamorphosis – as a concept, a topic, a structuring and guiding principle, and as a proposed model – in order to expose, challenge, design strategies of resistance to, and eventually overthrow, such myths and discourses. From a generic point of view, the traditional structures and purposes of fairy

tales, that is representing the resolution of a conflict, teaching how to move away from that which disturbs harmony and (re-) establishing a final equilibrium which mirrors stable, desirable and normalized social norms, are replaced by Carter with the very idea of embracing and performing – never-ending – change. Restyling generic conventions in turn influences the experiences of the characters, that is the identity journeys they are allowed to set out on and their aftermaths, because narrativisation is what enables them to be signified, made sense of and accounted for through language. In this respect, the tales seem to suggest that only through a continuous effort of analysing, understanding, and then questioning and changing their social definitions and locations, and most importantly by devising creative narratives to account for them, can women be active masters of their destiny. The body is the site where change becomes visible, so it can be considered both the surface of inscription of the transformations portrayed on a textual level and conceptualised in terms of identity politics, and the means through which change can actually be performed. Carter’s literary work turns the body into «writing», that is marks it with the signs which narrativise identity by inscribing it onto and making it readable from the body surface itself (see Brooks 1993).

Ultimately, the purpose of this study is an analysis of the different kinds of metamorphosis represented in *The Bloody Chamber*, which endeavours to expose without attempting to resolve the tensions and contradictions characterising either the individual tales or the collection as a whole. Contradictions, flux, and polysemy are praised as keywords to understand the subversive potential of Carter’s fairy tales, in which change, malleability and instability of meanings and identity make their reinterpretations and re-appropriations after almost forty years not simply possible, but still productive.

The first section, “Sexual-textual politics”, sets the framework of the analysis in terms of generic conventions and gender politics, that is the first two dimensions of metamorphosis that are investigated in Carter’s fairy tales. In this first part, the central topics in the poetics and sexual politics of *The Bloody Chamber* are identified and a selection of critical approaches to the analysis of the stories are put forward, which hinge on transformative images to advocate for a renewed understanding and practice of women’s identity construction and of the relationships between the sexes.

Part two “Staging metamorphosing bodies to re-signify the body” explores the ways in which metamorphosis is made visible and physically enacted, or better, *enfleshed*, in the fairy tales. The weight of female metamorphosing bodies and the potential of change they embody is of paramount importance in Carter’s stories, for it symbolically draws on the disrupting representation of female sexualities and identities and materialises the cre-

ative use and blend of generic conventions. Although the representation of hybrid, subversive, grotesque and transforming bodies has been extensively investigated in Carter's novels, surprisingly enough the topic has not been examined in depth in her fairy tales, where attention has mainly been drawn to issues as the development of female identities and sexualities or unconventional economies of desire without focusing on how they are actualised and given shape on the bodies. In trying to fill this gap, I turn to the theoretical work of feminist philosophers such as Grosz (1995), Butler (1993, 1999) and Braidotti (2002) who, like Carter, understood the body as a porous surface, a site of power struggles and a cultural construct always historically and contextually signified, and at the same time as the locus where change is enacted and the transformation of the existing – oppressive – order is made possible.

The bodies represented by Carter are *lived bodies*, signified in the process of changing, of being appropriated by woman in her own ways, inscribed with new, but always provisional meanings, to emphasise, once more, that change and transformation themselves are not only fundamental dimensions of life, but also – and most importantly – the features that women must embrace and master in order to finally enjoy new forms of agency and empowerment<sup>1</sup>.

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1 This research exclusively deals with the fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber* for a number of reasons. Even though some later tales by Carter deal with similar topics – most notably metamorphosis – or share the same narrative strategies, the choice of focusing primarily on *The Bloody Chamber* is due to the analytical angle and critical tools opted for, which draw on *The Sadeian Woman* as well as the work of some contemporary feminist scholars. The need to select and narrow the scope of the investigation, then, also led to the choice of excluding other related themes such as motherhood, as well as the work of some contemporary feminist authors who write (and re-write) fairy tales with a political agenda. Needless to say, all these ideas could be developed in future research.



# PART I

## SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS

*Speculative fiction really means that [writing about ideas], the fiction of speculation, the fiction of asking “what if”. It’s a system of continuing inquiry. In a way all fiction starts off with “what if”, but some “what ifs” are more specific.*

(Carter in Katsavos & Carter 1994: 13-14)

*You write from your own history [...] you have to bear it in mind when you are writing, you have to keep on defining the ground on which you’re standing, because you are in fact setting yourself in opposition to the generality*

(Carter in Haffenden 1985: 79)



## I.

### GENERIC AND TEXTUAL METAMORPHOSIS: CARTER'S POSTMODERN EXPERIMENTS

#### I.I. SEXUAL AND TEXTUAL POLITICS BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND LITERARY TRADITION

Carter's writings have been either praised or despised in the light of her alleged feminist agenda, of her appropriation and subversion of different generic conventions in order to expose and overthrow patriarchal control over social structures, power relations and the circulation of knowledge – or, most notably, her failure to do so – of her provocative claims and her bewildering style. Even if her subversive, parodic, sometimes mocking intentions are undeniable, on no account must Carter's work be reduced to a coherent political agenda, to a supposed message she wants to communicate or to a set of meanings she wants to convey, which might be seen to inform her literary production and could therefore be used to interpret it. Rather, Carter's fairy tales are first and foremost literary texts, and as such require an analysis which accounts for their dialogue with other literary texts belonging to the same as well as to different genres, whose goal is also that of finding out the reasons why traditionally established generic models are transformed. As to Carter's political agenda, there certainly is one, or rather there are more, which have evolved over the years, and which she discusses in her non-fictional writings. *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), for instance, is a controversial essay that was published in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*, and that as different critics point out (Wisker 1997; Day 1998; Sage 2007; Atwood 2007) undeniably sets forth what is represented in fictional terms in the fairy tales. «Do I situate myself politically as a writer?» (Carter 1997: 37) is the question Carter asks to herself in “Notes from the Front

Line”, whose answer is unsurprisingly «Well, yes; of course» (*Ibidem*). Interestingly she also admits to be a feminist writer, «because I’m a feminist in everything else and one cannot compartmentalise these things in one’s life» (*Ibidem*). However, trying to retrace the articulation of a coherent feminist programme in her work would be useless if not forcing the point. What one can find throughout Carter’s writings is a deep commitment to materialism and historicism, which for her means being aware of one’s sexual and socio-cultural position and overtly exposing it as the standpoint from which one speaks. Therefore, far from being attached to a set of feminist world-views in particular, what Carter is interested in is questioning her «reality as a woman», trying to investigate and disclose the processes through which the «social fictions that regulate our lives», first of all that of femininity, are created «by means outside [our] control». This goes hand in hand with *historicism*, which is a fundamental dimension of Carter’s politics both under an individual and a collective perspective. According to Carter, indeed, individual political consciousness and attitudes are forged by one’s own experiences, first and foremost by the «practice» of sexuality (Carter 1997: 39). These attitudes, nevertheless, are produced as well as represented by and enacted in social, collective practices, which fashion «what constitutes material reality» (38). Most notably, understanding sexuality as a historicised act, or series of acts, implies that it is subject to change over time, that it is an inherently transformative performance, whose core feature is instability and whose nature entails negotiation over multiple additional meanings<sup>2</sup>. When discussing the process through which patriarchal social arrangements ended up stabilising and naturalising female role positions in the Western world, Carter asserts «Our flesh arrives to us out of history» (Carter 1979b: 9), implying that women’s subject positions in specific epochs depend on the power relations which characterize those historical moments, on the tension between the normative and creative aspects of power, on the space which is left for rebellion or subversion, and thus on the agency – and the transformative potential – which is accorded to the unprivileged. Her statement reveals that it is necessary to be aware of the ways in which power imbalances and their underlying sexual politics constrain and control people by normalizing and naturalizing appropriate behaviours – or conversely blame, punish and isolate disturbing ones – and at the same time suggests that change is possible, as history is made and written by people (3)<sup>3</sup>.

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2 Incidentally, this is also one of the many contacts which can be established between the work of Carter and Judith Butler’s notion of performativity (Butler 1990, 1993). That is to say, with her emphasis on sexuality’s historicity, Carter seems to uncover performativity’s attempts to conceal its historical dimension (Butler 1993:12) and to pass as a natural, universal bodily condition.

3 As is perhaps already clear, Carter’s non-fictional writings are influenced by the early work of Michel Foucault, whom she quotes at the very beginning of *The Sadeian Woman* (1979b: 3) and mentions among the critical references. For more about the influence of Foucault’s work on Carter’s, see Day 1998 and Sage 2007.

From Carter's point of view, as it surfaces from a close reading of the fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber*, the very possibility of change lays precisely in the emphasis on the situatedness of the characters as well as of the writer: «you write from your own history [...] you have to bear it in mind when you are writing, you have to keep on defining the ground on which you're standing, because you are in fact setting yourself up in opposition to the generality» (Haffenden 1985: 93). In other words, being aware of one's own position within the network of relationships founded on a patriarchal, oppressive model, of the historical and material position which shaped and continues to shape one's own existence is a precondition to be able to describe it, and subsequently to change it. Rather than imparting truths, or conveying stabilised meanings, Carter's purpose in writing fiction is helping explain experience and «making the world comprehensible» (79), in order to present and represent ways to improve or radically reshape it. It follows that the fairy tales do not predicate how ideal role positions for women and performances of femininity should be, but show possible alternatives to those which are already provided by representing fictional examples of transformations and by creatively transforming already existent fictional models, i. e. genres, modes, figurations. In this sense, sexual and textual politics overlap in Carter's tales, where the turmoil represented through often disturbing, rebel, or unconventional behaviours of the heroines mirrors the way themes, motifs and narrative strategies belonging to different textual genres are mingled and intertwined.

My analysis regards *The Bloody Chamber* primarily as a work of art, a text whose literary qualities must on no accounts be considered subservient to a – feminist – political agenda, strong and evident as Carter's political commitment could appear to be. That being the case, rather than identifying the flaws and contradictions emerging from the tales, incoherence and instability are praised as resources for challenging and changing established discourses and role positions designed for women within society.

Carter is aware that literary works cannot avoid referring to previous works, which are chained together in an intertextual web of references, thus her well-known statement about her writing being a matter of «putting new wine in old bottles» (Carter 1997: 37). However, this claim also paradoxically means that Carter wants to communicate something new and considers herself capable of doing so. That is to say, she is aware of the resources offered by intertextuality, but also of the fact that texts are not merely «about texts» – i.e. there must be a «first book» about which the other books are (Carter, Katsavos 1994: 14). In *The Bloody Chamber* Carter plays with fairy tale's generic conventions, plots and narrative strategies by complying with them enough to make fairy tales recognizable as such, but at the same time she also disrupts them for political – *demythologising* – purposes: she transforms them. Yet, the narrative strategies she politically and intertextually re-

sorts to and her peculiar style, besides being the vehicle for change, are also to be interpreted as evidence of an authorial voice surfacing throughout the stories, a voice which speaks from a precise historical, social and gendered perspective, just as the female protagonists-narrators of the fairy tales do. The insistence on Carter's authorial voice is inscribed in the representation of metamorphosis on a political level: it promotes the possibility of actual changes in women's agency. These changes, Carter seems to suggest, must be grounded in the material reality of women, of which they must be aware. The deconstructionist claims of the death of the subject do not seem to make sense in the case of a female writer who proclaims the need to demythologize and expose the structures of oppression and their narratives, who plays with the literary canon to expose, parody and mock its most prestigious texts. «One cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted control over» (Braidotti 2002: 82); one must first be aware and take control of her subject position in order to be able to change it. In Carter's material perspective, therefore, who speaks, where and when does matter (Alterves 1994: 18), even if, of course, the literary texts will be able to speak for themselves, to be interpreted in different ways and to signify something different to readers over time and in disparate cultural contexts.

Closely interrelated with this topic is Carter's stance on myths. Her pronouncement «I'm in the demythologising business», is grounded in the firm belief that «all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human experience». Carter interprets myths as «consolatory nonsense[s]» (Carter 1979b: 6), that is false universals where women are encouraged to find the reasons for their underprivileged position within society by identifying with mythical models, which would embody the most desirable features of femininity. According to Carter, failing to acknowledge that these supposedly universal models are in actual fact false and misleading makes women complicit in their submission, as they prefer to «dull the pain» of their condition by looking for ideal images which legitimise and to a certain extent universalise submission and voicelessness as the natural destiny for all women. Finding «emotional satisfaction» in «the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin», in that of «the healing, reconciling mother», or even in worshipping a «mother goddess» (*Ibidem*) means indeed choosing the shortcut of identifying with taken for granted patriarchal discourses instead of engaging in investigating one's own material reality in order to be able to question and to change it. Once again, then, changing the way in which one looks at reality and interprets past experience and current behaviours proves to be the core dimension of Carter's commitment to the enterprise of making women aware of their subordination as well as their potential for improving their position. Carter's «demythologising business», then, can be seen as a «transformative commitment», that is commitment to transforming one's (especially women's) understanding of

social roles and relation to be able to materially transform them. The new, *transformed* myths offered by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* are no longer to be meant in their traditional sense of stabilising abstractions, but rather as a historicised set of meanings, which are subject to – indeed must bring about – change.

Besides their historically locatable origin and their inherently unstable character and transformative potential, all the new myths of *The Bloody Chamber* play intertextually with the literary as well as folkloric tradition and intratextually relate with each other thanks to the omnipresent, underlying idea of metamorphosis. Instead of emphasising the starting point or the product of the transformation, or pointing out the achievements of the protagonists who have been able to solve a problematic situation, Carter's tales seem to associate the ongoing process of turning into something else, in whatsoever shape, with the most important outcome of their adventures. In this way the new myths offered to women become examples of a – more often than not disturbing – metamorphosis of some kind. It is worth noting that metamorphosis as it is represented by Carter does not devise role models to be embraced as sources of consolation, but on the contrary it sets up problematic examples to be put into question, since exposing the mechanisms of transformation means crossing boundaries, destabilising borderlines, unveiling the fluidity and instability of the categories and frameworks through which the world is made sense of (Walker Bynum 2001: 31).

#### 1.2. IN-BETWEEN COMPLICITY AND REBELLION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF CARTER'S FAIRY TALES

The metamorphosis and redefinition of the fairy tale as a narrative genre which result from Carter's re-writing of traditional fairy tales foregrounds the productive interaction between poetics and politics, textual and sexual politics in *The Bloody Chamber*. The metamorphosis of female identity and of gendered role positions and social relationships represented in the tales is indeed strongly connected with its textual rendition. Storytelling and identity development are mutually productive, and Carter's transformative texts embody the changes which are taking place in the psychosocial<sup>4</sup> development of the characters. Furthermore, the protagonists of some tales are given the opportunity of accounting for themselves by narrating their

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4 The term 'psychosocial' is purposely used here to highlight two intertwined fundamental features of Carter's characters. On the one hand, it underscores that not only is their development shaped by the relationships and discourses which rule their experiences and interactions, but they are also given psychological depth. On the other hand, their psychological characterisation and its metamorphosis emphasise Carter's significant amendment of the generic conventions of the fairy tales. In *The Bloody Chamber*, indeed, the traditional types are often replaced by individuals with a rounded and constantly problematized personality.

own stories, or by being the focalizers of the events in the context of a third person narration.

Stating that Carter's fairy tales perform a social function implies endorsing the view that the literary fairy tale is the product of an intertextual interaction between folk tales and previous literary versions. In addition, establishing a dialogue between the oral and literary tradition of the fairy story is one of the hallmarks which allows one to label the short stories collected in *The Bloody Chamber* 'fairy tales' despite the number of features which distance them from the genre.

Jack Zipes has devoted his scholarly work to researching and advocating for the need to trace the origins of the fairy tale as a genre in the oral tradition, which the literary one has not yet ceased to refer back to and mingle with:

The literary origins of all our canonical fairy tales in the West mark the culmination of an oral tradition in history but certainly not its end. As historical culmination, the literary fairy tale regulates an oral folk tale thematically and stylistically, possesses it, passes it off and on as its own, and thus does violence to it. Therefore, it is at the intersection of the oral with the literary that we can begin to trace the cultural significance of a fairy tale. (Zipes 1993: 7)

Bacchilega<sup>5</sup> basically agrees with Zipes' stance when she asserts:

The 'classic' fairy tale is a literary appropriation of the older folk tale, an appropriation which nevertheless continues to exhibit and reproduce some folkloric features. As a 'borderline' or transitional genre, it bears the traces of orality, folkloric tradition, and sociocultural performance [...]. And conversely, even when it claims to be folklore, the fairy tale is shaped by literary traditions with different social uses and users. (Bacchilega 1997: 3)

The stories of *The Bloody Chamber* are located exactly on the threshold where the oral and the literary tradition are hinged. Deciding to write fairy tales which refer back to both the folk and the literary versions seems to be the culmination of the process started by Carter when she was translating Perrault's fairy tales and felt the need to bring the texts back to «the simplicity and directness of the folk tale» (Carter 2008: 76)<sup>6</sup>.

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5 Besides her work being a major reference throughout my research on fairy tales, this section in particular is indebted to Bacchilega's insights. In addition to carrying out an apt and interesting analysis of postmodern fairy tales, Bacchilega's critical investigation of Carter's stories is groundbreaking also with regard to the exploration of the political implications of the writer's narrative choices.

6 The folkloric elements, indeed, had been censored by a writer whose intended audience



In the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) Carter endorses the folkloric origins of fairy tales while also giving a definition of the genre:

The term 'fairy tale' is a figure of speech and we use it loosely, to describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth – stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor. (Carter 1990: ix)

Even though her versions owe a lot to the popular tradition, they can be unmistakably considered literary texts: «writing them down [...] both preserves, and also inexorably changes, these stories» (ix-x). Besides being tailored to suit a particular audience and lose their original democracy, the literary versions are to be framed in the literary creativity of a writer who reworks their ingredients in a personal way – «This is how *I* make potato soup», as Carter writes of herself (*Ibidem*). She appropriates, plays with, disrupts and puts into question fairy tales' depiction of relationships between men and women which sustain «fertility and continuance» (Carter 1990: xviii). Turning conventions against themselves as she always does – both on a textual and on a political level – Carter exploits the normative functions of these tales but instead of enforcing «the ties that bind people together» (*Ibidem*), represents ways of questioning them, and teases their sub-text «to isolate their elements for cruelly lucid contemplation» (Sage 2001: 68)<sup>7</sup>.

Among the central concerns of the collection are power relations, represented and scrutinised by Carter by exposing their inherent instability and disrupting their naturalisation in traditional fairy tales. The protagonists' struggles against oppressive power arrangements also emphasise that in traditional folk and fairy tales – as in actual life – striving for independence does not necessarily mean subverting established social discourses, but sometimes only leads to uphold current power structures (Bacchilega 1997: 6). As a matter of fact, even when change is realised in the tales, social re-

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was the French Court of Louis XIV. Far from despising Perrault for the changes he made in moralising and mitigating the original content of folkloric versions, Carter rather shows the sharp awareness that «Each century tends to create or re-create fairy tales after its own taste» (Carter 2008: 76) and accordingly decides to show in hers what she deems to be the required changes in values and power structures – obviously after *her own* taste.

<sup>7</sup> The strong, permeable links between folk tales as fictions of the poor and their literary remoulding can be easily detected through a close reading of the fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber*, particularly those which have a clearer and traceable folk origin, such as “Little Red Riding Hood”. All the three stories explicitly referring to this folk tale contain descriptions of the rural settings and superstitions, which reproduce the atmosphere of the places where different versions of the cautionary tale were most probably told and which do not usually find place in the most famous literary adaptations.

lations are not necessarily altered (Zipes 2002: 28). The reason why Carter represents «the alliance» and not simply the conflict within power relations is to be found, once again, in her intention to ground her fictional writing in the materiality of human experience, where the variety of alternatives to the solution of conflicts aimed at improving one's social conditions is rich and unpredictable. Moreover, it is rooted in her polemical criticism of traditional fairy tales sustaining patriarchal gender politics and the naturalisation of women's subservience and passivity, which is intertextually evoked in order to be criticised and possibly overthrown.

Carter's fairy tales can be deemed to perform a political function first and foremost because they are a response to the urge to investigate and renegotiate power arrangements and established social discourses involving women in a specific historical moment – the second half of the Twentieth Century. The transformations Carter represents in *The Bloody Chamber* manage to give her stories emancipatory developments and – albeit open – endings because of the changes she introduces in their generic conventions, for

Narrative genres clearly do inscribe ideologies (though that can never fix the readings), but later re-writings that take the genre and adapt it will not necessarily encode the same ideological assumptions [...] when the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology [...] then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions. (Makinen 1992: 4-5)

A pivotal aspect of the social function of Carter's stories is also the polemical distance they take from the literary canon insofar as it hands down and purports to stabilise naturalised and disciplined behaviours, which sometimes renders the stories escapist and consolatory, therefore of no use besides questionable entertainment. This critical stance allows one to draw further connections between narrative and politics, as Carter's narrative techniques and devices also endorse feminist criticism and promote strategies of resistance against the imposition of patriarchal ideologies – which explains why her fairy tales are so often called 'feminist'<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Notaro (1993) effectively explains the transition of the function of the genre from its literary systematisation which took place in the Eighteenth Century, when fairy tales lost their «original purpose of clarifying social and natural phenomena but became sources of refuge and escape in that they made up for what people could not realize in society» (Zipes in Notaro 1993: 72) to contemporary feminist re-writings. Like some fellow feminist writers (such as Tanith Lee), Carter's fairy tales criticise those literary adaptations which «perpetuate the patriarchal status quo by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate» because «fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our "real" sexual function within patriarchy» (Rowe in Notaro 1993: 73, 92). Most importantly, not only do the tales explicitly question the patriarchal naturalization of a convenient *status quo*, but they also offer alternatives, criticising «current shifts in psychic and

As Carter declares: «My intention was not to do “versions” or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, “adult” fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories [...] and to use it as the beginning for new stories» (Haffenden 1985: 84). In metanarrative fashion, she also describes the collection as «a book of stories *about* fairy stories» (Makinen 1992: 5). Of course, this is an attempt to disavow any easy labelling of her work on the part of the writer, which, however, is not unfounded. What Carter does, indeed, is twisting the original content of folk tales, remoulding their plots and structures, mocking the purposes they took on through their different literary adaptations and manipulations in history, blending them with other narrative genres and adding her personal touch to let the mix amalgamate and get a new flavour altogether. Bacchilega calls Carter's rewritings «magic re-clothing» (1997: 51), which «involves substantive though diverse questioning of both narrative construction and assumptions about gender» (*Ibidem*) not only on the part of the writer, but also on that of the reader, who is «actively» engaged in «a feminist deconstruction» (Makinen 1992: 3).

As a matter of fact, re-writing seems to suit the fairy tale particularly well, as it is «the genre par excellence of iteration (re-telling)» (Crunelle-Vanrigh 2001: 128), which accordingly welcomes the metamorphosis and distortion of its structures. The principle underlying the changes introduced by Carter in her versions does turn some of its conventions utterly upside down, as

Fairy tales are informed by closure, a movement from change to permanence. Their plots move from an initial, pernicious metamorphosis to a stable identity that must and will be reached or recaptured. Carter, however, stubbornly moves the other way round, from stability to instability, undermining the closed binary logic of fairy tale.

[...] The fairy tale moves from the margins to the center, Carter from the center to the margins. (Crunelle-Vanrigh 2001: 128-129, 139)

In the old bottle of the generic conventions of the fairy tale, which perform social functions by being primarily concerned with power structures and struggles, Carter puts new wine, that is she explores topics and strategies of storytelling which do not normally find place in the genre. These strategies have frequently been labelled, too many times unproblematically, 'postmodern'. If postmodernism is to be considered, following Hassan (1993) as a «theory of change» (280), a social as well as artistic phenomenon which encompasses provisional, disjunctive, even contradictory discourses,

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social structures and [...] point[ing] the way toward new possibilities for individual development and social interaction» (Zipes in Notaro 1993: 73).

then Carter's fairy tales fit the paradigm well enough. The analysis of her supposed allegiance to a postmodern aesthetics could then help organize – as systematizing would be too hard, and perhaps useless, a goal – the study of demythologising strategies, intertextual references and play with generic conventions in *The Bloody Chamber*.

In line with Carter's stance on historicity and her claim that her fiction is always grounded in material experience, it is possible to reconcile postmodernism with the constant changeability it entails and historicity, materialism and commitment to feminist politics through the notion of change itself (which the various levels of metamorphosis represented in *The Bloody Chamber* testify to).

According to Bacchilega, «'postmodern' retellings» can be distinguished from other contemporary fairy tales «on the grounds of narrative strategies (doubling as both deconstructive and reconstructive mimicry) and subject representations (self-contradictory versions of the self in performance)» (1997: 140-141). «It is Carter's focus on subjectivity as constructed in social and narrative contexts that makes hers a postmodern approach» (21), together with the enquire of borderlines performed by her fiction and her practicing «writing-as-experience-of-limits» (Hutcheon in Bacchilega 1997: 20). Furthermore, Carter's postmodern rewriting is

twofold, seeking to expose, make visible, the fairy tale's complicity with 'exhausted' narrative and gender ideologies, and, by working from the fairy tales' multiple versions, seeking to expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexplored. (Bacchilega 1997: 50)

The choice of the fairy tale model is evidence of signals Carter's incredulity towards «metanarratives» (or «master narratives») which according to Lyotard characterises the postmodern condition and is expressed by the refusal to «posit any structures [...] – such as art or myth – which [...] would have been consolatory» (Hutcheon 1988: 6). These «attractive» and «illusory» «systems» are countered by Lyotard with smaller, *petit récits*, or particular, localised narratives (Lyotard 1993), precisely what Carter's fairy tales do as opposed to the myths they set out to demythologise.

'Metanarrative' is a term which deserves particular attention within the investigation of Carter's postmodern narrative strategies, for it could be also understood as «narrative about narrative», as Makinen probably does when she points out that Carter's fairy tales are in fact «stories about fairy tales». An expansion of this connotation of metanarrative can be found in the metacommentaries, which surface form a close reading of some stories within *The Bloody Chamber*. The most evident instance of these self-reflexive comments within the stories is perhaps to be found in one of the first

paragraphs of “The Erl-King” (Kramer Linkin 1994: 312): «The woods enclose. You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up [...]», which continues, after a few lines:

the woods enclose and then enclose again, like a System of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me. It is easy to lose yourself in these woods. (Carter 1979a: 85)

Intertextuality, seen after Barthes as a common, inevitable feature of every text, in *The Bloody Chamber* is a powerful narrative device, which takes on a number of embedded meanings and functions. The fairy tale as a genre is intrinsically intertextual, as it is characterised by the accumulation and intertwining of multiple «versions and inversions» (Sage 2001: 69) produced, written and handed down in different socio-historical contexts, thus taking on different meanings and implications. Like intertexts, fairy tales are «“permutation[s] of texts” in which several utterances, taken from other texts [in this particular instance, above all from previous versions of other fairy tales] intersect and neutralize one another» (Kristeva in Allen 2000: 35). In addition, not only do these texts include, appropriate and re-signify traces of other texts, they also «contain within them the ideological structures and struggles expressed in society through discourse», that is the stratification of the «cultural textuality» (36) which is the result of intertextual accumulations. Most notably, intertextuality must not be reduced to simple reference to «“sources” or “influences” stemming from what has traditionally been styled “background” or “context”», as it implies practice and productivity as well, that is the engagement in «on-going ideological struggles» over the different meanings texts never cease to take on (*Ibidem*).

