

The Female Fantastic vs. The Feminist Fantastic: Gender and the Transgression of the Real

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David Roas,

"The Female Fantastic vs. The Feminist Fantastic: Gender and the Transgression of the Real"

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Abstract: Since Ann Richter coined the term "fantastique féminin" in 1977, many works in different languages have postulated a "female" way of writing fantastic texts, depending on the selection of themes, language, characters, supernatural elements, and the portrayal of the uncanny and the monstrous. This claim on the existence of a "female fantastic" reflects central issues in Feminist Literary Theory: on the one hand, the will to identify an aesthetic mode opposed to the dominant patriarchal discourse (female writing, the use of specific themes, etc.); on the other hand, the argument that there are marginal genres, forms and styles voluntarily removed from the central canon (this would also apply to the fantastic written by men). This article offers a review of the theoretical viability of the main works on this subject to show how most of them define the fantastic in terms of recurring themes that, paradoxically, tend to also appear in the works of male authors. Much more productive and more viable from a theoretical point of view is to study the "feminist fantastic" (this is the central thesis of this article), given the tendency of a significant number of women writers to use the fantastic as an element of destabilization of cultural, ideological and political characteristics and values of patriarchy.

David ROAS

The Female Fantastic vs. The Feminist Fantastic: Gender and the Transgression of the Real¹

Since 1977 when Anne Richter coined the term "female fantastic," a series of works in different languages and from different perspectives have advocated the existence of a specifically female way of cultivating the fantastic. This interesting theoretical issue is connected to several main ideas from Feminist Literary Theory. On the one hand, there is the desire to establish an aesthetic that opposes the dominant patriarchy (through women's writing, through the use of certain themes, etc.). On the other, there is the vindication of marginal genres, forms, and styles that are intentionally distanced from canonical centrality (which, by the way, also applies to male-authored fantastic texts). At the same time, vindicating the marginal provides a way to transgress the boundaries of the patriarchal system.

1. "Essentialist" Definitions

As I specified earlier, it was the Belgian writer and critic Anne Richter who first coined the term "female fantastic" and proposed its definition in her book *Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours* (1977).² This compelling (and necessary) anthology also provides a historical overview of the female fantastic through stories in different languages by female authors from various countries. In a brief introduction, Richter explains her understanding of the "female fantastic," a definition on which she will later elaborate and further develop in *Le fantastique féminin. Un art sauvage* (1984) and *Les écrivains fantastiques féminins et la métamorphose* (2017).

Richter begins with a fundamental idea: only modern fantastic literature can be truly "female." However thought-provoking the works of authors like Ann Radcliffe, Vernon Lee, or Emilia Pardo Bazán (all of whom are included in her book) may be, Richter considers that "Il aurait pu tout aussi bien être oeuvre masculine: il s'agit en quelque sorte d'un art asexué, ou plus exactement d'une littérature d'emprunt -les femmes recopiant les thèmes et les arguments d'une littérature d'hommes, conçue selon un esprit dominé par un logique virile" (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe* 7). For this reason, she does not hesitate to say, albeit without clear scientific justification, that

Women move within magical realism in a more spontaneous and concrete way than men: they do not think about it, they do *reflect* it, as if it were their natural and, so to speak, everyday element. Always confronted with the eternal illogicality of beings and things, they have in a way learned to tame it. While men generally feel the need to build their work on a dialectic of the strange, that they want to dominate their fantastic universe by giving it an essentially mental structure, women enter on the same level, without discussion and without pride, in the supernatural whose existence seems to them, a priori, to be an incontestable evidence (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe* 9-10).

This leads Richter to develop, as the basis of her argumentation, a type of "archetypal essentialism," which other researchers will later question (rightly so, if I may add). Thus, for example, she states that

the feminine imaginary expresses a persistent nostalgia, its connivance with elementary nature, which is now underestimated. (...) The revelations of current fantastic literature bring us back to the path of life and wisdom. For the demands of nature that she embodies are not only material, but also spiritual. The exacerbation of the intellect has completely cut off the so-called civilized man from intuitive discernment. In the face of the disasters with which this excess threatens us, does not salvation rest on the restoration of feminine values? (*Le fantastique féminin. Un art sauvage* 195).

Richter thus considers female myths and fantasies as liberating ways of representing women, insofar as they exalt (supposedly) primordial female characteristics, such as madness and irrationality.

