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FEMININITY AND VAMPIRISM AS A CLOSE CIRCUIT: "THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE" BY ANGELA CARTER

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Abstract

In her fiction, Angela Carter systematically presents an artificial notion of femininity that has to be overcome by women in order to fulfill themselves. In line with poststructuralist feminists, Carter aims to prove that, as Luce Irigaray states (84), "'femininity' is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity". Not surprisingly, Carter herself questions "the nature of my own reality as a woman. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing" ("Notes" 70). Once you realise that this role is artificially constructed, that "you're not simply natural, you really need to know what's going on" ("Interviewed" 189). Carter endeavours to show that femininity is a dark construction that imprisons women and turns them into living dead creatures. In her story "The Lady of the House of Love" — included in her collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1991), but first published in *The Iowa Review* (1975)— she uses the motif of the Queen of vampires together with gothic elements as powerful devices to display the artificial life of femininity and its dark side. Carter's question in the story is whether it is possible for women to escape from this role and find freedom.

Keywords

Gothic – femininity – vampire – femme fatale – gender – Angela Carter

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Queen of Terror, Mistress of Nothing

In her fiction, Angela Carter systematically presents an artificial notion of femininity that has to be overcome by women in order to fulfil themselves. In line with poststructuralist feminists, Carter aims to prove that, as Luce Irigaray states (84), "'femininity' is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity".¹ Not surprisingly, Carter herself questions "the nature of my own reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off

on me as the real thing” (“Notes” 70). Once you realise that this role is artificially constructed, that “you’re not simply natural, you really need to know what’s going on” (“Interviewed” 189). Carter endeavours to show that femininity is a dark construction that imprisons women and turns them into living dead creatures. In her story “The Lady of the House of Love” —included in her collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1991), but first published in *The Iowa Review* (1975)— she uses the motif of the Queen of vampires together with gothic elements as powerful devices to display the artificial life of femininity and its dark side. Carter’s question in the story is whether it is possible for women to escape from this role and find freedom.

The protagonist is described as “the queen of night, queen of terror —except her horrible reluctance for the role” (197). Carter’s intention is to present femininity as a site of terror and to demystify the negative stereotype of the *femme fatale* by showing that it is a role tailored for women, but with which they do not identify themselves. Even when the protagonist is presented as a queen, Carter aims to dismantle the fake

power with which she is endowed. Her agency is only a mirage, as unreal as the light of the moon, and she is only a puppet at the service of a patriarchal system that dictates her behaviour. The oppressive presence of her ancestors is felt throughout the story with the reference to old paintings, and particularly to their “painted eyes” that are so powerful as to overcome the canvas and exert a supernatural and haunting influence on the protagonist, and even on the reader. The reference to her ancestors’ eyes, leer and grimace is constant, described as “demented and atrocious” and watching the queen of the night closely to make sure that she perpetuates the tradition. In this sense, the text insists that each ancestor, “through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence” (195), that their eyes bear “a disquieting resemblance to those of the hapless victim” (203) and that “the beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions” (205).

She is presented as a victim, although somehow confined to an in-between position: on the one hand, and as a result of her ancestral indoctrination, she has the impulse to follow the vampiric role of her predecessors, because “hunger always overcomes her” (198) and they

exert that pressure on her from the wall: “Dinner–time, dinner–time,’ clang the portraits on the walls” (206), so that she “helplessly perpetuates her ancestral crimes” (195). On the other hand, she feels guilty for she does not like that role and wants to break free, as can be inferred from the image of the blood of one of her preys mixed with tears in her eyes (198). Thus, although she is presented as the queen of night and “the hereditary commandant of the army of shadows” (196), her power is illusory — “weird authority, as if she were dreaming it” (197), since the real agency comes from her ancestors, who control her actions. This image becomes clearer when we read that “her voice is curiously disembodied; she is like a doll ... a ventriloquist’s doll” (204), the voice of her ancestors rather than her own.