Conscious of the implications of a similar stratification of overlapping but distinguishable meanings over time, which is the product of endless struggles and negotiations, Carter chooses to revise fairy tales further, fully exploiting their intertextual potential and making it even more intricate. The complexity of this postmodern hyper-reflexive operation consists in adding to the fairy tales other generic conventions in order to broaden the scope of their significations, writing fairy tales which comment on previous – oral and literary – versions of the story, and/or linking different tales within the collection in a complex intertextual web of references, whereby the tales are in dialogue with one another. The most subversive intertextual act, however, is perhaps Carter’s choice to set the stories in precise historical moments and in geographically locatable places. In this way the writer is able to comment on and criticise the sets of values and the power structures and relations of dif-

ferent periods, by pointing out with her fictional examples that the imposition of naturalised and disciplined behaviours and norms is merely the result of contextual – therefore provisional – discursive arrangements. Furthermore, the same impression of the temporary and circumstantial character of discursive positions is conveyed, even magnified, by the comparison of different versions of the same tale within the collection<sup>9</sup>.

Even though an all-encompassing and exhaustive analysis of the entangled web of sources to which Carter's fairy tales refer would be necessarily partial and beyond the scope of this work, a couple of examples are provided in order to account for the refined intertextual net cunningly woven by Carter in her metamorphosing and critical intents.

"The Bloody Chamber", the opening story of the collection, turns at least to two main sources: the fairy tale "Blue Beard" by Perrault – and possibly to other revisions of this motif and of that of the «forbidden chamber» (Bacchilega 1997: 121) – and the figure of Sade. The first reference is easily drawn through the plot of the tale, which basically follows Perrault's structure but for the end, where instead of being saved by her brothers, the protagonist is rescued by her mother. Other important variations are to be found in the change of some details where the feminist politics of the text can be pinpointed, such as the female first person narrator, her speculations about her complicity in her dreadful destiny and on the nature of sexual desire, the link between curiosity and the heart-shaped bloodstain the key leaves on her forehead, the description of the heroine's journey towards self-consciousness and the shaping of her female identity. The most outstanding disruption of readers' expectations is to be located in the overt association between the male antagonist of Carter's tale, whose name is eloquently enough «the Marquis», to the literary master of pornography, Sade. Consistent with this reading is the possibility of associating the young bride with Justine, the innocent masochistic victim of countless libertines, who, like the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber" is to some extent implicated in her submission (Notaro 1993: 20). Among the most significant allusions to pornography which can be detected in the story (see Sheets 1991) is the description of the shock the protagonist experiences when she enters her husband's library and finds books interspersed with pornographic illustrations. After setting eyes on a copy of «Huysman's *Là-bas*» and on some books by Eliphaz Levy, the young lady is suddenly confronted with a dreadful truth. Even though at first she does not understand the implications of titles such as «*The Initiation, The Key of Mysteries, The Secret of Pandora's Box*», the young bride cannot avoid to quiver when she looks at the pornographic pictures and reads their unmistakable captions

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9 For example, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride", both of which refer to "Beauty and the Beast", and the three tales which intertextually rework the motif of "Red Riding Hood" in different but interconnected ways: "The Werewolf", "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice".

I had not bargained for this, the girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a slit fig below the great globes of her buttocks on which the knotted tails of the cat were about to descend, while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like the scimitar he held. The picture had a caption: "Reproof of curiosity". [...]  
 I turned the pages [of *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk*] in the anticipation of fear; the print was rusty. Here was another steel engraving: "Immolation of the Wives of the Sultan". I knew enough for what I saw in that book to make me gasp. (Carter *a* 1979: 16-17)

Besides their significance as omens of what is about to happen to the girl, these images are particularly telling because they hint at the nature of the Marquis' sexual appetite and of the sadomasochism underlying the pleasure of his sexual encounters. Most notably, however, they also show Carter's extreme – intentional – intertextual provocation, as similar images of violence and explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse certainly never appear in fairy tales – at least, not after they have started to be addressed to children.

"Puss in Boots" is an interesting, playful example of intertextual references to less known, but more overtly linked with the popular tradition, literary versions of the fairy tale with the same title. Most likely, the main reference made by Carter is to the Italian tale "Cagliuso" by Gianbattista Basile, collected in *Lo cunto de li cunti (The Tale of Tales [1634-36])* – Roemer & Bacchilega 2001: 13). This is unquestionably a political choice, as Basile's book incorporates, too «an eclectic range of styles and themes drawn from various traditions», and above all it is aimed at rearranging «linguistic and cultural hierarchies» through the intersection of high and low culture and by means of subversive strategies – such as having a noble man speak the Neapolitan dialect at a time when it meant being associated with «peasants, vagabonds, fools» (*Ibidem*). Mockery of social conventions and their subversion seem to be Carter's purposes as well, as her tale happily ends with «the low subordinat[ing] the high in fun and challenge» (15), when the poor master succeeds in tricking the rich Signor Pantaloon and in conquering both his wife's heart and his money. Even if Carter changes the Neapolitan setting of Basile's story, the backdrop of "Puss in Boots" remains all the same an Italian city, Bergamo (Carter 1979a: 68). Hints at the fact that the original story resorted extensively to the Neapolitan dialect can be traced in Carter's use of Italian words within the English text (68, 72, 77).

The more one proceeds through the stories of *The Bloody Chamber*, the more intertextual references become entangled, as it is evident from the complexity of the intertextual web characterising "The Erl-King". The sourc-

es of this tale, indeed, rather than in previous versions of fairy tales are to be recovered in the folkloric tradition as well as in the literary one. As the title-character suggests, the story is based on the figure of the Erl-King, a malevolent spirit of the forest who lures and kills unaware human beings who cross its path. Although this is a character of Northern European folkloric legends, and reference to similar old wives' tales would be consistent with Carter's re-writing project which also seeks to bring fairy tales back to the folk, the main reference here is most probably to Goethe's ballad *Erlkönig*. As Kramer Linkin (1994: 207) claims, nevertheless, Carter's purpose is not to refer directly to Goethe's «ballad of fathers and sons», but rather to use it to address more broadly the Romantic aesthetics of which it undeniably is a product. As a matter of fact, its narrative is «conspicuously overlaid with echoes of canonical nineteenth-century lyric poetry» (*Ibidem*). What Carter sets out to criticise by means of intertextual references is thus the gender politics underlying an aesthetics which represents women as invariably «encapsulated within the male, as if they can only be Blakean emanations whose separate existence in a public sphere so threatens the integrity of the male» (308). Thus, the recurrent images of cages and entrapment which permeate the story, suggested since the beginning in a halo of foreboding from the descriptions of the forest, where threats seem to be hidden in every corner: «the woods enclose [...] the wood swallows you up» (Carter 1979 a: 84). The forest is a «subtle labyrinth», where women who got lost – and have lost themselves – are condemned to «hunt around hopelessly for the way out» (84-85). The same claustrophobic motif of entrapment is soon after repeated like a refrain – «the woods enclose and then enclose again» (85). In this way the reader, too, is encouraged to speculate about Romantic representations of nature and desire, sticking to which, the narrator warns, «It is easy to lose yourself in these woods» (*Ibidem*). Read as such, the story becomes a sort of cautionary tale, which urges readers to put into question Romantic-like male chauvinist perspectives on reality and relationships if they want to avoid being done «grievous arm» (*Ibidem*) by the ominous Erl-King.

Another shade of *The Bloody Chamber's* intertextuality which deserves to be investigated is the re-writing of different versions of the same fairy-tale type within the collection, i.e. “Beauty and the Beast”, of which Carter provides two versions, and “Red Riding Hood” of which the collection includes three variations (if one considers “Wolf-Alice” among them following Bacchilega's classification –1997: 65). Although each of these tales has an internal intertextual consistency of its own, the scope of their intertextual complexity is best understood when they are read against each other. In other words, they can be «considered narrational units; however they are also sites of opening, thresholds on to other tales which themselves provide entries into others» (Roemer 2001:107). Intertextuality as a narrative choice



in Carter's work is therefore once more to be paired with transition and change, because through it different sets of values are simultaneously juxtaposed in the minds of the readers, enabling them to cross different ideological territories and to transit «to new modes of thinking» (Renfroe 2001: 95).

The first couple of openly intertextually connected tales reworks the theme of "Beauty and the Beast". The main common sources of these stories are to be located in the Latin tale "Cupid and Psyche", in Perrault's "Riquet à la Houppe" (Bacchilega 1997: 89-90) and in what is perhaps the most famous version of "Beauty and the Beast" written by Mme Leprince de Beaumont (91). Bacchilega (*Ibidem*) and Day (1998: 135) agree that the first of Carter's rewritings, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", is «more a version or imitation» (Bacchilega 1997: 91) of Le Prince de Beaumont's story, because it more or less upholds its plot and does not introduce revolutionary changes. Yet, as Bacchilega specifies, «Carter's language and focalization [...] complicate matters, shifting her tale towards Perrault's ironically ambiguous "Ricky and the Tuft"» (*Ibidem*). Less direct flashes of intertextual links with other fairy tales can also be glimpsed, such as the description of Beauty recalling the traditional portrait of Snow White: «This lovely girl, whose skin possesses that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow» (Carter 1979a: 41), or the reference to *Alice in Wonderland* when Beauty's father arrives at the Beast's house and finds «On the table, a silver tray; round the neck of the whisky decanter, a silver tag with the legend: Drink me, while the cover of the silver dish was engraved with the exhortation: Eat me, in a flowing hand» (43). Even if this is an apparently innocent and harmless version of the story, its – intertextual – disruptive potential surfaces when it is compared to the tale which follows in the collection, that could be considered its specular rewriting: "The Tiger's Bride", which questions and distorts everything that was considered normal and domesticated in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon". First of all, the father-daughter relationship from an affectionate submission in impeccable patriarchal style – «Yet she stayed and smiled, because her father wanted her to do so» (Carter 1979: 45) – turns into the passionate account of a girl who is bitterly disappointed with her father because he «lost me to the Beast at cards» (51). To the silent, unquestioning submission of Mrs Lyon to-be, the future Tiger's Bride opposes her rational, albeit emotional disappointment towards her father's behaviour, which is definitely not absolved:

Gambling is a sickness. My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards [...]. Oh, I know he thought he could not lose me; besides, back with me would come all he had lost, the unravelled fortunes of our family at one blow restored [...]. You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at *no more* than a king's ransom. (Carter 1979a: 54)

Furthermore, the evident change in narrative voice and focalisation is particularly telling, as its difference is a vehicle for two divergent significations of the metamorphosis taking place in both stories. The «external, camera-like» (Bacchilega 1997: 94) distant focalisation of “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” depicts «Beauty’s transformed vision of herself [which] also transforms Beast», and whose magic «leaves its work visible» (*Ibidem*). Even though the bourgeois idyll of its happy ending describes the re-establishment of an «objective naturalisation» (95) of the patriarchal order: «Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden; the old spaniel drowzes on the grass, in a drift of fallen petals» (Carter 1979a: 51), the «work of focalization» produces a subtle criticism of «the fairy tale’s collusion with bourgeois and leisurely carnivorousness» (Bacchilega 1997: 94-95). This criticism is then made explicit and turned into subversion in “The Tiger’s Bride”, where the female first-person narrator is given the opportunity to describe her own self-development outside of any patriarchal prescribed framework<sup>10</sup>.

### 1.3. POSTMODERN DEMYTHOLOGISING BUSINESS: THE CONTRADICTION DOUBLENESS OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

The analysis of poetics and politics in the framework of the postmodern textual subversions performed in Carter’s fairy tales can be further investigated with reference to the relation they engage in with history, which scrutinises historicity itself. Carter’s re-writings can be interpreted as «a kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables this contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature» (Hutcheon 1988: 124). Also in this respect, then, Carter’s enterprise proves to be metamorphosing, as she re-writes well-known texts without completely fulfilling readers’ expectations in order to point to the need for such traditional narratives to be re-signified – that is to be changed through new interpretations. Only in this way, Carter seems to suggest, is it possible to describe a renewed reality where traditional roles and expectations are scrutinised and alternatives are devised, and where female agency is not only thinkable but also feasible.

Carter’s stories show a «contradictory doubleness» because some indispensable features of the fairy tale are retained so that they can still be rec-

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<sup>10</sup> At least another group of tales can be productively read intertextually: those which rework the motif of “Red Riding Hood” in three very different, but interconnected ways, which also «dialogue with the folkloric traditions and social history» of their sources (Bacchilega 1997: 59) and with mainstream literary adaptations, such as that of Perrault and of the Grimm brothers. In addition to sharing the similar wintery mountain setting crowded with obscure popular legends and superstitions, these tales are linked together by a trail of blood. Due to the significance of this web of intertextual references in the representation of the body, their implications will be discussed at length in part two.

ognised as belonging to the genre. At the same time, nevertheless, these conventional elements are aptly and subtly subverted – sometimes in a parodic way – or mixed with typical traits of other genres. To begin with, some stories are located in a precise, or in any case easily locatable historical and geographical setting, which obviously enough is at odds with the timeless ‘neverwhere’ of fairy tales, and which has at least two important political implications. First of all, moving «the tales from the mythic timelessness of the fairy tale to specific cultural moments» (Kaiser 1994: 30) discloses the context-bound and therefore provisional character of the power structures sustained and transmitted by traditional – both folk and literary – fairy tales. In addition, and as a consequence, the social function performed by fairy tales is exploited by Carter to propose alternative discourses, which could guide the development of female identity, and free and empower female sexuality and desire through the metamorphosis of the foundations of power relations themselves. Traditional fairy tales are indeed shown to be primary vehicles for the enforcement of specific normative systems, and to represent harmless struggles for power, as they do not endeavour to challenge social structures and/or power discourses, but only to change the social status of the protagonists<sup>11</sup>.

In this way, Carter gives examples of her theoretical statements about her demythologising business grounded in and sustained by her commitment to historicity and materialism, which is materialised through the postmodern narrative device of historiographic metafiction.

The critical work of historiographic metafiction suits Carter’s appropriation of fairy tales on two main accounts. On the one hand, they share «theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs» which are made «the grounds for rethinking and reworking [...] the forms and contents of the past» (Hutcheon 1988: 5), that is generic conventions and the discourses they hand down. On the other hand, historiographic metafiction like Carter’s parodic criticism of patriarchy is inherently contradictory, for it «always works within conventions in order to subvert them» and «paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies» (5, 9). Furthermore, this powerful postmodern notion discloses what Carter represents in fictional terms, that is the «meaning-making function of human constructs», among which history and narrative hold the same authority, as «both history and fiction are discourses, both constitutive systems

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11 The backdrop of “The Bloody Chamber”, for example, is «the world of decadent turn-of-the-century French culture, amongst the operas of Wagner and the fashions of Paul Poiret» (Kaiser 1994: 30). The main settings of the story are Paris, where the narrator enjoys a cheerful, public life before getting married, and the dreadful isolated castle of the Marquis – whose description reminds one of Mont Saint Michel – where the young wife is trapped in her new, unwelcomed private life. Moreover, and most importantly, through its portrayal of the socio-geographical landscape the tale explores issues of class and the protagonist’s «socio-economic motivations for entering the bloody chamber of collusion» (Bacchilega 1997: 126).

of signification by which we make sense of the past [...]. History cannot be written without ideological and institutional analysis, including analysis of the act of writing itself» (Hutcheon 1988: 88; 91). With her stories Carter challenges a common trait of historical narration and the fairy tale, which «tend to suppress grammatical reference to the discursive situation of the utterance (producer, receiver, context, intent) in their attempt to narrate past events in such a way that the events seem to narrate themselves» (92-93), even if they do so in different ways. History, indeed, derives its authoritativeness from the assumption that those facts which account for themselves have most certainly happened in the real world whereas fairy tales reach the same goal in that the events they account for are outside of plausibility, and belong to the fictional – therefore altogether unreal – realm of magic. The consequences of the de-contextualisation of the production and reception of both narratives on these grounds, however, bypass the fact that they are situated discourses imbued with political purposes and implications, which are unmasked by Carter through the description of the settings of her fairy tales. Since the writer is well aware that «both history and fiction are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained» (112), she decides to turn «“Events”, which have no meaning in themselves» into «facts», which are instead signified» (122). Far from leading to extreme relativism, which is the consequence of postmodernism most feared by engaged feminists, the outcome of Carter self-reflexive fiction is rather disturbance and challenge of taken-for-granted narratives, which does not mean that they are made obsolete, but rather rethought and confronted with alternative possibilities.

#### 1.4. WHO'S SPEAKING/LOOKING? UNRELIABLE NARRATORS AND DISRUPTIVE FOCALIZATION

The last set of issues at stake within the discussion of Carter's postmodern narrative experiments has to do with her disruptive choices in terms of focalisation and narrative voice, and introduces other significant ramifications of the intersection between poetics and politics in her literary enterprise.

In spite of what Carter claims in the introduction to the *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* – that folk tales are «anonymous and genderless» (Carter 1990: x) – implying a certain «nostalgia for anonymity, for the archaic powers of the narrator whose authority rests precisely on disclaiming individual authority» (Sage 2001: 21), textual evidence in *The Bloody Chamber* proves the contrary. The narrative strategies deployed in these literary fairy tales reveal in fact that Carter lets her authorial voice and the politics underlying the texts surface, first and foremost through the subversion of the typical third person account of the events, where the focalization is usually external. The

use of first person narrators is all the more disruptive, as it also substitutes the types of the fairy tale with psychologically complex characters, and reaches a particularly high degree of complexity when Carter rewrites two different versions of the same story, one told in the traditional fashion and the other in the first person (for instance, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” versus “The Tiger’s Bride”). Moreover, it is more dynamic and less stable than the typical omniscient third person narrative voice of fairy tales, even more so when doubts can be cast on the narrator’s reliability – that is to say, in all the instances, like “The Bloody Chamber” or “The Erl-King” in which the story is told by the female protagonists, we know that she wants the reader to learn *her version* of the events to understand and justify her actions. Last, but not least, the choice of using female first person narrators in the stories, which is strictly related to their psychological complexity, can be drawn back to Carter’s metamorphosing enterprise, whereby telling *one’s version* of the story equals empowerment.

Carter’s complex characters, whose personalities instead of being clear-cut or typified are multiple and problematic, often displaying features of the ‘good’ as well as the ‘bad’ woman at once are caught while describing – narrativising – the inner struggles they faced to come to terms with the contradictions of their selves. Most notably, the end of the story rarely coincides with a resolution of this conflict, thus suggesting that the most important part is the struggle itself, the journey, the process which leads to transformation. Rather than embracing the typical traits of the desirable woman or of the wicked witch, the protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber* usually deconstruct mythical versions of femininity and substitute them with women who are struggling, who must negotiate with their conflicting selves, who decide what is best for them despite social expectations or the threat of marginalization and exclusion. The best examples of these inner struggles accounted for in the first person are therefore the “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Tiger’s Bride”, where the protagonists spell out the conflicts they experienced when faced with the sudden inevitability of ‘becoming women’, as well as with being turned into bargaining objects in the patriarchal exchange presided over by their fathers and/or husbands. In these accounts of female maturation, the girls are confronted with a double dimension of change. First of all, they experience the inevitable changes occurring while growing up (both physically and psychologically), which necessarily alter the way in which they understand and interact with themselves and the others. Besides this obvious step, Carter’s heroines are then presented with the alternative of conforming to the ideal of the ‘passive, good woman’, which usually has negative consequences and leads to experiencing fear, violence and helplessness (as in the case of “The Bloody Chamber”), or the possibility of embracing change as an empowering dimension (as in “The Tiger’s Bride”).

Not only do Carter's fairy tales display a shift of female character's perspective to the centre<sup>12</sup> – that is they move from the place of the object of desire/of the hero's quest to subject of the gaze, i.e. focalizers, or to be the narrative voice of the stories – but they also feature more complicit and traditional female characters. The transformative movements towards the centre and towards alternative perspectives do not coincide with the central, dominant ones but provide empowering alternatives to them. More to the point, when two versions of the same source-story (such as "Beauty and the Beast") are presented with different narrators and under different points of view, changes and displacement become even easier to detect.

Besides being disruptive as they unsettle fairy tale's generic expectations, the stories which feature a first person narrator in *The Bloody Chamber* are all the more problematic either because the narrative voice is combined with peculiar or shifting focalizations – as in the cases of "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Tiger's Bride" – or because the narrator herself is unreliable – as in "The Erl-King".

As Culler points out in the introduction to an edition of Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1990), «In what is traditionally called a first-person narrative the point of view can vary, depending on whether events are focalized through the consciousness of the narrator at the moment of narration or through his consciousness at a time in the past when the events took place» (Genette 1990: 10). The narrator of "The Bloody Chamber" belongs to the first instance, since the story is told by a woman after the facts have taken place but the actual narrator is not always the main focalizer; different points of view are offered as the gaze is alternatively that of the young girl whose story is being told or that of the grownup woman who is telling the story<sup>13</sup>. «Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate [...] or resolutely provisional and limited – often undermining their own seeming omniscience» (*Ibidem*). If the latter is the case of the narrator of "The Bloody Chamber", who is unreliable because she is far from being omniscient (she can only account for her past experience with her

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12 This notion is grounded in Hutcheon's new formulation of postmodern subjectivities, which always draw on what they purport to subvert (as disruption always does in Carter's fairy tales): «The decentering of our categories of thought always relies on the centres it contests for its very definition [...]. The power of these new expressions is always paradoxically derived from that which they challenge» (1988: 59). It is important to note that 'de-centering' in this sense does not simply entail the displacement of the centre so that it can be replaced by what is marginal, but rather a questioning of both the centre and the margins «from the inside as well as from the outside, against each other» (69). Inasmuch as «the centre used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged one half», it established a language of otherness that must be transformed and replaced with a language of difference and discontinuity which breaks with the norms sustained by the discursive impositions of the privileged half. After the centre has been put into question, «if [it] is seen as a construct, a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality, the old either-or begins to break down [...] and the new and-also-of multiplicity and difference opens up new possibilities» (62).

13 For a thorough analysis of narrative voices in *The Bloody Chamber*, see Bacchilega 1997.

present, provisional and still in-process point of view), the former variant suits the narrative voice of "The Courtship of Mr Lyon". In this story, indeed, the apparently normal third person omniscient and powerful narrator of traditional literary fairy tales actually hides a difficulty of pinpointing whose perspective is being adopted and the multiple focalization, which in fact is character-bound (Bacchilega 1997: 91).

Carter's self-reflexive narratives unsettle the generic conventions of the genres to which the tales refer and foreground the writer's commitment to a feminist gender politics, thus also epitomising the outcomes of the post-modern narrative strategies deployed throughout the collection. Admittedly, resort to fragmented and unreliable narrators in *The Bloody Chamber* goes hand in hand with the unstable, still in-process female subjectivities they represent, whose metamorphoses can be described by analysing the political consequences of Carter's transformative textual strategies on the subjects they portray and on the identity journeys they are accordingly allowed to set out to.





## 2.

### ISSUES OF PERFORMANCE, ROLE POSITIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN CARTER'S TRANSFORMATIVE GENDER POLITICS

#### 2.1. GETTING READY TO EXPLORE IDENTITY JOURNEYS

As has already been remarked, power is the key to understand how the transition of metamorphosis from textual strategy to its visible materialisation on the body through gender politics works in Carter's fairy tales. The stories sketch a definition of metamorphic female identity at least in a twofold way. First of all, subjectivity is represented as unstable, fragmented and multiple, and is caught in the act of being made through language and storytelling. This means that it is a never ending process mediated by individual – and by necessity partial – desires and drives as well as by the social interactions and relationships in which the subject is engaged (Foucault, 1998; Braidotti 2002). Secondly, the identities described by Carter are rooted in material experience and historicity, thus they invariably change according to contextual and contingent situations, therefore transformation could be considered, if any, their only foundational and stable feature. Furthermore, in order for women's conditions in society to improve, as suggested by the portraits of Carter's heroines, change is to be considered the chief achievement which is worth fighting for (Carter 1979b). Of course, change is not disruptive in itself, and does not necessarily entail improvement (Bacchilega 1997; Zipes 2002).

The centrality of power in *The Bloody Chamber* surfaces from the description of unequal relationships where violence, aggression, polarities and imbalances are depicted both in terms of gender and of class. A similar understanding and representation of power and its consequent impact on the development of self, social and gendered identity most probably derives

from Carter's acquaintance with the work of Foucault, which she quotes at the beginning of *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), her theoretical manifesto on sexual politics, and may have inspired her famous contention that «Flesh comes to us out of history» (Carter 1979b: 11). In general, Carter shares Foucault's conviction (Sage 2007: 34) that power is an omnipresent component of society and human relationships – which it constitutes through its constant *circulation* – that its nature is both constrictive and productive, that it is inscribed in knowledge and its transmission, and above all that sexual politics is contingent on historically determined discourses.

