

NO MORE LULLABIES FOR FOOLISH VIRGINS. ANGELA CARTER AND “THE ERL-KING”

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Abstract

Angela Carter's fiction has been generally acclaimed for her "Rabelaisian humor and linguistic exuberance." However, the same critics who praise these stylistic traits in Carter call attention to an alleged political weakness in the narrative strategies used by the British writer. The present study uses her story "The Erl-King", included in the collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), to explore Carter's intentional ambiguity in providing her fictional women with a voice of their own. Departing from an alternative musical discourse and subversive intertextual references to "The Erl-King" and "Little Red Riding Hood", Carter creates an illusory setting in the heart of the forest that both deconstructs the patriarchal subjugation of women and holds them hostage in a stagnant dream. This dyad justifies the contradictory opinions among her critics and endows Carter with her unique way of building an alternative type of feminism.

Resumen

La ficción de Angela Carter ha sido con frecuencia ensalzada por su humor caricaturesco y su exuberancia lingüística. Sin embargo, los mismos críticos que alaban estos rasgos estilísticos en Carter destacan la aparente ineficacia política de sus estrategias narrativas. El presente estudio parte del relato "The Erl-King", incluido en su colección *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), para explorar la estudiada ambigüedad de Carter en proporcionar a las mujeres de su ficción una voz propia. Partiendo de un discurso musical alternativo y referencias intertextuales subversivas al mito del Rey Elfo y el cuento de Caperucita Roja, Carter crea un ambiente ilusorio en el corazón del bosque que, de un lado, desconstruye la subyugación patriarcal de las mujeres y, de otro, permanece anclado en un sueño viciado. Esta ambigüedad justifica las opiniones contradictorias entre sus críticos y dota a Carter de una peculiar forma de producir un feminismo alternativo.

Keywords: Angela Carter, fairy tale, Erl-King, Red Riding Hood, musical discourse.

Palabras clave: Angela Carter, cuento de hadas, Rey Elfo, Caperucita Roja, discurso musical.

Angela Carter's fiction has been generally acclaimed for her "Rabelaisian humor and linguistic exuberance" (Gasiorek 1995:126). However, the same critics who praise these stylistic traits in Carter call attention to an alleged political weakness in the narrative strategies used by the British writer. This is Andrzej Gasiorek's opinion when he concludes: "Carter's work [...] repeatedly warn[s] [...] readers that, however inspiring submersion in the magical, fantastic, and carnivalesque may be, the play of 'holiday time', which permits mockery, will be followed by the reality of 'everyday', which demands praxis" (Gasiorek 1995:136). Like others,¹ Gasiorek seems to neglect the fact that Carter's use of the fairy tale pattern is rational with a clear feminist intention in mind –to exert an impact on everyday life. Aidan Day explains this idea:

[Fantastic elements in Carter] are invoked in the service of a positive and highly directed feminism. In my reading, the fantastic elements in Carter's fiction do not anarchically disrupt established order; they do not introduce liminal possibilities which veer off into the rationally unaccountable and unrecoverable. Fantastic features in Carter's fictions do not engage at a fundamental level with the surreal. Her fantastic is entirely under conscious, rational control and is deployed in order to articulate issues concerning sexuality that occur in the actual day-to-day world. (1998:7)

Carter herself questions "the nature of my own reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing" (1983:70). Once you realize that this role is artificially constructed, that "you're not simply natural, you really need to know what's going on" (1992:189). Carter endeavors to show that femininity is a dark construction that imprisons women and, in doing so, the effect is defamiliarization, with a steady goal in mind: the deconstruction of a patriarchal system with a socio-cultural impact.² One of the vehicles she uses to attain this

¹ Some examples are Paulina Palmer, who states that Carter's texts are "frequently masculinist in association" (1995:188); Terry Lovell, who concludes that "Non-realist writing frequently 'connotes' not to be taken seriously. It licenses escape, fantasy, pleasure" (1983:25); or Camille Paglia, who bluntly states that "the feminist project of rewriting myth is both pointless and absurd" (1990:28).

