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"Monstrous and Atrocious: Defiance and Resistance in the Female Protagonists of Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*"

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ABSTRACT

The female monster/atrocious belle stereotype in literature is a figure that crosses social boundaries and embodies the mystery and the threat of a concealed identity. The present master's thesis intends to probe into the monstrous feminine image in two novels from similar periods, yet clearly disparate literary traditions and languages: Machado de Assis' *Dom Casmurro* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. More particularly, we will analyze their two powerful female protagonists, respectively Capitú and the vampiric Carmilla: both powerful yet strikingly oblique in terms of their narrative presentation. The two characters refer us to the social construction of woman as an evil, monstrous creature, which a feminist reading cannot but associate to the transgressive power of the adulterous beauty and the lesbian vampire imageries. In the light of such contemporary but also legitimate reading our research will attempt to show that the monstrous feminine stereotype, while born from age-old myths, can be interpreted as a contemporary symbol of resistance.

Keywords: Female monsters, Dom Casmurro, Carmilla, Capitú, Feminist Criticism.

RESUMEN

El estereotipo literario de la mujer monstruo/ bella atroz es una figura que traspasa las fronteras sociales y encarna el misterio y la amenaza de una identidad oculta. El presente Trabajo de Fin de Máster pretende explorar la imagen de lo femenino-monstruoso en dos novelas de épocas similares, pero lenguas y tradiciones literarias claramente distintas: *Dom Casmurro* de Machado de Assis y *Carmilla* de Sheridan Le Fanu. Más concretamente, nos centraremos en sus respectivas protagonistas femeninas, figuras poderosas aunque presentadas, desde el punto de vista narrativo, de un modo llamativamente oblicuo: Capitú y la vampírica Carmilla. Ambos personajes nos refieren a la construcción social de la mujer como una criatura malvada y monstruosa: una construcción que una lectura feminista no

puede sino asociar al poder transgresor de imaginería en torno a la bella adúltera y la vampira lesbiana. A la luz de esta lectura, tan contemporánea como legítima, nuestra investigación intentará demostrar que el estereotipo de la mujer monstruosa, aunque nace de mitos ancestrales, puede interpretarse como un símbolo contemporáneo de resistencia.
Palabras clave: Femenino-monstruoso, Dom Casmurro, Carmilla, crítica feminista.

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INTRODUCTION

A central concern of feminist literary criticism has always been how female characters are presented in literature. Among the longest-standing fictional stereotypes are those of the monstrous female and the evil yet beautiful woman —what Erika Bornay calls "atrocious belles" (257). In nineteenth century narrative literature there are many instances of such or related clichés, even within such disparate traditions as social realism and the gothic novel. In his monograph *Monster Culture (Seven Theses),* Jeffrey Jerome Cohen raises the argument that "the monster's body is a cultural body" (4). In other words, the literary female monsters are not separated from their culture and represent the concerns and anxieties of mainstream society. The Brazilian author Machado de Assis and the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu come from different countries and literary traditions. In spite of that, both authors do belong to the same period and present in their novels similarities that can be addressed in terms of the representation of woman in fiction.

This thesis analyses the female creations of Machado de Assis and Sheridan Le Fanu's in their respective novels *Dom Casmurro* and *Carmilla*. We propose to consider the presence of monstrous feminine traits in the characters of Capitú and Carmilla and to explore how such characterizations can be reclaimed today as a representation of woman's resistance.

In order to achieve this purpose, in the first part of our inquiry we will provide an overview on the monstrous feminine in literature and the phallocentric notions that underpin such monstrous representations by drawing upon selected secondary sources. The second part of our thesis is devoted to the examination of Machado de Assis' *Dom Casmurro* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* female characters (Capitú, on the one hand, and Laura and Carmilla on the other) insofar as they serve the purpose of updating the monster-beauty stereotype. The third part of this project concentrates upon the comparative analysis of Capitú and Carmilla, who embody the principle of the abject-monstruous — Medusa and vampire —

as symbols of resistance against established moral conventions. In our conclusion, we will pick up on the main notions about feminine monstrous identity in order to sum up our findings and show that, from a feminist perspective, the female protagonists in both works cross the boundaries of social conventions and challenge sexist stereotypes.

1. THE MONSTROUS FEMININE: ABJECT BODIES LURKING IN THE DARK

The ideological foundations that shape the construction of the female monster image in Western society go a long way back in History. From ancient and classical myths and tales to Roal Dahl's witches, an age-old tradition lives on whereby gendered and sexed images of woman involve bodily representations that carry in them the sign of the strange and the horrendous. A significant part of feminist criticism highlights the literary connection between the female and the monster in multiple narratives. Works such as *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), by Hélène Cixous, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), by Barbara Creed, and *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) by Julia Kristeva, approach such initially negative portrayals of the feminine body as an element of transgression, and insightfully explore the monster woman stereotype in its multiple forms. Creed asserts that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, and abject" (44). Interestingly, beyond the mere exposure of such phallocentric concepts which underpin these monstrous representations and the critique of sexist stereotypes, these proposals often reclaim "the monstrous feminine".