Carter uses another dark, supernatural element, the Tarot, to show that the femininity represented by this quasi *femme fatale* is an oppressive role. In line with the ancestors’ ubiquitous presence, the writer introduces the concept of determinism to show that women’s fate in patriarchy is pre–set, a “closed circuit” (195), like the “inevitable Tarot” that always shows the same configuration for the protagonist:

wisdom, death and dissolution. Her future is irreversible, but this creature still has some

hope that the situation will change for her, and Carter seems to leave the door open for that change with a question that is repeated twice in the story: "Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?" (195, 204). In fact, the vampire keeps a lark in a cage as a symbol of her own imprisonment, and the bird is described as sometimes singing but more often it remains a "sullen mound of drab feathers" (196). In spite of this woman's secret hope, the reader seems to find no escape for her: she is as caged as her pet lark.

As a result, she has no existence, and Carter succeeds in creating this impression by selecting a vampire with her lack of reflection on mirrors. She starts the story with a clear reference to a mirror "that does not reflect a presence" (195). In this sense, the protagonist is displayed as having a beautiful appearance, but Carter insists on the association of femininity with beauty and narcissism as a construct that hides emptiness behind its glittering appearance, so that it appeals to women and keeps them under control: external beauty, internal rottenness and dissatisfaction. The writer presents femininity as an artificial construct that has nothing to do with real women: "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 imperfections of the human condition. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness” (196). Thus, her description is characterised by artificiality: she is “an ingenious piece of clockwork”, “an automaton” with “waxen fingers” (199, 204). The hair, traditionally a symbol of femininity, here is associated with sadness: “her hair falls down like tears” (195); this queen of night is described as “a cave full of echoes”, “a system of repetitions”, living “an imitation of life” (195, 197). Even the castle where she lives is rotten inside, in consonance with Kristeva’s definition of the modern subject as “[a]n empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts —‘powerless’ outside, ‘impossible’ inside” (*Powers* 49). Like her own self, the castle is described as having a ruinous interior, so that she is the mistress of all the disintegration.

Carter plays with traditional associations with femininity to prove how harmful they might be for women. One of them is marriage as the best state for a woman, following the traditional happy ending of romance novels. In the story, Carter links marriage to death, thus showing its negative effect on women and its pervasive presence 7 [123]

in the history of mankind. The protagonist is wearing “an antique bridal gown”, which happens to be “the only dress she has, her mother’s wedding dress” (195, 198). The implication is that this “antique” dress has been passed from generation to generation as the only garment that women can wear, a garment that causes them dissatisfaction, as when she is described as a “shipwrecked bride” (202).

In fact, it is as if women themselves were responsible for keeping alive this repressive role. Carter uses another traditional symbol of femininity: the rose. We are told that the protagonist’s mother planted roses in the garden which “have grown up into a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates her in the castle of her inheritance” (197). Femininity — which resembles a rose in its external and sensual beauty but also in the danger that it involves for women, represented by the thorns— becomes an oppressive role that imprisons women. And it is the mother herself who planted the flowers that turned into a wall. To insist on the negative image of this femininity, Carter reveals that these roses have such a rich colour and swooning odour because they feed on the corpses of the vampire’s victims, therefore insisting on its corrupt character.

No More Heroes: Goodbye to Sleeping Beauty

After presenting the queen of night as the epitome of a rotten femininity, Carter tantalises readers to make us believe that the solution for the protagonist's dissatisfaction lies in love and, thus, she resorts to the typical fairy tale pattern. Carter introduces the figure of a man, who is described as the prince of traditional fairy tales: "a young officer in the British army, blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled" (198). He is branded "a hero", "he cannot feel terror; so he is like the boy in the fairy tale, who does not know how to shudder" (205). The writer introduces the intertextual reference to two famous fairy tales: the boy who did not know fear —to insist on the figure of the hero who saves the heroine— and "Sleeping Beauty", to suggest that this creature of the night will be awakened by the rationality of a hero. Thus, the man in this story is presented as "immune to shadow", compared to the sun —the patriarchal symbol of light vs. the moon and its dreamy femininity— and riding a bicycle —"the two-wheeled

symbol of rationality” (200). The reference to “Sleeping Beauty” is clear in the text, because the idea that a single kiss will wake up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood is repeated twice (199, 205).