*The Sadeian Woman. An Exercise in Cultural History* sets forth Carter's stances on the relationships between men and women, the cultural construction and naturalisation of gender roles and performances, the disruption and depiction of empowering patterns of development for female identities. In this influential essay Carter engages in a criticism of patriarchy – which she calls «demythologising business» (1997: 38) – which turns its discourses against themselves. Through the critical and polemical examination of Sade's work Carter reveals the centrality of the category of sex in defining identity and meanwhile dismantles the binary oppositions informing and sustaining patriarchal thought by exposing the cultural constructedness of their naturalising drives and outcomes. In so doing, the contingency of what have been traditionally considered appropriate roles, positions and behaviours for men and women, and therefore for the relationships between them, is exposed. Acknowledgement and disclosure of the discursive dynamics at work is then followed by their challenge and disruption, that is by the suggestion of alternative patterns (in theoretical terms in *The Sadeian Woman*) and by their representation (in fictional terms in *The Bloody Chamber*). In this way criticism leads to agency, and it is precisely the analysis of Carter's strategies of resistance and empowerment for women that allow one to examine her feminist agenda and the political impact of her literary work<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.2 WOMEN IN PROCESS: CARTER'S SEXUAL POLITICS FROM *THE SADEIAN WOMAN* TO *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*

The process through which the female protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber* construct their identities could be described as a transformation taking

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1 If the reach of Carter's work in terms of criticism towards patriarchy is unquestionable, it is also true, however, that the tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber* show an evident limit: working within the heterosexual matrix. The relationships between the sexes are indeed scrutinised and patriarchal assumptions about them are challenged without undercutting or providing alternatives to the heterosexual economy of desire. Far from underestimating or minimising the revolutionary and subversive range of her literary speculations, it could be argued that Carter is interested in questioning and remoulding power dynamics and relationships between the sexes, which however results in the endorsement of normative – albeit disruptive – heterosexuality.

place during the transition from submission (to and within a patriarchal discursive order) to the achievement of different degrees of empowerment. These journeys caught while still in progress, nevertheless, never come to an end, as the protagonists' struggles and negotiations with themselves and with the other – mainly male – people do not lead to everlasting happiness. Rather, their accomplishment seems to be the journey itself, the process through which they experience change, the always still-in-act itinerary of identification and subject-formation. As Manley points out with reference to the narrator of "The Bloody Chamber", who initiates the journey of the collection and to a certain extent typifies the experiences of the other female characters: «She is a woman in process, someone who is exploring her subject position and beginning to tell her own story» (2001: 83). These private, personal journeys where young women learn how to make an account of themselves are always grounded in their material conditions, which Carter discloses and questions as a primary influence in the development of their identities.

The gender politics set forth in *The Sadeian Woman* and enacted through fictional examples in some of the tales of *The Bloody Chamber* can be investigated in the light of some core patriarchal practices and systems whose primary purpose is to ground and stabilize the relationships between the sexes over time. More specifically, the patriarchal institutions openly addressed and contested by Carter in both texts are marriage (particularly in "The Bloody Chamber" and "Puss in Boots"), the commodification of women through bargains between fathers and husbands (in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride"), rape and sexual violence (which are hinted at – more or less overtly – in most of the stories). These issues, besides being of paramount importance within the feminist debate of the Sixties and Seventies, are tackled by Carter in the usual fashion of presenting the reader with both alternatives: acknowledgement and understanding of patriarchal practices and elaboration of strategies of resistance, never represented as definite solutions or successful outcomes but on the contrary as processes through which the heroines struggle, make mistakes, and/or assess the extent of their success. It is important to note that in *The Bloody Chamber* women's complicity with their subversion is often emphasised – as it is in *The Sadeian Woman* – to underline that they must first of all be aware of the part they play in sustaining their subordination.

The transformation of patriarchal economies of desire grounded in the metamorphosis of the ways in which women can develop autonomous and empowered identities is introduced in the fairy tales by the representation of reciprocity. The identity journeys constructed in the stories, indeed, can be considered attempts to amend the experiences of Sade's Justine and Juliette – described by Carter as the binary alternatives of female role models in the categorical opposition set by patriarchal discourse. The performances

and behaviours of the Sadeian women are considered as either/or, as the only alternatives offered by a phallogocentric economy, and their limits are unveiled, criticized and deconstructed. As Carter points out, Justine is the «heroine of a Black, inverted fairy tale» (Carter 1979*b*: 44):

Always the object of punishment, she has committed only one crime, and that was an involuntary one; she was born a woman. [...] She is a gratuitous victim. And if there is no virtue in her suffering, then there is none, it turns out, in her virtue itself; it does nobody any good, least of all herself. [...] The passive virtue of a good woman, ensures she can never escape them [misfortunes] because the essence of her virtue is doing what she is told. (Carter 1979*b*: 44, 45, 53)

With Justine's example, Carter unmasks the dangers of abnegation and submissiveness in those women who identify with the socially imposed ideal of the subservient, modest, silent angel of the house. Furthermore, she deconstructs the definition of the virtue – or rather, its emptiness and lack of foundations – behind which those women hide in order to justify their otherwise pointless suffering: «The question of her virtue is itself an interesting one [...] why does such an intelligent girl so persistently locate virtue in the region of her genitals?» (54). After Justine has been raped, she goes on being stubborn and amends her concept of virtue, without however unbinding it from – the denial of active – sexuality: «she concludes her virtue depends on her own reluctance» (55), because

her denial of her own sexuality, is what makes her important to herself. Her passionately held conviction that her morality is intimately connected with her genitalia makes it become so. Her honour does indeed reside in her vagina because she honestly believes it does so. (*Ibidem*)

In other words, Justine has come to – most likely unconsciously – endorse the patriarchal discursive reduction of women to sexuality, from which they are allowed to redeem only through virtue. Such a notion of virtue, in turn, is itself devised by established discursive arrangements aimed at disciplining the development of female identity and at keeping the female body under control in order to master reproduction.

Interestingly, Justine is totally sterile despite doing nothing to prevent conception, which for Carter stands for her «inability to be changed by experience» (Carter 1979*b*: 58). The obstinate conviction that she can preserve her virtue no matter what, which always guides and justifies her actions, to a certain extent does not make her feel responsible for her conduct.

Therefore, «she is always the dupe of an experience that she never experiences *as* experience; her innocence invalidates experience and turns it into events, things that happen to her but do not change her» (57-58). In sum, Justine represents «the prototype of two centuries of women who find the world was not, as they have been promised, made for them and who do not have, because they have not been given, the existential tools to remake the world for themselves» (65).

What is most relevant in the framework of this analysis, is Carter's insistence on Justine's inability to change, which may be the only feature she shares with her reversed mirror image: her sister Juliette. According to Carter, indeed, their lives are «in a dialectical relationship» (89).

Contrary to Justine, Juliette epitomises the aggressive, self-made woman, who appropriates masculine traits and is thus constrained into the opposite role of the martyr Justine, namely that of the whore. In a patriarchal economy where the binary distinctions set a clear-cut opposition between the public and the private sphere, respectively – and exclusively – assigned to men and women, a woman who decides to occupy the public domain and to engage in its business-like transactions has one only asset to sell; her body: «in a world organised by contractual obligations, the whore represents the only possible type of honest woman» (65). The only way in which Juliette can be rich and free and wield power is to «enter the class» of men: «the life of Juliette proposes a method of profane mastery of the instruments of power. She is a woman who acts according to the precepts and also the practice of a man's world» (90). As a consequence, nevertheless, not only does she obtain men's benefits (that is wealth, power, free will), but she is also by necessity infected by the consequences of being – and needing to remain – the dominant half of the binary. Thus, she has to give up also the positive aspects of femininity in order to embrace masculinity and «cause [...] suffering» (*Ibidem*). Even if she has succeeded in overcoming the limits of her condition, her example does not undermine patriarchal definitions of femininity, as the role reversal merely leads her «by the force of her will, [...] to] become a Nietzschean superwoman, which is to say a woman who has transcended her gender but not the contradictions inherent in it» (98). What Carter suggests in order to empower women, then, is that they can construct an identity freed from patriarchal constraints only through the redefinition of the category of woman itself, and certainly not by trying to appropriate masculine attributes. Both sisters are negative 'ideals', or more precisely 'types' of woman exactly because their performances, subversive as they may seem – above all in Juliette's case – do not undermine the binary categories which define and constrain women in traditional Western thought and practice. As Carter comments, both Justine and Juliette should be considered «type[s] of female behaviour» rather than models, and the former's failure and misery is to be matched to the latter's apparent triumph (90):

Justine is the thesis, Juliette the antithesis; both are without hope and neither pays any heed to a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling. (Carter 1979b: 90-91)

At this first stage, hence, Carter calls on women to be able to make a synthesis between the attributes which they have been traditionally associated with and those which would allow them to fight back and re-appropriate their voices and bodies in order to narrate their own stories in their own terms. The same synthesis, in other words, which the Sadeian heroines failed to achieve:

The Sadeian woman, then, subverts only her own socially conditioned role in the world of god, the king and the law. She does not subvert her society, except incidentally, as a storm trooper of the individual consciousness. She remains in the area of privilege created by her class, just as Sade remains in the philosophic framework of his time. (133)

The truly revolutionary and subversive move is made towards the end of the book, where Carter proclaims the necessity for reciprocity, which was denied to the Sadeian protagonists – both men and women, perpetrators and victims – and which would be the pivotal requisite to experience sexuality and pleasure as something which can lead to change and improvement. Instead of a mutually enriching and pleasurable activity, sexual intercourse – and one could broaden the scope to other aspects of the relationships between the sexes – thus becomes something one can steal from the other, a mutually exclusive activity where one loses what the other gains. In the Sadeian economy of desire, «when a woman pilfers her sexual pleasure from a man, she patently reduces his own and to witness her pleasure can do nothing more for him than to flatter his vanity» (Carter 1979b: 167). The same logic governs the binary thought organised according to mutually exclusive categories: what is praised in one term is despised in its counterpart, so that if one embodies the positive side of the binary, by necessity its ‘other’ can only be assigned the residual negative meaning. As a consequence, the sexual experience in Sade, as Carter contends, is «entirely inward» and besides «is not experienced as experience», that is «it does not modify the subject. An externally induced phenomenon, its sensation is absolutely personal, just as it does not hurt the knife if you cut yourself with it» (169).

With the fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber* Carter tries to design alternatives to the inescapable stillness and incapability to actively experience and narrativise women’s processes of identity development. The idea of reci-

procuity allows one to investigate the – new – conceptualisation of identity emerging from the stories as well as the way in which women can literally and materially engage in the redefinition of their selves and of their roles within society.

The female identities materialised in the fairy tales can be defined as ‘transitional’ for they are best understood, or rather grasped, as processes in transition rather than accomplishments. What Carter suggests with fictional examples is not a definite alternative to existing models of development and outcomes of female subjectivities. Rather, it is the painful, at times misleading, often ambiguous and even contradictory efforts of women who try to divert from the readymade path and to build new ones. The difficulty of these endeavours stems from the fact that – as Carter never ceases to remind readers – before relying on a brand new set of tools, they must start from what is already at their disposal, that is patriarchal categories and discourses. Before actively starting to construct, therefore, they need first to be aware of what has already been built, find a way to deconstruct it, and after having resourcefully devised strategies of resistance, overthrow it and replace it with something more desirable – but nonetheless equally transitory and partial. As Braidotti would put it, «the point is not to know who [they] are» in an essential way, «but rather what, at last [they] want to become, how to represent mutations, changes, and transformations, rather than Being in its classical fashion» (Braidotti 2002: 2).

The cartographic approach advocated for by Braidotti is an effective methodological guideline to analyse – as well as itself the expression of – Carter’s way of dealing with identity *ante litteram*. A similar standpoint, indeed, «fulfils the function of providing both exegetical tools and creative theoretical alternatives» (*Ibidem*), for Carter’s fairy tales interpret and criticize their times as well as try to put forward possible practical, experiential options. Moreover, both texts strive to provide «alternative figurations or schemas for these locations [spatially and temporally individual positionalities]<sup>2</sup>, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*)» (*Ibidem*). Last, but not least, the notion of subjectivity conveyed by Braidotti’s theoretical claims seems to be the outcome Carter’s protagonists struggle to achieve, that is «a decentred and multi-layered vision of the

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2 Thus Braidotti defines what she means with ‘politics of location’, which is fundamental in order to correctly frame and understand the similarities between her theorisation and Carter’s fictional accounts grounded in the materiality of experience: «The politics of location refers to a way of making sense of diversity among women within the category of “sexual difference” understood as the binary opposite of the phallogocentric subject. In feminism, these ideas are coupled with that of epistemological and political accountability seen as the practice that consists in unveiling the power locations which one inevitably inhabits as the site of one’s identity. The practice of accountability [...] as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials is linked to two crucial notions: memory and narratives. They activate the process of putting into words, that is to say of bringing into symbolic representation, that which by definition escapes consciousness» (Braidotti 2002: 12).

subject as a dynamic and changing entity» whose definition takes place «in between [...] in the spaces that flow and connect in between» (*Ibidem*).

As has already been pointed out, the experiences of the female subjects accounted for by Carter remain enclosed within a heterosexual matrix. This could be interpreted as the author's endorsement of patriarchal discourses, which cannot escape the oppositional, enclosing categories of man and woman. Yet, though Carter does not challenge sexual difference altogether, she most certainly tries to question the grounds on which difference is constructed in order to problematize it. In other words, even though the normative nature of sexual difference is not turned down by the fairy tales, it does not mean that its normalisation is not disputed and amended<sup>3</sup>. Thereby, the sustainability of the claim that Carter succeeds in turning patriarchal categories against themselves and in re-arranging their signification in a non-binary, non-oppositional manner.

### 2.3. IDENTIFYING VISIONS: CONSTRUCTING AND MASTERING IDENTITIES THROUGH GAZES AND REFLECTIONS

The transition of female identity journeys towards change through reciprocity in *The Bloody Chamber* is variably represented by and through the motif of the gaze and/or a complex play with mirror images – which are always linked to sight and looking. Also in this case the stories are intertextually arranged in a climatic fashion. The journey starts with “The Bloody Chamber”, where the protagonist basically remains subject to the male gaze and tries to negotiate her self – and social – identity by struggling with the image her husband imposes on her. After that, with the “Beauty and the Beast” stories the compliance and subjection to the male gaze exposed in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” is amended and broadened in “The Tiger’s Bride”. The “Red Riding Hood” story which concludes the collection, then, epitomizes the culmination of the process of identification through mirroring as reciprocity. “Wolf-Alice”, indeed, directly addresses issues of subject formation and socialisation by explicitly reflecting on the Lacanian mirror stage, and shows how an unmediated socialisation can lead to a mutually healing relationship.

Interestingly, in those tales where the transition is emphasised from being subject *to*, to being subject *of* the gaze – that is, in the instances where alternatives for an autonomous configuration of female subject formation are provided – different sensory dimensions are given pre-eminence and eventually substitute sight<sup>4</sup>. Carter’s fictional examples of alternative patterns

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3 These ideas stem from a lecture held by Judith Butler at the University of Cambridge: “Understanding society” (22/05/2013).

4 The symbolic reach of such a replacement of sight with smell and taste also stresses the necessity to re-appropriate identity through the body, and is therefore linked to the reflections that will be articulated in the following chapter.



for the development of female identity could be said to originate precisely from the awareness of the power imbalance underlying the centrality of vision – specifically of the male gaze – in the process of subject formation. Imbalance that is then challenged by introducing other sensory experiences together with or as opposed to sight, even if, as the omnipresent play with mirroring reflections shows, sight itself is not completely done away with. Rather, Carter seems to try to negotiate a redefinition of the workings of the gaze through different significations of the looking glass – whether it is an actual mirror or a reflective surface which casts back a reflection, such as the other’s eyes – in order for women to master it, and by extension become masters and narrators of their self-development<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the relation between sight and the other senses is a hierarchical one, given that vision is not dependent – as the other senses are – on space, being rather the «point of view» around which other sensory experiences are organised: «the look is the domain of domination and mastery [...] The tactile, auditory, and olfactory sense organs depend on some spatial representation, which, in our culture if not in all civilizations, is hierarchically subordinate to the primacy of sight» (Grosz 1990: 38).

The ways in which the male gaze establishes its primacy over the female one are the product of socio-historically contingent discursive formations, whereby the masculine subject of the gaze puts its object at a distance and by so doing prevents the object’s possibility of taking part – that is of being actively involved – in the action of looking itself. Frozen in their being looked at, female subjects are left in an apparently inescapable passive position and their participation in their definition of themselves is hindered. As a result of this process, woman is constructed as the negative – i.e. lacking, maimed, incomplete or imperfect – mirror image of man, who besides needs the power of man’s word and gaze to be defined and completed. As Carter seems to suggest with her fairy tales nevertheless, the first step towards the destabilisation of such an engaging male gaze is recognising its provisional character and its dependence on contextual power-knowledge organisations, and on female complicity. Likewise, mirroring itself is not «value free [...] but a “special effect” of ideological expectations and unspoken norms – a naturalising technology that works hard at [...] re-producing “Woman” as the mirror image of masculine desire» (Bacchilega 1997: 29).

Sight is an extremely powerful motif throughout *The Bloody Chamber* insofar as it establishes intertextual echoes among the stories, as well as draws together issues of sexual and textual politics, and above all their ‘embodiment’.

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5 As Grosz contends: «Of all the senses, vision remains the one which most readily confirms the separation of subject from object. Vision performs a distancing function, leaving the looker unimplicated in or uncontaminated by its object. With all of the other senses, there is a contiguity between subject and object, if not an internalization and incorporation of the object by the subject». (1990: 38)

The female subject experiences the world first and foremost through the body and its relation to what surrounds it, a relation which is always in progress, its development through time leading to mutual influences and changes. Most notably, subject formation and the construction of identity are indissolubly linked with and mediated by the body. Sight in terms of perspective is certainly connected with the analysis of sight as underlying power relations in determining who is looking, i.e. who the subject of the gaze is and who, conversely is its object. Last, but not least, sight also enables one to turn to the body in investigating the implications of Carter's emphasis on other sensory experiences, as provocative and/or empowering alternatives to – masculine – vision.

Unsurprisingly, among the range of sensory experiences described in *The Bloody Chamber*, sight is probably the most complex and articulated. First of all, the action of looking or the condition of being looked at links the changing body to narrative, for who looks and who is looked at determines who the focalizer and the focalized of the text are, thus opening up questions of narrative perspective. This, in turn, allows one to establish the degree of activity and passivity of the female protagonists of the fairy tales, and to assess the extent to which their metamorphosis – whether it is physical or psychological – changes the power arrangements and enables them to speak for themselves and give free accounts of their identity journeys. Furthermore, the gaze is connected to questions of objectification and otherness, since the subject of the gaze wields the power to define the object of its gaze. The alternatives offered to the subject gazed upon are limited to passively conforming to the meanings attached to it, or resisting and challenging them, thus being labelled as 'other' and marginalised. In fantastic literature, like in all narrative accounts, the body is «generated in language – in narrative strategy and descriptive technique – and is simultaneously the expression of the vision of a particular narrator, whose act of looking translates the objects seen in particular ways» (Harter 1996: 51). Moreover, the gaze determines the point of view, establishes and tries to fix the difference between the self and the other in order to keep its threatening, unknown nature under control (*Ibidem*). Harter's insights into the objectifying gaze of the narrator in fantastic texts emphasise the construction of the female body as a body in pieces, as the dismemberment of the female form allows the male gazing subject to own it, to safely represent it without experiencing the feeling of hesitation generated by the unknown.

The analysis of the images linked to sight in *The Bloody Chamber* problematize the issue of the gaze and its implication in power distribution even further if they are read against Kaplan's contention that the male gaze «carries with it the power of action and possession that is lacking in the female gaze» (Sheets 1991: 646). In other words, women are looked at and can look back, but allegedly cannot act on their gaze. The reasons why the male gaze

aims at dominating women is the need to contain the threat and exorcise the same fear for women's sexuality that also leads to the representation of femininity as monstrosity. Carter, however, challenges the traditional power arrangements and manages to set free enslaved and codified representations of femininity by conveying alternatives to that of sight. This means that she does not try to reverse the roles and to give the female gaze the same oppressive, enclosing power of the male counterpart, but rather exploits the other senses to suggest strategies of resistance and empower female agency. Some of Carter's heroines, for example, speak (they account for their experiences in the first person), that is they have a voice, therefore «can be heard without being seen» (648).

The last, important articulation of the motif of sight in Carter's fairy tales is the examination of the omnipresent image of the mirror, which takes on a number of meanings with relation to the articulation of female identity, otherness and the idea that the subject achieves self-awareness through the incorporation of the other in the reflection of its body into the other's eyes. The complexity conveyed by reflections in *The Bloody Chamber* is due to the manifold meanings attached to mirrors. It is by glancing at their reflections in the looking glass that the heroines «see themselves being seen» as subjects and, at the same time, it is through the same process that they see their reflection into the other's – usually male – eyes (Pi-tai Peng 2004: 117). Significantly enough, the extent to which women are able to act and to empower their sexual position depends on «the way the female subject participates» in the complex visual exchange she engages in with the master gaze (*Ibidem*).

“The Courtship of Mr Lyon” and “The Tiger's Bride” can once again be read as complementary reflections also with reference to the process of female identity construction and to account for its transformation to and through the achievement of reciprocity. For starters, as Bacchilega remarks, the “Beauty and the Beast” stories are privileged vehicles for «women's transformative powers», since regardless of Beauty's active or submissive role, she is able to «transform another being, and more specifically, a sexually and/or socially threatening male» (Bacchilega 1997: 78). Even though this kind of female power most probably related to women's «ability to produce new life» has been systematically reduced «within patriarchal ideology to the popular ‘kiss a frog motif’» (*Ibidem*), Carter's stories succeed in bringing back female transformative agency under a double perspective. The first, most obvious kind of transformation performed by Beauty is a physical one, whether it is the more traditional metamorphosis from beast to man represented in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” or the subversive metamorphosis of woman into wild animal, as in “The Tiger's Bride”. Secondly, the physical transformation implies a covert transformation as well: what is made explicit through the bodily remodelling is the metamorphic process

experienced by the woman while trying to come to terms with and to map her identity journey. In Carter's tales both developments require or lead to reciprocity, as the physical transformation is enacted only after both male and female characters have faced the need to renegotiate their individual and/or social identity and acknowledged the need to change with each other's help. Significantly, in both instances self-awareness and action stem from a mirroring process where a transformation in the way of looking underpins the reconfiguration of gender relationships. Thus the other – either the woman as object of the gaze or the beast as animal – is no longer perceived as 'object', and both characters are allowed to become subjects of the gaze.

In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" the transformation of Beast happens in Beauty's eyes, regardless of the actual change in the bodily shape of the lion: it is «Beauty's transformed vision of herself» that transforms Beast (Bacchilega 1997: 94). Furthermore, as in "The Bloody Chamber", vision here is the prevalent sensory experience, even if it is no longer the one-way threatening gaze of the patriarch, which forces on women its ideal definition of their role and place in society. Rather, Beauty's fear gradually turns into braveness and confidence, so that when she sees her reflection in the Beast's eyes she is not shocked because of the unfamiliar, alien and scary nature of what she sees. On the contrary, she starts to see herself for the first time precisely from the moment in which she glances at her reflection into his eyes. On their first night together, «Beauty and Beast exchange a crucial look» (Bacchilega: 1997: 93), which already suggests the mutuality of their relationship and the fact that the Beast's gaze is not empowered, one-dimensional or *othering*. «He drew back his head and gazed at her with his green, inscrutable eyes, in which she saw her face repeated twice» (Carter 1979a: 47). Up to now, the Beast's eyes are «inscrutable» precisely because Beauty is only able to see herself in them. However:

Still "inscrutable", his eyes are no longer "sick of sight", for in their green meadow Beauty's reflection begins to blossom. The naturalizing gaze works "on some magically reciprocal scale": as she turns into the promise of life, he offers her a new vision of herself. (Bacchilega 1997: 93)

Likewise, as if he could foresee Beauty's ability to free him from his miserable animal condition, the Beast was bewitched by her picture not simply because of her looks, but because he glimpsed in it the potentially transformative perceptiveness of her eyes:

The Beast rudely snatched the photograph her father drew from his wallet and inspected it, first brusquely, then with a strange

kind of wonder, almost the dawning of surmise. The camera had captured a certain look she had, sometimes, of absolute sweetness and absolute gravity, as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul. (Carter 1979a: 44)

Of course, in this instance, as in that of “The Tiger’s Bride”, the power imbalance between masculine and feminine is reduced because the male protagonist of the story is a Beast, thus himself embodying a form of otherness – which narrows the distance from the woman and lessens the authoritativeness of his gaze: «He disliked the presence of servants because [...] a constant human presence would remind him too bitterly of his otherness. [...] She found his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable» (45).

The image of Beauty cast back from the Beast’s eyes far from reducing her self-awareness to what he wants to see, paves the way for Beauty’s second significant encounter with her self, when she is sitting alone in her room in front of the mirror, far away from the Beast’s palace.

Returning late from the supper after the theatre, she took off her earrings in front of the mirror; Beauty. She smiled at herself with satisfaction. She was learning, at the end of her adolescence, how to be a spoiled child and that pearly skin of hers was plumping out, a little, with high living and compliments. [...] She smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days, and the face that smiled back was not quite the one she had seen contained in the Beast’s agate eyes. (49)

The physical distance from the place where the girl caught sight of her self for the first time could suggest that, unlike the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber”, she is not objectified, nor is her self-perception influenced by the master’s gaze.

The crucial transformation of Beauty’s identity, which triggers the Beast’s physical metamorphosis, takes place when the girl goes back to the castle to find him agonising. There she has the chance to look once more into the lion’s eyes and to realise that she had never looked at them, but only at her reflection within them: «His eyelids flickered. How was it that she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?» (Carter 1979a: 50). That is to say, for the very first time Beauty acknowledges the presence of the other beneath the reflective surface of his eyes, and recognises humanity in them. In an entangled play with specular reflections, Carter thus shows how in order to avoid objectification one must first recognise herself in order to be able to recognise the other, and that

this mutual knowledge is achieved provided that one is capable of seeing in the other's eyes what lays beyond one's own reflection. The mutual process of recognition will then lead to a transformation which will make ongoing mutual exchange and sharing possible.

In "The Tiger's Bride" the motif of vision is equally central and is conveyed through the transition accounted for by the I narrator from object to subject, which finds expression in «the splitting of the subject/object of focalization» as a «necessary step in the difficult process of turning the younger 'eye' into the exuberant 'I'-narrator who acts upon her desire» (Bacchilega 1997: 95). As Bacchilega suggests, the tale is focused on «the familiar tabu against looking», which affects equally Beauty, as she «refuses to be seen», and Beast, who «wears a mask» (96). Here, too, the mirror is an intermediary between the girl and her perception of herself and of the world: «"I saw...I saw... I saw" she says, fulfilling our expectations of a careful "I-witness" with a detailed perception of places, people, and feelings. But much of this in-sight soon proves to be mediated, indirect, already materially and culturally framed» (97). As a consequence, the more the protagonist understands about herself and about the Beast, the less her experience – symbolised by her gaze – is mediated by the mirror. As the privileged space of otherness, where the undesirable is trapped in order for the desirable to be able to take place, but always winks and threatens to surface; as the place where different – imagined, projected, physical as well as psychological – spaces are superimposed to one another, the mirror seems to take on a heterotopic function (Foucault 1967). The reflection of one's gaze in the mirror or upon a reflecting surface thus stands for the process through which the individual tries to appropriate its own identity by mapping the contours of its body and trying to reach, by looking into one's own/the other's eyes, what lies beyond.