1.1. Medusa: The Queen of the Pantheon of Female Monsters

The use of the term 'monstrous feminine' in this chapter draws upon Creed's argument about the emphasis on female monstrosity associated with sexuality (3). Such an association constitutes a metaphor of the behavioral deviation of some female characters. The monstrous body becomes a paradigm that activates the sense of fear and repulsion underpinned by gender bias. The figuration of the monstrous feminine can be traced in numerous artistic representations, including the visual arts, literature or film. Lindop claims that "the archetype of the fabled deadly woman has appeared under many guises throughout the centuries" (19). Yet the same author adds that regardless of the form this archetype takes,

"Pandora, Medusa, Sirens or Vampires", she is steadily portrayed "as an iniquitous creature that has the power to seduce and destroy men" (19). The mythological Gorgon Medusa is considered by the feminist scholar Barbara Creed the par excellence representation of female monstrosity as a source of male terror. "The Medusa, with her 'evil eye', head of writhing serpents and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone." (Creed 44). It is precisely around the powerful image of the iconic Medusa that Hélène Cixous built her famous manifesto where, among other things, she probes into the interlacing of feminine body and sexuality, on the one hand, and, on the other, the element of danger and horror.

In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous takes one of the most horrendous myths of Greek mythology and turns it into its opposite. Cixous argues that we must write about the Medusa who is alive; about the Medusa's intact body before decapitation, the creature that scares men: "they need to be afraid of us... look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes" (885). Cixous's reference to male fear of female power points at an evident fact throughout history. Place illustrates this horror of the femme fatale by arguing that "the myth of the strong, sexually aggressive woman first allows sensuous expression of her dangerous power and its frightening results, and then, destroys it, thus expressing repressed concerns of the female threat to male dominance" (35). By characterizing women as monsters or potentially evil creatures, the patriarchal ideology dehumanizes them; and in doing so it perpetuates male superiority and precludes female resistance against male domination.

Cixous depicts Medusa as the representation of the threat a woman embodies once she ceases to be controlled by male rule, and instead follows her own desires and instincts and chooses her own destiny. As soon as a woman does not accept the imposed state of affairs, she is seen as "monstrous" by society and even by herself: "who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives, hasn't accused herself of being a monster?" (Cixous 876).

The female monster, therefore, represents the destabilization of the ruling order due to the fact that her transgressive body crosses boundaries, “resists death” and “makes trouble” (Cixous 885). Hélène Cixous calls for a New Woman who challenges the established order, a woman whose strength comes from the body: a free body. Cixous declares that Medusa “ throws her trembling body for-ward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech” (881). Indeed, if we are to go by Cixous’ interpretation, the figure of the flying female monster represents the breaking of the chains of oppression. Medusa realizes the power hidden in her body and, as Creed puts it, this ‘queen of the pantheon of female monsters’ liberates the powers of the body for the myriad of other female characters with ‘monstrous’ features.

1.2. The Body Without a Soul

In Gothic Literature the monster woman is commonly an unnatural female who transfigures her body and crosses the boundaries between the conventional and the horrendous. The monstrous feminine incarnated in the figure of the female vampire represents the concealed identity of the femme fatale, her ominous mystery. Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* refers to the ‘abject’, i.e. “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Creed, in turn, reviews the term and Kristeva’s attempt “to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies” (68). If we more particularly focus on gender roles in nineteenth-century literature, the female vampire provides a perfect example of an abject figure, and her transformative physique vigorously departs from Victorian conceptions of the feminine body. A creature like a vampire, who walks across life and death, disturbs the natural order and conveys immoral notions.

The polymorphic monstrous body of the vampire portrayed in literature allows for a chaotic embodiment of abjection: the corpse. According to Kristeva “the corpse, seen without

God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). The figure of the female vampire embodies the space between life and death, but also the aggressive and transgressive female sexuality, the deviant woman challenging the precepts of the natural female. Creed claims, with regard to horror films, that "the most popular horrific figures are 'bodies without souls' for instance 'the vampire'" (70). The female vampire is an example of the abject insofar as she personifies the improper body and rejects natural laws, consequently disturbing the established order. According to Stott, the figure of the femme fatale in literature is the symbol of "chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal" (37). The fictional figure of the female vampire, and her transgressive body without a soul, has the power to spread the disease of vampirism to other people. Hence the need to prevent other women from being affected and exclude the risk of 'death infecting life' while maintaining the integrity of the body-soul relationship.

1.3. The Abject and the Darkness

Kristeva's notion of abjection and Creed's revisitation of the term can be used to explain woman's fictional banishment in works like the ones that constitute the subject of our analysis: their exile to the world of the rejected and the monstrous. Since the abject "threatens life; it must be radically excluded" (Kristeva 2). The woman who is considered unnatural must be shunned because she poses a threat to the patriarchal system. Both the figure of Medusa and that of the female vampire embody a challenge insofar as they are liberated from constrictions: a challenge that must be annihilated. Their improper bodies must be controlled or destroyed in order to secure social stability.