¹ This work is partially supported by ICREA under the ICREA Academia programme.

² A year earlier, Ellen Moers had proposed the term "female gothic" (1976), although she intended it in an even broader sense to include works from various mimetic and non-mimetic categories and genres.

Her explanation translates to an "essentialist" definition of the female fantastic, which, as Gloria Alpini puts it, we can recognize by its use of

an old-fashioned system of binary oppositions: male/female, intellect/instinct, rational/irrational, *Homo sapiens*/Mother-Nature. Along this line, rather than woman as an 'active' subject, we have woman as an 'irrational' subject. It might prove unhelpful to regard the irrational as *the* exclusive, 'female' aspect of the Fantastic. This would involve the risk of perpetuating the male habit of reducing the feminine to the expression of the irrational/Eros as opposed to the masculine/rational/Logos (Alpini 61).

In *Contemporary Italian Women Writers of the Fantastic: The Creation of Literary Space*, Danielle Hipkins provides a similar critique. She not only questions the idea of an ancient matriarchal power, like many other scholars at the moment, but also women's innate capacity to communicate with nature and thereby overturn the male domain of reason (Hipkins 32).

Despite this, various works echo Richter's archetypal (or utopian) essentialism. For example, in her essay *L'irruzione del vedere nel pensare: saggi sul fantastico* (1997), Monica Farnetti draws on Kristeva's psychoanalytic research to propose the definition of the female fantastic as a questioning of the patriarchal symbolic order through dreams and the irrational, two key means of transgressing western language and thought. But, like Richter, she continuously insists on women's "eternal" connection to Earth, Nature, Instinct, Eros, and the Irrational.

This essentialist and archetypal view of women also appears, among other places, in two very illuminating works. The first is the book *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (2000), in which the author, Lucie Armitt, also mixes different non-mimetic forms (fantastic, gothic, magic realism, and science fiction) under the term "fantastic" in analyzing the works of various female writers from the second half of the twentieth century. The second is Zoé Jiménez Corretjer's doctoral thesis, *Una búsqueda de lo fantástico femenino* (1996), later converted into the book *El Fantástico Femenino en España y América* (2001), which explores texts by twentieth-century Hispanic authors. As Jiménez Corretjer herself points out, in her research she focuses on finding common denominators between the women writing in this genre (although her book also mixes fantastic, magical realist, and marvelous texts). The common denominators to which she is referring are mythical coincidences, religious symbols, magical iconography, the mixture of the uncanny with the real, the use of symbols, and a female approach to the representation of archetypes. The author explains that female writers can appropriate female fantastic literature to subvert traditional systems. They can use these concepts as tools with which to invert the classical parameters that had established writing as an exclusively male instrument (287-290).

Thus, Armitt and Jiménez Corretjer, like other scholars before and after them, consider fantastic literature written by women as a transgressive act, both against the patriarchal system and against the very limits of logic, insofar as it allows female writers to appropriate fantastic figures as feminist instruments.

The last work in this vein I would like to address is Francisco Vicente de Paula Júnior's doctoral thesis, *O fantástico feminino nos contos de três escritoras brasileiras* (2011), in which the author strives to provide a detailed definition of the concept, features, and aesthetic and ideological implications of essentialist and archetypal views of the "feminine." From all his theoretical arguments, I would like to focus on six parameters that, according to him, would allow us to identify the female fantastic (de Paula 95-96):

1. The text must be written by a woman. He himself states, however, as Richter did (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe* 7), that not every fantastic text written by a woman can be classified under the term "female fantastic," which is why we need the next five parameters, whose fulfillment will determine whether the text can be included in this category.

2. The text must address issues inherent to women, whether directly or indirectly, among which the author highlights motherhood, adultery, incest, abortion, and lesbianism.

3. The text must be written in a "feminine" *language*. This is where his argumentation becomes the most confused, especially when he posits a correlation between the "natural" ambiguity of a fantastic text and that of "feminine" language.

4. *Otherness*, manifested through the woman's encounter with the other and with her double, must be clearly presented as a central theme.

5. The text must address *the status of women in society* either through a mythical or symbolic approach.

6. Finally, the woman herself, her world, and the people and things around her, must be presented from a *female point of view*. To paraphrase Irigaray (45), we could say that what best characterizes

the female fantastic is the presence of a woman's point of view, which will require her to adopt the role of a speaking subject within the framework of the themes covered in the text, thus revealing the consciousness of a female (or feminist) "I".