A similar spatial understanding of subjectivity through mirroring is what could enact Braidotti's recommended «cartographic» approach to describing and narrativising subjectivity. In this particular tale, the culmination of the process of identification coincides with the physical metamorphosis that will set forth Beauty's liberation and empowerment: the disrobing. At the beginning, for example, the protagonist looks at the room where her father is losing her at cards – and by extension approaches an attempted understanding of the situation where she is definitely turned into a bargaining object – through a mirror: «The mirror above the table gave me back his frenzy, my impassivity, the withering candles, the emptying bottles» (Carter 1979a: 52). The same mirror casts back the reflection of the Beast, himself concealed by his disguise which performs the same mediating function that the mirror does for Beauty: «The mirror above the table gave me back [...] the still mask that concealed all the features of The Beast but for the yellow eyes that strayed, now and then, from his unfurled hands towards myself» (*Ibidem*). Everything in the Beast is camouflaged: his face is covered by «a

mask with a man's face painted most beautifully on it», which however is blatantly fake, as this beautiful face is «one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human, [...] too perfect» (53). He also wears a wig, a silk stock and gloves to cover his hair, neck and hands, and even his smell is covered by a «fuddling perfume» (*Ibidem*). Even though his eyes are the only true and seemingly lively thing, Beauty cannot see her image reflected in them, neither can she look at his face for recognition not so much because he is an animal, but because of his deliberate disguise – that is, his intentional refusal to be recognised for what he is: «And yet The Beast goes always masked; it cannot be his face that looks like mine» (56). This also means that, at this stage, Beauty is still looking for resemblance, for sameness in the other to make sense of and accept both. The first disruptive experience of the girl occurs when she meets her clockwork maid, «a soubrette from an operetta, with glossy, nut-brown curls, rosy cheeks, blue, rolling eyes. [...] she is a marvellous machine, the most delicately balanced system of chords and pulleys in the world» (59-60). Later on, indeed, when she is riding with the Beast and his valet, she realises that the maid is «a clockwork twin of mine», for «had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?» (60, 62). This means that she acknowledges that so far she has just been the puppet of her father or of the other men in her life, having allowed them to pull her strings as she refused to drop the veil which covered her eyes, to leave behind the mirror which mediated her experience of herself and of the world – either out of fear or out of convenience. Only then is she ready to «bear the sight of him» (64), so she finally looks at the Beast's naked body, and willingly decides to take off her clothes in a true instance of «reciprocal pact» (Bacchilega 1997: 96). As soon as the Beast has eventually, bravely, given up his disguise, indeed, Beauty, too, feels empowered enough to take off her clothes and even to accept being deprived of her own skin.

Hence, for the first time in the collection, reciprocity leads to the representation of an instance of female identity development which is linked to the male other as it needs the other's gaze in order to awaken self-awareness, but at the same time is not entirely defined, nor conditioned by the other. Rather, mutual exchange and a balanced distribution of power within the masculine and the feminine are required in order for both of them to develop an independent but not lonely identity journey where reciprocity is not only possible but becomes necessary to achieve independence. Most notably, this accomplishment brings about and is subsequently re-enacted and amended through the change of the established social – discursive – order. The issue at stake with regard to the alternative and empowering development of female identity in these two stories reveals once again the tensions between complicity in and transgression of the patriarchal order and naturalised ideals of female subjectivities and role positions:

In both stories, Carter intertwines gender and narrative concerns to comment on how the classic fairy tale plots women's "developmental" tasks and desires within patriarchy in more ways than thematically and psychologically. The questions at work here do not simply concern Beauty's self-fulfilment or desire as she gains control over the path of her initiation process, but also investigate how narrow that narrative path is, and how it shapes the heroine's conforming or contesting journey. (Bacchilega 1997: 102)

It is not by chance that the first and the last story of the collection circularly emphasise the idea of a transformative journey towards subject formation – albeit in different ways. The identity development of the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber" is established from the very beginning as a journey «away from girlhood [...] into the unguessable country of marriage» (Carter 1979a: 7). Her «destination», identified by the girl with her «destiny» (8), that is with marriage, is the castle of the Marquis, set in opposition to the house of the mother, the «enclosed quietude» (7) of childhood. The unpredictability of this destiny is highlighted by the opposition between the «quietude» of what is known and reassuring and the inability even to guess what is waiting for her after the wedding. Since the beginning, therefore, it is clear that the protagonist is experiencing a process of transition, which she does not know how to handle. This apparently minor element is of particular significance in that it gives reasons for the girl's utter powerlessness against her husband, who can thus impose convenient definitions and role positions on her without being questioned.

As for "Wolf-Alice", the last tale in *The Bloody Chamber* and «a kind of summary of the collection's preoccupations and perspectives as a whole» (Day 1998: 162) it represents female identity journey as an ongoing process which must be rethought, re-signified and above all freed from patriarchal disciplining discursive constructions. "Wolf-Alice" could be considered an alternative model of female identity development, which tries to negotiate and compensate for the lacks and losses of the other female protagonists of the collection. The tale, indeed, displays the provisional consequences of an identity journey which starts from unusual premises – that is a girl who comes into contact with human civilization only after living with wild wolves for years – and is articulated outside of a normalised – phallogocentric – discursive framework, as the people who try to tame her soon realise that there is not enough humanity in her and thus she cannot be socialised. Wolf-Alice's experience shows that the wild girl in fact does go through a similar processes of identification and subject formation to that of the other human beings. However, her marginalisation and independence from established social conventions and recommended role positions at the same



time transforms these processes, so that eventually the development of her identity will reach different outcomes. More explicitly, she will be able to experience reciprocity and to bring the werewolfish Duke back to life thanks to her pristine alienation.

The tale, then, can be considered a solution to the difficulties and impossibility of developing an autonomous and empowered identity that the other female protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber* had to face. The «alternative» to a subject formation and identity development imbued in patriarchal assumptions, expectations, normalising and disciplined strategies is articulated through the example of an individual who grew up without being subject to them, thus being able to articulate an autonomous socialising process, which led to reciprocity, recognition of the other, and life.

*The Bloody Chamber* is sprinkled with examples of performances of femininity accurately staged by Carter to expose their fictional character, their theatrical playfulness and the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the enactment of a gendered identity which is partly subject to external – more or less conscious – discursive constraints and the need to devise strategies of resistance to and negotiation with them. The development and ongoing transformations of female identity are both shaped by and negotiated with reference to an entangled play of gazes and reflections, where autonomy and empowerment are struggled over through learning how to master vision and to signify specular reflections. In other words, the process through which female subjects gain – different degrees of – awareness of their selves and construct their identities is based on how woman sees herself and the extent to which she can(not) avoid identifying with the image conveyed by those who master the gaze and have the power of defining the meanings of the reflections cast by the rational glass – in whatever form.

The disparate experiences of Carter's protagonists show that the development of identity is a painful, complex effort, a journey with many diversions and deviations, a never-ending work in progress of mediation with oneself and with the world, always provisional and never conclusive. The gallery of examples described by Carter portrays different patterns of development for female subjectivity; some that comply with established discursive arrangements, some that fail to stray from the path they know, for it is already too deeply rooted in their (un)consciousness, some, finally, that manage to amend or re-signify the normative role positions society expects them to take on.

In general, the solution devised by Carter for an alternative articulation of subjectivity seems to be reciprocity, which implies mutual exchange with the other, incorporation instead of appropriation, and is based on the refusal of a binary and oppositional organisation of experience in mutually exclusive categories – which, needless to say, have always ended up disem-

powering and subordinating women and what is associated with them in the binary.

After introducing the different paths that these identities can take and their (problematic) discursive construction in language, special attention needs to be devoted to the «how», that is to the ways in which change and metamorphosis take place and/or are made visible throughout. In other words, the focus is to be placed on the body, i.e. on the surface where transformations are enacted and detectable during the endless, uneven, erratic process of identity development, and of its deconstruction, reconstruction and signification.

A further bridge between the articulation of identity and its enactment on the body and through the body can be built starting from notions of theatricality, mimicry, masquerade and performance. Similar concepts suggest that embodied subjects are structured through the discursively established identification with ideal bodies and behaviours, but also that they can struggle over imposed role position by staging their own performances through the body, its expressions and disguises. Most notably, when one turns to the body, the category of gender is even more crucial in patriarchal attempts to devise and control the circumscribed meanings that can be attached to female subjectivities. Thus it is from and by means of the body that the metamorphoses performed or experienced by the female protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber* succeed in creating actual alternatives to the available – phallogocentric – discourses on womanhood. Starting from acknowledgement, questioning and deconstruction of the patriarchal systems, the tales end up turning their assumptions against themselves, and then propose alternative, subversive patterns of development through disruptive metamorphoses of the female body.

## PART 2

# STAGING METAMORPHOSING BODIES TO RE-SIGNIFY THE BODY

*All the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious. All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface.*

(Grosz 1994: vii)



## I.

### THE BODY AS AN INSCRIPTIVE *TRANSFORMATIVE* SURFACE

#### I.1. THE BODY IN CONTEXT: A DISCURSIVE FRAMEWORK

Carter's fairy tales always represent a physical metamorphosis of some sort, the most obvious being that of the young woman who is growing up and experiencing the physical and psychological changes which are part of the transition from childhood to adulthood. A number of other symbolic and meaningful changes are illustrated, which embody the revolutionary and disruptive potential of Carter's narratives in that they overthrow rather than sustain traditional gender roles and relationships by means of fantastic figurations. On the one hand, the tales describe human protagonists turning into animals and vice versa, in most cases the choice of giving up the human shape being a way for women to free themselves from binding and limiting role positions. On the other hand, the protagonists of the stories are often metamorphic creatures such as zombies, vampires and werewolves, that is hybrid and liminal beings who have already experienced a metamorphosis, who have challenged death and given up humanity, who threaten life, but who do not belong completely to either life or death, and therefore have to negotiate their position within and between the two.

In any case, the body becomes the surface on which change is made visible, at times conceived of as a limit (usually the human body) but more often as the primary site in which desires can be fulfilled and constrained identities can be freed (usually the animal one). Most notably, Carter's bodies are always sexed, in such a way that the traditional Western association 'woman-body' is unmasked and subtly criticized as a core part of the binary and oppositional system grounding Western philosophy and thought, which not only have naturalized female inferiority and consequent submis-

sion, but have also set up reproduction and motherhood as the sole suitable outcomes of female identity journeys.

The fact that the female protagonists of some tales are or decide to turn into wild, cruel and threatening animals or supernatural beings is of particular significance, in that such bodies defy the codified associations or, at least, question their basic inferences and consequences in terms of disciplined behaviours. This aspect suggests that embracing the instinctual drives of desire from which they have always been restrained – if they wanted to suit the norm and avoid being marginalised – is a way for women to enact an autonomous, active, and free subjectivity instead. A similar process matches the way in which Carter intertextually plays with fantastic elements in manipulating fairy tale conventions: she is aware of their codification and is able to re-write them so as to make them at once recognizable and disruptive. In a similar fashion, her female protagonists seem to comply with social expectations – or at least to try to – that is, they embrace the associations woman-body/instinct-desire but then disrupt their conventional meanings and give them empowering new ones.

In *The Bloody Chamber* the body is characterised both as an intrinsically transformative surface and as the site where the metamorphoses covertly transmitted through textual strategies and representations of identity development are actually performed. The meaningful, often transgressive, transformations experienced by some of the characters of the fairy tales are notably aimed to emphasise the importance of the body and the need to re-signify it anew from different perspectives. First of all, this process is part of Carter's feminist politics, in that it reconfigures the available definitions of female identity development and subjectivity through the re-appropriation of the female body. Such re-appropriation requires new ways of approaching and understanding the body, which must be freed from the constraints of binary and mutually exclusive – patriarchal – knowledge. Secondly, and as a consequence, discourses about the body must be reshaped so as to being able to account for the specificities of sexual difference, that is to supersede the neutralising and universalising drives of the phallogocentric tradition. In other words, female bodies must be tackled in their peculiarities and differences, after giving up the patriarchal presumptions – derived from the mutually exclusive categories upon which similar knowledge is structured – that they represent a somehow lacking or inferior variant of the male body, to which they are set at the same time in dialogue with and in opposition to.

Carter's commitment, so frequently stressed and repeated by the writer herself, to materialism and to historically and socially grounded experience, finds expression in her almost obsessive focus on the female body and on the representation of embodied performances in the collection as well as throughout her career. It is of paramount importance, then, that the bodies represented in the fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber* are caught and depicted

in the act of changing, so that metamorphosis becomes once again the distinctive trait of most of the protagonists. Fourth, the link between sexuality, identity development and the visible results of the transformation on the body become vehicles for Carter's project of devising alternative paths to patriarchal discursive constructions. The difficulty of straying from the path, so deeply rooted in cultural practices and affecting subjects from the very beginning of the process of their socialisation, is highlighted by the need to resort to fantasy, fictional, monstrous and magic bodily figurations to render the metamorphic liberation and empowerment of the female characters. Last but not least, this issue exposes the conflation – that in Carter becomes a weapon that women can exploit in order to achieve freedom to choose – of imagination and material experience in the development and enactment of narratives of the self. No longer engulfed in the limiting binary thought of oppressive discourses, indeed, those of Carter's heroines who succeed in embracing change and leave behind the comforting and safe bonds of patriarchal submission are able to give an account of themselves and to find strength both in imagination and in the 'reality' of their positionalities.

Carter's fairy tales can be said to share one of the primary goals of contemporary feminists in trying to establish a philosophical and cultural tradition parallel to, not completely disjointed, but at the same time autonomous from its patriarchal predecessors in «refocusing on bodies in accounts of subjectivities» (Grosz 1994: vii). The first step towards a similar accomplishment is questioning, displacing and leaving behind the binary, mutually exclusive categories which have set the opposition between male and female and the supremacy of the former through its association with thought, reason and «culture», while confining the latter into a – biased and diminished notion of – body and nature. Interestingly, through the fictional accounts of female experiences narrativised in her fairy tales, Carter succeeds in revaluing concepts like materiality, body, and nature, which are disparaged by patriarchy through the comparison with their counterparts in a structure whose organising framework excludes incorporation and reciprocity on principle. The structural «inversion» advocated for by Grosz and enacted by Carter through her stories sets out to

Displace the centrality of mind, the psyche, interior or consciousness (and even the unconscious) in conceptions of the subject through a reconfiguration of the body. If subjectivity is no longer conceived in binarized or dualist terms, either as the combination of mental or conceptual with material or physical elements or as the harmonious, unified cohesion of mind and body, then perhaps other ways of understanding corporeality, sexuality, and the differences between the sexes may be developed and explored which enable us to conceive of subjectivity in

different terms than those provided by traditional philosophical and feminist understandings. (Grosz 1994: vii)

Carter's fairy tales can be re-read nowadays in the light of these purposes, and offer a starting point and/or strategies of resistance to, disruption and renegotiation of alternative patterns to those based on a «binarized or dual» understanding of the individual and of social relations – in particular those between men and women. Sexuality itself, and by extension sexual relationships, may be redefined and acquire new meanings if the body is made the focus of attention in their re-conceptualisation. It can be understood

in terms of an act, a series of practices and behaviors involving bodies, organs and pleasures, [...] in terms of an identity [that is, broadly speaking, gender] [... and as] a set of orientations, positions, and desires, which implies that there are particular ways in which the desires, differences, and bodies of subjects can seek their pleasure. (viii)

The importance of redefining sexuality is due to its centrality in shaping people's relationships with themselves as well as with the external world, as

Our conceptions of reality, knowledge, truth, politics, ethics and aesthetics are all effects of sexually specific – and thus far in our history, usually male – bodies, and are all thus implicated in the power structures which feminists have described as patriarchal, the structures which govern relations between the sexes. (ix)

The function of the body, then, is dislodged here as the seed from which change can blossom, since it is impossible to universalise and neutralise the differences written on bodies, which can no longer be circumscribed to the «neutral» – but strategically empowered – masculine.

The subject, recognized as corporeal being, can no longer readily succumb to the neutralisation and neutering of its specificity which has occurred to women as a consequence of women's submersion under male definition. The body is the ally of sexual difference, a key term in questioning the centrality of a number of apparently benign but nonetheless phallogocentric presumptions which have hidden the cultural and intellectual effacement of women. (ix)

The fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber* expose the «colonisation» of the body by discourses which try to conceal that in fact «in all cases, how bodies are conceived seems to be based largely on prevailing social conceptions of



the relations between the sexes» (x) and that, as Butler would also eagerly sustain, bodies are no less cultural constructions than sexual relations and performances.

#### 1.2. THE BODY IN THIS CONTEXT: BODILY INSCRIPTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*

The bodies of *The Bloody Chamber* investigated in this work are both male and female, and although the former are devoted special attention, the latter are not disregarded either (most notably, the bodies of the Beasts in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride”). They are caught in the act of changing in the process of growing up, of transforming into a different, animal-like or fantastic beings and/or in the choice of taking off a masque, of giving up a strategic or reassuring disguise. In any case, they are ‘lived bodies’ which change as a result of their experience, of which, in turn, they bear the signs. The bodies represented by Carter are not blank pages upon which meanings can be written and fixed, but rather surfaces of inscription, whose permeable skin can be etched, from time to time, with a range of unstable, unfixed and changeable meanings. Bodies themselves, then, become the maps where the development of identities can be tracked, whose pliable flesh bears the marks of experience and of transformation in the form of more or less visible scars: «every body is marked by the history and specificity of its experience. It is possible to construct a biography, a history of the body, for each individual and social body» (Grosz 1994: 142).

More specifically, in Carter’s fairy tales some of the signs left by this carving of experience on the body can be spotted, enabling one to consider the bodies of the protagonists both as surfaces of inscription and as maps. The most evident example is perhaps that of the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber”, whose body is forever marked by the heart-shaped, blood-red scar left by the bloody key her husband has pressed on her forehead as a symbol of her disobedience, as well as a sign of her complicity with a newly-awakened desire that she does not know how to define and how to control yet. In this case, the scar left on the body signifies a change that has taken place in the identity of the girl, which otherwise could risk going undetected, as it apparently has not changed her physical appearance – or, at least, not in a manifest way: she lost her virginity, but such a transformation is not evident on the outside. Other instances of the mappability of bodies could be found in the cases where something recognisable is left in the body of the character who underwent a radical transformation. This is what happens to the Beast in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”, who, after turning into a man, still bears some traces of his previous beastly state, such as his eyes or «an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses

of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of all beasts» (Carter 1979a: 51).

These apparently random and undetectable signs emphasise that within social discourses, both the male and the female body are «involuntarily marked, but also incised through “voluntary” procedures, life-styles, habits and behaviors» (Grosz 1994: 142). In Foucauldian terms, in the bodies of Carter’s characters the technologies of production and self-production of subjects are uncovered and challenged, so that the body itself becomes the medium through which power relations and social discourses are made visible, questioned and amended. It is through the metamorphosis of the body, indeed, that some of Carter’s tales achieve the transformative potential required to change the way social power relations are organized and structured, and thereby allow the female protagonists to renegotiate their role positions and performances through the construction of a different social order based on new foundations.

The transformative power of the bodies described and inscribed by Carter may be best accounted for if one turns to Foucault’s definition of the body as «the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration [...] totally imprinted by history and the processes of history’s destruction of the body» (Grosz 1994: 146). Foucault’s insights into the body, the tensions between its appropriation and signification by and through power, and the power it wields to resist power and disrupt social discourses when they are perceived as unbearable and no longer able to grant agency and a certain degree of autonomy to the subject are effectively summarised by Grosz as follows:

In Foucault, the body is the object, target and instrument of power, the field of greatest investment of power’s operations, a stake in the struggle for power’s control over a materiality that is dangerous to it, precisely because it is unpredictable and able to be used in potentially infinite ways, according to infinitely variable cultural dictates. [...] power, according to Foucault, utilizes, indeed produces the subject’s desire and pleasures to create knowledges, truths, which may provide more refined, improved, and efficient techniques for the surveillance and control of bodies, in a spiral of power-knowledge-pleasure. The body is that materiality, almost a medium, on which power operates and through which it functions. (Grosz 1994: 146)

The cogency of Foucault’s notion of the body, however, does not merely rely on its account of the body as *subject to* power, but rather, and most importantly, on its idea of the body as *subject of* power, as it is

acted upon, inscribed, peered into; information is extracted from it, and disciplinary regimes are imposed on it; yet its materiality also entails a resilience and thus also (potential) modes of resistance to power's capillary alignments. It is a kind of passivity, capable of being mobilized according to the interests of power or in the forms of subversion, depending on its strategic position. (*Ibidem*)

In Foucault's terms, the «political investment of the body» in power relations thus constructed becomes a «useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body» (149). This idea, of course, derives from his understanding of power as a network that ceaselessly brings things into reciprocal interrelations, negotiations, investments, which engenders control but at the same time bears within it the possibilities and strategies of resistance to its functioning (see Grosz 1994: 147-148). The most significant facet of Foucault's thought stemming from these considerations about the body, which may best account for the bodies represented in Carter's fairy tales, is the notion of sex, and the centrality of sexuality to power relations and struggles:

Sexuality is a particularly privileged locus of the operations of power because of its strategically advantageous position at the core of individualizing processes of disciplines and training [...]. Sexuality is not a pure or spontaneous force that is tamed by power; rather, sexuality is deployed by power to enable it to gain a grip on life itself. (152)

That is to say, sexuality is among the favourite loci where regulatory power operates, to the extent that it can be defined a «discursive-technological complex», and as such it cannot be identified with a biological, «material reality» (154). Rather, like the body, it is a historically contextual cultural construction, a product of determinate power-knowledge negotiations:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: [...] a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (Foucault 1978: 105-106)

Carter's appropriation of Foucault's work can be considered groundbreaking, for it succeeds in overcoming one of the main objections feminist scholars make to Foucault's conceptualisation of sexuality and the body. As Grosz remarks, indeed, Foucault's bodies are defined as surfaces of inscription without specifying the nature of the surface itself: in fact it makes a great deal of difference if the body which is being written upon is male or female<sup>6</sup>. Carter's project of demythologising femininity precisely entails acknowledging that women are history's makers, that they play an active role in the relationships they are involved in – whether they result in subversion or empowerment – and, above all that «sexual differentiation» is a matter of cultural construction which cannot be disregarded (Carter 1979b: 3-4, 7) and which affects the body as well: «Our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else» (9). The pronoun «our» in this case, includes but also limits, as it does not address a universal commonality of the human experience, but on the contrary refers to women, and thus stresses the specificity of female flesh. Shortly after, indeed, Carter adds: «Flesh is not an irreducible human universal» (*Ibidem*). As a matter of fact, in the fairy tales which are about to be analysed, examples of both male and female bodies are put forward while caught in the process of self-creation, definition, modification, embodiment, which are invariably historically and culturally specific and depend on the identification with or amendment of roles, positions, behaviours and models of embodied sexuality – as has already been stressed, always within the confines of a heterosexual economy.

In the light of these considerations it is also possible to fully grasp the reasons why the disruption of patriarchal discourses performed by some characters of *The Bloody Chamber* needs to pass through compliance. In order to be twisted and turned against themselves, indeed, power structures need to be understood and *incorporated*. From this awareness and enactment, then, rebellion can surface and try to change what is perceived as oppressing or limiting, for power generates power and the negotiation of new power-knowledge formations springs from a restyling of the existing ones:

Power must be understood [...] as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another. (Foucault 1978: 92)

Carter's female characters are represented in the process of «self-production and self-observation», while they wander along or across the «fine line»

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<sup>6</sup> For the main feminist objections to Foucault's arguments, see Grosz (1994: 156-158).

which separates compliance and subversion. What is emphasised through the transformation of their bodies is their «enmeshment in disciplinary regimes» as the subjects' condition of «social effectivity, as either conformist or subversive» (Grosz 1994: 144).

Last, but not least, if the body and sex are not natural givens, but the product of ongoing discursive negotiations and of contextual power-knowledge organisation, and if power's instability incorporates the potential of resistance, then it also involves the possibility of agency. This is of paramount importance, as it allows one to introduce the notion of 'performativity', which draws together identity development and bodily acts, and is linked to action in that it entails the idea of – more or less – purposely making visible on the body what has been happening beneath its surface. In addition, such concept also points to theatricality and masquerade as strategies deployed in order to take action and to shape the inscriptive surface of the body in polemical compliance with or subversive contrast to discursively established ideals.

### 1.3. STAGING THE FEMALE BODY: THEATRICAL PERFORMATIVITY

The notion of 'performativity' as it is reworked by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) allows one to draw interesting connections between the development of (gendered) identity, sexuality and the body, which prove to be particularly insightful for an account of the metamorphoses of the female bodies represented in *The Bloody Chamber*. The process of subject formation reflected and/or mediated by mirrors or influenced by one's own or someone else's gaze (especially when the other who looks is a man who stands for the patriarchal tradition) is indeed crucial for the analysis of the protagonists' identity development as a process of inscription of meanings on the body. As the performances of different characters throughout the collection show, identity journeys bring about negotiations and struggles between self and social perceptions about oneself, the proper/appropriate role positions one is allowed to occupy, acceptable or discouraged behaviours, normal and deviant ways of giving an account of or defining one's experience. In general, these couples of alternatives emphasise that identity construction is an ongoing effort, which requires endless mediation if one refuses to uncritically take on whatever position is attached to them according to the limited span of options offered by current discourses. As will be shortly illustrated, representing a change in the way meanings and performances are attached to the body by starting from the re-appropriation or by different approaches to the signification and understanding of the body itself is a particularly valuable strategy when it comes to women. Their identities, indeed, have traditionally been shaped by phallogocentric discours-

es first and foremost to keep their bodies under control – mainly in order to control reproduction – while at the same time the body itself, and its association with the category of ‘woman’ has been devalued within the binary logic of mutually exclusive alternatives. More to the point, reading the bodies represented by Carter against Butler’s conceptualisation of performativity discloses the reciprocity implied by the productive interaction body-identity, where the body displays the marks left by the stages of identity development and at the same time is the medium through which the latter can escape the discursive constraints to which it is subject.

Butler’s definition of performativity draws on Foucault’s insights into the centrality of sexuality, conceived of as a «regulatory ideal» which compels the materialisation of the body through power-knowledge organisations. The normativity of the discursive settlements about sexuality, however, is then displaced – again in Foucauldian fashion – by the idea that the imposition of power as constrictive is always paired with an inherent possibility of resisting and overthrowing it. In this way, the body is proved to be able to exceed the norms which compel its materialisation, enabling the subject to turn the law against itself «to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law» (Butler 1993: 2), that is the body is configured as the primary locus of agency. In Butler’s words:

The category of sex is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal”. In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. (Butler 1993: 1-2)

Nonetheless, within this never-ending process, «bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled» (2).