According to Ovid's story, when the mythological Medusa finds herself transformed into a repulsive creature, she flees her home never to return again and wanders in the dark, until she meets death at the hands of Perseus (220). Similarly, the vampire character is a creature of darkness. The legend of the first female vampire, Lilith, is present in many ancient

traditions. Raphael Patai's recounting of the story of Lilith — already mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud and clearly associated with the creation myth in the *Alphabet of ben Sirach* (c. 800s to 900s) — is particularly useful at this point: Lilith was Adam's first wife (both were created from the dust of the earth by God). Lilith therefore saw herself as being in equal terms with Adam: "why should I lie beneath you, when I am your equal, since both of us were created from dust?" (Patai 296). Following once again the retelling of the myth by the Hungarian-Jewish ethnographer, she rejected the role of a submissive wife and fled to the Red Sea, the "place of ill repute, full of lascivious demons" (296). The Lilith narrative clothes one of the earliest versions of the female vampire archetype. Both Medusa and Lilith leave their original home and become wanderers as a result of their deviant, abject nature.

Ancient narratives like Lilith's story construct feminine characters as a representation of social danger. It follows that maintaining the statu quo makes it necessary to fully eradicate this danger, since according to Kristeva "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2): exile is not enough, the abject must entirely disappear. The destruction of the abject moreover serves as a lesson for all, and is necessary for the continuous reinstatement and consolidation of the prevailing ideology. This ritualistic practice of identifying, isolating and excluding all individuals who do not fit into the given patterns is a fundamental part of the discursive construction of patriarchal ideology.

For authors like Harvey, although the elimination of the monstrous feminine, or the penance undergone by female monsters, may well constitute the symbolic representation of the defiant woman's repression and disempowerment, their transgression of the moral order possesses lasting effects in people's imagination: "despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance" (31). Along the same line of reasoning, Place declares that our most vivid

memories of these femme fatales are not the recollection of their “destruction”, but that of their “strength and power” (54). We thus see that the cultural presence of the woman monster challenges moral principles and undermines paradigms. In the territory of the novel, the mysterious, threatening female refutes phalogocentric discourse and poses immense risks under the complex sign of abjection.

2. FEMALE MONSTERS IN *DOM CASMURRO* AND *CARMILLA*

While discussing female clichés in literature, Josephine Donovan, a major representative of the 'images-of-women' school in feminist literary criticism, argues that "In the Western tradition these stereotypes tend to fall into two categories, reflecting the endemic Manicheistic dualism in the Western world-view. Female stereotypes symbolize either the spiritual or the material, good or evil" (266). Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* and Le Fanu's *Carmilla* present interesting aspects of the monstrous feminine and the horror caused by domineering women. The femme fatale reclamation enacted by the characters of Machado de Assis' Capitú and Le Fanu's Carmilla, expresses the multitude of woman embodiments and confronts the patriarchal ideologies of the nineteenth century, presenting the female characters, in Donovan's terms, as "selves, not others" (264).

2.1. Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro*

The founder and first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (1879), Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839-1908) was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The grandson of freed slaves, Machado de Assis was black, stutterer, epileptic, orphan, and unable to attend school. Despite his arduous early life, he became a great literary influence in Brazil and around the world. Considered the most illustrious author of Brazilian Literature, Machado de Assis created intriguing characters that are still very vivid in the imagination of readers, even more so than a century after his death.

The intriguing mystery which shrouds Machado's novel *Dom Casmurro* (1899) stems from the eternal doubt about the supposed infidelity of Capitú. Bento Santiago (Bentinho), the novel's main protagonist and unreliable narrator, presents his recollections of childhood, teenage romance, marriage, and eventual separation from his apparently adulterous wife, while engaging in complex arguments and speculations in order to persuade the reader about the betrayal of his wife, Capitú, with his best friend, Escobar. Jealousy thus becomes the

novel's pivotal point, while the undependable narrator and central character, clearly conditioned by his own view of the events, constitutes the single source of information. Therefore, Machado de Assis leaves it to reader to decide whether Bentinhos's arguments ultimately make sense or, on the contrary, conceal a pathological jealousy that progressively dominates the narrator, particularly after his marriage.

Dom Casmurro's narrator portrays himself as innocent, pure and dominated by emotions; while Capitú is a very smart, strong and domineering woman. A striking feature in Machado de Assis's work is the portrayal of female characters as dominating, manipulative, strong and determined women. Finney describes a femme fatale as a "mysterious, enigmatic and exotic" female (51). And indeed *Dom Casmurro* presents the most popular femme fatale in the narrative repertoire of Machado de Assis: Capitú. She is a woman who rises above the woman model imposed on Brazilian society in the nineteenth century. Capitú is independent and powerful, and to that extent dangerous and capable of destroying a man's life, which is exactly what we readers are to believe to judge by the neurotic gaze of Bento Santiago. Capitú is the archetype of the woman whom Brazilian society rejected for destabilizing the moral order. By means of his indirect, "contaminated" portrayal of the novel's female protagonist, Machado de Assis established a new paradigm for woman, whose transgresiveness played a differential role in that time and society.

