

Conjuring the Curse of Repetition or “ Sleeping Beauty ” Revamped : Angela Carter’s *Vampirella* and *The Lady of the House of Love**

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CONJURING THE CURSE OF REPETITION
OR “SLEEPING BEAUTY” REVAMPED: ANGELA CARTER’S
VAMPIRELLA AND *THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE* *

This article illustrates Angela Carter’s literary practice through her utilization of “Sleeping Beauty” in the radio play *Vampirella* and its prose variation *The Lady of the House of Love*. It argues that Carter vampirised European culture as she transfused old stories into new bodies to give them new life and bite. Her experiments with forms, genres and mediums in her vampire fiction capture the inherent hybridity of the fairy tale as it sheds new light on her main source, Charles Perrault’s *La Belle au bois dormant*, bringing to the fore the horror and terror as well as the textual ambiguities of the French *conte* that were gradually obscured in favor of the romance element. Carter’s vampire stories thus trace the “dark” underside of the reception of the tale in Gothic fiction and in the subculture of comic books and Hammer films so popular in the 1970s, where the Sleeping Beauty figure is revived as a *femme fatale* or *vamp* who takes her fate in her own hands.

“Once we have accepted the story we cannot escape the story’s fate.”

P. L. Travers, *About the Sleeping Beauty*, 1975.

*From Vampirella to The Lady of the House of Love:
vampirism as metaphor*

Angela Carter’s radio play *Vampirella* (1976) opens with a chorus of birdsong, with doves cooing and a lark singing to the musical accompaniment of the title character’s long and sharp nails against the bars of a birdcage. The melancholic vampire asks herself, “Can a bird sing

only the song it knows or can it learn a new song... ”¹, only to be interrupted by the screech of a bat. This is an apt prelude for Carter’s take on “Sleeping Beauty”, from fairytale romance to creepy horror story. The idea of replay is everywhere at work in this allegory of creation where the female vampire refuses to follow the predetermined script and takes her fate in her own hands: the “new song” line is not only repeated in the radio play, but also echoed twice in slightly different circumstances (a game of Tarot which always presents the same configuration of cards) in the associated short story *The Lady of the House of Love*, included in Angela Carter’s famous collection of “stories about fairy stories”², *The Bloody Chamber* (1979)³. In the preface to *Come Unto these Yellow Sands* (1978), Carter explains that she “took the script of *Vampirella* as the raw material for a short story, *The Lady of the House of Love*. It was interesting to see what would and would not work in terms of prose fiction” (p. 10).

* This essay is dedicated to David Mounce for his kindness to strangers, and in memory of Christa Helene Mounce, his beloved wife who was an early admirer of Angela Carter’s work. I am grateful to Neil Forsyth, always a patient and generous reader.

1. A. Carter, “Vampirella”, p. 84.

2. A. Carter, “Notes from the Front Line”, p. 38.

3. Carter’s radio play *Vampirella* was first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1976, and *The Lady of the House of Love* was originally published in the *Iowa Review* in 1975 (Summer/Autumn issue), although we know from Carter herself that the radio play came first. As Charlotte Crofts points out, the development of Carter’s work from her translation of Perrault’s *contes* to her rewritings “is more complicated than it first appears” (“Anagrams of Desire”, p. 39): “Her translation of Perrault coincides with the transmission of her first radio play, *Vampirella*, in the summer of 1976. In turn, her initial work in radio informs her later fictional engagement with the genre” (*ibid.*, p. 40). In her preparatory notes for the “story version”, Carter lists changes including narrative point of view (“1st person”), emphasis (“concentrate on erotic relation between Hero and Countess”), and minor character (“remove Mrs Beane-replace her by a deaf-mute”), followed by isolated sentences: “mysterious solitude of ambiguous states” and “I give you as a souvenir the dark, fanged rose I have plucked from between my thighs, like a flower laid on a grave”. She goes on to quote from T. Gauthier’s “La Mort Amoureuse”, the story of a female vampire much admired by Baudelaire. The file also contains various drafts of the story, including a screenplay with the handwritten note: “This is actually NOT a screenplay, but a kind of intermediary version between screenplay and short story...”. Also included is a cutout of a voluptuous *Vampirella* by José Gonzalez, reproduced at the end of the article (from the cover of the *Vampirella Special-1977* issue).

Radio, she says, enables her “to create complex, many-layered narratives that play tricks with time. And, also, to explore ideas, although for me, a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms” (p. 7). She goes on to elaborate on the different possibilities opened by the two mediums as follows:

In radio, it is possible to sustain a knife-edge tension between black comedy and bizarre pathos. [...] This is because the rich textures of radio are capable of stating ambiguities with a dexterity over and above that of the printed word; the human voice itself imparts all manner of subtleties in its intonations. So *The Lady of the House of Love* is a Gothic tale about a reluctant vampire; the radio play, *Vampirella*, is about vampirism as metaphor. The one is neither better nor worse than the other. Only, each is quite different⁴.