Not only is the subject whose body and identity are thus constituted *subject to* the regulatory ideal which compels its identity formation and the materialisation of its body, but it also, and most importantly, has the power to actively disrupt the reiteration of the law and to bend and amend it. Interestingly, according to Butler one of the most effective ways in which

the subject can question the repetition of the norm and disrupt its naturalisation is through repetition itself, that is by mimicking the behaviours prescribed by the regulatory ideal and thereby disclosing its artificial, constructed nature. The norms which «both produce and destabilize sex through reiteration» naturalise sex and the prescribed behaviours attached to it, but at the same time the ritual «opens up gaps and fissures that allow disruption to be performed» (10) because the «reiteration of a norm or set of norms [...] acquires the status of act-like [...] and conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition» (12). Butler calls the ritual, citational repetition involved in performativity «theatricality», which clearly suggests that it is the result of acting, of playing a role, regardless of the intentionality or awareness on the part of the subject.

In sum, performativity and theatricality acquire in Butler – as well as in the way Carter plays with the motif – a double character. On the one hand they unveil and question the practices underlying identification and subject formation, and emphasise the need to be aware of them in order to be able to locate their flaws and turn them against themselves. On the other hand, and as a result, they disclose the agency hiding underneath the surface of the apparently inescapable circuit of reiteration which does not trap the subject in compulsive repetition, but rather allows it to mimic such theatricality in parodic fashion, and to exploit its covert normative character to perform change and promote and entrench destabilising alternatives: «The subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, *it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice*» (15, my emphasis)<sup>7</sup>.

Different textual examples in *The Bloody Chamber* convey the impression that Carter is well aware of the mechanisms of performative staging of identity – which will be conceptualised by Butler more than ten years later – and above all that she exploits all their playful and subversive potential. To begin with, as has already been highlighted, some of the stories are set in historically recognisable periods in order to stress that particular patriarchal discursive formations are being scrutinised. As a consequence, their historicity and the naturalised performances they engender are no longer «dissimulated» (*Ibidem*), and the theatricality implied in the related staging of identity is overtly addressed. Furthermore, the more or less conscious idea of staging one's identity through performances which imitate, and to a certain extent also parody, expected, disciplined behaviours is presented on

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7 Interestingly, among the consequences of the materialisation of the bodies conceived of according to Butler's idea of theatrical performativity, there is the production of accepted and abject bodies, which do not «qualify as fully human» because of their deviance. Even though Butler mainly refers to those bodies which exceed the heterosexual norm, and are thus considered abnormal, this notion will be exploited to discuss some aspects of Carter's monstrous bodies in the following sections.

more than one occasion in the fairy tales.

The first instances of Carter's approach to the idea of theatricality and of staging one's identity can be found in "The Bloody Chamber". Interestingly, throughout the story a sort of progress can be detected, whereby the protagonist, at first playing what she considers the appropriate role for a young woman who is about to get – and then has just got – married, later on deliberately acts the normalised role of the wife in order to trick her husband. That is to say, at the beginning of the story, when the girl is still unaware of the changes in her body and of her sexual desire – which has just awakened – she stages her identity because she strives to conform to the behaviours which she deems her husband's ideal. As she gains awareness of her situation, of the brutality of the bargain she has sold herself in, the nature of her performance slightly, but unmistakably changes. The young woman experiences estrangement when she looks at her reflection in the mirror, and is unable to recognise what she sees because of the new consciousness of her body and of sexual desire. However, she refuses to accept to be defined by and to identify completely with the way her husband sees her, since his lustful gaze blames the desire which she begins to appropriate. When she has just arrived at the castle of the Marquis, the girl thus tries to encourage herself, at a time when she has not fully understood yet what she has bargained for: «Courage! I shall act the fine lady to the manner born one day, if only by virtue of default» (Carter 1979a: 19). Although she consciously decides to play a role that does not belong to her, here the girl still proves to be unaware of all the implications of acting «the fine lady». Therefore, during her first sexual encounters with the Marquis, it seems that she is experiencing his assaults from outside of her body, as if she was just the viewer, witnessing through specular reflections what is happening to someone else. The loss of her virginity, in fact, is staged like a private theatrical performance set within closed «purple velvet curtains» that the husband has arranged for himself, where the main actress is nothing but an uninformed, casual victim:

I had Cointreau, he had cognac in the library, with the purple velvet curtains drawn against the night, where he took me to perch on his knee in a leather armchair beside the flickering log fire. He had made me change into that chaste little Poirer shift of white muslin; he seemed especially fond of it, my breasts showed through the flimsy stuff, he said, like little soft white doves that sleep, each one, with a pink eye open. But he would not let me take off my ruby choker, although it was growing very uncomfortable, nor fasten up my descending hair, the sign of a virginity so recently ruptured that still remained a wounded presence between us. (*Ibidem*)



And when the libertine suggests that only an expert could have detected a «promise of debauchery» on her «thin, white face» (20), at first the girl is impressed and scared. She admits she is afraid of herself (*Ibidem*) because she identifies completely with the image reflected by her husband's eyes, where she feels she is «reborn», and as a consequence sees in her newly born desire only a «talent for corruption» (*Ibidem*):

I felt a vague desolation that within me, now my female wound had healed, there had awoken a certain queasy craving like the cravings of pregnant women for the taste of coal or chalk or tainted food, for the renewal of his caresses. Had he not hinted to me, in his flesh as in his speech and looks, of the thousand, thousand baroque intersections of flesh upon flesh? I lay in our wide bed accompanied by a sleepless companion, my dark new-born curiosity.

I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me.  
(22)

This passage is interesting under multiple points of view. First of all, the loss of virginity is described as a wound in the female body, as something that requires healing, and at the same time as leaving an invisible, but very substantial scar. Secondly, desire and the longing for the husband accordingly take on the negative meaning of something inevitable and disgusting, as the scar left by a wound which has healed but whose barely visible imprint on the skin is destined to remain as a reminder. The reason why the girl abhors such a longing is that she has not realized yet what pleasure means, because it has been violently taken, stolen from her. Moreover, her remarks could stem from the association, already made explicit by the Marquis, between female desire and perversion, corruption, something deviant which should be kept under control. In this context, sex is a performance which leaves no room for reciprocity and exchange, because it is staged by a patriarchal director whose sole purpose is to tame the puppet-woman into his disciplined ideal of the perfect wife – which, in this particular case, implies being subject *to*, but most certainly not *of*, his perversions. Even though the girl has never been explicitly compared to a marionette or a doll, significantly enough, towards the end of the story, when he realises that his perfect deadly plot has been spoiled, the Marquis is addressed as a – failing – puppet-master: «The puppet-master, open mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns» (Carter 1979a: 39).

In the end, the girl manages to break free, and although her liberation is pragmatically effected by her mother, her emancipation symbolically begins

when she stops lowering her eyes and bowing her head to look away – and turn away – from her self. The beginning of the process which enables the young woman to set herself – or rather, be set – free can be traced back to the moment when she witnesses the true character of her husband's homicidal perversion – that is when she enters the bloody chamber. The second step is the encounter with the piano tuner, which lets her experience the implications of selfless affection and reciprocity with a man for the first time, and after which she can finally fully grasp the scope of the role imposed on her by her husband. Carter emphasises this change in perspective the second time the young bride is described while playing a part, which becomes – albeit desperate and hardly successful – a willing act, a deliberate performance. The young woman stops trying to imitate the constitutive constraints of the identity imposed on her by her husband, or to escape them by turning her eyes away from his and from mirrors, and purposely stages – imitates – that performance with deceptive intentions: «With the most treacherous, lascivious tenderness, he kissed my eyes, and, mimicking the new bride newly awakened, I flung my arms around him, for on my seeming acquiescence depended my salvation» (34).

The young protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” could be considered a disembodied subject in that she has yet to take hold of her body, to learn how to mark it, how to write her own cartography on its surface. That is why she cannot help but learn how to live with the mark of shame impressed on her forehead by the bloody key, which symbolises the power of signifying her body that her husband still wields: «I scrubbed my forehead with the nail brush as I had scrubbed the key but this red mark would not go away, either, no matter what I did, and I knew I should wear it until I died» (37).

A similar instance of female body devoid of meaning and therefore compared to that of a puppet because its owner is not able to inscribe it with her own meanings, can be found in “The Lady of the House of Love”. Although this tale will be extensively analysed with reference to monstrosity and the female grotesque, it is worth stressing also its significance as to the issue of a dis-owned body, a body which has been forever marked by immortality, which in her case also means impossibility of changing. The destiny of immobility to which her ancestors have condemned her is perceived by the Lady-Vampire as helpless, unwelcomed, disgusting, a «role» that she is most reluctant to play: «Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror – except her horrible reluctance for the role» (Carter 1979a: 95). Here the body is even more central than in “The Bloody Chamber”, not so much because the woman does not understand it – after all, it cannot change – but rather because it imposes its urges, its hunger on her:

The white hands of the tenebrous belle deal the hand of destiny. Her fingernails are longer than those of the mandarins of ancient China and each is pared to a fine point. These and teeth as fine and white as spikes of spun sugar are the visible signs of the destiny she wistfully attempts to evade. (94)

This passage discloses a pivotal strand within patriarchal discourses that Carter sets out to unmask, criticise and overthrow, namely the contention that «anatomy is destiny», that women's fate is written on their bodies. Interestingly, Carter tackles the topic by resorting once more to theatrical figurations, and she conveys the inability experienced by this woman to change and appropriate her body by comparing her to a «ventriloquist's doll», to an «automaton», and later on to a «haunted house»:

Her voice, issuing from those red lips like the obese roses in her garden, lips that do not move – her voice is curiously disembodied; she is like a doll, he thought, a ventriloquist's doll, or, more, like a great, ingenious piece of clockwork. For she seemed inadequately powered by some slow energy of which she was not in control; as if she had been wound up years ago, when she was born, and now the mechanism was inexorably running down and would leave her lifeless. This idea that she must be an automaton, made of white velvet and black fur, that could not move of its own accord, never quite deserted him; indeed, it deeply moved his heart.

[...]

She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself. (102-103)

Significantly, the automaton here does not stand for the potentially empowering hybridisation between human – and more specifically woman – and machine most aptly advocated by Donna Haraway (1985), but rather for her disembodiment, which man is eager to fill with his own meanings<sup>8</sup>. That is why, perhaps, the young cyclist is «moved» by the Lady's ostensible forgery and later on does not hesitate to fantasize about possible ways of fixing what seems wrong in her body.

In both tales – “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Lady of the House of Love” – theatricality and mimicry do not represent the achievement of an empowered subjectivity freed from patriarchal constraints. Rather, they disclose different, almost opposite, hardships endured by women in the process of forging their own identity while facing disembodiment but at

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<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, this description is produced by the male character, who is the focalizer of this section.

the same time perceiving that bodily inscription is the core of both their submission and their latent liberation and empowerment. More precisely, the first tale tells the story of a girl who is growing up – therefore her body as well as her social position are changing – and, more or less willingly, has to face the displacement caused by the realisation that she is forced to act a limited span of parts that have already been prepared for her. The second story represents instead a woman who is prevented from changing, whose body incarnates her eternal predatory stillness, and whose – bodily – performances are therefore ironically doomed to be an ongoing repetition of sameness. This woman literally embodies the constitutive constraints of disciplined performative repetitions and re-enactments of the same, from which she does not seem capable of escaping, thus her identification with a ventriloquist's doll, which is voiceless and whose very movements depend on the will of the master.

So far, then, the issue of theatricality has been exposed as something exploited by Carter to trigger awareness, to disclose hidden, too often undetected and too deeply internalised patriarchal strategies of spreading and rooting discourses about disciplined female bodies. Nonetheless, these first connotations pave the way for a significant set of implications related to the concept of theatricality and the staging of identity on and through the body, which are also related to and may engender resistance and agency; the notion of 'masquerade'.

#### I.4. BODILY PERFORMANCES: PARADOXICAL MASQUERADES

In introducing the tenets of her notion of masquerade, Tseëlon (1995) sets out to explore some of the «paradoxes which frame the feminine experience in contemporary West», which Carter, too, tries to disclose and question through her fairy tales. In particular, among the most significant traits of both texts are the attention for the intersection between cultural, discursive constructions and bodily inscriptions; the mutually productive nature of the relationship between self and social identity; and the close analysis of the role of representation in shaping embodied subjects:

The departure point of my work is the notion that a cultural designation is instrumental in shaping a personal one. There is a dialectical dialogue between cultural categories and the people who embody them: the act of representation modifies the nature of the represented object. (Tseëlon 1995: 3)

Tseëlon proposes a definition of the category of woman, which suits the lived experience of Carter's characters, and besides could be a response to

the urge of redefining instead of rejecting the category of woman advocated for by Braidotti. According to Tseëlon, «woman» defies «any categorical designation», therefore she constitutes herself «as a paradox, a perpetual deference, an image of reality with the unavailability of desire, an absent presence» (2). Despite her apparent impossibility of being grasped, however, woman has always been imposed on roles that she is supposed to wear, or to perform, which puts her in an even more liminal and paradoxical position:

The roles that are available to her (social, psychological, visual) place her in another impossible position. If she embraces them she is supporting the ideology which defines her in the first place. If she rejects them outright she denies herself a certain amount of options, now marked, that would have otherwise been available to her. (2-3)

This is exactly the problematic situation in which Carter's heroines find themselves and from which they try to escape. The protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber* are often caught in the need of acknowledging the ways in which oppressive discourses work in order to be able to question and defy them, and the necessity of finding alternative articulations to those available to them. The performances of the protagonists of "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love" also fit into one of the paradoxes articulated by Tseëlon's analysis of female identity as masquerade, namely «female identity as non-identity» (Tseëlon 1995: 33). This paradox «ranges from mythological and theological descriptions which define the essence of the woman as dissimulation, [...] as an inessential social construction» (33-34). Broadly speaking, the outcomes of such contentions, which according to Tseëlon are – albeit with fundamental differences (see Tseëlon 1995: 34) – the definition of femininity as fake, duplicitous, masquerade in the light of the importance of «the appearance of femininity» raise questions about the authenticity of the category of woman. In other words, Tseëlon asks, is the appearance of femininity «indicative of inauthenticity of character», or is it «external to the self»? Regardless of the arguments laid out in order to answer this question, what is of relevance here is that in this debate one voice is significantly always absent: that of woman herself (34). The real question to ask, then, which underlies the former, would be: «Given that women are placed in these feminine roles, do they experience them as alien or as part of the self?» (*Ibidem*).

With the instances of "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love" Carter seems to engage precisely in this controversy, which is not resolved, but nonetheless is invariably problematized. As the experience of both female protagonists highlight, indeed, the roles designed for women

are most certainly socially and discursively devised and more often than not foisted on them – therefore they are alien to their selves. Nevertheless, if Butler’s arguments about theatricality, performativity and repetition, Tseñlon’s remarks and the way in which they are represented in Carter’s stories are drawn together, the interplay between and mutual productivity of acting and the embodiment of imposed role positions – experienced as alien as well as part of the self – becomes apparent. Carter’s characters and their fictional experiences show that patriarchal established ideals of femininity are at first pivotal to female subject-formation and identification, that is they are the first stage in which the idea of «what it means to be a woman» is approached and internalised. After that, however, acknowledgement of the fiction of femininity thus encoded is necessary, and is followed by – as the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” reveals – the parodic, acquiescent embodiment of those roles aimed at turning patriarchy against itself, that is at mimicking patriarchal conventions in order to trick and bend them. Only then can it be conceivable for woman to finally perceive the roles she wears as «part of the self», as something which belongs to the subject, that can consciously be displayed at will. And, most importantly, this is the assumption which enables one to take a step further, that is to begin to build defiant autonomous sets of roles and performances.

The function of the body and of its changes in this process is crucial. It is primarily through the body that woman displays her masquerade, whether it is complicit in what is expected from her or subversively plays with the different identities she is required to wear. Moreover, it is chiefly through the body that the change in attitudes, which is more often than not a sign of will and choice, is made visible. Far from signalling a «lack of identity», then, the paradoxical condition of femininity, its masquerade, is a weapon in women’s hands. This is to say, the duplicity with which they are associated and which is source of fear and eludes clear understanding is evidence of women’s ability to change and thwart the constrictions of the binary thought.

Besides staging and questioning female identity performances through theatricality and masquerade, the mask and the idea of playing a role are exploited by Carter to call into question masculine strategies of identity construction through the body and embodiment as well, and to expose their fictive and performative nature. Significantly enough, if one turns to the stories about “Beauty and the Beast”, some paradoxes also emerge from Carter’s characterisation of masculine identity and its transformations.

Carter’s approach to masculine identity construction in these tales is peculiar, as it develops from the need for the male characters to transcend their physical appearance as animals, which they reject. Interestingly – and paradoxically – both Beasts literally endeavour to overcome an actual animal shape, whereas the female protagonists try to overcome woman’s symbolic

associations with and reduction to the animal, which goes hand in hand with her identification with the body<sup>9</sup>.

In both “Beauty and the Beast” stories the Beasts are dressed, and/or exert themselves to behave like men, in spite of the grotesque results of their efforts. In “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” the Beast’s attitude and appearances highlight the paradoxes of a self split between the resolution to look like a human being and the inevitable surfacing of beastly attributes. On his first appearance before Beauty’s father, the Beast stands on his hinder legs and is elegantly dressed like a wealthy man. Yet, his body betrays his nature and his rage exposes him for what he is; a wild animal: «Head of a lion; mane and mighty paws of a lion; he reared on his hind legs like an angry lion yet wore a smoking jacket of dull red brocade and was the owner of that lovely house and the low hills that cupped it» (Carter 1979a: 44). Significantly, in front of Beauty’s father, the Beast does not hesitate to stress his animal nature when he feels outraged. When the scared man addresses him as it is convenient because of the aristocratic surroundings as «My good fellow», the Beast thus reacts: «Good fellow? I am no good fellow! I am the Beast, and you must call me Beast» (*Ibidem*). When it comes to Beauty, however, the lion tries to behave like a gentleman, although the result is grotesque. When he kisses her hand, indeed, it takes her a while to realise what he is doing:

As she was about to rise, he flung himself at her feet and buried his head in her lap. She stayed stock-still, transfixed; she felt his hot breath on her fingers, the stiff bristle of his muzzle grazing her skin, the rough lapping of his tongue and then, with a flood of compassion, understood: all he is doing is kissing my hands.  
(*Ibidem*)

Despite the twisted character of the scene, Beauty still feels a pang of surprise when she fully realises that she is in fact facing an animal, which walks on all fours: «Then, without another word, he sprang from the room and she saw, with an indescribable shock, he went on all fours» (*Ibidem*).

The male protagonist of this story, thus, is a liminal creature, unmistakably embodying animal features, but at the same time displaying enough human attributes to prompt his final transformation into a human being. Unlike the Beast of the following story, “The Tiger’s Bride”, this one can speak, even if his voice is a «dark, soft, rumbling growl» which «seemed to issue from a cave full of echoes» (46).

The beastly character of “The Tiger’s Bride” literally wears a mask «that concealed all [its] features», even though he doesn’t succeed in disguising his actual looks, thus conveying a strident, utterly fake ensemble. The Beast’s

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<sup>9</sup> As will be argued in the following section, animals in Carter’s fairy tales take on very different meanings depending on their sex.

body is completely hidden: his face is covered with a mask, his clothes do not leave an inch of his furry body visible.

I never saw a man so big look so two-dimensional, in spite of the quaint elegance of The Beast, in the old-fashioned tailcoat that might, from its looks, have been bought in those distant years before he imposed seclusion on himself; he does not feel he need keep up with the times. There is a crude clumsiness about his outlines, that are on the ungainly, giant side; and he has an odd air of self-imposed restraint, as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would far rather drop down on all fours. He throws our human aspirations to the godlike sadly awry, poor fellow; only from a distance would you think The Beast not much different from any other man, although 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: one profile of his mask is the mirror image of the other, too perfect, uncanny. He wears a wig, too, false hair tied at the nape with a bow, a wig of the kind you see in old-fashioned portraits. A chaste silk stock stuck with a pearl hides his throat. And gloves of blond kid that are yet so huge and clumsy they do not seem to cover hands. He is a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair. (Carter 1979a: 53)

His smell, too, is clumsily dissimulated so that it actually reveals instead of concealing what it tries to hide: «My senses were increasingly troubled by the fuddling perfume of Milord, far too potent a reek [...]. He must bathe himself in scent, soak his shirts and underlinen in it; what can he smell of, that needs so much camouflage?» (*Ibidem*). Despite his pitiful, desperate attempts to disguise its animal nature, this Beast is even less human than the lion of the previous story, as he cannot speak: «His masked voice echoes as from a great distance as he stoops over his hand and he has such a growling impediment in his speech that only his valet, who understands him, can interpret for him, as if his master were the clumsy doll and he the ventriloquist» (53-54).

Besides accounting for the masquerade of male identity, this description provides interesting insights into the parallels between woman and animal drawn by the patriarchal tradition, which usually go undetected because of the internalisation and naturalisation of its mutually exclusive binaries. Like other female protagonists throughout the collection, indeed, this – male – Beast does not have a voice of his own, therefore his experience must be mediated, that is translated by another person – the valet – as, for instance, the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” needs her husband’s gaze to ar-



ticulate a definition of her self and the mediation of the mirror to be able to account for it and then to part from it. More to the point, the Beast is directly compared with a ventriloquist's doll, as is the female vampire in "The Lady of the House of Love", which suggests that their bodies are soulless empty vessels. As a matter of fact, the vampire is source of fear and threats humanity because it is a body without soul, as the soul has left the body when the latter died, and the fear it engenders in the human being causes its isolation and marginalisation: the threat must be kept under control, confined and expelled from society. Likewise, the animal is traditionally granted a lesser status than the human for its lack of soul or conscience.

As Fudge's study on the perception of animals in Early Modern England (2002) shows, at the origins of the distinction between the human and the animal, and above all of the binary subordination of the latter to the former, lies the uncritical definition of «humanity» regardless of the attributes of «human-ness». «Human-ness» would designate «the qualities which [...] each area of thought proposes as specific to the human» (Fudge 2002: 9). This is not to say that there exist some features or behaviours that qualify humanness, but rather that different historical epochs – and thus different discursive formations – define what standards are to be met for human beings to qualify as such. Conversely, the term «humanity» works through exclusion, that is it designates as human – in essential terms – that which possesses the features of humanness within a specific socio-cultural discourse, which is then extended to embrace a supposedly universal human condition. As a consequence, humanity becomes «the unproblematic and unthought category of human: those who are human whether or not they possess the qualities of humanness» (9-10). This is how, for example, having or not having a soul/conscience (the latter being the case of animals and monsters) has become a way of distinguishing the human and the animal and, most importantly, of subordinating what is associated with the animal – as Carter polemically emphasises in these stories, the common features of women and animals. This seems to be a sufficient reason why the Beasts try to disguise their animal nature and to imitate humanity, even though, as the fairy tales highlight, humanity has to be redefined altogether in order that both men and women be able to freely construct and express their selves.

The association between woman and animal, and the fact that the Beasts' masquerades are performed through clothes must not be disregarded. It could be helpful here to recall another of the paradoxes of femininity pointed out by Tseëlon; the definition «of the essence of the woman on the side of the matter (body and appearance) as opposed to spirit» and the simultaneous proscription of woman on account of «her inferior essence» (Tseëlon 1995: 7). According to Tseëlon, the importance played by fashion and dress codes in defining and expressing female identity dates back to early Christianity, when female bodies were considered vehicles of sexuality, deemed source of

temptation and consequently threats of men's damnation: «since the Fall is blamed on the woman, the links between sin, body, woman and clothes are easily forged» (14)<sup>10</sup>. Clothes play an ambivalent role in the revelation and concealment of sexuality «because clothes, through their proximity to the body encode the game of modesty and sexual explicitness, denial and celebration of pleasure. Clothes veil the body. Do they provide a kind of disguise of the body's nakedness, or enhance the body's nudity that is fantasised behind?» (*Ibidem*). Furthermore, fashion can be included among the technologies of gender and the mechanisms through which the body is kept under control: «Fashion has functioned as a technology of social control» (*Ibidem*).

Interestingly, in Carter's fairy tales clothes take on at least two distinct but related sets of meanings. To begin with, they disguise the body; they are masks to be worn by the male Beasts to hide their animal nature and to enact a masculine performance, but they also conceal, enclose and confine the female body, that is, female sexuality. In the first sense, then, they are a metaphor of lack of power over the body, of the difficulty to escape social control, either because the need to identify with something familiar and accepted is too strong (in the case of the Beasts) or because they are the vehicles of a set of imposed behaviours which the subjects are not yet able to question and to elude (in the case of the Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride"). Nonetheless, clothes also play a second, important role in Carter's stories, for they are instruments through which subjects express agency as well. This second instance accounts for the performances of different characters in the collection and, paradoxically, is represented through two opposite actions: wearing or taking off clothes.

Wearing clothes generally conveys the idea of putting on an identity, and expresses performances through the body. In "The Bloody Chamber" the young bride uncritically wears the clothes her husband gives her in order to identify with his desired image of her, until she finally realises that she can exploit this imposed identification to willingly perform the part of the subservient wife for her own advantage. Obviously enough, this cannot be considered downright subversion, as it does not trouble patriarchal discursive arrangements, but rather a preliminary strategy of resistance.

In "The Lady of the House of Love" clothes are played with to provide a grotesque contrast between the predatory and deadly nature of the female vampire and the virginal, alluring innocence her white bridal gown is supposed to convey. The Lady utterly – and most likely purposely – mocks the mythical «seductive threat» (Tseëlon 1995: 25) ascribed to woman. Her attire, indeed, does not carry the seductive dangers of a young untouched body nor promises the fulfilment of sexual desire, but rather conjures up

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<sup>10</sup> Although the topic is beyond the scope of this research, Biblical references in Carter's fairy tales are numerous and telling. See, for example Renfroe (2001) who draws a parallel between the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber" and Eve.

pathetic childish games:

[...] this shape resolved itself into that of, of all things, a hoop-skirted dress of white satin draped here and there with lace, a dress fifty or sixty years out of fashion but once, obviously intended for a wedding. And then he saw the girl who wore the dress [...] so that it was little by little, as his eyes grew accustomed to the half-dark, that he saw how beautiful and how very young the bedizened scarecrow was, and he thought of a child dressing up in her mother's clothes, perhaps a child putting on the clothes of a dead mother in order to bring her, however briefly, to life again. (Carter 1979a: 100)

Far from being a seductive threat, then, the «shipwrecked bride» (101) gives the impression of a young girl – «he thought she must be only sixteen or seventeen years old» (*Ibidem*) – clumsily playing the grownup woman, even though she is in fact the ancient, dreadful «beautiful queen of the vampires [...] queen of night, queen of terror» (93, 95).