2.1.1. Capitú: A thousand women in one

Clever, intelligent, and daring, Capitú demonstrates, already in her image as a young girl, that she is a woman ahead of her time. Intriguingly ambivalent, very mature for her age and very advanced for her time; Capitú also presents a great psychological density —a feature of characterization shared by several of the people in Machado de Assis's novels. Her excessive audacity and vivacity make Bentinho, the protagonist-narrator, live in the shadow of Capitú, whom he describes as "a woman within and without, a woman to the right and to

the left, woman on every side and from head to foot." (161). Pereira argues that Capitú is "the amount and fusion of multiple personalities, a kind of superwoman" (my translation) (24). The fascinating multiplicity of Capitú is due to her personality, made of mystery and enchantment: a dedicated wife and a femme fatale, an angel and a monster. Along the narrative she remains both: a deceitful creature and a proper wife, as if her supposed villainy was hidden behind her submissiveness.

The dual characterization of Capitú, as a child and a woman, takes up significant chunks of Bentinho's narratorial discourse. Thus, he declares "If you remember Capitú as a child, you will recognize that the one was in the other, like the fruit in its rind" (148). While depicting her as a reflective and intelligent girl, the narrator conveys the implicit idea that Capitú possesses the maliciousness that a girl of her age should not have, that is to say, she does not exhibit the purity that was supposed to adorn a good girl —a perception that brings to mind Beauvoir's argument that "too much audacity, culture, intelligence, or character frightens men" (347). It is Capitú's domineering personality which makes the narrator depict her as evil-like. Her features turn her into a powerful being who embodies the principle of existence and resistance. The Machadian Capitú leaves stereotypes aside, and resists in her multifaceted personality. She is neither a saint nor a devil; she is just a different and intelligent woman: simply Capitú, "more of a woman" than the male narrator "was a man" (Machado de Assis 59).

2.1.2. The Gaze of the Medusa

Having no voice of her own in the novel, it is the metaphorical and oblique presentation of Capitú's gaze that evokes her personality and presence in the story. Machado de Assis highlights the actions, emotions, and thoughts of the feminine soul through the description of her eyes: those eyes that terrify the male narrator and make him succumb to their mysterious attraction. Capitú owns a powerful appeal that her eyes

encapsulate at its highest and arouses Bentinho's envy. We clearly identify this desire to at least partake of a little share of Capitú's self-possession when he claims "All my envy went with her. How could she control herself so easily when I could not?" (149). She is stronger, wiser, smarter, and she is eventually the one who governs the destinies of both. She has no candor, the ingenuousness of the romantic maidens, nor is she a naturalized female dominated by the opposite sex. Capitú is the prototype of the modern woman of the twentieth century, too advanced for a time when the average female had not yet discovered the full power of her eroticism and her material and sexual independence. Readers of *Dom Casmurro* can easily perceive this sense of power when the author describes her eyes through the agency of his intradiegetic narrator. While indirectly presented, the heroine's dense presence occupies the story's center stage:

> Grammar of lovers, give me an exact and poetic comparison to describe those eyes of Capitu's. I can find no image–without breaking the dignity of my style–to convey what they were and what they did to me. Eyes like the tide? Yes, like the tide. That's what they were. They had some mysterious and force giving fluid that drew everything up into them, like a wave that moves back from the shore when the undertow is heavy. In order not to be swept under, I grasped at other, neighboring parts, her ears, her arms, at her hair that was spread over her shoulders; but as soon as I sought the pupils of her eyes again, the wave that came from them kept growing, cavernous, dark, threatening to engulf me, to pull me, drag me into itself. (81)

Capitú's overpowering and even threatening aura is best understood against the backdrop of the Brazilian society of this period, which was strongly marked by patriarchalism. Pinto portrays Capitú as "another version of the seductive Eve... a sketch of the powerful Medusa with her dangerous, hypnotizing eyes" (21). Just like Eve, in the creation myth, leads Adam to destruction, and Medusa in turning men into stone sentences

them to a miserable life, so the evil eyes of Capitú are a source of man's horror. It is inevitable to recall here Hélène Cixous's seminal revisitation of the Greek Gorgon, once silenced by male domination. As with Medusa —"You only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her" (885)—, Capitú's power is in her eyes.

The Machadian Capitú, a woman ahead of her time, embodies the resistance to the established sexual and moral conventions. Beauvoir argues that "The woman who freely exercises her charms—adventuress, vamp, femme fatale—remains a disquieting type" (213). Capitú's strength and the power of her gaze scare Bento Santiago. Terrified by those eyes that are "threatening to engulf" him, Bentinho, portrays her as an evil monster. Yet it is precisely this apparently negative portrayal that turns Capitú into the representation of the New Woman: an invitation for woman to liberate herself from the patriarchal oppression by rejecting her assigned roles in society and taking control of her own life:

> The uncertainties created by [the] strong-willed women (…) reveal the restless fears of an enfeebling masculinity, but concurrently denounce the rise of a New Woman who is embodied by Capitu, a female protagonist marked by a highly ambidextrous characterization - half masculine temper, half feminine femme fatale - and an array of qualities which place her in a liminal position, uncertain enough to paradoxically terrify and arouse the skittish, effeminate Bentinho. (Anselmo-Sequeira 135)

Just like Cixous' Medusa, the Machadian Capitú is a symbol of resistance and liberation, and modern readers are invited to look deep into her "Gypsy's eyes, oblique and sly" (50).