According to de Paula (93), the female gaze resignifies the fantastic work, giving it a new function: speaking directly or indirectly about women and their condition in society. The female fantastic, in de Paula's opinion, is a *strategy that shifts the margin towards the center*, or rather, an attempt to change women's condition through a new approach that encompasses female and feminist ambitions.

Leaving aside the essentialist undertones of de Paula's work (for example, he openly insists on the "undeniable" link between women and the supernatural, or women and the mystical and mythical aspects of humanity), I believe that this last idea of his opens up interesting avenues that can lead to a possible definition of the female fantastic, one that coincides with those of other female scholars who reject essentialist views of the subject. These avenues would have to take into account the thematic dimension of the text besides any potential formal and stylistic features; de Paula highlights, above all, the recurrent theme of otherness and its direct link to another central theme in female and feminist fiction: the search for and construction of identity.

2. Overcoming Essentialism (Towards a Feminist Fantastic)

In this section, I will review various works written from a non-essentialist perspective that seek to define the "female" fantastic, but which actually, and more importantly, end up defining and vindicating a "feminist" fantastic (which, however, cannot be said of all fantastic works written by women).

In her book *The Female Fantastic. Evolution, Theories and Poetics of Perversion* (2009), which I mention above, Gloria Alpini produces one of the most insightful studies on the subject. The Italian author begins by calling attention to two problems that the majority of researchers studying the female fantastic come across: 1) the difficulty in differentiating between masculine and feminine imaginary, and 2) the fact that the feminine imaginary still needs to be fully explored and defined. Perhaps that is why, she concludes, we have yet to reach a convincing definition of the "female" fantastic (55-68).

Alpini thus proposes a very different approach to the notion of "female" fantastic, which she posits as a form of transgression determined less by essentialism than by an appreciation of women's bio-historical subject position, which, she insists, we must examine from a clearly spatial perspective. To do so, she turns to Lucie Armitt's doctoral thesis (*Pushing Back the Limits: The Fantastic as Transgression in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 1992), in which the author focuses on the spatial qualities of female transgression in the fantastic, particularly in relation to the domestic sphere. Her analysis, in turn, draws on the celebrated work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), in which the authors Gilbert and Gubar define the relationship between the nineteenth-century woman writer and her space as fundamental to understanding her writing.

This approach allows Alpini, like Armitt before her, to describe how women transgress the limits that patriarchy has prescribed for them, without having to resort to Richter's outdated essentialism and still emphasizing the feminist dimension of the texts: "The female fantastic involves a 'poetics of perversity' that does not celebrate but rather rejects and 'perverts'/distorts/misrepresents/changes the traditional representation of women as something perfect/abstract/idealised... the female voice chooses paradoxically the Fantastic to assert that a woman is no silent creature" (Alpini 217).

Clearly, both Alpini's work and previous "essentialist" reflections on the topic are fundamentally thematic in nature. Thus, she explains that the female authors she examines use the fantastic to reflect on women's position in society from another perspective and in this way subvert patriarchal notions of it. This becomes evident in the way female characters are portrayed and in the recurring theme of identity construction:

One of functions of the Female Fantastic becomes that of loosening repressive bonds... Now, women writers create a female character that disrupts normative behavior by imposing their sexual assertiveness (...) Sexual emancipation makes the Female Fantastic a 'literature of subversion' as it encourages the overthrow of normative values (Alpini 221).

The Fantastic that rewrites the same female figures over and over again from being alienating becomes liberating when it 'perverts' women. Perverting female characters means leading them into a way of thinking or behavior that is 'considered' wrong... It means refusing to identify women with those female figures created out of male imaginary (Alpini 224).

María Akrabova develops a similar approach in *El signo y el espejo. Una aproximación a lo fantástico femenino*, published in 2004. For her, the fantastic creates a natural space for the expression of female subjectivity, and is defined in terms of an otherness that evokes systems of desire and of the unconscious and is, therefore, subversive in nature.