In this instance, then, clothes represent the attempt to wear an identity which does not suit the subject, a masquerade which dissimulates an inherent monstrosity that the woman is not able to escape. It is important to note that this does not mean that the Lady possesses an essential nature, which she is not able to run away from, as if identity was an easily pliable inner core. Rather, as Carter suggests by means of this story, what is incapable for the vampire is the immobility of her condition, the impossibility of changing, which is the reason why she strives for becoming human and persists in staging her identity even if she is doomed to fail. The bridal gown, then, is also evidence of the empowering potential of the staging of identity, a choice the woman makes of eternally being on the threshold in a double sense; she cannot help being halfway between life and death and she paradoxically chooses to be in one of – human – women's most displaced position: the wedding day, which traditionally formalizes the transition from girlhood to womanhood.

“Wolf-Alice” is perhaps the best example of how wearing clothes could be an empowering act. After the girl has started to recognise her image in the mirror and gone through the subsequent stages of identification, she maladroily manages to wear a white dress – which, once again, could remind one of a bridal gown:

She pawed and tumbled the dress the Duke had tucked away behind the mirror for a while. The dust was soon shaken out of it; she experimentally inserted her front legs in the sleeves. Although the dress was torn and crumpled, it was so white and of

such sinuous texture that she thought, before she put it on, she must thoroughly wash off her coat of ashes in the water from the pump in the yard, which she knew how to manipulate with her cunning forepaw. In the mirror, she saw how this white dress made her shine. (124-125)

The dress has a double symbolic implication for the wolf-girl. On the one hand, it is evidence of Alice's humanity, which did not have a clear status before, as she behaved and perceived herself more like an animal than like a human being: «now she knew how to wear clothes and so had put on the visible sign of her difference from them» (Carter 1979a: 125). On the other hand, it suggests that the girl is starting to enact her femininity, to take hold of her identity and performatively stage it.

Both these contentions could be argued against, as they could put forward a regression on Alice's part, as if by wearing a female dress she had decided to give up the animality which was a vehicle of her positive difference from the other human beings (i.e. the fact that she was not subject to normalising cultural discourses and that she could escape and freely act outside of limiting social constrictions). Moreover, the wedding dress could signify that after all she has decided to identify with disciplined heterosexual performances of femininity. However, evidence in the text demonstrates that Alice's entrance into discourse maintains enough peculiarities to be still considered subversive. In fact, she has not entirely abandoned the animal features that empowered her; like a wolf she still relies more on smell than on sight, which means that she will not be subject to the defining powers of the male gaze, unlike other protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber*.

Although she could not run so fast on two legs in petticoats, she trotted out in her new dress to investigate the odorous October hedgerows [...] delighted with herself but still, now and then, singing to the wolves [...].

[...] then her nostrils twitched to catch the rank stench of the dead that told her co-habitor was at hand [...]. And if her nostrils flare suspiciously at the choking reek of incense and his do not, that is because she is far more sentient than he. (Carter 1979a: 125)

In addition, her humanity remains at odds with that of the other villagers, who are superstitious and hostile, who reject difference and refuse to understand it, therefore are unable to conceive of reciprocity and exchange. Not only have they confined Alice and the Duke at the margins of society because of their difference, but now they hunt the Duke down and try to kill him because they believe he is a threat to their survival, as they did

with Alice's wolf mother – despite neither was harming them: the Duke feeds on corpses, not on lively bodies, he «hunts the graveyards» (124). It is, finally, by means of one of the senses discarded by human beings, taste, that Alice is able to save the Duke, that is to bring him back to human life, licking «without hesitation, without disgust, with a quick, tender gravity, the blood and dirt from his cheeks and forehead» (126), as an animal would do. The ongoing metamorphoses of her self and her choice to perform her womanhood resulting from it hide a transformative potential which, in its reciprocal reach, is capable of remodelling the other, too.

As for the female dress the girl picks from the Duke's wardrobe, it is certainly a sign that Carter decides to stay within the territory of a normalised heterosexual economy. Nevertheless, at the same time it questions traditional associations between woman and animal, since the act of putting on a dress sets forth a distinction between the realm of the human and that of the animal, although their boundaries are porous, so that the woman always has the chance to embody those animal attributes which can help her contest and resist the external imposition of a tailored and buttoned-up female identity.

Taking off the clothes, when it is the outcome of an autonomous decision is a less ambivalent act, which more often than not can be directly associated with agency and empowerment. In *The Bloody Chamber* nakedness is not to be read in negative terms as lack of modesty or intentional and tricky seductiveness, as the patriarchal tradition would interpret it (see Tseëlon 1995: 29), but rather as the willing act with which woman embraces sexual desire and acknowledges that her connection with the body is not a limit, but a potential – the experience of pleasure and reciprocity which engenders and celebrates change.

In “The Company of Wolves” Carter plays with the transitional ritual described in the folkloric versions of the fairy tale “Red Riding Hood”, where the wolf orders the girl to throw her clothes into the fire, which traditionally symbolises renewal and rebirth (see Bacchilega 1997). In Carter's story, it is the protagonist herself who willingly takes off her clothes and throws them into the fire, after she has understood that being scared of the wolf – and of the sexual desire it stands for – does her «no good»:

She [...] took of her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid.

What shall I do with my shawl?

Throw it on the fire, dear one. You won't need it again.

She bundled up her shawl and threw it on the blaze, which instantly consumed it. Then she drew her blouse over her head; her small breasts gleamed as if the snow had invaded the room.

What shall I do with my blouse?  
Into the fire with it, too, my pet.  
The thin muslin went flaring up the chimney like a magic bird  
and now off came her skirt, her woollen stockings, her shoes,  
and on to fire they went, too, and were gone for good. The fire-  
light shone through the edges of her skin; now she was clothed  
only in her untouched integument of flesh. (Carter 1979a: 117-  
118)

After that, the girl takes off the wolf's clothes as well, and takes the initiative of kissing him:

Then went directly to the man with red eyes in whose unkempt  
mane the lice moved; she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the  
collar of his shirt. [...] She freely gave the kiss she owed him [...then] she ripped off his  
shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her  
own discarded clothing. (118)

With these acts, Red Riding Hood shows that she is eager to dismiss all the disciplined behaviours society has taught her and to start acting on her desire in her own terms, even if it means breaching all the laws of disciplined and convenient femininity – her «integument of flesh» is «untouched» because she is a virgin, but also in that now she is free from any externally forced restraint. The agency and empowerment implied by this action are expressed through the domestication of the wolf: instead of eating her, he lies with her in bed, where the dangerous, threatening beast has now turned into a «tender wolf» (118). Once again, the transformation of the girl, who decides to free herself from social expectations, results in the transformation of the animal, and in a telling reversal, the supposedly dangerous untamed female desire succeeds in taming an actually dangerous creature. The wolf, indeed, tries to scare the girl: «What big teeth you have! [...] All the better to eat you with», only to find out that she bursts out laughing, as now she is wise and «she knew she was nobody's meat» (*Ibidem*). Then, in a lovely act of mutual exchange, she encourages the wolf to do what she did by helping him take off his clothes.

Likewise, in “The Tiger's Bride” willing unclothing on the part of both characters exposes the reciprocity required for a transformation that goes beyond and at the same time emphasises the metamorphosis taking place in their identity, and pre-empts the actual physical change. The Beast finally decides to take off his mask and to show himself for what he is:

The tiger sat still as a heraldic beast, in the pact he had made  
with its own ferocity to do me no harm. He was far larger than

I could have imagined, from the poor, shabby things I'd seen once, in the Czar's menagerie at Petersburg, the golden fruit of their eyes dimming, withering in the far North of captivity. Nothing about him reminded me of humanity. (Carter 1979a: 64)

And the girl chooses to look at him, despite the fear and the panic arising in her at the very idea of such a sight:

“If you will not let him see you without your clothes –”  
I involuntarily shook my head –  
“– you must, then, prepare yourself for the sight of my master, naked.”  
[...] My composure deserted me; all at once I was on the brink of panic. I did not think that I could bear the sight of him, whatever he was.  
[...] When I saw how scared he was I might refuse, I nodded.  
[...] I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound. The valet moved forward as if to cover up his master now the girl had acknowledged him, but I said: “No.” (64)

After confronting her fear, Beauty realises that the Beast is afraid of his nakedness as well, of being helpless in the face of his body and desire, therefore she is ready to give up her disguise, too, that is the idea that nakedness is shameful and sexual desire something to be restrained: «I, therefore, shivering, now unfastened my jacket, to show him I would do him no harm» (*Ibidem*). As a result of this wilful act, she acknowledges: «I felt I was at liberty for the first time in my life» (*Ibidem*). And when she returns to her room she realizes that the clockwork maid is no longer – as she had felt earlier – her twin: «[...] while my maid, whose face was no 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» (65). The woman is now freed from patriarchal discursive constraints because the choice to fully identify with her body and to embrace her desire made her realise that it is source of power, and she is ready to undergo the ultimate metamorphosis, to voluntarily turn into a beast.





## 2.

### EXCEEDING BODILY BOUNDARIES

#### 2.1 BECOMING ANIMAL

Although the metamorphoses of the often hyperbolic bodies represented in *The Bloody Chamber* do not challenge the heterosexual matrix, they do challenge patriarchal discourses by being implicated in what they oppose (more often than not the protagonists are introduced as docile bodies, subject to discourse and not yet subjects of power), so that they are able to turn power against itself. Moreover, their agency is made explicit through their disruptive bodily performances, which exceed the norm and/or overthrow it. The bodies of supernatural beings such as vampires or werewolves as they are represented in Carter's fairy tales belong to the first category, since they are liminal creatures which used to be – but no longer are – subject to human laws. They know what it means to be human but now exceed the human, therefore do not need to abide by compulsory discursive repetitions. Furthermore, they do not belong to human society, and would be marginalised for their difference in any case, because it is synonymous with or brings death. The willing transformations of female characters into animals belong instead to the second category, for they symbolise the decision to refuse humanity and its constraining discursive arrangements in order to embrace another nature, which is free from – and does not care about – power hierarchies, and obeys another law (meaningfully enough, one linked to instinct and thus to desire, and where there is no room for rationality).

In traditional representations, wild animals and supernatural creatures share some features as well as symbolic attributes such as danger, death, violence or monstrosity. Furthermore, they are usually identified with otherness or with the abject, thus rejected and pushed to the margins, or

tamed and kept under control. The categorical association of women with these creatures in a discursive binary logic, which also goes hand in hand with feminine identification with monstrosity, is made explicit by Carter. Representing and investigating women wilfully turning into wild beasts or horrific monsters can unveil the double otherness embodied by the feminine and also scrutinize potentially empowering dimensions of the metamorphosis. Like the grotesque body, the bodies of such creatures signify a collapse of the boundaries between human and non-human, and are thus places of transgression, instability, confusion and change. Moreover, they are abject in that they are places of meaninglessness, which highlight the failure of language in making sense of and defining them (see Creed 1993: 9-10). Yet, for these very reasons they are also the places where new meanings and performances can infiltrate and alternative, re-shaped identities can be developed.

Escaping the paradigms encoded by established discourses is not an easy task, but Carter sets out to explore ways of amending and changing them through the redefinition – or, in some instances, the rejection – of the confines between the human and the animal, which begins with blurring the boundaries between their bodies. In order to dismiss the negative definition of the animal and its association with woman, animality must be redefined in positive terms, so that when woman chooses to turn into a beast, it becomes a willing act of empowerment and liberation. If the strategy succeeds, patriarchy is once more tricked, and its logic is turned upside-down and against itself, which means that its discourses are subverted as well.

Even though in Carter's fairy tales male and female animals and their transformations are tackled in different ways, their bodies share a fundamental feature: openness, which signifies a collapse of the confines between the human and the animal. These permeable bodies are located on the edge of two different states, thus can oscillate between them, and embody the desired features of both. This is an inherently subversive standpoint, as animals have traditionally been defined «the metaphysical other[s] of man» (Braidotti 2002: 121), that is they have historically been set in opposition to the human being in order to point out the differences which emphasise and sustain human superiority. Most remarkably, in the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* the boundaries between the human and the animal are unsettled and made penetrable through the metamorphosis of the bodies of the protagonists, which goes both ways: from – male – animal to human (in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”) and vice versa (in “The Tiger’s Bride”, where a woman turns into a beast), and whose nature is investigated and negotiated in “Wolf-Alice” (where a girl struggles to build her human identity after being raised by, and mainly identify with, animals).

The definition of the human as something different from the animal and characterised by the possession of a soul offered by Descartes (Fudge, Gilbert

& Wiseman 2002: 3) has taken roots over time in the desperate undertaking to justify the superiority of the human over the animal. Patriarchal attempts at universalising and naturalising this distinction through binary oppositions have engendered the parallel between woman and animal that Carter's fairy tales seek to contest and to amend. Woman shares animals' otherness because she is the negative half of the binary needed by men to assert and uphold the superiority of the rationality they purport to embody. However, like all discursive formations, this is an historically contextual construction, subject to modification through resistance when it is no longer adequate to account for and regulate changing social practices: «The borders between self and other, human and animal [...] would seem to offer proof of difference. Yet the borders of the human turn out to change according to context and point of view» (Fudge, Gilbert & Wiseman 2002: 5). Given that «women, too, are found at the border of the human and its others» (7), the category can and must be displaced and questioned in that women, like the animal «other» are of «structural importance [...] as props that confirm the "same" in His dominant subject position». In this way, the dominant half of the binary is challenged and displaced in «its very foundations» (Braidotti 2002: 118). One of Carter's representational strategies which move towards this direction is polemically literalising the association between woman and animal, whereby woman is encouraged to identify with or to become the animal as a means of empowerment. This act, indeed, unsettles normalised power balances and points to the positive potential of the metamorphosis performed through the dissolution of the confines between human and animal bodies.

In Carter's fairy tales, animals exceed all their traditional functions; like the Deleuzian becoming-animal, they «are neither functional to teleological systems of classification, nor are they about metaphors: they are rather about metamorphoses» (Braidotti 2002: 126). For starters, their strength «lies precisely in not being-one which is expressed in their attachment to and interdependence on a territory» (133). Re-signifying the identification of women with animals in these terms, which stress communion and mutual exchange, could bring forward the dissolution of patriarchal binary oppositions, so that the emerging subjectivity is «not split along the traditional axes of mind/body, consciousness/unconsciousness, or reason/imagination». On the contrary, it becomes a «forever shifting entity, fundamentally driven by desire for expansion towards its many-faceted exterior borders/other» (131). The subject thus defined, then, exceeds the borders of its body, is able to incorporate the other without consuming it, and celebrates the instability of its identity because it entails forthcoming, endless, change.

The transformations undergone by the bodies of Carter's female characters tend to this outcome, that is they show how trespassing and transgressing fixed bodily borderlines challenges discursively imposed behaviours

and helps them perform – attempted and provisional but autonomous – identities. In other words, they are examples which indicate how to exceed the norm and propose ways of re-encoding it.

The body from which Deleuze starts to construct his notion of the «becoming animal» is an «un-organic» body: «a body without organs, a body freed from the codes of phallogocentric functions of identity» (Braidotti 2002: 124). It is not a body literally deprived of its organs, but rather the functions of its organs are creatively rearranged so that the moral and prescriptive values associated with disciplined bodily performances can be re-signified, resulting in the empowerment of the subject who can thus inscribe new meanings on its body:

The un-organic “body without organs” is supposed to create creative disjunction in this system [the phallogocentric one], freeing organs from their indexation to certain prerequisite functions: this is the process of becoming animal. In some ways, this calls for a generalised perversion of all bodily functions, not only the sexual ones; it is a way of scrambling the master-code of phallogocentrism and loosening its power over the body. (*Ibidem*)

“Wolf-Alice” can be considered an experiment aimed at testing the possibility of plying human bodily functions by integrating them with animal ones in order to detach the human body from the phallogocentric pre-eminence of sight, which keeps at a distance and others the observed object while forcing on it a limited set of meanings. That is why, even after having initiated a socialisation process towards womanhood, the wolf-girl still keeps on relying more on the other senses, even if they are traditionally subordinated to sight exactly because of their association with animality: «She can get so much more of the world than we can through the fine, hairy, sensitive filters of her nostrils that her poor eyesight does not trouble her» (Carter 1979a: 119).

The becoming-animal undoes one of the metaphysics of the self, scrambling the distinction between human and non-human. [...] It not only engages in dialogue with the classical “other” of Man [...which in this case is Woman/Animal] but it also frees the animal [and by extension, woman] from the anthropocentric gaze altogether. (Braidotti 2002: 145)

As a matter of fact, the invaluable asset at Alice’s disposal in the construction of her identity is the liminal position of her body: neither animal nor human, but an ongoing process of negotiation between the two. The way in which Carter represents Wolf-Alice’s purposely incomplete transition from

animal to human, which is paired with her transition from childhood to girlhood, does not meet the standards of normalised subject formation because her animal drives are not «processed and tamed in order to be made tolerable», their «raw intensity» is not «turned down», but rather incorporated in the substance of her womanhood, so that she never ceases to howl at the moon although it is not a «proper behaviour» (141). Like her hyphenated name suggests throughout the text, Wolf-Alice will continue to inhabit the borderless, metamorphic space of interstices, always in-between.

The physical transformation of the woman into a tiger in “The Tiger’s Bride” is part of Carter’s re-signification and empowerment of the female body under another perspective. Whereas the internal and external metamorphosis of “Wolf-Alice” lead her to humanising the Duke through «instinctual, merciful, maternal» love (Atwood 2001: 147), the physical change of Beauty in “The Tiger’s Bride” is the outcome of sexual drives, of a desiring subject whose passion urges her to exceed the confines of her human body to fulfil those instincts which are proscribed to her or blamed in the light of her femininity. This tale reflects on the interactions between the body and desire and the strategies through which the latter can be freely disclosed and acted upon. The reflections on the topic fictionalised in the story could stem from challenging at least two assumptions. First, that the association between passion and woman has been traditionally pathologised and has served as a weapon for patriarchy to uphold the need to keep female bodies under control. Second, that drawing a clear-cut distinction between human and animal has assisted phallogocentric discourses in trying to tame desire – and the animal attributes in the human body – in order to build a model of the body as a «well-organised and functioning organism», whose sexual desires are by extension disciplined, controlled and regulated into «normal orgasms» (Braidotti 2002: 140) – that is, into heterosexual reproduction.

Braidotti provides a sharp analysis of how passion has become synonymous with dangerous disruption, its attachment to the female body leading to the need of taming and restraining its performances. Then by coupling deconstruction with re-construction, she offers an alternative way of redefining passion and desire in positive terms, in order that they become – as Carter’s story exemplifies – the guiding forces which can trigger change through alternative bodily performances:

Historically, the dangerous tendencies or intense drives towards blurring of categorical distinctions or boundaries have been discursively packaged under the heading of “passions”. The term passion, of course, is of the same etymological root as the notion of pathology. Both of them, in western culture, bear connotations of a disease that shatters the balance of the subject. Since the eighteenth century especially, the pathologization of the pas-

sions has led to the modern regime of sexuality that Foucault analyses in terms of *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*. [...] This historical process has also invested primarily the female gender as a high-risk, “emotional” category. The hysterical body of women in some ways marks the threshold of this process of pathologising human affectivity. (143)

Needless to say, in patriarchal regimes the female body is opposed to male rationality, and the two categories are mutually exclusive. As Braidotti contends, nevertheless, «the process of becoming is collectively driven, that is to say relational and external; it is also framed by affectivity or desire, and is thus ec-centric to rational control» (*Ibidem*). Albeit dislodged from rationality, and mainly constituted by «unconscious affects, drives or desire», «the processes of change and transformation, however difficult and at times painful, are also empowering and highly desirable events» (*Ibidem*). These contentions reflect the experience of Beauty in “The Tiger’s Bride”, where the girl at first rationally speculates about the difference between herself – as a human being – and the Beast and its valet – as animals – only to realise that despite being physically human, she has been objectified like a bargaining item. Thereby she comes to the conclusion that the notion of humanity she was taught needs to be reconsidered altogether.

A profound sense of strangeness slowly began to possess me. I knew my two companions were not, in any way, as other men, the simian retainer and the master for whom he spoke [...]. I knew they lived according to a different logic than I had done until my father abandoned me to the wild beasts in his human carelessness. This knowledge gave me a certain fearfulness still; but, I would say, not much... 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. If I could see not one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me, then the six of us – mounts and riders, both – could boast amongst us not one single soul, either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out. Understand, then, that though I would not say I privately engaged in metaphysical speculation as we rode through the reedy approaches to the river, I certainly meditated on the nature of my own state, how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand. (Carter 1979a: 63)

After realising that rationality does not help her solve the riddle of her identity and humanity, the girl decides to turn to instinct, to let her body be the guide and to embrace the instability of transformation. Most notably, her metamorphosis, as the one advocated for by Braidotti, is not an individual act: it requires the presence of the other – in this case of the Beast – to be fully enacted and achieved. Furthermore, it is a painful process, accounted for by the I-narrator of the story as a sort of «flaying». When the girl takes off her clothes for the second time, in her room, the disrobing hurts because now she is aware of the symbolic reach of this act: she is ready to take off all the meanings imposed on her body, to strip off her flesh and go back to being meat so as to re-signify her body anew.

Then I took off my riding habit, left it where it lay on the floor. But, when I got down my shift, my arms dropped to my sides. I was unaccustomed to nakedness. I was so unused to my own skin that to take off all my clothes involved a kind of flaying. I thought The Beast had wanted a little thing compared with what I was prepared to give him; but it is not natural for humankind to go naked, not since first we hid our loins with fig leaves. [...] I felt as much atrocious pain as if I was stripping off my own underpelt. (Carter 1979a: 66)

The second step after giving up the meanings and performances imposed on womanhood – i.e. what the girl did on the riverbanks, when she showed her nakedness to the Beast – is stripping off the assumptions that define humanity, whose cultural constructedness is conveyed by the biblical reference. The cultural codes are so deeply inscribed on the woman's body that she feels a physical, excruciating pain. When Beauty approaches the Beast she is «raw», that is her body has been freed from the weight of the many – metaphorical – constrictive layers of clothes, and she is eager to offer herself to him because she knows that «his appetite need not be my extinction» (67). The pact of reciprocity has been made, and she is ready to undergo the ultimate metamorphosis:

He dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sand-paper. “He will lick the skin off me!” And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive sin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (*Ibidem*)

The powerful image of the skin being licked away resonates the depth of the bodily change that the subject needs to painfully endure if it wants to become animal, that is to learn how to dismiss the construction of difference as otherness and «pejoration», and conversely how to incorporate the other – and being incorporated by it – so that desire and pleasure do not entail being taken from, but rather being experienced together and exchanged. The «changes of co-ordinates» required by the choice of embracing metamorphosis as a constructive – albeit unstable and never ending – force, call for

The political and conceptual necessity to change in depth and thus to extract from our enfleshed memory the repertoire of available images for self-representation. [...] I would [...] describe it as a process of peeling off, stratum after stratum, the layers of signification that have been tattooed in the surface of our body and – more importantly – in its psychic recesses and the internalized folds of one's sacrosanct "experience". Like a snake shedding an old skin, one must remember to forget it. (Braidotti 2002: 170)

## 2.2. GROTESQUE INTERLUDE

The metamorphosing bodies of Carter's heroines become permeable in exceeding the boundaries between the human and the animal, that is they open themselves up to absorb and incorporate the substance of the body of the other coming from outside as well as to expose and expel what is inside. The openness and porosity which characterise the body 'becoming animal' are to be found also in the bodies of supernatural creatures and monsters dealt with in the stories yet to be investigated, which undergo a transformation, or are inherently metamorphic. These similarities allow one to read all these excessive bodies against the notion of the 'grotesque body' under multiple perspectives, which deepens the complexities of the polysemy taken on by the body in Carter's tales as well as guides and intermingles the analysis of the metamorphic body of the animal with that of the monster.

So far the body has been analysed in its interrelation with identity, its weight and metamorphoses linked to the construction and development of the subject's identity in order to show that the materiality of the body is shaped by but also, most importantly, shapes the transformations taking place at the level of subjectivity. The boundaries of these bodies are constructed and deconstructed with relation to psychic processes, that is they can and do change, they can become feeble and permeable, and thus be trespassed when established discourses around the development of subjectivity are contested and rearranged. As Butler would put it, the materiality of the



body is not a causal effect of the psyche, the body is not inherently ontological and materialised by a psyche which «establishes its modes of appearance as an epistemological object» (Butler 1993: 66). On the contrary, the psyche is «an epistemic grid through which the body is known» but is also «formative of morphology»: «psychic projection confers boundaries and, hence, unity on the body, so that the very contours of the body are sites that vacillate between the psychic and the material. Bodily contours and morphology *are* [...] tensions between the psychic and the material» (*Ibidem*).

In the light of these considerations, calling into question and challenging patriarchal traditional ways of understanding the workings of the psyche and its disciplinary impact on the body entails opening the borders of the body, so that its surface can expand and incorporate new meanings through alternative mechanisms of inscription. That is why the experiences of Carter's protagonists tend towards openness rather than the demarcation of the boundaries of the skin, which becomes a layer of clothing to be stripped off, or more generally a thin film that can be easily wounded and broken to let out the bodily fluids it contains.

Among the different characterisations and implications of the notion of 'grotesque body', the one that best suits the characters represented in *The Bloody Chamber* is perhaps its ability to blur «the boundary between self and other» (Creed 1995: 131), which leads to a reciprocal incorporation and emphasises the relational features of the materialisation of an un-disciplined body in Carter's collection. As Russo explains, the notion of Grotesque/Carnavalesque body introduced by Bakhtin already stresses the social, collective nature of the body, whose materiality is not «“contained in the biological individual [...] but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed”. [...] the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world; “it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects”» (Russo 1994: 8). Moreover, its subversive character lies in its disruption of what is discursively constructed as the normal, naturalised body – which usually corresponds with a clearly circumscribed body whose boundaries are as tightly closed as possible: «The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek; it is identified with the “high” or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the Rationalism, individualism and normalising aspirations of the bourgeoisie» (*Ibidem*). By contrast, due to the binary and mutually exclusive organisation of the categories predisposed by phallogocentric traditions, the opposite, negative, counterpart of this idealised body (often associated with the feminine, but, more broadly, with the body of the other, which is different and unaccountable for whatever reasons) is the grotesque body, which is «open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official “low” culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation» (*Ibidem*).

The flaws of the grotesque body, then, turn into its assets, as its excesses lead to transformation, whereas the ideal, static, body, is condemned to immobility and to endlessly mirroring itself and its perfection. Carter, thus, chooses to represent open bodies without clear-cut boundaries because only those bodies are capable of becoming vehicles of individual as well as social change. Once again, politics and poetics overlap, and the transgression of patriarchal politics is brought about through the fictionalised, narrative representation of – more or less – transgressive bodies and their metamorphoses.