2.2. Sheridan Le Fanu's Camilla

The Gothic narratives from the nineteenth century presented a significant number of female characters with atrocious features. About the authors who exploited this genre,

Showalter asserts that these “novelists made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction [...] by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying the fantasies of protest and escape” (159). Considered the father of the modern horror story, the Irish writer Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) created the first novel in which the vampire myth is represented by a female figure. *Carmilla* (1872) is narrated by the character of Laura, who provides the details and feelings of the relationship between herself and the vampire Carmilla: one that continually hovers between life and death.

Living in solitude with her father in a little castle in Styria, Laura meets the beautiful Carmilla, and falls prey to her seduction. Laura recognizes Carmilla from a dream she had when she was younger, and their connection becomes ever more intense, arousing in Laura a feeling of love and terror, desire and repulsion. Le Fanu innovated the Victorian literary scene by creating a gothic novel whose protagonist is a female and lesbian vampire. Once Carmilla’s predatory identity is revealed, a stake is driven through her heart and she is beheaded and burned. The feminine vampire-like monster must be annihilated in order to save Laura from becoming a vampire too.

Jeffrey Cohen asserts that “The monster’s body is a cultural body” (4). Thus, in Victorian society (1837-1901), where what did not follow the standards of the time was considered subversive and disruptive, Carmilla rises as the epitome of the monster woman. While fully steeped in the Victorian culture, she is also the representation of the transgressive woman of the nineteenth century, determined to take unrestricted possession of her own body and inhabit her own desire in defiance of social conventions, religion and patriarchy. As claimed by Signorotti, *Carmilla* is

> a tale of female desire—forbidden, exclusive female desire that bonds against male tyranny and resists marriage. Unlike Laura's and Bertha's homosocial friendship,

> which we can assume is of the non-threatening sort, Laura's and Carmilla's lesbian friendship assaults patriarchal law and is finally perceived by Styria's men as anything but innocuous. (613)

The novel's vampiric component encapsulates all that was taboo in the Victorian era. The vampire woman revives to outface the standards of a conservative society, therefore incarnating female monstrosity. Or perhaps in subtler terms, her ambiguous position between woman and monster challenges the natural order, which makes her all the more disruptive. Kristeva argues that what causes abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

While speculating about authorial intent is a risky (and for some critical schools even irrelevant) exercise, it is striking that Le Fanu both echoes Victorian concerns about unconventional female behaviour as a potential threat to patriarchy and at the same time creates a fascinating tale where a depraved yet mesmerizing female figure overshadows her male antagonists.

2.2.1. Laura: The Imprisoned Angel

The image of the conforming Victorian woman is represented by Laura, who follows the rules of a patriarchal society and accepts the submission of an imposed conception of femininity. Laura is a young lady raised on Christian precepts, the ideal of the Victorian woman or, to quote once more the recurrent stereotype enshrined in the title of Patmore's poem, 'the Angel in the House'. Gorham states that the latter motif helped to promote and popularize an image of woman as angel, "a passive, meek, charming, graceful, gentle, self-sacrificing, pious and pure creature" (4). Laura has been raised in a castle in Styria according to the standards of the Victorian society. As she herself puts it in her autobiographic account, "My gouvernantes had just so much control over me as you might conjecture such sage persons would have" (41), a comment that refers to the strictness of Laura's education: one

pervaded by Christian morality and aimed at nurturing the angelic purity of a delicate, fragile and asexual creature.

Yet Le Fanu's portrayal of Laura as a Victorian angel who is seduced by a mysterious and evil woman may lend itself to alternative readings in connection with female repressed drives and inner desire for freedom. Laura acknowledges her mesmerizing curiosity about anything novel and different: "But curiosity is a restless and unscrupulous passion, and no one girl can endure, with patience, that hers should be baffled by another. What harm could it do anyone to tell me what I so ardently desired to know?" (104). She experiences a strong desire for knowledge which grows stronger as the narration makes progress. Heller argues that "Laura's relation to knowledge becomes increasingly mediated by male authority" (89). The male figures in the story restrict Laura's knowledge, and she finds in Carmilla the chance of discovering the truth of events. Carmilla assures Laura that "the time is very near when [Laura] shall know everything" (37).

Le Fanu's representation of women as sharing dangerous knowledge also evidences Laura's fear of acquiring such consciousness, which in turn provokes in her a state of refusal: "From these foolish embraces ... I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies failed me. Her murmured words... soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms" (292). Laura is torn between the irresistible attraction to Carmilla and her instinct to resist a situation that is threatening her whole life and challenges the beliefs and the domestic, patriarchal values that have sustained it so far. Stein claims that:

> In the Gothic mirror, the self is reflected in the extreme poses of rebel, outcast, obsessive seeker of forbidden knowledge, monster. Monsters are particularly prominent in the work of women writers, because for women the roles of rebel, outcast, seeker of truth, are monstrous in themselves. (123)

Carmilla represents everything that Laura is not; and soon Laura finds herself drowned into Carmilla's influence and inexplicably bonded to her. While desirous of intellectual development, the knowledge forbidden to woman, she is afraid of becoming "a monster". The predicament caused by her dual existence elicits Carmilla's declaration: "Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes; but in the meantime there are grubs and larvae, don't you see?" (31). Carmilla urges Laura to escape from the fetters of patriarchal society and nourishes in her a craving for freedom.