These comments on the impact of the medium on the message shed light on the dynamics of creation in Carter’s work, whose remarkable inventiveness derived from the interplay of her various activities as children’s author, translator, fiction writer, fairy tale scholar, editor, journalist and cultural critic, as well as her continual experiments in retelling old stories – including her own – in different genres, mediums and styles⁵. While the term “reformulations” (p. 10) used by Carter in this passage to describe her own writing evokes the magic formulas associated with the fairy tale⁶, the ominous phrase “raw material” humorously tropes the creative process as a form of cannibalism or vampirism. It hints at the possibilities offered by unusual generic combinations (or transfusions) for transgressive retellings, but also reveals the inherent hybridity of literary genres. Indeed, as I will show below, Carter’s reworking of *Sleeping Beauty* quickens to life that which remained dormant in her main source, Perrault’s *La Belle au bois dormant*, and gives it new bite.

Vampirella links Gothic horror and the fairy tale through the Countess, a self-loathing vampire who imagines that she is *Sleeping*

4. A. Carter, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, p. 10.

5. See M. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, *Reading, Translating, Rewriting: From The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault to The Bloody Chamber* (forthcoming).

6. The performative power of language is a theme that runs through the history of the tale. See D. Haase’s contribution to the volume on the tension between spoken and written language. Carter also picks on “the course of romance and redemption lying at the heart of the *Sleeping Beauty* tale” to quote Haase.

Beauty, thereby fusing two powerful myths of femininity: the *femme fatale* and the *belle endormie*⁷. The leitmotif of the birdsong encapsulates the character's melancholic musings on the curse of being born a vampire condemned to repeat her ancestors' crimes in a language that is itself marked by repetitions:

I am compelled to the repetition of their crimes; that is my life. I exist only as a compulsion, a compulsion...⁸

The "beautiful somnambulist" (p. 105) passes the time in a dream-like state, "an endless revery, a perpetual swooning" (p. 90), wondering whether she will be able to escape a pre-ordained fate. When she declares "I am both the Sleeping Beauty and the enchanted castle; the princess drowns in the castle of her flesh" (p. 90), the character signals her self-estrangement in the shift from the first to the third-person as well as in her identification with the fairy tale heroine and the castle in which she is confined, thereby playing on the ambiguous title of Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*, where "dormant" ("sleeping") qualifies the wood surrounding the castle as much as the princess herself⁹.

Carter's vampire stories suggest that the fairy tale and Gothic fiction have in fact a lot in common, including a fascination for intermediary states, (self-)transformation and the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human, as well as a constitutive generic hybridity and parodic self-consciousness¹⁰. Because she deliberately draws

7. The association of the two stereotypes of seductive femininity (passive vs dangerous) is already present in *fin-de-siècle* fairytale-inspired literature, as M. Viegnes's article demonstrates. In a review of Pabst's *Pandora's Box* and von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, titled "Femmes Fatales" (*New Society*, 1978), Carter reads this powerful myth of the twentieth century as a misogynistic fantasy that construes female sexual desire and independence as destructiveness, encapsulated in the statement of "the spineless sponger" in Wedekind's play, that "A woman blossoms for us precisely at the right moment to plunge a man into everlasting ruin; such is her natural destiny" (quoted by A. Carter, "Femmes Fatales", p. 353).

8. A. Carter, "Vampirella", p. 84.

9. Michael Foreman's cover illustration for the second edition of Carter's translations of selected *contes*, *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales* (1982), also plays on this ambiguity as it depicts a fairytale knight on a white horse with a backdrop of forests shaped like a woman's profile.

10. David Punter, who devotes a few perceptive pages to Carter as a modern Gothic writer in his classical study *The Literature of Terror*, notes that "One of the epigraphs to Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, which also has strong, and malevolent, connections with

on Gothic clichés, the Countess's self-dramatization as an embodied castle reactivates a staple feature of the genre. The pleasant dreams of Sleeping Beauty turn into the nightmare of the living-dead condemned for all eternity to live in the castle of their flesh and feed on the blood of the living¹¹. As the Countess declares to the Hero in stilted language, periodic sentences and pathetic accents:

I do not mean to hurt you, I do not want to cause you pain. But I am both beauty and the beast, locked up in the fleshly castle of exile and anguish, I cannot help but seek to assuage in you my melancholy...¹²

The caged bird with which the female vampire identifies represents the conflict of body and soul, fate and free will, compulsion to repeat and capacity to change which is at the heart of Gothic literature¹³. It thus captures the Countess's quandary, trapped as she is in "the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires"¹⁴ and the age-long tradition of vampire stories associated with her father, Count Dracula.

We remember that in Perrault's tale, one of the gifts of the fairies to the baby Princess was the ability to sing like a nightingale ("la cinquième qu'elle chanterait comme un Rossignol"¹⁵). This image becomes central in Carter's *Vampirella*, revolving as it does around the Countess's aspiration to "sing her own song". The vampire's pet bird, however, is not a nightingale but a "skylark" (p. 98). Like Shelley's musical and literary bird, whose heart is said to pour "profuse strains of unpremeditated art"¹⁶, the Countess longs for free expression and self-determination¹⁷.

fairy-tale, is from Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*: 'The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness.'" (p. 139).

11. "car il y a apparence (l'Histoire n'en dit pourtant rien) que la bonne Fée, pendant un si long sommeil, lui avait procuré le plaisir des songes agréables" (Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 136).

12. A. Carter, "Vampirella", p. 97.

13. See D. Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 100.

14. A. Carter, *The Lady of the House of Love*, p. 97.

15. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 132.