Akrabova brings the question of female expressiveness and of women's appropriation of the dominant discourse to the forefront of her research. She establishes parallels between the existence of a strictly female language (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva) and fantastic writing in terms of their inherent ambiguity, subversiveness, and marginality with respect to literary and cultural conventions. She clarifies, however, that their affinity does not necessarily mean they are identical: "It is to be assumed that within the fantastic there will be a differentiation between the masculine and the feminine text based on preferences of theme and presentation procedure" (43). She thus points out that defining a female fantastic text is difficult for two main reasons. Firstly, both fantastic and female writing are regarded as such only when the reader recognizes their subversive nature, which can sometimes be skillfully disguised and discernible only to those willing to see it. Secondly, there is no consistent definition of either fantastic or female writing, mostly because the number and classification of recurring themes and images is sometimes lost within an all-encompassing theoretical approach.

In my opinion, this is also one of the central problems of the entire issue; previous research is too thematically focused and is more concerned with establishing a typology of recurrent themes in works by creators of very different origins than with trying to pinpoint genuine formal or stylistic differences, if any exist, that would allow us to identify and differentiate a "female" fantastic.

Despite this, Akrabova's research also ends up being thematic in nature, since her main hypothesis rests on the fact that the female fantastic text is characterized by themes pertaining mainly to the *interior fantastic*. She draws her definition of the *interior fantastic* from Herrero Cecilia's work, forgetting that Vax and Baronian had already defined the concept, as Richter already pointed out in a similar study (which Akrabova does not mention either):

It is no coincidence, in fact, if the compliance of the feminine fantastic coincides with the hatching of the modern fantastic. The art of Henry James, Stevenson, or Kafka, is characterized by a climate of stripped and intense interiority, the creation of a 'space of the interior' which does not offer any more common measure with the incredible or monstrous creatures of the traditional genre. The feminine fantastic corresponds exactly to the characteristics of the fantastic "interior" which Louis Vax or Jean-Baptiste Baronian have emphasized (*Le fantastique féminin. Un art sauvage* 24).³

In her search for what is specifically female in the fantastic, Akrabova also emphasizes the notion of subversion to show that in the realm of the fantastic, reality is doubly inverted because of the reflection of female subjectivity in the writing itself. She resultantly concludes that the confluence of fantastic elements and female subversion undermines dominant perceptions of power, social class, aesthetics, and sexual identity. This inversion of value assumptions of the phallogocentric culture (which ascribes a negative or reduced value to everything associated with femininity) serves to restore the feminine of its marginalized position. It also urges us to reconsider the mechanisms that sustain the very presence of dominant discourses. Despite explicitly using the term "female," like Alpini and others I mention above, Akrabova is clearly proposing a definition of a "feminist" fantastic in her work.

3. A Brief Excursus on the Confusion of Categories

As I previously stated, most research that examines the concept of the "female" fantastic usually constructs its definition based on works from different non-mimetic categories and genres (i.e. the fantastic, the gothic, science fiction, the marvelous, magic realism), whose function and meaning are very different.

Thus, in the English-speaking world (and I'm now referring to the fantastic in a more general sense), the term *fantasy* is usually considered a non-mimetic macro-category that includes science fiction, fairy tales, the fantastic, natural horror, and gothic fiction. Approaches such as that of Rabkin

³ It should be noted that in vindicating the interior fantastic, Richter makes very vague statements about works that she categorizes under the term "fantastique féminin". For example, with regards to Shirley Jackson's disturbing novel *We have always lived in the castle*, Richter states: "A very feminine book insofar as it describes a strictly interior universe, the myth of the birthplace: a stay of absolute privacy, a dreamlike home where time can stand still" (*Le fantastique féminin. Un art sauvage* 175).

fall under this framework. In a work now considered a classic, *The Fantastic in Literature*, Rabkin proposes that all non-realist fiction is "fantastic," including two genres as distant from the impossible as crime novels and science fiction.⁴ Meanwhile, Hume uses the concepts of mimesis and fantasy to define the two basic narrative impulses in western fiction: either imitate reality or move away from it. Once again, the problem is that she places all forms of narrative that move away from our agreed concept of reality under the term *fantasy*, as if all of these forms could pertain to the same category.⁵ The same can be said of two other comprehensive concepts. On the one hand, we have the concept of *littératures de l'imaginaire* coined by francophone critics (Bozzetto, Berthelot) to encompass the various literary genres that subvert the frontiers of the real. On the other are the concepts of *literatura do sobrenatural* and *insólito*, which appear regularly in the works of various Portuguese and Brazilian researchers (Furtado, García). (Note, however, that although they propose a macro-category that includes various forms of non-mimetic expression, they do not confuse the function of the various "types" they cover.)