2.2.2. Carmilla: The Seductive Monster

Carmilla, the deviant female character is "absolutely beautiful", "gentle and nice" and has a "very sweet voice" (14). Le Fanu emphasizes the features which give Carmilla the power to seduce and manipulate her victims. For Cohen a monster is "that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness." (9). Carmilla represents this dualism, as she has the ability to walk on the very thin line between the monster and the woman. Thus, for instance, when she encounters and greets Laura's father:

> 'Thank you, sir, a thousand times for your hospitality,' she answered, smiling bashfully. 'You have all been too kind to me; I have seldom been so happy in all my life before, as in your beautiful chateau, under your care, and in the society of your dear daughter.' So he gallantly, in his old-fashioned way, kissed her hand, smiling, and pleased at her little speech. (114).

Carmilla's power is also represented by her metamorphosis as recounted by Laura: "I saw something moving round the foot of the bed, which at first I could not accurately distinguish. But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat" (115). The transformation of Carmilla into an animal refers to her monstrous status and represents the obscure, the occult, and her multiple identities. Dijkstra points out that "The vampire Carmilla, then, is the eternal animal in woman, desperately struggling with the forces

of civilization to reenter the body from which it has, in the course of history, been expelled" (342). Dijkstra's argument reminds us of Hélène Cixous' words when she writes that, just like Medusa, women "have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). A gendered reading of *Carmilla* cannot but hinge on the novel's main female characters as women who have been separated from their bodies by the oppression of a man-ruled society and now put up resistance and reclaim their own lives back.

Carmilla seduces and subdues; an embodiment of female radical freedom and empowerment, she is consequently fear-inspiring: her sexual (unorthodox) assertiveness constitutes the kind of "wild zone" that unsettles the bourgeois and patriarchal domesticity that had ruled Laura's life before the revenant's arrival to the point of causing rejection and even horror (Harman and Meyer 88). Indeed, woman's sexuality is very often related to horror in Western society. Creed argues that the 'monstrous feminine' is "as with all other stereotypes of the feminine... defined in terms of her sexuality" (3). Carmilla transgresses the traditional notion of passive femininity; she confronts the moral and religious values of the period. She is sensual and sexual, which takes her as a woman away from a submissive position and places her as domineering, embodying the danger posed by the ascension of the Victorian "New Woman".

Following Kristeva's theory on abjection, once the abject "threatens life; it must be radically excluded" (2). Carmilla threatens the phallocentric society, and she must be punished. She is violently murdered with a stake driven into her heart before being beheaded and burnt (Sheridan Le Fanu 90). The female vampire, a symbol of women's resistance and liberation, is killed by the hands of a man, and her execution is witnessed by a large male crowd who graphically represent patriarchy. Heller points out that "in light of the tale's thematics of female knowledge, it is also telling that Carmilla is decapitated, and that her head, site of knowledge and voice, is struck off" (90). Even so, Carmilla manages to embed

herself into Laura's soul, illustrating what Creed describes as the vampire's threat "to seduce the daughters of patriarchy away from their proper gender roles" (3).

2.2.3. The Monster Inside the Angel

In the light of the above considerations, we may claim that Carmilla represents the Victorian woman's desire for sexual liberation, and her awakening of repressed female sexuality is at the heart of the horror that exudes from this Gothic tale of desire. The novel provides a sharp contrast between the angelic-ideal lady and the evil-monster woman, both examples of their respective prototypes. The relationship between Laura and Carmilla begins in Laura's childhood, when she awakes alone in her room and sees a face:

> a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed . . . [s]he caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself under the bed. (90)

This encounter comforts and pleases Laura, but at the same time it threatens her. Laura and Carmilla are separate individuals in different bodies, but somehow, from this moment on, they begin to uncannily merge like two sides of the same soul. Laura's "possession" by Carmilla produces an internal conflict in the former: "I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me, she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging" (101).

Laura's attachment to Carmilla may be read in terms of a lesbian relationship that would have run counter to Victorian conventional sexual code of conduct —even though

Victorian “mainstream femininity [while not] secretly lesbian, open [was] openly homoerotic” Marcus 3)—, but it also signals the surfacing of the repressed consciousness that has been kept in the dark of Laura’s personality and now comes up to the light. The narrative gradually discloses Laura’s ambiguous feelings concerning Carmilla, but also, inevitably, herself.