16. P. B. Shelley, "To a Skylark", l. 5.

17. Symbolic birds abound in the romance tradition, as J.-C. Mühlethaler shows. The association of text and music, and its metafictional implications, are discussed by S. Ballestra-Puech. Another possible echo in Carter's text is to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, when Torvald Helmer's affectionately (and somewhat patronizingly) calls Nora 'my

In Shelley's poem, the bird suggests a spontaneous, natural form of poetry through song. Although, as a creature of light, joy and freedom, the skylark is opposed in many ways to Carter's heroines, the romantic poet also likens it to a lonely maiden in a palace tower who soothes her lovelorn soul with music, not unlike Sleeping Beauty's creepy sisters Vampirella and the Lady of the House of Love. The leitmotif of the bird song in these vampire stories thus plays a complex and manifold role as it comments on the situation of the main character: a poor "night-bird" (p. 102) trapped in the "castle of her flesh" (p. 90) who aspires to the condition of the emblematic skylark. Enclosed in the "vast, ruined castle" (p. 88) of her ancestors, she is condemned to the endless repetition of her crimes and, on another level, to the prison-house of literary referentiality and its inescapable echoes. By invoking romantic lyrical poetry through the musical bird, as a symbol of the redeeming power of love and song, the Countess seeks to liberate herself from her predetermined fate and from the constraints of the Gothic genre that keeps her captive.

Even the gloomy atmosphere of the Transylvanian castle in which she lives (whose battlements evoke "broken teeth", p. 89) is not unrelated to Perrault's *conte*, when we recall that the Prince's first impression on entering the sleeping castle is one of horror, as it confronts him with silent images of ruin and death ("c'était un silence affreux, l'image de la mort s'y présentait partout"¹⁸). Likewise, the claustrophobic images of the body as prison can be related to the heroine's subjective perception of her condition as a *belle endormie* condemned to passively submit to a preordained fate and to the male gaze¹⁹. The radio play, however, relying as it does on words and sound effects, shifts the visual economy associated

own little skylark'. Like Nora who disobeys her prescribed role in patriarchal, bourgeois society, Vampirella and the Countess escape from their own cage never to return. In *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Carter's unconventional heroine Fevvers is a bird-like woman who works as an aerialist in a travelling circus.

18. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 135.

19. For a discussion of Carter's reappropriation of horror writing from a feminist perspective, see G. Wisker, "Revenge of the Living Doll". In *Vampirella*, the erotic appeal of a woman's corpse is celebrated by the necrophiliac Henri Blot, whose intervention serves as an ironic comment on the topos of the *belle endormie* embodied by the Sleeping Beauty figure. See E. W. Harries's contribution to the volume for a discussion of the persistence of the motif in contemporary art, and its voyeuristic implications.

with the Sleeping Beauty tale to the aural stimulation of imagination, since for Carter “radio always leaves that magical and enigmatic margin, that space of the invisible, which must be filled in by the imagination of the listener”²⁰. What is more, both *Vampirella* and *The Lady of the House of Love* reverse the traditional fairy tale script insofar as the Sleeping Beauty figure becomes a predatory female who uses her charms to catch and kill the young men on whom she feeds, although this “feminist” twist in the plot does not represent a significant improvement in her condition, but merely the move from one stereotype (the passive princess) to another (the blood-thirsty predator). The Countess, however, is recast as a persecuted romantic figure longing for true love and expressing herself in melodramatic tones²¹. Her body is no longer the sign of her soullessness (as vampire or male fantasy) but the trapped bird whose voice can liberate her from the curse of repetition and prewritten scripts: instead of singing a Wagnerian “liebestod”, she thwarts expectations and generic conventions when she simply asks the Hero for “a goodnight kiss” (p. 114) that kills her. In this sense, the motif of the bird song and the emphasis on voice fulfil an obvious metatextual function. The vampire who laments her predicament reflects on her status as a character caught in old, exhausted and convention-ridden genres from which she can free herself only through an unexpected twist in the plot and return to child-like innocence. This turns her into a double of the author herself who, with characteristic self-irony, dramatizes her own struggle with a long and stifling legacy in order to ward off the curse of repetition. And so Carter manages to retell the familiar story without falling into the trap of the happy ending expected of fairy tales or the brutal killings of the vampirical others that we find in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Carter’s Countess eventually conjures the twin curses of heredity and generic confinement, fate and plot, by singing her own song.

In mock Sleeping Beauty fashion, the Countess awaits her Prince Charming and imagines that only a true lover’s kiss can put an end to the curse that blights the line of vampires engendered by Count Dracula:

20. A. Carter, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, p. 7. See Ch. Crofts “Anagrams of Desire” for a nuanced discussion of the significance of the medium of radio for a feminist poetics.

21. See S. Sceats, “Oral Sex”, esp. p. 110.

COUNTESS. But love, true love, could free me from this treadmill, this dreadful wheel of destiny...

COUNT. My daughter, the last of the line, through whom I now project a modest, posthumous existence, believes [...] that she may be made whole by human feeling. That one, fine day, a young virgin will ride up to the castle door and restore her to humanity with a kiss from his pure, pale lips²².