This incorporative notion of the grotesque has become a bodily category which «emerges as a deviation from the norm» (Russo 1994: 11), that is it sets itself in opposition to the normalising drive of patriarchal disciplining bodily practices. As Russo remarks, however, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the general – assumed as universal but actually mainly referred to the male – conceptualisation of the grotesque body offered by Bakhtin, and its implications when it comes to the female body. The «positioning of the grotesque as superficial and to the margins is suggestive of a certain construction of the feminine» (5-6). The genealogies of the female body and of the grotesque are «mutually constitutive» even if there is no «exclusive» or «essential» relationship between them, and most notably despite the correspondence between the two terms being a tautology, since the feminine «is always defined against the male norm» (12). That is to say, the female body is always identified as deviation from a standard in itself; if the «universal thinking-subject position» is assumed to be the «*disembodied*» masculinity set in opposition to its other, then woman is «over-embodied and dis-identified as the essential *other* marked by her unthinkable bodiliness» (Kerchy 2008: 39).

The transformations and transgressions of the bodies described in *The Bloody Chamber* have been analysed in terms of performative, iterative constructions caught in the tension between complicity with and subversion of the norm. As Butler contends, however,

the normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as “being” – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unviable, the unnarrativisable, the traumatic. (Butler 1993: 187-188)

This insight is of particular relevance to the investigation of the female grotesque body for at least two main reasons. First of all, it introduces the site of the abject and its association with the female body as source of marginalisation and the designation of woman as monster due to the threat-

ening character of her bodily attributes. Secondly, it discloses the implications of a grotesque body that incorporates the other, thus making its abject experience viable and narrativisable, and helps the subject cope with and overcome traumatic events through reciprocity.

The grotesque, metamorphosing body devised by Carter is «a paradoxical space that fuses the ideologically prescribed writing *on* the body with the subversive materially induced writing *from* the body», where «the body is regarded as a palimpsestic space of polymorphous, antagonistic texts» (Kerchy 2008). The subjects-in-process accounted for in the tales, indeed, «are embodied in Carter’s fiction by the grotesque, freakishly (re)incarnated body generating its subversively somatised narratives» (*Ibidem*).

The bodies of the female protagonists of the stories can be considered «in-process» – as can their identities (see Manley 2011) – in that they are subject to change because of the process of growing up (which usually coincides with menstruation), the loss of virginity, or a physical change (like that undergone by the Tiger’s Bride) which points to the choice of giving different meanings to the body, of completely identifying with it and with its desires by welcoming transformation.

### 2.3. BLOOD TRAILS

A further dimension of woman’s bodily experience which is strictly related to the grotesque, but also exceeds it in many ways, stems from the inherent openness of her body, whose changes are foreshadowed by the spill of bodily fluids – more specifically, blood – which on the one hand can be read in positive terms as a symbol of renewed strength and agency, but on the other lead to the coincidence between her body and abjection – and thus to less clear-cut interpretations. Last, but not least, it is thanks to this association that the female body, whose changes always involve the shedding of blood, is constructed as threatening and ultimately monstrous.

Female spilled blood is a powerful element in Carter’s narrative for its re-signification is crucial to encode and exemplify new paradigms of female agency and empowerment. As Bacchilega remarks quoting Irigaray:

The economic and symbolic revaluing of women’s menstrual and birth blood [is] essential to the transformation of the heroine’s subjectivity. Formerly identified with life itself, blood’s “natural” value has been “covered over by other forms of wealth: gold, penis, child”. In patriarchal economies, women – who represent these “blood reserves” – are exploited because both profit and pleasure require the spilling of their blood. (Bacchilega 1997: 66)

In “The Werewolf” the blood of grandma-werewolf is spilled by the young girl, who cuts off her arm when she encounters her grandmother in her dreadful wolfish form. As specified by Bacchilega’s interpretation, Carter’s version refers to some folk-tales within the “Red Riding Hood” tradition, where the girl is tricked by the wolf into drinking her grandmother’s blood as a ritual which signifies her transition into adulthood and emphasises her connection with the family and, more specifically with the legacy of its women. The original ritual pattern is however disturbed by Carter, as «instead of drinking her ancestor’s blood to reinforce family/female ties, the girl spills that blood in a scapegoating ritual that ensures her own livelihood. She replaces the old woman, not by assimilation but through a violent severance that reproduces the wolf’s ferocity» (Bacchilega 1997: 61). As the tale shows, then, this is the blood of the ancestors, which needs to be incorporated but also spilled, and could therefore signify the necessity of leaving the past behind if the girl wants to «prosper» in her grandmother’s house (Carter 1979a: 110). As Carter seems to whisper to her readers by breaking the unchanging chain of the ritual, old, monstrous patriarchal ideals of disciplined femininity (embodied by the grandmother, who stands for an example of femininity to be followed by her granddaughter but at the same time turns into a werewolf, thus symbolising patriarchal threats) must be left behind and replaced by a new, uncompromised paradigm of brave, self-aware and cunning womanhood.

After having spilled the blood of past, acquiescent articulations of femininity, Red Riding Hood embarks on a journey where she can discover desire and negotiate her female identity outside of patriarchal restrictions and reductive span of alternatives. In what could be considered a chronological sequence, this process is represented in the rewriting of the Red Riding Hood theme in “The Company of Wolves”. Blood here turns into the menstrual blood of an adolescent girl, who armed with her empowering virginity looks out into womanhood: «Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white as she has just started her woman’s bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month» (Carter 1979a: 113). When she meets the werewolf-hunter, her naiveté prevents her from noticing the threat posed by the predator: «There is a faint trace of blood on his chin» (115). To this spilled blood of a prey which has been consumed, and therefore has become dead meat, the girl counters the blood spilled when she loses her virginity. When she chooses to offer herself to the wolf, indeed, she is not devoured like meat by his appetite, but instead participates with him in the pleasures of sex like lively, desiring flesh. Thus, the spilling of blood in this case symbolises for the girl «act[ing] out her desires», not an act of violence and death (as it was in “The Werewolf”), but one of transformation and life. In a way, her act of reciprocity also manages

to tame the hunger of the wolf: «See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf» (118). In the end a double metamorphosis (similar to that portrayed in the variations on “Beauty and the Beast”) is performed: in the girl's subjectivity and sexual maturation as well as in the animal instincts of the wolf.

The last of the tales in the wolf trilogy, “Wolf-Alice”, takes a step further in using the symbol of blood to represent the construction of – positive – alternative patterns of identity development for women. In this tale blood, albeit linked to the sexual maturation of the girl, finally completely coincides with the principle of life. It is through blood, indeed, that the wolf-child begins to perceive a sense of her self, as well as her connection with the world because her first bleeding, tied with the cycles of the moon, also coincides with her first conscious confrontation with her mirror-image. When she does not know how to explain either the menstrual blood or the fact that what she sees in the mirror is her reflection, the girl theorises that another wolf «must have nibbled her cunt while she was sleeping» (Carter 1979a: 122), so goes to the mirror to check if she can see it: «The moon and mirrors have this much in common: you cannot see behind them. Moonlit and white, Wolf-Alice looked at herself in the mirror and wondered whether there she saw the beast who came to bite her in the night» (123). Another strong symbolic meaning of this new self-awareness whose primary vehicle is blood, is the process whereby she learns the notion of time through the regular appearance of her menstrual blood.

Her first blood bewildered her. [...] The flow continued for a few days, which seemed to her an endless time. She had, as yet, no direct notion of past, or future, or of duration, only of a dimensionless, immediate moment.

[...] Soon the flow ceased. She forgot it. The moon vanished; but, little by little, reappeared. When it again visited her kitchen at full strength, Wolf-Alice was surprised into bleeding again and so it went on, with a punctuality that transformed her vague grip on time. [...] Sequence asserted itself with custom and then she understood the circumambulatory principle of the clock perfectly [...] *she discovered the very action of time by means of this returning circle* (my emphasis). (Carter 1979a: 122-123)

It is worth noting that a subtle consequence of this coincidence is the different understanding of time Alice gains, which is at odds with the traditional linear development sustained by – and which sustains – patriarchal discourses. Linked to the lunar phases and to the idea of a regularly recurrent cycle, this perception of time is circular, and epitomises the necessity to change traditional cultural approaches to the notion. Although the idea

of linear, chronological development apparently entails progress, therefore change, it has instead proved to be unable to account for the transformations of the female body in a positive way. Moreover, a similar, partial and therefore flawed understanding of time has prevented a deeper comprehension of the female changing body, thus contributing to enforce fear for it, and its consequent demonization. Wolf-Alice's blood instead, like that of the protagonist of "The Company of Wolves", is a positive token which symbolises life in contrast with the blood spilled by «us» – i.e. the other socialised, allegedly fully human members of mankind – which points on the contrary to death and destruction: «"We" judge and spill blood, while her brave acceptance of difference revalues life» (Bacchilega 1997: 65).

In the same stories where blood can be positively read a sign of agency, from which young women begin to build their identity, to autonomously confront the world and defy normalised relations, it can also be interpreted in the light of the notions of the grotesque and the abject – therefore bearing a less clear-cut and even more problematic symbolic load. For starters, the abject quality of blood – especially of menstrual blood – is one of the main specificities of the female grotesque body, included by Kristeva in the category of «bodily waists» (Creed 1993: 9), which threatens the stability of the disciplined body by exposing its fissures and its contents.

The first menstrual blood referred to countless times in *The Bloody Chamber* locates woman in a liminal position: «at the threshold of womanhood» (Creed 1995: 150), which is grotesque – i.e. it disturbs normality and order – because it hints at «female power associated with bodily change» (*Ibidem*). This is the case of Red Riding Hood in "The Company of Wolves", whose shawl stands throughout the story for her first bleeding and locates her on the threshold between girlhood and womanhood: «Her mother and the grandmother [...] knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow. [...] she has just started her woman bleeding» (Carter 1979a: 113). Later on, her decision to take off the shawl, once again explicitly linked to her menstruation, suggests that she is ready to leave behind her girlhood – i.e. her naiveté, related to fear for what is unknown – to embrace the sexual pleasure associated with womanhood – after she has chosen to overcome fear. Likewise, in "Wolf-Alice" the menstrual blood's abject quality is inherent in its symbolic association with growing up. In this case the displacement brought about by the abject fluid is even more significant as it also stands for the threshold between humanity and animality. The ideas of transformation and renewal implicit in Alice's first experience of menstruation are even stronger than those of the previous example, as she believes her bleedings are adding new skin to her body: «She would spend hours examining the new skin that had been born, it seemed to her, of her bleeding» (Carter 1979a: 124). This «new skin» could stand for the new consciousness the girl is acquiring of her body, no longer

a functional empty vessel which performs vital functions, but an inscriptive surface on which she can begin to write something new and from which she can look at the world through different senses.

Within the collection, the blood linked to female metamorphosing body as a site of abjection and threat to the established order is also that which is spilled through the loss of virginity. The stories emphasise the ambivalence of this kind of bloodshed, too, as Carter shows different instances in which the equally abject voluntary or violently imposed loss of virginity signifies different – more or less empowering – processes of appropriation of the body on the part of woman. The eagerness with which Red Riding Hood strips off her shawl, and subsequently her clothes, suggesting that she is ready to lay in bed with the wolf, is at odds with the reluctance of the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” to do the same. The latter, indeed, endures all the rituals related to the first sexual intercourse with intentional detachment, expressed by the action of looking away from the mirror or from her husband’s eyes when she glimpses the reflection of the woman, whom she is not ready to identify with yet. The loss of virginity constitutes for her a violation of her body, paralleled by the atrocities she witnesses in the bloody chamber where the Marquis keeps the bleeding corpses of his previous wives and victims. The motif of defloration is expressed by the blood stains on the sheets, when the Marquis ironically remarks:

“The maids will have changed our sheets already,” he said. “We do not hang the bloody sheets out of the window to prove the whole of Brittany you are a virgin. Not in these civilized times. But I should tell you it would have been the first time in all my married lives I could have shown my interested tenants such a flag.” (Carter 1979a: 19)

Although the words of the Marquis entail an ostensible idea of progress by implying that the wife’s virginity is no longer deemed a vaunted trophy, their meaning suggests the contrary. The husband is in fact proud of being able to boast about the virginity of this young bride, as he would do about a new exotic item in his collection.

The objectification of this female body and its violation with relation to defloration stands out even more when set in comparison with the experience of the female protagonist of “Puss in Boots”. The gravity with which the topic is tackled in the first story is indeed replaced by mockery and a jovial, comical atmosphere in the second. Here sex is a liberating, playful act, perhaps enjoyed even more profoundly by women since, as the clever cat remarks: «women, I think, are, of the two sexes, the more keenly tuned to the sweet music of their bodies» (Carter 1979a: 78). Towards the end of the tale, the young lady unhappily married with an older, nasty man, finally

has the opportunity to enjoy sex with a handsome young boy after being deprived of it by her greedy husband, who does not dare to enjoy any kind of consummation which could occasion a loss of some kind – even of physical energy – or could spoil the perfection of his wife. The sexual encounter is accurately staged like a «grand charade» (*Ibidem*) by the cat and its master, who pretend to be rat exterminators in order to access the impenetrable house of Signor Pantaleone – symbolically identifiable with the untouched body of his pretty wife. In this case, the blood-stained sheets are comically camouflaged to conceal the betrayal out of which the girl has taken as much pleasure as possible (79), and the bed is turned into the battlefield of a war between cat and mice, whose implicit sexual undertones are easily inferable: «Puss had a mighty battle with the biggest beast you ever saw upon this very bed; can't you see the bloodstains on the sheets?» (*Ibidem*).

Regardless of its positive or negative associations, the loss of virginity is generally dealt with in the collection as the infliction of a bleeding wound on the female body. It is interesting to note that in at least two other instances Carter resorts to the fairy tale motif of the virgin girl pricking her finger. Thus are insinuated the deflorations of Beauty in “The Tiger’s Bride” – the girl pricks her finger with a thorn of a rose that the Beast has given her, smearing it with blood (55) – and of Snow White in “The Snow Child” – the girl born solely out of her father’s desire «pricks her finger on the thorn» of the rose the Countess commanded her to pick (92) before dying and being raped by her father.

A number of other examples in *The Bloody Chamber* refer to or explicitly mention blood and its flowing with relation both to the female and to the male body. Besides menstruation and defloration, blood usually marks a kind of violation of the body, as it is injured, drained, maimed, torn apart or devoured. This last set of meanings associated with blood is to be placed in the realm of the abject and of the grotesque body as well, but with another connotation. The violent spill of blood, indeed, also stands for another kind of otherness associated with femininity because of the excessiveness of the female body: the erosion of the confines between human and supernatural, life and death. In this respect the body of woman is deemed to be grotesque for it becomes once again a place of transgression, instability and confusion due to change. In addition to the implications investigated so far, however, the grotesque features of the female monstrous body are enriched with the threat of undermining the other – male – bodies’ integrity through its physical attributes and, more specifically, their seductiveness which endangers the stability of established meanings with its potential of *engendering* change.



#### 2.4. MONSTROUS FEMININITY – THE DOUBLE ABJECTION OF THE BODY OF THE VAMPIRE

Monstrosity, like any other culturally constructed category, is to be investigated in its gendered specificities as the notion takes on different meanings depending on the sex of the monster, which must be carefully scrutinised outside of simplistic mirroring reversals and binary oppositions. As Barbara Creed claims, there is a substantial difference between the concepts of «monstrous femininity» and «female monster», where the latter is a simple reversal of the «male monster», for the female scares for different reasons and in different ways than the male does: «as with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase “monstrous-feminine” emphasises the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity» (Creed 1993: 3). The inherent monstrosity of female sexuality is grounded in her body on account of its abject transformations. The «abject» is, according to Kristeva, «that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules”, that which disturbs identity, system, order» (Kristeva in Creed 1993: 8), and is therefore marginalised when it cannot be kept under control. «Abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject» (*Ibidem*). More to the point, the abject, grotesque body is perceived as dangerous not only because of its permeability, but also for its inherently duplicitous nature. On the one hand it is «the place where meaning collapses» where life is threatened and thus «it must be “radically excluded” (Kristeva 1982: 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self». On the other hand, abject is also «that which [...] helps to define life» (Creed 1993: 9) because its in-betweenness and its ability to expose and to cross borders entail that the place of abjection is also the place of rebellion and transformation.

Carter’s female vampire in “The Lady of the House of Love” embodies the features of the monstrous feminine and is characterised by a double abjection: that associated with the female body and its reproductive functions and that linked to the corpse and the body without soul; it stands for both the vitality of generation and the threats of death. «When woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions» (Creed 1993: 7) because they imply a physical change of some sort, the loss of bodily fluids, and/or the exposure of the inside of the body, through which the body exceeds its borders and shape. In addition, as a vampire, the Lady is a source of abjection because her body without soul feeds on other bodies’ source of life, thus wounding them and causing the loss and exposure of blood (10).

This sort of ambiguity also echoes one of the paradoxes of femininity analysed by Tseëlon, that is, «woman signifies death as well as the defence against it» (1995: 6). Death is one of the major – repressed – sources of fear which cannot be explained in rational terms. Like the abject body of the woman, whose changes scare because they exceed bodily borders, death is uncanny, it «is the opposite of all that is familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, comfortable, arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security» (101). The reason why the female body is paradoxical with relation to death is that the sublimation of the fear of death increases the need to fantasise and idealise it. Inasmuch as woman represents death, the uncanny female body is controlled through its aestheticisation, as a way of taming and making sense of death (102).

The body of the female vampire exposes this covert cultural identification devised by male anxieties towards death, since it is usually a beautiful soulless vessel, inhabited by a deadly threatening monster who kills and incorporates the victims by literally sucking life out of them. The gender attributes of the vampire, whether they are intentionally blurred or clearly described to emphasise the peculiarity of threat and seduction that male and female bloodsuckers embody, can also openly be a vehicle of mortal danger linked to sex. More specifically, in the case of female vampires they are associated with masculine fears of castration, since their bodies epitomise the *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina – 72):

The fantasy of the *vagina dentata*, of the non-human state of woman as android, vampire, or animal, the identification of female sexuality as voracious, insatiable, enigmatic, invisible, and unknowable, cold, calculating, instrumental, castrator/decapitator of the male, dissimulatress or fake, predatory, engulfing mother, are all consequences of the ways in which male orgasm has functioned as the measure and representative of all sexualities and all modes of erotic encounter. (Grosz 1995: 203)

Hence, the female body and its metamorphoses are perceived and constructed as threatening – vampiric – because sexual desire, pleasure and seduction have traditionally been discursively constructed within a patriarchal economy as one-way drives whose subjects are unequivocally men.

The bodily performance of “The Lady of the House of Love” is disturbing and subversive, all the more as its paradoxes succeed in exposing and deconstructing the naturalisation of the female body as monstrous accomplished by phallogocentric discourses. First of all, the female vampire discloses the patriarchal construction of woman as monstrous for, as Carter reveals from the very beginning of the story, her monstrosity is grounded in the impossibility of changing. That is to say, the Queen of the Dead incarnates death not

because of the threatening attributes of her reproductive organs, but thanks to her immortal nature, which implies that her body needs to feed on death in order to survive, and that it is sterile, i.e. under no circumstances can it be source of life. Trapped in this world and instinctively forced to hunt in order to preserve her flesh, this apparently soulless body cannot change, let alone give birth, and despite causing bloodshed while feeding, does not know what it means to bleed – thus it is impossible to attach menacing meanings to its menstruation, defloration of childbearing: «she is herself a cave full of echoes, she is a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit» (Carter 1979a: 93).

Secondly, in the usual fashion through which Carter exposes patriarchal discursive constructions before challenging them, at first the description of the Lady apparently meets all the standards of the paradoxical identification between female beauty and death pointed out by Tseëlon. Her beauty is linked to disorder, deadly threat, soullessness:

She is so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity, for none of her features exhibit any of those touching imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfection of the human condition. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness. (Carter 1979a: 94)

Moreover, she incarnates the abject features of a grotesque body which exceeds the borders between human and animal: despite her human appearance, her ravenous hunger and her hunting instincts being beastly:

On moonless nights, her keeper lets her out into the garden. [...] When the back door opens, the Countess will sniff the air and howl. She drops, now, on all fours. Crouching, quivering, she catches the scent of her prey. Delicious crunch of the fragile bones of rabbits and small, furry things she pursues with fleet, four-footed speed; she will creep home, whimpering, with blood smeared on her cheeks. She pours water from the ewer in her bedroom into the bowl, she washes her face with the wincing, fastidious gestures of a cat. (95)

The Countess wants fresh meat. When she was a little girl, she was like a fox and contented herself entirely with baby rabbits that squeaked piteously as she bit into their necks with a nauseated voluptuousness, with voles and fieldmice that palpitated for a bare moment between her embroidress's fingers. But now she is a woman, she must have men. (96)

Interestingly, though, all the descriptions of her hunger and of her hunts are paired with singular statements asserting the reluctance with which she performs the animal rituals she is doomed to. Clearly she refuses her animality, not so much because of its unruly associations and the aggressive potential it entails, but rather as it is symptom of her changeless immortality:

The voracious margin of huntress's nights in the gloomy garden, crouch and pounce, surrounds her habitual tormented somnambulism, her life or imitation of life. The eyes of this nocturnal creature enlarge and glow. All claws and teeth, she strikes, she gorges; *but nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition, nothing.* (*Ibidem*)

The beautiful somnambulist *helplessly* perpetuates her ancestral crimes. (93)

Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror – except *her horrible reluctance to the role.* (95)

*She loathes the food she eats* [...] but hunger always overcomes her. [...] A certain desolate stillness in her eyes indicates *she is inconsolable.* (96; my emphases)

The conflict experienced by the female vampire, who cannot put up with the requirements of her monstrous body, is expressed through the recurring motif of the tarots, which the Lady constantly, hopelessly and pointlessly interrogates, even if the cards always send the same message:

She counts out the Tarot cards, ceaselessly construing a constellation of possibilities as if the random fall of the cards on the red plush tablecloth before her could precipitate her from her chill, shuttered room into a country of perpetual summer and obliterate the perennial sadness of a girl who is both death and the maiden. (93)

These and teeth as fine and white as spikes of spun sugar are the visible signs of the destiny she wistfully attempts to evade via the arcana. (94)

In her dream, she would like to be human; but she does not know if that is possible. The Tarot always shows the same configuration: always she turns up La Papesse, La Mort, La Tour

Abolie, wisdom, death, dissolution.

[...] She resorts to the magic comfort of the Tarot pack and shuffles the cards, lays them out, reads them, gathers them up with a sigh, shuffles them again, constantly constructing hypotheses about a future which is irreversible. (95)

The Lady cannot come to terms with and accept her state because it is proof of her body being an empty vessel, a puppet through which her ghostly ancestors are free to peep and speak:

the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence.

[...] She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. [...] The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions. (93, 103)

The destiny of eternal repetition of her ancestor's passions already suggests that she does not possess a voice of her own, but she is condemned to endlessly repeat the dreadful message of death to those who regrettably approach her: «Her voice is filled with distant sonorities, like riverberations in a cave: now you are at the place of annihilation, now you are at the place of annihilation» (93). This parallel culminates, as has already been pointed out, with the young cyclist describing her voice as «disembodied», like that of a «ventriloquist doll» (102).

Significantly, then, the kernel of her paradoxical state aptly devised by Carter is that the she-vampire is disembodied. Although the construction of monstrous femininity stems from the over-identification or reduction of woman to her body, the vampire being one of the most suitable incarnations of this process, this monstrous woman-corpse is anomalously discarnate. This does not mean, however, that the Countess wants to get rid of the physical constraints of her body in order to overcome the limits of a body whose attributes are demonised because of their association with threatening sexuality and desire. Her impossible dream of becoming human in fact imply the contrary, that is the possibility of experiencing love and change, even if they require pain and death. She is convinced that «love would free me» (105), and turn against itself the fatal ritual of seduction through which she lures her victims with the promise of pleasure, but which inevitably ends with their demise and her annihilation. Her tempting invitation, «“My

clothes have but to fall and you will see before you a succession of mystery”» is aimed at masking the fact that instead:

She has no mouth with which to kiss, no hands with which to caress, only the fangs and talons of a beast of prey. To touch the mineral sheen of the flesh revealed in the cool candle gleam is to invite her fatal embrace; in her low, sweet, voice, she will croon the lullaby of the House of Nosferatu. (94-95)

Yet, thanks to the encounter with the young cyclist – and, possibly, with love – she is able to breach the endless repetition of her murderous ritual and to turn into a human being, even if it means dying, breaking the spell, thereby exposing the fake tawdriness of her surroundings.

Pi-tai Peng contends that the tale ultimately does not succeed in conveying a message of female empowerment or liberation, because the vampire’s source of power is a «forever-annihilating» «passivity»: «she desires something she is structured lacking and she falls victim to romance, which is ironically her rescue» (2004: 110). «The countess’ doll-like vampiric desire» is seen as a sign of a «feminine sexuality – voracious passivity», which

Parodies the male-centered rational discourse with its exorcising power, not just to subvert its rational-phallocentrism but to deconstruct the myth of the fearful power that has been imputed to the female vampire, to show that this fearful power is debilitating for women in its empowerment from the phallocentric discourse. (*Ibidem*)

In this perspective, female sexuality is still considered a dark continent, whereas masculine rationality is the necessary light which can exorcise the inherent monstrosity of female desire: «The Countess represents the dark space outside the rational discourse, haunting men with her dark excess, while the young man, representing the Enlightenment rationality, exorcises her vampiric power with his rational eye» (*Ibidem*) Despite the cyclist’s rational speculations, nevertheless, it is not the young man who breaks the spell and performs the vampire’s transformation. His attempts at explaining the oddity of the girl’s body and behaviour by resorting to medical science, indeed, prove to be pointless, and accordingly they never find validation in the story. Their only function is to reassure him and to prove the lack of fantasy which prevents him from dying of fear. Moreover, as the omens throughout the tale and its rather overt end suggest, his rationality will not spare him death at war<sup>1</sup>. It could rather be argued, therefore, that

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<sup>1</sup> It could be hypothesised that rationality in fact leads him to death, as his fate is waiting for him «in the trenches of France», which suggests that he is going to fight in the First World

Carter's «use of vampiric tropes indicates profound ambiguities at the heart of desire», which are aimed at transgressing borderlines (Sceats 2001: 119). The only reason why in “The Lady of the House of Love” vampirism is not entirely embraced, but itself questioned, is that through her disembodied subjectivity the Lady continues to occupy a liminal condition; she refutes the over-embodied monstrosity discursively linked to woman's desire, while also struggling to fill her empty, haunted vessel.