In reference to cultural portrayals of the femme fatale, Dijkstra claims that female vampires stand for the evil side of the “two designations for a single dualistic opposition” that represents woman in culture, which are “the virgin and the whore, the saint and the vampire” (334). Le Fanu characterizes in his novel the female monster living inside the oppressed angel, the “beast” that threatens patriarchal gender roles and sexual morality. The dangerous woman who comes from the past to make trouble must be killed in order to maintain the ‘natural’ order. But somehow, she remains, possibly for ever, in Laura’s memory and soul after her physical extermination. This is confirmatory of Carmilla’s previous words: “You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever” (23). The novel’s somewhat open-ended and disturbing coda suggests that the monster — the Gorgon, the vampiric fatal woman— will not be extricated from the consciousness of the adult Laura:

> It was long before the terror of recent events subsided; and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations — sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door. (96)

Thus the characters of Laura/Carmilla dynamically combine and merge in order to present, as Adrienne Rich states in her poem, “A woman in the shape of a monster/a monster

in the shape of a woman" (1.1.2): a richer, more powerful female presence than what their existence as separate characters may convey.

3. CAPITÚ AND CARMILLA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In the light of the above discussion of the female monster image in Machado's *Dom Casmurro* and Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, the present chapter will attempt a comparative analysis of both characters, Capitú and Carmilla. Although the novels come from different literary traditions and genres and portray disparate social contexts, they do belong to the same period and present similarities that can be addressed in comparative terms against the backdrop of female fictional representations. Arguably, in both novels the images of women are constructed on the basis of cultural myths that involve gender notions and, more particularly, foreground evil and even monstrous traits. Our claim is that the ambivalent nature of the two works under examination allows for a feminist reading where such apparently negative traits transform their female protagonists into embodiments of resistance.

3.1. The threat of the abject

Both Capitú and Carmilla rely for their construction as characters on a Manicheistic dualism. In the case of Capitú, the intradiegetic narrator depicts her first as a devoted wife and mother, but gradually constructs an image of her as a mysterious, unreliable creature who can turn "crafty and perfidious" (my translation) (Pujol 247). In turn, Carmilla, who ultimately challenges the Victorian morals, hides her dangerous vampiric identity behind the "absolutely beautiful", "gentle and nice" image of a young lady (21). The American feminist critic Josephine Donovan presents two opposite categories of feminine stereotypes, which respectively represent the "spiritual" and the "material". The former involves the soul and goodness, while the material one concerns the body and the evil. Deviant women are the ones who "do not properly serve man or his interests", they are "the witch/lesbian, the shrew or domineering mother/wife" (Donovan 266). Our female protagonists fit into this stereotype. Capitú is a domineering woman who stands out for her beauty and intelligence, but is also depicted as deceptive and evil. Carmilla portrays the sexualized female whose lesbianism

positions her as “unnatural” or “against Nature” (Gelder 61). Both female characters transgress a prohibition of the moral code in the area of sexuality, and in so doing they subvert the established order. Their non-conformity with nineteenth century moral and sexual standards tags them as lustful and evil.

Following once again Kristeva’s notion of the ‘abject’, our female characters are in “the place where meaning collapses” (2). They threaten life and order inasmuch as they represent the embodiment of the dangers associated to the place where boundaries break down. Carmilla’s most threatening aspect is her seduction of Laura, which represents the possibility of spreading vampirism to another woman. The character-narrator in Le Fanu’s novel asserts that “it is the nature of vampires to increase and multiply” (95). Carmilla’s intent to turn Laura into another vampire represents the possibility of transferring immortality and knowledge to another woman, of creating a new threat, a new abject.

As for Capitú, José Dias (another character in the novel) declares: “Capitú, in spite of those eyes that the devil gave her … Did you ever notice those eyes of hers? Gypsy’s eyes — oblique and sly” (50). In turn, Bentinho compares her eyes to “the tide" (262); “they had some kind of mysterious, active fluid, a force that dragged one in, like the undertow of a wave retreating from the shore on stormy days” (63). In other words, he likens Capitú’s strength to the tumultuous waves of a sea that swallow everything that stands in their path. We may even argue that she embodies masculine apprehensions fuelled by feelings of inferiority (“she was more of a woman than I was a man”, see above 17) and echoes the kind of fears encapsulated in images of “the queen termite reigning over the servile males; the preying mantis and the spider, gorged on love, crushing their partners and gobbling them up” (De Beauvoir 41). Like in *Carmilla* this kind of imagery conveys a role reversal concerning “the violence of the male predator [in fiction] … emphasized by the helplessness of his victim...for if the male were preying on an equal, the whole effect would be lost” (Calder 1976, qtd. in Mitchell 6),

and challenges patriarchal hegemony: Both Carmilla's and Capitú's physical power confers on them a superiority over men, for which they must be "radically excluded" (Kristeva 2).

Silenced, repressed, and eventually rendered defenseless, the monster woman shall be punished for her transgression –even by death – in order to maintain the patriarchal statu quo. Capitú's Swiss exile and ensuing death, as well as the decapitation of Carmilla, symbolize the restoration of the broken order and the eradication of the threat. The monster woman has been silenced by male force. Carmilla's beheading is also symbolical. The defiant woman loses her head and her life, i.e. she is denied her voice, her brain and her sexual power (a condition that likewise defines Capitú's predicament).