The image of the wheel of destiny, which harks back to the age-old spinners of human fate, once again raises the question of the Countess's capacity to become a free agent of her own life. The existential musings of the heroine, couched as they are in direct speech, melodramatic tones and pathetic accents, prefigure her ultimate choice to renounce the terrible gift ("terrible don"²³) of eternal life given to her at birth by her monstrous father. She becomes human (and, therefore, mortal) when she lets herself be tenderly kissed by her potential victim, a young and naive traveller, in an ironic reinterpretation of the life-giving kiss found in Grimm's version of the tale. This innocent kiss ("Softly, with my lips, I touched her forehead, as if I had been kissing a child goodnight", p. 114) is the exact opposite of her own deathly and erotically charged bites, and she dies in his arms. The Hero adds:

She felt quite limp in my arms [...] Soon it will be morning; the [...] first light will dissolve this Gothic dream with the solvent of the natural²⁴.

Dracula, enraged by this most unexpected turn in the Gothic tale of violence, murder and terror, interrupted by the romantic cliché *par excellence*, "moans and gurgles: 'Is a millennium of beastliness to expire upon a kiss?'" (p. 114-115)²⁵. The following morning, Mrs Beane, the

22. A. Carter, "Vampirella", p. 85-86.

23. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 132.

24. A. Carter, "Vampirella", p. 114.

25. The Countess recovers the child-like innocence associated with fairy tales as children's stories when she experiences death as a soft and gentle falling asleep in the Hero's arms. The motif of the tender kiss deprived of erotic connotations is borrowed from Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*, where the parents kiss their daughter good-bye before leaving the Castle for ever (see M. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, "'But Marriage itself is no Party'").

governess, releases her protégée's pet lark: "Fly away, birdie, fly away!" (p. 115). Like the bird, the Countess is free at last. She has overcome her predatory nature and compulsion to kill, and chosen her own destiny by recovering the childlike innocence of fairytale romance. The vampire with her "Strewelpeter's hands" (p. 113) has vanished into the light, like Shelley's skylark, after singing her own sweet song of sadness²⁶.

Modern technology meets folklore: the magic of sounds in the dark

In the Preface to *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, Carter explains that she was a child of the radio age, and that *Vampirella* came to her as radio "in terms of words and sounds" (p. 10). For her, "writing for radio involves a kind of three-dimensional story-telling" (p. 7) which centrally relies on "the imagination of the listener" (p. 7). Carter's decision to write *Vampirella* originated in the suggestiveness of the sound made by a pencil which she "ran idly along the top of a radiator. It made a metallic, almost musical rattle. It was just the noise that a long, pointed fingernail might make if it were run along the bars of a birdcage" (p. 9). That is where the idea of the story originated, in that birdcage. The creation of the radio play, which brings together the pen and the radiator, writing and sound, is pursued in the alliterative logic that guided Carter's imagination in her description of the creative process:

I alliterated her. [...] A lovely lady vampire; last of her line, perhaps, locked up in her hereditary Transylvanian castle, and the bird in the gilded cage might be, might it not, an image of the lady herself, caged as she was by her hereditary appetites that she found both compulsive and loathsome. [...] I invented for the lovely lady vampire [...] a hero out of the *Boy's Own* paper circa 1914, who would cure and kill her by the innocence of his kiss and then go off to die in a war that was more hideous by far than any of our fearful superstitious imaginings. [...] It *came* to me as radio, with all its images ready formed, in terms of words and sounds²⁷.

26. *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845) is a popular German children's book by Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann. It comprises ten illustrated and rhymed stories, mostly about children, which contain morals demonstrating the disastrous consequences of misbehavior typical of 19th-century pedagogy.

27. A. Carter, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, p. 9-10.

Carter's radio play uses radiophonic technology as a new form of magic that revives the ancient, oral storytelling tradition, as it resorts to theme-music, sound effects, lyrical speech and dramatic intensity to create the peculiar mix of "black comedy and bizarre pathos"²⁸ intended by the author. The Countess's anguished monologues and artificial diction, together with the thematic emphasis on voice and song enacted in the sound effects, reference melodrama as a hybrid artistic form enhanced by the sense of doom and theatrical setting of the Gothic castle. The combination of melody (from the Greek *μελοιδία*, or "song") and drama (*δράμα*, or "action") thus dramatizes the demise of Gothic fantasy in favour of historical fact: in *Vampirella*, the extinction of the female vampire is followed by the return of morning bird song, interrupted by the chuckle of the Fatal Count, whose shadow "rises over every bloody battlefield" (p. 116). Gothic fantasy is similarly displaced and transformed at the end of *The Lady of the House of Love* by twentieth-century history and the real enough horrors of the first-world war. Accompanied by birdsong, the Hero leaves the castle on his bicycle, "So I sped through the purged and rational splendours of the morning; but when I arrived at Bucharest, I learned of the assassination at Sarajevo and returned to England immediately, to rejoin my regiment" (p. 116). But it is the Count who has the last laugh, since the young man is off to a bloody war.