Confronted with these theoretical approaches, some stronger than others, I believe that applying the same label to such different forms of non-mimetic expression (in terms of objectives and above all effects) as the fantastic, the marvelous, magic realism, and science fiction does not help to improve our understanding of how they all function, as inevitably it turns them all into mere variants of a greater form even though they are more different than similar (see Roas, "El reverso de lo real" and *Behind the Frontiers of the Real*). For example, while the fantastic is articulated by means of the disquieting incursion of the impossible in a world similar to that of the receiver, the marvelous (fantasy) aims to create an autonomous world governed by a set of rules that function radically differently from those of empirical reality (thus, strictly speaking, the impossible does not take place in such works because everything that occurs in this world is natural provided that we read these events within their own conditions of reality). Meanwhile, magic realism establishes a harmonious coexistence between the natural and the uncanny in an everyday world, which creates a curious hybrid of the fantastic and the marvelous. Finally, science fiction proposes an expansion of our framework of reality by means of scientific speculation (present or future, human or alien), so just as occurs with the marvelous and, to a certain extent, with magic realism, the (apparently) impossible ceases to be perceived as such as it has a logical explanation (always based on certain scientific and technological developments presented as possible within the strict margins of the text).

Coming back to the studies on the "female" fantastic: as I have mentioned, since Richter's anthology, to define the "female" fantastic researchers have constantly mixed texts that do not correspond to the idea of the fantastic agreed upon by theory,⁶ unhesitatingly including marvelous narratives (fairy tales), magical realist, and even science fiction texts as examples. Thus, to cite only a few significant examples, Farnetti includes a large number of Italian authors who write fairy tales (Ortese, Jaeggy, Negri, Morante, and Capriolo). Meanwhile, in her research, Akrabova focuses on the works of several Hispanic authors who have very different ways of cultivating non-mimetic literature: Carmen Boullosa (science fiction), Isabel Allende (magic realism), and Cristina Fernández Cubas (the fantastic). Lastly, the authors of the works collected in the volume edited by Hutton, dedicated to Francophone literature, are as different as Darieussecq, Nothomb, Vonarburg, and Maillet, that is, they move between science fiction, the everyday fantastic, and allegorical texts.

As I see it, the recurring inclusion of non-mimetic categories under the term fantastic not only creates confusion but also undermines the theoretical validity of the works I am examining, in terms of providing a precise definition of that category.

4. The Feminist Fantastic

⁴ Nancy B. Traill's approach is very different: departing from the theory of possible worlds, she describes the fantastic as a "universal aesthetic category" that is manifested through any type of artistic expression: "It may be a play, short story, novel, ballad; we may find it in the form of a painting or a statue, or perhaps a symphony or an opera" (7).

⁵ See also Cornwell and Attebery on the concept of *fantasy*. Cranny-Francis's definition of "Feminist Fantasy", which takes various non-mimetic forms, is in the same vein. The same can be said of what's known as "Unnatural Feminist Narratology" (Peel), which developed from the concept of the "Unnatural Narrative" (Richardson; Alber & Heinze; Alber).

⁶ To spare the reader, it suffices to mention the diverse theoretical texts (some already classic and others more recent), written by both men and women, that differentiate the fantastic from all other categories and non-mimetic genres: Caillois, Todorov, Bessière, Jackson, Traill, Ceserani, Bozzetto, Campra, Reisz, Roas.

Despite what I have presented in the previous sections, my intention is not to diminish the importance of the aforementioned works (and so many others that I have not had time to mention) nor, much less, to criticize the perfectly legitimate strategy of trying to delimit a "female" fantastic. Instead, I propose that this concept is not operational, unless we tautologically consider as "female" fantastic any fantastic work written/created by a woman.

Nevertheless, these same theoretical propositions can be extremely useful when, as I pointed out earlier, they vindicate the fantastic created by women as a way of directly or indirectly attacking the patriarchal order and undermining power structures. That is to say, when they explore the feminist use of the fantastic, as Anne Cranny-Francis already has with respect to the (vaguer) concept of "Female Fantasy" when she refers to it as a category that "explores the problems of being for women in a society which denies them not only visibility but also subjectivity. It scrutinizes the categories of the patriarchal real, revealing them to be arbitrary, shifting constructs: the subjugation of women is not a 'natural' characteristic, but an ideological process" (Cranny-Francis 77).