² In opposition to Gasiorek's opinion, the majority of critics perceive Carter's consistent re-working of plots associated with patriarchy and her feminist intention; namely, Paulina Palmer

aim is the rewriting of traditional fairy tales for feminist purposes. She clarifies this aspect in one of her most thoroughly anthologized quotes:

Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode [...]. I'm interested in myths –though I'm much more interested in folklore– just because they *are* extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree. (1983:69, 71)

Her story "The Erl-King", included in the collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), will serve to illustrate this point, even though Carter is sufficiently ambiguous as to allow the coexistence of the two-fold opinion epitomized by Gasiorek and Day. The setting in "The Erl-King", as in many stories dealing with predators, is the heart of the forest in autumn. It is the story of a young girl who meets and has a passionate affair with the Erl-King in his cottage, where he is surrounded by innumerable animals that, in search of affection and care, gather around him after hearing his amorous call. She observes how her lover weaves little cages where he keeps the best singing birds and with which he decorates his cottage. After feeling that there is a threat coming from the Erl-King, the female narrator concludes that the birds in these cages are his former lovers and that he is weaving another cage for her. Carter's intention to put new wine in old bottles is manifest in her selection of a female protagonist and narrator of the story. The hypotexts that Carter uses in her depiction of the meeting with the Erl-King are Goethe's ballad "Der Erlkönig", Schubert's musical adaptation of the same name, and the translation of a Danish poem by Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Erlkönigs tochter" ("The Daughter of the Erl-King"), on which Goethe based his work. In these three versions the woman is left aside from the main story. In Carter's story, however, the woman is presented as the protagonist, a subject in the process of acquiring her own voice and identity in her refusal to become the Erl-King's object of desire.³

The setting of the story is perfect for the introspection that Carter is looking for and for the metaphorical denunciation of women's lack of

(1995:188), Lucie Armitt (2000:191-219), Stephen Benson (2001:47), Susan Sellers (2001:115), and Gemma López (2007).

³ Previous studies on Carter's "The Erl-King" have focused on her rewriting of the Romantic myth of creation to restore speech to the subordinated or silenced female voice. See Linkin (1994) and García Domínguez (2004). The present study, however, elaborates on the idea of an artificial femininity that is bestowed as agency, dealt with in a previous work (Rodríguez Salas, 2008), but departing here from a rewriting of the fairy tale pattern.

subjectivity. Pessimism seems to be the dominant note: it is autumn, “not quite yet the saddest time of the year,” a time marked by “a haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being;” “introspective weather” (1996:186).⁴ The forest, in turn, is presented as a subtle labyrinth devised by patriarchy to keep women under control. The connection between this setting and women as victims appears in the following description: “The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in woods and hunt round hopelessly for the way out” (186). Carter is going to mark her ambiguity from the beginning. After making explicit the link between this setting and the story of “Little Red Riding Hood,” she concludes that “she will be trapped in her own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems” (186). Therefore, the whole story is going to be marked by an oneiric, fairy tale atmosphere, which will lead the reader to doubt the female narrator’s perceptions. Carter offers a victimized representation of women in the patriarchal realm of the forest. To start with, they are merged with delicate birds that respond to the Erl-King’s music call so as to calm their “girlish and delicious loneliness,” thus fulfilling the traditional gender stereotype of the dependent woman who needs the masculine embrace and protection. At this point, however, the narrator has a faint understanding about the King’s ulterior motif: “Erl-King will do you grievous harm,” anticipated by the metaphorical reference to the heavy bunches of red berries, which are attractive but surrounded by thorns (187).