Carter's Countess fuses various motifs from "Sleeping Beauty". Her sharp, pointed teeth evoke the lethal spindle of the traditional tale, and her death-in-life state prolongs the hundred years' sleep to which the princess is condemned by the old fairy's curse²⁹. Significantly, the self-loathing heroine is both Sleeping Beauty and her cannibal mother-in-law, thereby reviving the spectres and scary monsters that haunt the fairytale tradition, "the flesh-eating ogre[s] and [...] death itself" which, as Marina Warner aptly observes, "are not always invoked in order to be

28. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

29. In *The Lady of the House of Love*, the situation is even more ironic as the traditional roles of female vampire and male victim are reversed when the young hero kisses the finger of the Countess, who has cut herself on broken glass, and she bleeds to death. The conflation of the familiar motif of the deathly pricking of the finger with the life-giving kiss of the Prince draws attention to the presence of horrific elements arousing fear and fascination in traditional versions of the fairy tale.

dispelled”³⁰. As such, the vampire illustrates the dynamics of retelling at work in the fairy tale tradition itself, endlessly reinvented through new combinations of characters, motifs, and images as well as cross-generic and intermedial transpositions. Carter’s radio play and short story therefore draw on a range of artistic forms, genres and mediums that share a number of conventions, including stock characters, stylized language and predictable plots. While radio stresses the fairy tale’s privileged connection with speech (which etymologically comes from *fari*, “to speak” in Latin), the short story explores its links with romantic literature and Gothic fiction. Historically, these genres are indeed interrelated, since the reception of French fairy tales in England influenced the development of Gothic fiction, out of which melodrama notoriously emerged³¹. Carter’s vampires thus symbolize the author’s awareness of the difficulties but also the potentialities of renewing and regenerating formulaic fiction by recovering hidden connections that lead to the recognition of the complex interpenetration of literary genres, and the fact that vampire stories never die – at least as long as they prey and feed on other texts and artistic forms.

Reading La Belle au bois dormant as a Gothic tale

Carter’s ingenious, self-conscious and multiple retellings of the familiar tale also enable us to discover the classic texts that she read so carefully and imaginatively anew. *Vampirella* and *The Lady of the House of Love* challenge the modern perception of “Sleeping Beauty” as a bland fairy-tale romance partly because it focuses on the darker aspects of Perrault’s

30. M. Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*, p. 33. The Scottish governess hired by Count Dracula to take care of his daughter comes from a family condemned for anthropophagy and necrophilia, and she ominously (and humorously) quotes the ogre’s lines from “Jack and the Beanstalk” when the naïve Hero arrives at the castle: “Fee fi fo fum. I smell the blood of an Englishman” (p. 90).

31. Penelope Brown (“Fairy Tales, Fables, and Children’s Literature”, p. 349) notes that “Despite the opprobrium they attracted from moralists in England as in France, especially in the last decades of the eighteenth century, French fairy tales were enjoyed as widely as they were despised, and have been seen to have exerted a general influence on fantastic tales, the Gothic novel, and tales of love and sentiment (Palmer and Palmer 1974: 44).”

La Belle au bois dormant, and partly because it draws on the tender “farewell kiss” given by the Princess’s parents to their sleeping daughter, an element that becomes central in her own translation for children³².

Perrault’s *La Belle au bois dormant* is indeed much more complex and ambiguous than its subsequent retellings and adaptations have made it out to be. While this is inevitably downplayed in Carter’s translation, her fairytale-inspired vampire stories foreground the sinister aspects of the tale, such as family curses and doomed unions but also temporal distortions and transgressive fantasies like cannibalism. This perversion is represented by the anthropophagous Beane family in *Vampirella*, as well as its well-known variation, vampirism, in both the radio play and the short story.

Carter’s versions of “Sleeping Beauty” not only play with the idea of the creative process as a deliberate vampirising of the literary and cultural past, but also as an exploration of generic combinations, structural inversions, and semantic possibilities already suggested by her main source. Reformulation (as she called it) thus becomes a key strategy of rewriting that enables Carter to explore the potential for revival and renewal of formulaic (sub)genres³³. Carter’s vampire stories exploit the

32. See M. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, “‘But Marriage itself is no Party’”. Due to space limits, an examination of Carter’s intertextual dialogue with Grimm’s *Märchen* needs to be limited to a marginal note. *Dornröschen* and *Schneewittchen*, based as they are on the first and second part of Perrault’s tale, are also an important source of motifs in Carter’s vampire stories, including roses, dead suitors caught in the thorns of the bushes surrounding the castle, and the strange incipit where the queen pricks her finger and as she gazes on the drops of blood on the snow, wishes for a baby girl white as snow, red as blood, and black as the ebony window-frame. In *Vampirella*, the extraordinary pale skin, long dark hair, and “fleshy”, “purplish crimson”, “morbid” (p. 101) mouth of the Countess reference both Grimm’s tale and vampire fiction, her extraordinary beauty being “so excessive it seemed like a kind of deformity” (p. 92). Carter’s radio play also refers to Snow White, who will spend many years in a glass coffin after being poisoned by her jealous step-mother, just as vampires lie in their coffin during the day: “There the quarry lies, as ruddy in the cheeks as if I had nodded off to sleep in my shroud” (p. 85). Ritually beheaded and bled (“out gushes warm torrents of rich, red blood, like melted roses”, p. 85), the vampire rises again, just like the stories which are endlessly revived, in multiple combinations, transpositions and reinventions. Carter also rewrote the tale in “The Snow Child”, whose working title was “Sleeping Beauty”. See S. Ravussin’s article in the volume for another retelling in the vampirical mode.

33. The threatening atmosphere, violence and transgressive behaviour present in earlier versions of the tale known as “Sleeping Beauty” were considerably toned down in

more disturbing aspects and sexual subtext of Perrault's *conte*, as well as the textual complexities that have been effaced or neutralized in simplified versions of the story.