> It's a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation. If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution of woman, a loss of her head. (Cixous, Sorties 43)

Confinement, silence and the annihilation of body and mind are the fate of those women who dare unsettle the power of masculinity. Apropos of Cixous' Medusa, Sargisson asserts that "the femininity to which Cixous refers in the story is connected to the bodies of the women" and that the chastised women "march in a silence that marks their new state of living death" (118). Without a head, without a mind, without a voice: Capitú and Carmilla are thus condemned to inhabiting a lifeless, soulless body. They are banished to the place of the abject, the Other, and the monstrous.

3.2. Why monsters?

Capitú's and Carmilla's "unnatural" behavior grants them membership of the class of women whom Cixous argues "make trouble" (876) —all the more considering the prevailing code of conduct of the period where the narratives are set, respectively the Brazilian Empire and the Victorian Era. As highlighted in the previous section within the framework of Julia Kristeva's ideas about the exclusion of the threatening abject in order to preserve the established order, at some point in both novels the female characters are excluded. In *Dom Casmurro*, as Bentinho recalls watching Desdemona's death in a stage performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*, he claims: "the last act showed me that it was not I but Capitú that ought to die." (226). Later, when he recounts Capitú's death, he remains curiously unemphatic: "I don't think I have said that she was dead and buried. She was; there she rests in the earth of old Switzerland" (239). Carmilla's death is also declared in Le Fanu's novel, but here the description is pervaded by violence —an ominous warning of the uncompromising repression that awaits women who dare trespass the boundaries of patriarchy:

> The body, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head was next placed upon a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away. (Le Fanu 92)

Like Capitú, Carmilla represents the awakening and resistance of the New Woman in nineteenth century society. These alleged evildoers —"monsters" in the literal or in the figurative sense— challenge our perception of gender imagery as modern readers and encourage us to contest literary (and ultimately social) stereotypes. For Cohen,

> These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them. (Cohen 291).

Indeed, in the light of this author's theory about the monster figure and its cultural symbolism, we can argue that Capitú and Carmilla stand out within their respective narratives for their power to interrogate the cultural and social assumptions of their time. Yet, Cohen also claims that monsters "can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of the mind, but they always return" (291). The deaths of Capitú and Carmilla symbolize the destruction of the monster's body, but somehow, they manage to escape punishment: they transcend and endure.

As suggested earlier in this master's thesis, the consequences of the eponymous villain's death in *Carmilla* are presented in a somewhat ambivalent way. Laura's narrative suggests that Carmilla still constitutes a powerful and lasting presence in her memory: "the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations – sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church" (146). Much in the same way, Capitú's death does not extinguish her existence and the power she incarnated when she was alive. Indeed, she continues to live in the narrator's memory and the whole novel's plot revolves around her overpowering presence: "now, why is that none of these capricious creatures made me forget the first love of my heart? Perhaps because none had her undertow eyes, nor her sly, oblique, gypsy look" (128). In both novels, the mighty presence of the indomitable female characters leaves a lasting mark in the narrators' recollections: one that questions and reframes contemporary expectations about female behavior.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The preceding analysis and discussion has shown that the female stereotypes typified in the female character creations of Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* are related to the moral and gender codes of their respective societies: Imperial Brazil and Victorianism. Both Capitú and Carmilla are ambivalently presented and oscillate between the good and the evil, the angel and the monster. They also represent the threat of the abject, while their monstrous traits transform them into embodiments of female freedom and resistance.

As representations of the monstrous feminine, Capitú and Carmilla trespass the contemporary limits of morality, as consequence, they are both punished with exile and ensuing death. Through her abject body, which hovers between life and death, Carmilla possesses the ominous power of infecting human beings (and more specifically young maidens) and spreading vampirism. Capitú's power lies in her eyes, in her mystery, in her overwhelming strength "like a wave that moves back from the shore when the undertow is heavy" (Machado de Assis 81). Both characters pose a threat to male dominance and trespass the boundaries of patriarchy. Their abject bodies challenge the phallocentric discourse and disrupt the patriarchal order. Despite their punishment and elimination, the memories of their power and non-conformity remain, and this allows a reading of both characters as symbolic of the struggle against normativity.

Capitú and Carmilla can be examined in the light of different literary clichés and motifs perspectives: the femme fatale, the vamp, the uncanny doppelgänger, the enigmatic demoness. However, they can also be reclaimed as monsters invested with a liberating power: "figures of horror, of the abject, are ideally placed to be reimagined and rescripted as positive celebrations of otherness" (Wisker 124). Indeed, a gendered reading of *Dom Casmurro* and

Carmilla might allow readers to reinterpret our female characters as symbols of feminine awakening, resilience and liberation.

Ultimately, both Dom Casmurro and Carmilla illustrate how the literature of the past can be profitably read and explored through the perspective afforded by gender criticism and female sexuality. By employing such a lens, we have tried in a modest way to critically revisit the characters of Capitú and Carmilla while at the same time contributing a demystified reading of the monstrous feminine and its ensuing imagery.

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