The Erl-King, as the epitome of the patriarchal system, is also empowered through the reference to his eyes, therefore fulfilling Laura Mulvey’s scopophilic power dialectic (1993), where the man is the voyeur exerting a hypnotic power over the woman, and the latter becomes the object of the gaze:

His eyes are quite green, as if from too much looking at the wood. There are some eyes can eat you. (187)

I lie above him and see the light from the fire sucked into the black vortex of his eye; the omission of the light at the centre, there, that exerts on me such a tremendous pressure, it draws me inwards. (187)

Eyes green as apples. Green as dead sea fruit. (187)

What big eyes you have. Eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the numinous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes. The gelid green of your eyes fixes my reflective face [...]. I am afraid I will be trapped in it forever like the poor little ants and flies that struck their feet in resin [...]. He winds me

⁴ From now on, references to this story will be cited parenthetically by indicating only the page number.

into the circle of his eye on a reel of birdsong. There is a black hole in the middle of both your eyes; it is their still centre, looking there makes me giddy, as if I might fall into it. (191)

Your green eye is a reducing chamber. If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish. I will be down into that black whirlpool and be consumed by you. I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty. (191)

Apart from the intertextual reference to "Little Red Riding Hood," the spider-fly metaphor is central to mark the victimization of women in this reducing chamber that is patriarchy.

The very description of the Erl-King and his domestic realm is representative of his hidden intentions. The external appearance is appealing: he is presented as "an excellent housewife," living in a room that is "musical and aromatic," where there is "a wood fire crackling in the grate, a sweet, acrid smoke, a bright, glancing flame" (188-189). This is almost a feminine fantasy that attracts women, offering them a promise of warmth and protection. However, the reference to an old fiddle, with broken strings, hanging on the wall beside the birds suggests that the musical atmosphere in the house is fake. Besides, the Erl-King's laugh and pointed teeth anticipate his vampiric intentions, which are materialized twice, always in connection with the topic of *eros* and *thanatos*: first with the protagonist, "you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream" (190); second, towards the end of the story when, after liberating the caged birds, the narrator finds that they "will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love-bite on their throats" (192). He is therefore presented as the predator, while women perform the role of perfect bird-like victims – "those silly, fat, trusting woodies with the pretty wedding rings round their necks" (189)– with the fantasy of marriage signified by the wedding ring acting as an asphyxiating ornament around their necks. He is the "tender butcher" and she is the "skinned rabbit." He is attuned to the autumn season, since his hair is "the colour of dead leaves," a decaying, corrupting agent who uses his incantation trick (the elder twig) to attract birds and keep them in cages; that is why the narrator falls for him. She falls like one of the autumn leaves suggested by his very flesh.

Together with the reference to the Erl-King's vampiric impulse, the text is rich with cannibalistic allusions that contribute to present patriarchy as a male praying mantis or spider intent upon devouring women, who, maybe due to a hypnotic effect, are surprisingly compliant with the annihilation of the female

through the love act: “Eat me, drink me” (191), solicits the female narrator, while the following description is highly revealing:

His skin covers me entirely; we are like two halves of a seed, enclosed in the same integument. I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me, like those queens in fairy tales who conceive when they swallow a grain of corn or a sesame seed. Then I could lodge inside your body and you could bear me. (190)

This love relationship seems to be based on equal terms –two halves of a seed– but it is only so on the surface, as the woman is masochistically attached to the man who loves her: “His touch both consoles and devastates me” (190).

There is a turning point in the story, when the protagonist seems to wake up from this hypnotic condition and gains her own power through the look, thus reverting to Mulvey’s scopophilic economy. Suddenly, she becomes a visionary and has the capacity to see the truth behind the King’s gentlemanly pose. She realizes that, behind the good, affectionate treatment of the caged birds, there hides the control of women, and his embraces are both “enticements” and “the branches of which the trap itself was woven” (191). She has no intention of joining the congregation he keeps in his cages and it is at this point that she corroborates her initial inkling about the King: “I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl-King would do me grievous harm” (192).