As argued earlier, *Vampirella* seeks to recover "the atavistic power of voices in the dark"³⁴, and thereby draws attention to references to the oral ("folk") tradition in Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant* reported by the peasants to the Prince, which spur him on to find the Princess³⁵. All kinds of scary legends surround the enchanted Castle, which is said to be haunted by ghosts ("esprits", p. 134) and wizards ("tous les sorciers de la contrée", p. 134). Most agree, however, that "un Ogre y demeurait, et que là il emportait tous les enfants qu'il pouvait attraper, pour pouvoir les manger à son aise, et sans qu'on pût le suivre, ayant seul le pouvoir de se faire un passage au travers du bois" (p. 134-135). A mere superstition, surely, except that the horrific stories and dark legends told by the peasants are closer to the truth than we might think, since the Princess's mother-in-law turns out to be an ogress who will later try to devour the young Queen and her children. Carter thus seems to elaborate on the orally-transmitted folk tales embedded within Perrault's literary *conte*, but left unexplored by the French writer. Ironically, the peasants tell these "tales" to the son of the ogress himself, who seems to have inherited from his mother the strange gift of crossing the magical wood

the course of time, to the point of being reduced to the stereotype of a sleeping girl waiting for the Prince Charming to kiss her awake. While the rape and impregnation of the slumbering princess by a passing (and married) prince in the medieval romance of *Perceforest* and in Basile's "Sole, Luna e Talia" (in *Lo Cunto de li Cunti*) gives way to a more chaste romantic encounter in Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*, the second half of his lengthy *conte*, which focuses on the persecution of the young queen and her children by an ogreish mother-in-law, disappears in favour of the marriage plot in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Dornröschen*, and in Walt Disney's animated film of 1959 (where the wicked Maleficent is strongly reminiscent of Snow White's jealous stepmother).

34. A. Carter, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, p. 13.

35. "Au bout de cent ans, le Fils du Roi [...] étant allé à la chasse de ce côté là, demanda ce que c'était que ces Tours qu'il voyait au-dessus d'un grand bois fort épais; chacun lui répondit selon qu'il en avait *ouï parler*. Les uns disaient que c'était un vieux Château où il revenait des Esprits; les autres que tous les Sorciers de la contrée y faisaient leur sabbat. La plus commune opinion était qu'un Ogre y demeurait, et que là il emportait tous les enfants qu'il pouvait attraper, pour les pouvoir manger à son aise, et sans qu'on le pût suivre, ayant seul le pouvoir de se faire un passage à travers le bois." (Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 134-135, italics mine). The stories within the story are marked as orally-transmitted folktales and, literally, hearsay.

unharméd. The repetition of the word “passer” in the passage even seems to signal (and enact) the connection between the Ogre of hearsay and the young Prince crossing the forest :

A peine s'avança-t-il vers le bois, que tous ces grands arbres, ces ronces et ces épines, s'écartèrent d'elles-mêmes pour le laisser passer³⁶.

The next sentence reinforces this textual echo by insisting on the feat of the Prince, for whom trees part and close after him (“les arbres s'étaient rapprochés dès qu'il avait été passé”, p. 135).

Another passage of Perrault's text presents an equally intriguing confusion of antagonistic characters. The tale memorably opens with the famous scene of the grand dinner prepared for the fairies (“un grand festin pour les Fées”, p. 131), which seals the young Princess's fate and takes its source in ancient rituals, myths and beliefs³⁷. After her disenchantment and marriage to the Prince, the young Princess is persecuted by her mother-in-law, the Queen mother, who repeats over and over that she wants to eat, first “la petite Aurore”, then “le Petit Jour”, and finally “la jeune Reine” (p. 138). Combining her brutal atavistic drive with gourmet sophistication à la *française*, she declares that she wants to eat the little girl in an “ogriish” tone (note the importance of voice), one of the few descriptive elements given about her in Perrault's tale :

Je le veux, dit la Reine (et elle le dit d'un ton d'Ogresse qui a envie de manger de la chair fraîche), et je la veux manger à la Sauce-robot³⁸.

Perrault's cannibal humour, here, is particularly ferocious. Even the narrator temporarily adopts the perspective of the Ogress via the cook to comment on the quality of the young queen's flesh, white and beautiful but a bit tough :

La jeune Reine avait vingt ans passés, sans compter les cent ans qu'elle avait dormi : sa peau était un peu dure, quoique belle et blanche³⁹.

36. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 135.

37. See S. Ballestra-Puech's *Les Parques*, as well as the section on Antiquity in the volume.

38. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 138.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Like the young Queen, Carter's vampirical heroine is both young and ageless, uncannily beautiful and morbidly pale as befits her condition. Like the old Queen, however, she hungers for young flesh and her nostrils quiver at the smell of the young man's blood. But the discovery of tenderness ("tendresse" as opposed to "tendreté", which in French distinguishes human softness of heart from the culinary quality of tender meat – an interlinguistic pun that seems to inform Carter's rewritings as "fiery tales") will humanize her when the hero "touche[s] her forehead, as if [he] had been kissing a child goodnight" (p. 114). The motif of the kiss in Carter's radio play thus conflates Perrault's text, where the King and Queen kiss their sleeping daughter before leaving the castle forever, and the Grimms', where the young Prince kisses the sleeping Princess awake.