I believe this feminist use of the fantastic can be characterized by the recurrence of three essential aspects: 1) a cosmology of questions specifically linked to the female experience, 2) female narrative voices, and 3) the presence of women as agents of action. These three aspects, moreover, are used in the service of a clear objective: to subvert the traditional submission of women and the ways in which women's identity and experience have been represented.

A fourth element, on which there is no clear agreement, can be added to these three: language, an aspect that, it is worth noting, has to do exclusively with literary manifestations of the fantastic.

There is no doubt that the problem of how to express a specific reality through a language that excludes it is central to feminist theory: just think of Cixous's, Showalter's, or Irigaray's reflections on the existence of a female writing. Although, there are some who deny it, as is the case, for example, with Wittig. It is not my intention to enter a debate on which an excellent bibliography already exists, but simply to point out that in some works mentioned, the authors establish a direct parallel between women's writing and fantastic writing based on what they consider to be their inherent ambiguity, their subversive quality, and their marginality with respect to literary and cultural convention (Akrabova).

Likewise, as we can see from the still limited number of works that explore the linguistic implications of the fantastic in a general sense (Bellemin-Noël, Bozzetto, Erdal Jordan, Campra, Mellier, Rodríguez Hernández, Roas), the fantastic becomes a subversive category, not just in its thematic aspects but also in its linguistic dimension; it alters the representation of reality established by the system of values shared by a community by inserting a description of an impossible phenomenon within that system: the fantastic text announces the presence of the unspeakable (the other side of the speakable) without being able to declare it. Thus, as Jackson explains, the fantastic traces a route of the unsaid and the unseen in culture, and therefore becomes a form of subversive social opposition that counters the ideology of the moment in history in which it arises.

It may, therefore, be worth asking if there is a language with a particular form of discourse that is characteristic of and natural to the fantastic. The various critics mentioned above have all arrived at the same conclusion: while it is possible to detect various recurring rhetorical, discursive, and structural devices in a significant number of narratives of the fantastic, they are not exclusive to the fantastic and are shared across literary language in general. Rodríguez Hernández (54) proposes the following (provisional) list of linguistic and formal devices employed in the creation of the fantastic effect:

a) Devices related directly to the narrative instance: first-person narrative, narrator-protagonist identification, interpretive hesitation or ambiguity, parabasis.

b) Devices related to syntactical aspects and narrative organization: the particular time of the statement, reverse chronology, absence of causality and finality, use of the *mise en abîme*, metaphorical metalepsis.

c) Devices related to the discursive aspects or at a verbal level: literalizations of the figurative sense, implied adjectivization, narrative equaling of the natural and the supernatural, elision of the term for designation, anthropomorphization of synecdoche.

As I mentioned, there are no substantial differences, at least not at first and from a linguistic perspective, between literature of the fantastic and mimetic literature. In this sense, the possibility of the existence of a language of the fantastic per se is analogous to differentiating between a non-mimetic language from a mimetic language or, ultimately, factual from fictional language. As Bessière has already stated, "There is no such thing as a fantastic language" (13). What we have, on the contrary, is a way of using language that generates a fantastic effect.

Leaving aside, then, the problem of language,⁷ the definition of the "female" fantastic is linked, as I mentioned, to the critical potential of the various themes and recurrent images. Thus, it is enough to go through the history of modern fantastic literature to realize how, since the golden years of the ghost story, a social and political reading of women has intensified⁸ (it is enough to think of the disturbing story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman), promoting a feminist interpretation that questions traditional values from a perspective that is not usually adopted in the fantastic written by male authors.⁹

At the same time, this does not mean, as some have tried to suggest, that we are dealing with a different fantastic.¹⁰ Rather, as I have said, with a different use of the fantastic that above all denounces female cultural models imposed by patriarchal power. For we cannot forget an essential point: what defines and distinguishes the fantastic is, above all other characteristics and functions, the transgression of our shared vision of the real (Roas, *Behind the Frontiers of the Real*). It is a transgression that can take form in many ways, but that is always there, and has been since the Romantic era to our postmodern times. It is what defines and distinguishes the fantastic from all other categories and non-mimetic genres.