The answer to this controlling intention coming from the old patriarchal system is symbolically addressed through the reference to music, which is pervasive throughout the story. There is a constant allusion to an old fiddle hanging on the wall, a fiddle with all its strings broken. Towards the end of the story, this fiddle is again mentioned as symbolizing the traditional system of patriarchy and its limiting effect on women:

Although the bow hangs beside the old fiddle on the wall, all the strings are broken so you cannot play it. I don’t know what kind of tunes you might play on it, if it were strung again; lullabies for foolish virgins, perhaps, and now I know the birds don’t sing, they only cry because they can’t find their way out of the wood. (192)

It seems that the hypothetical hypnotic effect of the system has materialized in the Erl-King’s flute and his simplistic music, a combination of two effective notes that make all women-birds fall for him. At this point, it is interesting to contrast the King’s melody with the strident cries of the birds rather than their sweet melody. It seems that, in their imprisonment and chaos, women have not found a voice of their own, yet at least they show their rebellious side by crying for freedom. This cry anticipates the narrator’s

rebellion in the form of music. It is already anticipated earlier in the story when she seems to desire the King's own castration by using the omnipresent image of the old fiddle. Thus, she comments: "If I strung that old fiddle with your hair, we could waltz together to the music [...] we should have better music than the shrill prothalamions of the larks stacked in their pretty cages" (190). The narrator hates the music produced by the caged birds, probably because she feels she will be one of them soon, so that, instead, she suggests the castration of the King by cutting his hair, with reference to Samson and Delilah's story and to hair as the source of virility and men's power.

The key passage is located at the end of the story, when all the elements that have been anticipated materialize in the episode of rebellion. The scopophilic economy of male dominance through the gaze is reverted: "Lay your head on my knee so that I *can't see* the greenish inward-turning suns of your eyes any more" (192; emphasis added). The eyes symbolize the controlling power of the male; therefore, in order to avoid it, she asks the King to turn them away, so that she has the strength to carry out her liberating action through murder. The Erl-King's emasculation is suggested when the narrator cuts off two huge handfuls of his hair and strangles him with them. As a result, and continuing with this musical discourse, she liberates the birds, which change back into young girls, and she strings the old fiddle with "five single strings of ash-brown hair." The story concludes with the following words: "Then it will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and will cry out: 'Mother, mother, you have murdered me!'" (192). As the year is coming to an end, this new woman has put an end to the system as we know it, represented by the omnipotent figure of the Erl-King. The falling condition of women, represented by the autumn season, has been replaced by the end of the patriarchal system, represented by winter and the end of the year. The suggestion is that the regeneration implied by a new year—probably a lunar, feminine one—is about to begin. In connection with music, women's new voice is not the simplistic and effective two notes of the King, but a polyvalent, discordant music played with the masculine symbol of the fiddle. Old bottles, new wine; old instruments, new music. The rule of the Father is over; now we are in the new era of the Mother, who has murdered her husband, a new Clytemnestra who will liberate generations of bird-women.

And yet, we cannot forget the initial impression that everything is just the narrator's illusion.⁵ Carter departs from traditional fairy tales, especially

⁵ This idea is precisely the central theory in García Domínguez's study (2004).

reminiscent of “Little Red Riding Hood:” “A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Riding Hood to her granny’s house but this light admits no ambiguities and, here, she will be trapped in her own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems” (186). If we take into account this remark at the beginning of the story, maybe the Erl-King is not real. Maybe he is this girl’s fantasy, a feminized and emasculated patriarch who is just part of women’s fantasy of revenge against the system, but it is no more than that: a fantasy. We could then consider two interpretations that summarize the double perception of Carter as both apolitical and political: on the one hand, in her stories we remain in wonderland, which would explain interpretations like Gasiorek’s that Carter lacks political impact; on the other hand, and more likely considering the author’s own confessions about her artistic and political intentions, Carter’s stories show her crafty way to portray the omnipotent effect of patriarchy and its subtle way to camouflage the imprisoning effect on women behind the appearance of everyday naturalness. In any case, ambiguity is served and, beyond that, it is clear that Carter vehemently lays claim for the end of lullabies for foolish virgins. Instead, she proposes polyphonic fugues for witty, self-confident experienced girls.

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