The confusion between the fairy tale heroine and her powerful antagonist in Perrault's text is also subtly suggested when the Queen mother and the young Queen are distinguished not by name but by age. This creates an ambiguity that is reinforced by the old Queen's monstrous urge to eat the younger one, a desire that is in a sense realised in Carter's vampire stories where the two characters become one. When the cook kills a doe in place of the young Queen:

Il alla accommoder une biche, que *la Reine* mangea à son soupé, avec le même appétit que si c'eût été *la jeune Reine*. Elle était bien contente de sa cruauté, et elle se préparait à dire au Roi, à son retour, que les loups enragés avaient mangé *la Reine* sa femme et ses deux enfants ⁴⁰.

The confusion is further increased in Perrault's text by the proximity of the phrase "la Reine-Mère" to designate the ogress and "la Reine sa mère" which refers to the young Queen in the next paragraph. What is more, the lie that the old Queen imagines to fool her son into believing

40. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 139, italics mine. In her translation of the passage, Carter disambiguates the text as follows: "He [...] went to kill a young doe that the queen mother ate for supper with as much relish as if it had been her daughter-in-law. She was very pleased with her own cruelty and practised telling her son how the wolves had eaten his wife and children while he had been away at the wars." (p. 70) She translates the second passage as follows: "One night as she prowled about as usual, sniffing for the spoor of fresh meat, she heard a voice coming from the servants' quarters" (*The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, p. 70).

that wolves ate his wife and children contaminates the language of the text, when she is described in animal terms immediately after:

Un soir qu'elle rôdait à son ordinaire dans les cours et basses-cours du Château pour y *halener* quelque viande fraîche, elle entendit dans une salle basse le petit Jour qui pleurait, parce que la Reine sa mère le voulait faire fouetter, [...] ⁴¹

The ogreish nature of the old Queen is revealed by her voice, and her connection with wolves betrayed by the lie that she imagines to account for the disappearance of her daughter-in-law and her children: she thinks of accusing “les loups enragés” (p. 139) (ravenous/rabid wolves) to have devoured his wife, and here again the (tall) tale within the tale is not so far removed from the truth, insofar as the Queen’s behaviour is described by the narrator in animal (almost wolfish) terms. Thus, the performative function of language is not only thematized in *La Belle au bois dormant* in the opening scene of the cursing of the newly-born baby but also enacted in the very text of the tale, to the point that the boundaries between prey and predator, story and discourse, are blurred. Carter’s vampire stories thus encourage us to go back to Perrault’s *conte* and reread it in the original language like Carter herself, and become aware of its textual complexities as a central source of (re)invention.

“*The Art of Horrorzines*”: when Baudelaire meets *Vampirella*

We have seen that Carter reworked the material of the familiar stories on which she “preyed” in characteristic postmodern fashion by experimenting with unexpected generic (trans)fusions and transpositions. These creative strategies also include a self-conscious exploitation of the

41. Ch. Perrault, *Contes*, p. 139, italics mine. The predatory Queen therefore clearly inspires Carter’s hungry female vampires prowling around the castle (let alone the werewolves that haunt *The Bloody Chamber*): “On moonless nights, her keeper lets [the Countess] out into the garden. This garden, an exceedingly sombre place, bears a strong resemblance to a burial ground and all the roses her dead mother planted have grown up into a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates her in the castle of her inheritance. 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” (*The Bloody Chamber*, p. 95).

transformative effects resulting from the crossing of linguistic, national and cultural boundaries, as well as the arbitrary frontier between “high” and popular culture. Carter’s entire work indeed reflects her insatiable intellectual curiosity, as well as her activities as a cultural critic, translator and editor. Always impatient at being seen as a British writer, Carter revelled in cross-cultural traffic, and this is comically dramatized in her vampire fiction, which stages a confrontation between “reason” (represented by the young British Hero who believes in science and bicycles) and the supernatural, transgressive forces epitomized by the Francophile heroine and the inhabitants of the Transylvanian castle.

While *Vampirella* references Gothic literature as a European phenomenon, it also pays homage to the sexy comic book heroine created by the American Forrest J. Ackerman in 1969, and the subculture of comic books and Hammer films so popular in the 1970s. In “The Art of Horrorzines” (published in *New Society* in 1975), Carter celebrates this modern spin-off of Gothic fiction in popular culture, the fanzine (fig. 1)⁴².

She nevertheless claims that “There’s no denying, Vampirella’s got a lot more class in French”⁴³. Her heroine is accordingly inspired by the sexy comic-strip vamp filtered through the dark glamour of the Baudelairean vampire – decadent, artificial, macabre, moody, melodramatic, sensuous, sophisticated and self-consciously theatrical (fig. 2)⁴⁴.

Carter observes that the vampire myth reflects culturally specific echoes and resonances, and accounts for the reception of the American Gothic in France as follows:

Baudelaire’s version of Poe helps to distort, to etherealise, to surrealise the original image of the chubby Vampirella in all its native sexploitativeness and sensationalism⁴⁵.

42. Fanzines are amateur-produced magazines written for a subculture of enthusiasts devoted to a particular interest, in this case of vampire stories, called “horrorzines” (also spelled “horror zines”).