This transgression of (our idea of) the real is usually accompanied by other forms of transgression; as Rosemary Jackson puts it, the fantastic becomes an excellent form of subversive social opposition that counters the ideology of the moment in history in which it arises:

It is possible to discern it [the fantastic] as a desire for something excluded from cultural order -more specifically, for all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries. As a literature of desire, the fantastic can be seen as providing a point of departure, in Bersani's words, "for an authentically civilizing scepticism about the nature of our desires and the nature of our being." (Jackson 176)¹¹

This idea was also put forth by Armitte and, as in the case of Jackson, can be applied to fantastic works by both women and men: "[the fantastic text], endlessly open and thus non-containable (...) must therefore pose as a dangerous threat to establish notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centricity" (Armitte 11). This leads Armitte to point out that the ambiguity inherent to fantastic works is a very attractive feature for exploring marginality and socio-political non-centrality, two aspects that the feminist fantastic will exploit to denounce oppression of the female subject. Hence, as I stated, the critical potential of the fantastic as a weapon for feminists to claim has intensified.

Alpini, whose proposition is extremely useful, in my opinion, also uses Jackson's ideas about the fantastic as a form of subversion as a starting point (though we should not forget that she is speaking generally about male and female authors). If, as Jackson says, the fantastic is an ambiguous and elliptical discourse that expresses what is excluded by culture, it is not difficult to understand why this mode of representation has been considered very adequate for portraying the female subject, traditionally silenced and marginalized within a masculine and patriarchal system. This leads Alpini to clearly identify an unequivocally feminist *strategy* (perverting the mode of representation of women) and *function* (rethinking the imaginary) for the "female" fantastic that she is trying to define, which embodies "the changeability of narrative structures necessary to dismantle the collective/male imaginary and create a new imaginary for women" (44).

Among the many examples that I could cite here, the recurrent tendency of a significant number of Latin American women writers to use the fantastic as an instrument for questioning social and political meaning is very revealing, as Rodero has demonstrated in several of his works (he explicitly uses the expression "fantástico feminista"):

⁷ For a deeper reflection on this subject, refer to the article by Anna Boccuti included in this monograph.

⁸ On this subject, see, among others, Dickerson, McCormick, and the various works collected in McCormick, Mitchell & Soares.

⁹ However, this does not prevent such characteristics and themes from appearing in works by male authors.

¹⁰ Take, for example, the idea of the *neo-fantastic*, coined by Alzaraki, who tried to form a new category in opposition to the fantastic. According to him, the latter would remain strictly circumscribed to the limits of the nineteenth century, thus setting apart what came about from Kafka onward and, especially, in the works of postmodern authors like Julio Cortázar. His attempt clearly failed, as demonstrated in Roas "La amenaza"; and *Beyond* 53-61).

¹¹ Jackson is quoting Leo Bersani (313).

This transgression of limits [that defines the fantastic] to challenge dominant cultural values takes a specific form in Latin America among many women writers during the last decades. Many of these writers have used the fantastic to discuss those values. With them, the fantastic takes on a political character and is displayed as an allegory in many cases. Rosario Ferré, Cristina Peri Rossi, Luisa Valenzuela, Rima De Vallbona, Isabel Allende, Myriam Bustos and Carmen Naranjo, among many others, have written fantastic stories in which the mutual problematization between the natural real and the supernatural unreal leads to questioning and subverting cultural values and prejudices in general, and patriarchal in particular ("Lo fantástico feminista" 266).

A feminist use of the fantastic, then, is becoming increasingly widespread among authors across different countries, languages, and art forms. This means that the characteristics mentioned above, including female voices describing their experience of the fantastic in the first person, are becoming ever-present. The same can be said of female characters whose stories convey a continuous process of identity reconstruction in the face of stereotyped identities created by the heterodesignation of patriarchal hegemonic discourse. At the same time, we are seeing an inversion of female roles (and the consequent deconstruction of these stereotypes) and the prominent use of the "monstrous feminine" (Creed) as a means to denounce and transgress traditional models of representing the body and the limits of monstrosity and of violence and horror as reflections of female oppression. Perhaps this is where the feminist fantastic differs from the fantastic usually created by men, which is not to say that a man cannot have *feminist* aims.

To conclude, as McCormick, Mitchell and Soares (xviii) have said:

Of course, there is no *female* fantastic. That is to say, both terms—the gender and the genre—are slippery for different reasons. But the fantastic mode, created by female-of-center or female-identified authors and explored from intersectional feminist lenses across decades, begins to reveal the multivalent potential of the genre to more than express experiences of gender or other subjugations or to subvert conventions. We argue that the fantastic manifests new multivalent ways of seeing and being and makes them cognitively possible for creators and readers.

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