The power of love, as spread for centuries by fairy tales, seems to be the drive that will save the heroine of the story from her dead state: “he would like to take her in her arms and protect her from the ancestors who leer down from the walls” (206). This masculine heroic action leaves women as mere objects who passively receive protection. Even the irreversibility of the Tarot is broken and this time the card of lovers appears, suggesting that the heroine’s fate can be changed through love. Indeed, she seems to partake of this patriarchal system where marriage is the solution for women, as she confesses that she has been waiting for her prince in her wedding dress for such a long time (204).

However, when the story appears to follow the traditional fairy tale structure and is about to finish, Carter introduces a radical change. In her story, we are told that the heroine cannot take off her mother’s wedding dress unless she takes off her dark glasses. Symbolically, these

glasses prevent her from seeing the truth about her imposed femininity. While in “Sleeping Beauty” the girl pricks herself with a needle, in Carter’s story, when she takes off her dark glasses, they break and she cuts her thumb with a piece of broken glass. In the fairy tale, the heroine falls asleep and will not wake up until she is kissed by the prince; in Carter’s story, this action is precisely the one that will awaken the heroine, so that she can see the truth: “she cries out, sharp, real” (207). She can take off her oppressive wedding dress and for the first time she can see her own blood, rather than that of others, her real self, the substance that she is made of. In an attempt to prevent the heroine from acknowledging her real self, the hero—as a spokesperson for patriarchy— “dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still it spurts out” (207). For the first time, her painted ancestors “turn away their eyes” (207). She has discovered the oppression of her role and is prepared to escape from it.

The limiting role of patriarchy, as epitomised by the hero, is clear when his intention is to take the protagonist to a doctor to cure her from her nervous hysteria and photophobia and to turn her into a lovely

girl (208). In other words, his intention is to turn her into a prototypical wife, away from dreams and hopes and much rooted into a real

world. However, the conclusion of the story is the destruction of that limiting femininity. The protagonist disappears and the only trace she leaves is some blood, “as it might be from a woman’s menses” (208). With this, she reaffirms her female physiology, but not her femininity. The lark, a symbol of herself, is liberated from her cage, and the protagonist appears as a dead body: “In death, she looked far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human” (208). She has abandoned the artificiality of her feminine role to become herself, human, even if in death. Sleeping Beauty has turned into a human, real corpse. It seems as if she had recovered the soul she had been deprived of and it had been released.

However, Carter is not completely optimistic as regards women’s freedom from this role. Although the protagonist escapes from its limitation, she leaves a souvenir to the hero: a rose. The implication is that the myth of femininity will always exist. It will always find women who will be forced to follow the role to have a place in patriarchy. The hero “discovered he still had the Countess’s rose ... Curiously enough, although he had brought it so far away from Romania, the flower did not

seem to be quite dead” (209). The rose resurrects at the end of the story and becomes a “monstrous flower” that haunts readers with its presence. Carter’s intention is clear: “I’m interested in myths ... just because they *are* extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree” (“Notes” 71). Her importance in demystifying femininity and, in this particular case, the myth of the *femme fatale*, cannot be underestimated.

NOTES

¹ There are other critics that theorise the lack of identity hidden behind the construct of femininity. Kristeva ("Talking" 114) declares to be "in favor of a concept of femininity which would take as many forms as there are women", so that, as Mary Ann Doane states (31): "The entire elaboration of femininity as a closeness, a nearness, as present-to-itself is not the definition of an essence but the delineation of a *place* culturally assigned to the woman". Doane, thus, perceives femininity as a masquerade or decorative layer that conceals an emptiness (25), and so does Joan Rivière (95).

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