43. A. Carter, “The Art of Horrorzines”, p. 447.

44. The cult comic-strip *Vampirella*, published by Warren Publishing, told the adventures of a sexy female vampire. This black-and-white magazine (except for the lurid covers), in the style of horror comics, ran from 1969 till 1983. See <http://www.vampilore.co.uk/history01.html> (last consulted 6 June 2011).

45. A. Carter, “The Art of Horrorzines”, p. 448. Carter surely had in mind Charles Baudelaire’s poems “Le vampire” and “Les métamorphoses du vampire”, one of the

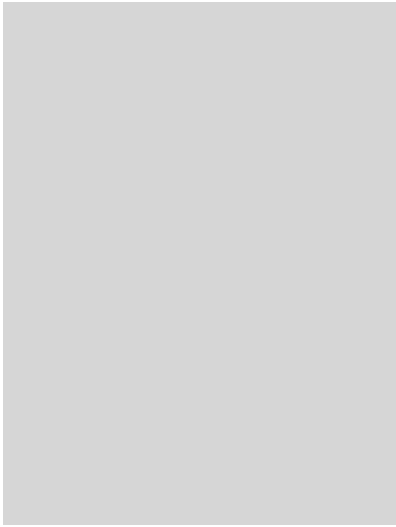


Fig. 1 — Vampirella issue 27 - September 1973 super-special summer issue - 1974 annual, cover Enrique Torres.

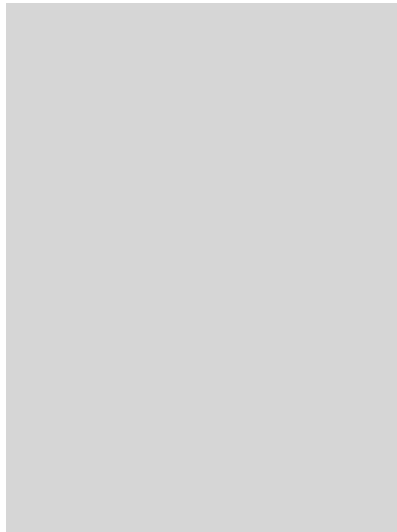


Fig. 2 — Vampirella issue 12 - July 1971, cover Manuel Sanjulian.

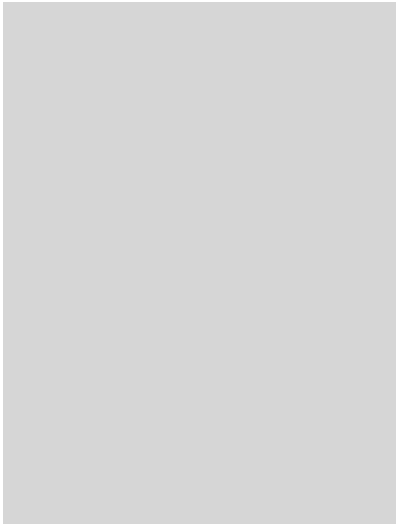


Fig. 3 — Vampirella special issue 1977, cover José Gonzales.

These observations on the cultural inflections of the vampire myth are based on her reading of the French fan magazine *Vampirella* which, she rejoices, “is the antithesis of that aspect of the British intellectual tradition typified by F. R. Leavis and those unable to see anything extraordinary in the juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table” (p. 448). Carter’s enthusiasm for the magazine, as opposed to the Leavisite bourgeois ethos eager to maintain cultural hierarchies and impervious to the marvellous, stems from the shattering of arbitrary hierarchies: between high and popular culture, good and bad taste, American pop culture and French decadentism, which she sees at work in the “parody academe” characteristic of the “sub-culture of the comic buff” (p. 449). Hence the appropriateness of the metaphor popularized by the surrealists to celebrate the creative potential of incongruous juxtapositions that awaken all kinds of associations and free up repressed images and new meanings, which perfectly applies to her own creative method.

Carter observes that the women’s movement has influenced the fanzine “in rather a complex way” (p. 450) (fig. 3). Her own Countess is not only inspired by the “sexually liberated” Marvel World heroine Angel O’Hara, who preys on her male victims, but also by Michael Morbius, with whom she shares a sense of her tragic condition, as “an existential kind of vampire” “consumed with self-loathing”. Morbius himself, she remarks, is influenced by “those nineteenth-century French decadents with whose style the captions are heavily tinged” (p. 450). Carter’s own *Vampirellas* therefore draw on the “raw material” of a global culture that is itself marked by cross-cultural borrowings, adaptations and reformulations, nourished as it is on the American comic-strip as much as the French *poètes maudits*, and thereby participate in the general circulation, blending and transformation of texts, genres and ideas.

Carter’s reinvention of highly coded genres such as Gothic fiction, the fairy tale and the comic-strip thus illustrates the idea of literary creation as cultural traffic, and the transfusion of new blood into old (textual and other) bodies, a variation on her well-known image of “new reading of old texts” as akin to “putting new wine in old bottles, especially if

“pièces condamnées” from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857, 1861).

the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode”⁴⁶. In this vampire context, of course, the wine is red.

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46. A. Carter, “Notes from the Front Line”, p. 37.

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Crédits iconographiques

Fig. 1-3 :

Vampirella (R) & (c) 2011 DFI. Courtesy of Dynamite Entertainment.