The fantasy of turning into a human being, then, does not point to the impossibility of fulfilling desire outside of patriarchal «enlightened» normalised performances. Instead, it could imply that in order to deconstruct the association female body-monster, woman must re-appropriate her body, that is abandon the established performances of disembodied monstrosity that she is compelled to repeat in order to re-signify them or devise new ones. From a rationalist perspective, «The Countess herself embodies the culturally irresolvable, which is why any attempts to effect a “cure” must culminate in extinction» (*Ibidem*). From a corporeal perspective, nevertheless, she stands for woman's willingness to exceed the over-identification with her – threatening – body, which in Carter's tale is effected through the symbolical death of both the victim and the perpetrator.

In a cunning interplay of reflections, Carter's characters once more embody and mirror the complexities of desire, as both can be considered either victim or perpetrator. If the cyclist as perpetrator is held to stand for patriarchal rationality, for example, then the story seems to insinuate that he – and the system he signifies – must die so as to be replaced by a new power-knowledge formation, as must the product of that system, namely the depiction of female sexuality, and by extension of the female body as the voracious, dangerous abject other. That is why the vampire willingly embraces death: because it actually means welcoming change and possibly changing the ways in which the female body is signified.

Thus, even if the vampire knows that «there is no room in her drama for improvisation» (Carter 1979a: 106), that is, her deadly, eternal ritual of compulsive repetition does not allow change whatsoever not even in the script, she manages to amend it. While she is taking off her clothes and is about to embrace the cyclist in her ghastly claws as she usually does with her male victims, she starts to cry, which triggers a series of unexpected events leading this monstrous Sleeping Beauty to wound her finger with a piece of glass and to bleed for the first time.

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War, sadly notorious for the use of newly devised deadly weapons. Moreover, the fact that he is going to be a casualty of war, which will most likely turn him into a war hero, is implied in the description Carter draws of his heroism. Associated with familiar ideal masculine attributes, this heroism is however deconstructed, it is ascribed to the boy's virginity (Carter 1979a: 104), which was earlier depicted as «source of power» but only because of «ignorance» and «unknowingness» (97).

She raises her hands to unfasten the neck of her dress and her eyes well with tears, they trickle down beneath the rim of her dark glasses. [...] she has fumbled the ritual, it is no longer inexorable. The mechanism within her fails her, now, when she needs it most. When she takes off the dark glasses, they slip from her finger and smash to pieces on the tiled floor. There is no room in her drama for improvisation; and this unexpected, mundane noise of breaking glass breaks the wicked spell in the room, entirely. [...] When she kneels to try to gather the fragments of glass together, a sharp sliver pierces deeply into the pad of her thumb; she cries out, sharp, real. (105-106)

After the ritual has been disrupted, change cannot be stopped, and the Lady is at last able to turn into a human being and die. Her death is the final blow to patriarchal constructions of female monstrosity, since the vampire is threatening only as long as she cannot change. When she does, she dies and ceases to be dangerous. This suggests that monstrosity is inescapable unless metamorphosis is embraced as a positive force, even when it coincides with suffering and death. Last, but not least, as the story emphasises through the paradoxes embodied by its disembodied protagonist, the construction of the female body as monster because of its inherent changing potential is merely a strategy devised by patriarchal discourses to scare away what seems too difficult to be rationally explained, and perhaps should be simply embraced and cherished as it is the privileged vehicle of life.

The red, «bloodily reblooming» (Sceats 2001: 113) rose, the only living thing found by the boy in place of the vampire's body after her death is the last, ominous presage which functions as a reminder. Among the different possible interpretations, it could be read as a token symbolising the deadly consequences of persisting in identifying female sexuality with a potentially devouring *vagina dentata* while preventing the necessary transformation of the available conceptualisations of the female body due to the scary, excessiveness and ongoing, cyclical change of its boundaries. In any case, as Kristeva would put it, the grim rose which stands for the excessive, monstrous body of its owner advocates against the purification of the abject historically carried out by art and literature in order to «bring about a confrontation with the abject» that is able to «finally eject and redeem the boundaries between the human and the non-human» (Creed 1993: 14). Even after the cyclist has left the enchanted castle to join the army, indeed, the rose he has brought with him still haunts him, as a magic reminder of the impossible experience he has lived, as the abject «rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh» (38). Through the piercing, charming smell of the rose and the luxurious opulence of its petals, indeed, the seductive, dangerous allure of the unconsummated encounter with the monstrous woman is kept alive:



When he returned from the mess that evening, the heavy fragrance of Count Nosferatu's roses drifted down the stone corridor of the barracks to greet him, and his Spartan quarters brimmed with the reeling odour of a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity, their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour. (Carter 1979a: 107-108)



# ENACTING METAMORPHOSIS, OR CARTER'S "NEW WINE"

*To be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case.  
To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed.  
This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman.  
(A. Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 1979)*



## DUPPLICITOUS APPETITES: A NEW HETERONORMATIVE MODEL OF INCORPORATING CONSUMPTION

Carter's 'new wine' is still making old bottles explode as the fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber* go on engendering reflections and new interpretations. Most notably, they also engage in a productive dialogue with the work of contemporary writers such as Tanith Lee, Margo Lanagan or Sara Maitland, who followed Carter's path in exploiting fairy tales' potential to represent, investigate and re-interpret female identity. That is why, rather than 'drawing conclusions', I would like to end this journey by expanding on Margaret Atwood's perceptive observation that: «*The Bloody Chamber* is arranged according to categories of meat-eater» (2001: 138). This remark offers a new 'angle', an interesting point of view on the collection, which combines issues of *genre* – more precisely, an assessment of the female protagonists' ability to give an account of their transformative identity journeys –, *gender* and the *body* in both its animal and monstrous connotations. More to the point, Atwood's suggestion widens the scope of the study of the sexed body and gendered relationships in the fairy tales because it gives way to the possibility of interpreting them in the light of appetites. The choice of the plural «appetites» endeavours to convey the symbolic polysemy the concept might take on with reference to different levels of reading. To begin with, appetite and eating are revealed as «loc[i] of vigorously exercised power relations» (Sceats 1997: 102).

Sceats makes an interesting distinction between hunger and appetite, according to which hunger is a physical drive coming exclusively from the inside whereas appetite, like sexuality, is a cultural construct that comes from inside as well as outside, being also subject to «external constraints and forces» (*Ibidem*). Such a distinction is even more meaningful since, whether it is sexual or alimentary, appetite does not necessarily privilege either the provider or the consumer (*Ibidem*). In other words, representing power dis-

tributions according to appetite promotes an alternative to institutionalised power, which «can be seen in the Foucauldian model of unstable power relations where dominant and subordinate positions are not fixed» (110).

Analysing the stories following the categories of meat eaters and the relationships between them, then, enables one to examine power distribution in the tales, since – as should be clear by now – both male and female characters can be carnivores and herbivores, wielding or struggling to obtain power. Moreover, predatory performances enacted by men and women, monsters and beasts within *The Bloody Chamber* question the ways in which heterosexual relationships are negotiated. That is to say, after having exposed the dangers hidden in different patriarchal traditions, Carter proposes alternative models of identification and of approaching sexual relations which are based on new foundations, and which, most importantly, are always the outcome of a transformation of some sort.

As to patriarchy, the predator-versus-prey-arrangement emphasises that patriarchal discourses work in a cannibalistic fashion, whereby the relationship with the other invariably entails devouring, violently incorporating it «to discipline, exclude, and repress it, and define it negatively, against himself» (Kerchy 2008: 47). It is true that «the object of desire has to be made digestible» (Braidotti 2002: 141), but digestion, that is processing and incorporating the body of the other, can result in assimilation rather than a voracious consummation which leads to its effacement.

This is where the experiences of the female characters represented in *The Bloody Chamber* culminate: the strategies through which they struggle to be the narrators of their own stories, the negotiations through which they perform and rework their identity journeys and the metamorphic appropriation of their bodies are aimed at piecing together an alternative model of heteronormative – sexual – desire and relationships. Even though the examples set forth by Carter's heroines are always specific, at times paradoxical, and never conclusive – for the kernel of their driving force is ongoing transformation – they tend towards the construction of an alternative model of heterosexual relationships based on reciprocity. The reciprocity already mentioned in terms of subject formation and identity development, indeed, finds even stronger grounds in the protagonists' bodily performances analysed by means of the eating/predator metaphor.

Once again the fictional enactment of what was theoretically speculated about in *The Sadeian Woman*, the bodies described in *The Bloody Chamber* open themselves up «to reciprocal otherness», that is they perform «negotiations between exciting, heterogeneous beings whose “alterities” (Grosz 1994: 192; Bordo 1993: 41) enrich each other through an exchange that instead of aggressively remodelling them, leaves and loves them-(selves) deformed as they are» (Kerchy 2008: 47).

Conceiving of (and enacting) reciprocity and assimilating incorporation

requires (self-) awareness on the part of the female subject about the political location of her body in discourse. This seems to be the pivotal starting point of the conclusive remarks of *The Sadeian Woman*, which scrutinise the construction of female flesh in phallogocentric power-knowledge formations. In the fairy tales, Carter plays with the double meaning of the word «consummation», which could stand for both eating and sexual encounters. This idea is enforced by Carter's *Exercise in Cultural History*, where the definition of «meat» and that of «flesh» are contrasted in order to underline the difference between the two acts addressed by the concept of consummation. «Meat» becomes synonymous with the edibility of a body, which can be devoured in a cannibalistic fashion as it is dead, devoid of meaning, an empty surface of inscription on which any meanings can be imposed. As a consequence, the term refers to sexual relationships where the object of desire is the victim, i.e. *subject to* othering, constrictive power, whose desire is not taken into account and from whom pleasure is stolen. «Flesh», in turn, comes to signify the lively meat of the subject who has learned – or is learning – to act on her desire, who is *subject of* power and for whom sexual encounters imply exchange, and therefore reciprocity in giving and receiving pleasure. In Carter's words: «In the English language, we make a fine distinction between flesh, which is usually alive and, typically, human; and meat, which is dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption» (Carter 1979b: 161).

Interestingly, this provocative definition already forecasts the complexities taken on by Carter's representation of the animal motif in the fairy tales. As a matter of fact, in the stories female animality is not simply synonymous with victimhood and dead meat ready for consummation, but it is rather an alternative source for empowerment which escapes patriarchal – human, and masculine – established and limited ranges of behaviours and performances. Inert meat, Carter seems to suggest, is not a natural fact, but a cultural construction; that is to say, what qualifies as meat is made such, and likewise flesh needs to be appropriated and signified in order to be considered the lively, desiring version of its slaughtered counterpart: «flesh becomes meat by a magical transition about which there is nothing natural» (166). When Carter contends: «But, if flesh plus skin equals sensuality, then flesh minus skin equals meat» (162), it could be claimed that the recurrent images of symbolic disrobing and the skin literally being peeled off of the body surface in the fairy tales address the necessity for women to give up established, oppressive meanings imposed on their bodies so as to be able to re-inscribe them with new, autonomously devised ones. In addition, sensuality is identified with a reciprocal notion of desire, where pleasure is exchanged through the flesh of both participants. This assumption is sustained by the following remarks, where Carter maintains that the reason why Sade's novels describe sexual relations «in terms of butchery

and meat» is that he «will disinfect of sensuality anything he can lay his hands on» (163).

Powerfully linked to this first topic is the complex relationship between prey and predator, carnivore and herbivore – which do not necessarily stand respectively for man and woman – conceptualised in *The Sadeian Woman* and forcefully fictionalised in the fairy tales. The grounding assumption of both is that a simplistic parallel must not be drawn between woman-herbivore-victim, as the relations between predator and prey are in fact far more complex:

The relations between men and women are often distorted by the reluctance of both parties to acknowledge that the function of flesh is meat to the carnivore but not grass to the herbivore. The ignorance of one party as to the intentions of the other makes the victim so defenceless against predation that it can seem as if a treacherous complicity finally unites them; as though, in some sense, the victim wills a victim's fate. (*Ibidem*)

Explicitly enough, and unsurprisingly, the source of – more or less willing – victimhood is lack of awareness of one's own position and of the intentions of the other. In other words, women enforce their cultural construction as victims by uncritically accepting naturalised and naturalising positions offered by patriarchal discourses. This is exactly what the identification of woman with herbivore, therefore victim, therefore deemed to be devoured hides: her performances have been literally naturalised through their identification with the *natural* behaviour of animals. Human beings, however, no matter to what extent they are fictionally represented by resorting to monstrous or animal figurations, are ultimately different from animals, not because of their souls, but because of their ability to signify their meat as flesh: «Sexuality, stripped of the idea of free exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty. Carnal knowledge is the infernal knowledge of the flesh as meat» (165).

Carter once again addresses a discursive economy of desire in which one of the two parties acts as the predator who subjugates and devours the flesh of its victim as lack of reciprocity. Her criticism is here against Sade's narratives as a contextualised example of phallogocentric discourse:

The act of predation [...] is the assertion of the abyss between master and victim. There is no question of reciprocal sensation; [...] to share is to be stolen from [...] when a woman pilfers her sexual pleasure from a man, she patently reduces his own and to witness her pleasure can do nothing more for him than to flatter his vanity. (166-167)



The Sadeian protagonists, and the patriarchal tradition they stand for, are incapable of experiencing reciprocity and of conceiving of sexual relations as mutually enriching, and are therefore prevented from changing, because for them «desire is a function of the act rather than the act a function of desire», through which «desire loses its troubling otherness; it ceases to be a movement outwards from the self» (171). These controversial acknowledgements are fictionally underscored in *The Bloody Chamber* through the “Beauty and the Beast” stories. The female protagonists of both tales, indeed, overtly speculate about their relations with the Beasts in terms of standard animal images of predators and victims. Interestingly, in both cases the issue at stake is otherness and the apparently natural impossibility of reconciliation and conceivable coexistence between carnivores and herbivores.

In the first story the topic is approached through the biblical image of the lion and the lamb, where Beauty unmistakably identifies with the prey, not only on account of the proverbial victimhood embodied by woman, but also for the compliance with which she is willingly sacrificing herself to obey her father and save his fortune:

How strange he was. She found his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable; its presence choked her. There seemed to be a heavy, soundless pressure upon her in his house, as if it lay under water, and 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. (Carter 1979a: 45)

Apparently similar but radically different is the experience of her twin character in “The Tiger’s Bride”. As happened with reference to many other motifs, the intertextual references between the two stories mark a progression. In the second one, indeed, in spite of Beauty letting herself go to similar considerations about predators and preys and the difficulty of their coexistence, she acts on them and decides to change the naturalised arrangements. In this case, the girl suffers, too, when facing the outstanding difference of the Beast, which causes in her a physical, but paradoxically welcomed, pain:

The Tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers. A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood. His domed, heavy head, so terrible he must hide it. How subtle the muscles, how profound the tread. The annihilating vehemence of his eyes, like twin suns.

I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound.  
(64)

As the first lines emphasise, it is the lamb, not the tiger, which can change the situation; that is, the herbivore can and must learn how to approach the predator not in order to fight or defeat it, but so as to «learn» how to play its game, how to be able to run free, to turn a body which has been signified as meat into flesh. This Beauty succeeds in the tasks: she gives up her old skin – i.e. what qualified her body as meat – and decides to wear the fur that the Tiger has exposed on the surface of her body as flesh. In this way, the woman is no longer a victim, she has overcome the «earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment» (67), that is to say, she is no longer afraid of being consumed in a cannibalistic fashion, for she has made a pact of reciprocity by incorporating the animal other in her body. Therefore, it is as flesh and not as meat, that she slowly approaches and offers herself to the Beast, shaking not out of fear but perhaps because of desire, as now she understands that she is offering with her body, with «myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction» (*Ibidem*). The Tiger's bride has decided to change her skin and to embrace animality – i.e. the «troubling otherness» of the Beast – in order to change the meaning and reach of her sexual desire, so that the «act becomes a function of desire» and she is able to move outwards from her self, to reach for the other and thereby to experience empowered and empowering reciprocity.

In sum, the reflections of these characters about the relationship between carnivore and herbivore, predator and prey, serve to emphasise that, metaphors aside, victimhood and predatoriness can and must be renegotiated within human – sexual – relationships, so that reciprocity and the circulation of pleasure can grant to both participants the enactment of desire through the body as flesh. In this way, the body of the other is digested and assimilated, and not utterly consumed and obliterated.

The stories about “Beauty and the Beast” explicitly challenge cannibalistic consumption offered as the most viable model of heterosexual relationships by patriarchal traditions. Throughout the collection, nevertheless, other, more covert but equally powerful instances are aimed at overthrowing, and above all at providing alternatives to bodily consummation. Significantly enough, Carter's challenge functions as usual as a process of unmasking, disclosing what lies at the heart of discourses disguised as natural, matter-of-fact truths and counters what it criticises through transformation.

In this sense, the transformative power of metamorphosis progresses within the collection, increasing from story to story with different intensities, but always at work. The opening tale, “The Bloody Chamber”, presents the reader with a human but no less bestly predator, the Marquis, whose

appetite is described several times as devouring, annihilating for his prey, the young wife. The interplay between hunger and sexual consummation is omnipresent, so that in every instance where the Marquis' appetite is mentioned, it refers to the desire of the beastly predator, which devours and annihilates his victim.

He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke – but do not imagine much finesse about it; this artichoke was no particular treat for the diner nor was he yet in any greedy haste. He approached his familiar treat with a weary appetite. (Carter 1979a: 15)

When he saw my reluctance, his eyes veiled over and yet his appetite did not diminish. His tongue ran over red lips already wet. (34)

“Don't loiter, girl! Do you think I shall lose appetite for the meal if you are so long about serving it? No; I shall grow hungrier, more ravenous with each moment, more cruel ... Run to me, run! I have a place prepared for your exquisite corpse in my display of flesh!” (39)

In “The Erl-King” the duplicitous meanings assigned to violent, cannibalistic consummation are even more complex. The male, predatory monster is an evil spirit of the woods always on the alert and ready to «gobble up» the female prey, to do her «grievous harm» (85). However, his dangerous nature is just the result of the projection of the female narrator's fears, due to what she has been taught about the dangers of acting on sexual desire. In the end the woman proves to be, in fact, the predator, and kills the Erl-King because she has enjoyed their sexual encounters but does not know how to set her desire free and to turn consummation into reciprocity. Therefore, the mutually exclusive association between man-predator and woman-victim is blurred and exceeded, as both characters prove to embody either role. As the story seems to suggest, under these circumstances the sexual relationship is annihilating for both male and female.

Similarly, in “The Snow Child” the lack of reciprocity stemming from the conception of a woman entirely out of a man's desire proves to be perverse (as the motifs of incest and necrophilia insinuate) and to prevent the peaceful absorption of the other, who is destined to die, to utterly be consumed by the desire of the predator – the Snow Child, indeed, in the end melts back into the elements which originated her body. Moreover, like in “The Erl-King”, both male and female characters prove to be able to act the role of the predator, even if the addition of a third side of the triangle increases

the complexity of the picture. The arrangements of the power relationships in the story could be read as follows: the part of the primary predator is played by the Count, who is able to impart his will both on his wife and on the child of his desire. The Countess, in turn, despite being victimised by the husband is allowed, with his consent, to act as a predator against the girl who, lastly, is totally speechless and powerless.

Other three tales seem to counterbalance this impossibility of amending the allocation of victimhood and of circulating power within the relationships between the sexes in order to enable the accomplishment a different kind of consummation. “The Werewolf” is all about feminine predatoriness; the werewolfish Grandmother, indeed, is violently killed by her niece, which grants the latter’s survival and prosperity. As has already been remarked, the tale underlines the need for a renewal of values and discourses in order for new models of femininity to take roots.

Utter displacement is brought about by the last two tales taken into consideration: “The Lady of the House of Love” and “The Company of Wolves”. The first story features a female carnivore, monstrous femininity in the flesh, who is a predator – albeit reluctant – for her own vampiric nature. Consummation is mentioned twice in the text, always referring to cannibalistic, devouring consumption, which, as has been argued in the previous section, acquires different meanings from that of the predatory male animal-monster:

However hard she tries to think of any other, she only knows of one kind of consummation. (Carter 1979a: 103)

[...] she knows no other consummation than the only one she can offer him. She has not eaten for three days. It is dinner-time. It is bedtime. (105)

Nevertheless, the vampire struggles to conceive of an alternative consummation, which ends up consuming her soulless life. In this way, even if no metamorphosis is actually enacted – as both characters end up dying – its feasibility is nonetheless implied. As a result of the protagonists’ unforeseeable destinies, the roles of prey and predator are not only obviously reversed, but also questioned and redistributed. On the one hand the cyclist does not embody the predator, since he is supposed to be the powerless victim of a voracious female-vampire, but neither is he a victim, because in the end he is not bitten to death by the monster – and, ironically, he does not even realise the danger he has faced. On the other hand, the Lady is supposed to be the carnivore ready to devour its prey; instead, she sees his meat as flesh and endeavours to devise a different kind of consumption that allows her to fulfil her desire of his body in a non-cannibalistic way. The

paradoxical inversion and intermingling of the roles of the victim and the predator and of the polysemy of consummation is further emphasised by the silent monologue of the Countess. In her unheard plea, she reassures and exhorts the cyclist like a groom would do with his bride on their first night together: «the bridegroom bleeds in my inverted marriage bed» (105). Throughout the passage, the boundaries between consummation understood as sexual encounter and as vampiric feast are often blurred, as if to hint at the dreadful commonalities raising from the confusion between the two meanings:

Vous serez ma proie.

You have such a fine throat, m'sieu, like a column of marble. When you came through the door retaining about you all the golden light of the summer's day of which I know nothing, the card called 'Les Amoureux' had just emerged from the tumbling chaos of imagery before me; it seemed to me you had stepped off the card into my darkness and, for a moment, I thought, perhaps, you might irradiate it.

I do not mean to hurt you. I shall wait for you in my bride's dress in the dark.

The bridegroom is come, he will go into the chamber which has been prepared for him.

I am condemned to solitude and dark; I do not mean to hurt you.

I will be very gentle. [...]

See, how I'm ready for you. I've always been ready for you; I've been waiting for you in my wedding dress, why have you delayed for so long ... it will all be over very quickly.

You will feel no pain, my darling. (103)

In general, rather than staged and enacted, the necessity of transformation is suggested by showing how immobility and inescapable eternal repetition – of the body of the vampire and of the stubborn rationality of the young man – prevent reciprocal assimilation and lead to death. After turning into a human being, the vampire is doomed to die because her performance, eternally staged as a «predator-prey ritual» does not include an alternative script (see Atwood 2001: 144). Most notably, however, the fact that the boy dies as well could signify that this cannibalistic, oppositional script should be left behind altogether, as it led to the annihilation of both actors in the struggle to devour and to be spared.

“The Company of Wolves”, which perhaps best illustrates the actual transformation of patriarchal carnivorous appetites, begins in a rather traditional fashion, with a carnivore werewolf undoubtedly playing the role of the aggressive predator. Significantly, the very first lines state: «the wolf is carni-

vore incarnate and he's as cunning as he is ferocious; once he's had a taste of flesh than nothing else will do» (Carter 1979a: 110), and the refrain «the wolf is carnivore incarnate» is then repeated as an ominous, but ultimately paradoxical reminder later in the story (116). The use of the term «flesh» with reference to eating instead of meat could be a deliberate strategy on Carter's part, to signify both implied meanings of consummation (as the following part of the story discloses). The nocturnal howling of wolves in the god-forsaken land where the tale is set is described as a melancholic lament, as if the wolves were «mourning for their own, irremediable appetites» for which there is «no redemption» (112). Even though «grace could not come to the wolf from its own despair, only through some external mediator, so that, sometimes, the beast will look as if he half welcomes the knife that dispatches him», the narrative proves the contrary. The apparently irremediable cannibalistic appetite of the male werewolf-hunter protagonist is in fact tamed by the «strong minded» (113) Red Riding Hood, and turned into assimilating, reciprocal consumption. The most remarkable clues suggesting the oncoming metamorphosis if the wolf's appetite are preceded by textual evidence pointing to the duplicity of consumption. In the first place, the girl's shawl is «red as the blood she must spill», which could seem to refer to the bloodshed following the wolf's feasting on her body, but that actually designates her defloration. Secondly, when Riding Hood takes off her clothes, it is not meat that they reveal, but flesh: «now she was clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh» (118). Finally, and more explicitly, when the wolf answers the ritual exclamation «What big teeth you have» with «All the better to eat you with», «the girl burst out laughing» because «she knew she was nobody's meat» (*Ibidem*). And her subsequent actions, that is ripping off the wolf's shirt in a surge of desire, enact the metamorphosis of the wolf, which does not turn into a human being, but realises that there exist alternative forms of consummation. His carnivorous nature is now presented under a different light: no longer devouring, but being appeased by the girl's flesh. Although the wolf is still described as a «carnivore incarnate» whose appetite is only satisfied by «immaculate flesh» (*Ibidem*) this does not prevent reciprocity. Once more, it is the girl who teaches him how to accept and incorporate the other through mutual exchange by performing an animal ritual which would be disgusting for a human being, thus proving that she – the *lamb* – is assimilating his wolfish nature, too: «she will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put lice in her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony» (*Ibidem*).

Overall, it can be claimed that metamorphosis is the kernel of the heteronormative models of relationship offered by Carter and cast in opposition

to those established by different patriarchal traditions. In contrast with phallogocentric normative discursive constructions, metamorphosis is an unruly principle, whose reach is variable and depends on the extent of the transgression brought about by different kinds of transformation. As this analysis has tried to show, the transformations encoded with language and enacted and performed through the body are at the same time the source and the outcome of a process of bodily re-inscription and re-signification which, in turn, expose and engender the changes taking place at the level of identity. Re-negotiating power arrangements through bodily performances is a subversive strategy deployed by Carter to counter patriarchal traditions which project, confine, and expel what is deemed to be different, other, on account of the difficulty (and therefore also the importance) of rationally explaining and controlling it. Embodying the displacing and disturbing attributes of change, the female body has thus been restrained and contained on account of the excessive abjection of its mobile borders through its over-identification with the dangers of unbridled sexual desire.

Carter's fairy tales offer alternative, empowering and liberating examples for women exactly because they advocate for the necessity and illustrate the possibility of performing metamorphosis as a celebration of the displacement, the mutability and permeability of female bodies. Thus otherness, difference and excess take on positive connotations, so that the over-identification of woman with her body can be exploited to extract and wield the power generated by the driving force of ongoing change. In a powerful reflective inversion, what sustained subordination can disruptively be turned into a source of power: «The metamorphic power of monstrous others serves the function of illuminating the thresholds of "otherness" while displacing their boundaries» (Braidotti 2002: 202).





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