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Sartorial Rhetoric and Gender Roles in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

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Abstract: Angela Carter's double allegiance to feminism and postmodernism involves a heightened consciousness of the fluid nature of gender identity, whose unambiguous representation she avoids programmatically. In *The Bloody Chamber*, she explores a multitude of possibilities of conceiving and representing femininity, masculinity, and gender relations. The present paper examines the sartorial rhetoric by which Carter complexifies and subverts entrenched perceptions and ideas. Clothes-related imagery which emphasizes artificiality, spectacle, ceremony, carnival, and the cultural implications of nakedness is shown to constitute part of her peculiar strategy of dealing with difference and otherness
Keywords: gender relations, postmodern feminism, fairy tale, Camp, carnival, mask, nakedness, clothing, Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*.

Angela Carter's 1979 collection of re-writings of traditional and literary fairy tales met with mixed responses from the camp of feminist critics. To some, she was not radical enough, offering just subversive feminist interpretations of age-old fairy tale motifs – Helen Simpson, for instance, in *The Guardian*, quotes Patricia Duncker's objection that Carter 'could never imagine Cinderella in bed with the Fairy God-mother' (2006) –, employing 'uncritically' feminist themes and even promoting unwittingly an essentialist view of gender, for the sake of rhetorical sensationalism (*cf.* Palmer, 1986, p. 26). Other critics have praised her as a highly original writer, whose feminist commitment and critical subtlety had been more than proved in her major theoretical work, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, published in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*.

In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter's bold postmodern strategies of questioning both established gender representations and the possibilities of their revision involve the audacious revamping of a literary genre often seen by feminists as irredeemably confiscated by the ideology of patriarchy, having served for centuries

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as a cultural instrument in the subjection of women. The falsely universalizing black-and-white divisions of femininity identified by many critics in the fairy tales – the good woman vs. the witch/the bitch –, as well as the culturally scripted gender roles that situate man and woman in asymmetrical power relations, are here dismantled and re-imagined in a series of variations on tales like "Bluebeard," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Little Red Riding Hood," to the plots of which she brings a wealth of intertextual allusions. Carter's re-writings hyperbolize the clichéistic binary gender opposition of the conventional feminist perception into a poeticized and highly unstable relation between prey and predator, the terms of which are examined in their potentiality and never fixed in a clear correspondence with one particular gender. Thus, she may turn the traditional victims, the innocent, vulnerable women of these tales, into empowered creatures, who welcome a transgressive experience, and she may also reveal masculinity as, potentially, equally vulnerable. Or she may deconstruct the figure of the empowered woman as dreamed of by feminist militants, endowing her with the capacity of voluntary, assumed submission, made to appear as an admirable utopian aspiration, 'the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction' ("The Tiger's Bride"; Carter, 1979, p. 67).

Arranged, as Margaret Atwood noticed, 'according to categories of meat-eater' (qtd. in Gamble, 1997, p. 132), Carter's tales insistently dwell on the opposition *meat–flesh* (recalling the binarity Culture–Nature), which she daringly explores in *The Sadeian Woman*. This metaphorical pair readily evokes another distinction, that of the *naked* vs. the *covered* body, by means of which Carter complexifies the issue of gender identity and invites reflection on its cultural-historical determinations.

In Carter's tales, the motif of sexual anxiety and fear of devourment,[1] rendered by evocations of predatory masculinity and of woman as passive, as an object of sexual consumption, in the many variations on the antithetical figures of the Lamb and the Tiger, is constantly accompanied by references to either nakedness or symbolic or ritual objects of clothing.

This is most obvious in those tales which include a marriage plot, the patriarchal transaction whereby the father – or mother, as in "The Bloody Chamber" – gives away a daughter to a husband. In such tales (e.g. "The Tiger's Bride," or its bourgeoisified version, "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon"), the active imagination of the bartered girl – who is granted the narrative voice – mitigates the realization that woman is a passivized object of transaction. These heroines encounter their new master with an apprehension of devourment which represents an ancestral fear springing not so much from physical vulnerability as from a deeply engrained cultural awareness of the nature of gender relations in the

[1] Bruno Bettelheim finds that the fear of devourment, the result of sexual taboos imposed on girls in their childhood, usually by their female care-givers, is projected in fairy tales in the figure of the 'animal groom', who represents the metaphorized, displaced perception of 'the bestial nature of sex' (Bettelheim, 1977, p. 298).

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asymmetrical world of patriarchy. Their projection of feline threat is an imaginative transfiguration of a social gender situation which is unbearable, yet unavoidable. Their perception of this asymmetry in gender power generates in them a feeling of 'intolerable' difference (felt, for instance, by the young girl in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" – *cf.* Carter, 1979, p. 45), of utter estrangement.

In the first three 'meat-eater' stories, masculinity is beastliness in sumptuous apparel. Carter signifies gender inequality through the difference in social status (an aspect which is also present in fairy tales) and its outward insignia. The Marquis' generous lavishing of expensive, sophisticated gifts on his child bride indicates his abiding by what Thorstein Veblen had defined as 'the code of reputability' (Veblen, 2007, p. 88), which dictates what is acceptable and suitable to wear or to consume, so as to project a certain image of social status. Veblen points out that, in a patriarchal tradition, woman, whose status equals that of 'chattel,'

> should consume only what is necessary for her sustenance, – except so far as her further consumption contributes to the comfort or the good repute of her master. The consumption of luxuries, in the true sense, is a consumption directed to the comfort of the consumer himself, and is, therefore, a mark of the master. (*Ibidem*, p. 51)

The middle class young girl with artistic inclinations in "The Bloody Chamber" moves, with marriage, from the lowly status indicated by her '[t]wice-darned underwear, faded gingham, serge skirts, hand-me-downs' into the 'exile' of the trophy wife condition, which is signified by the profusion of what Ruth Barcan calls 'liminal clothes' (2004, p. 16) bestowed on her as a token of – in Veblen's terms again – the 'conspicuous waste' which is incumbent on an aristocratic master. The items of clothing and jewelry that she receives – the expensive satin nightdress, with its promise of erotic pleasure in its silken touch, or the virginal Poiret dress ('a sinuous shift of white muslin tied with a silk string under the breasts' – Carter, 1979, p. 11), which duly attracted everyone's eyes to her – redefine her, from a social point of view, as a prized possession. The young bride has the revelation that her new status means in fact her sexual designation as an item of consumption ('He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke'; he examined her 'limb by limb', as if she were a 'lamb chop') or as an object in an economic transaction ('And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain' – Carter, 1979, p. 15).

A special significance is reserved to a piece of 'nongarment'[2], the obscene ruby choker, 'two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat' (Carter, 1979, p. 11), a description which figuratively recalls Veblen's remark that luxury

[2] According to Carter (*Nothing Sacred. Selected Writings*, 1982), nongarments include forms of luxury clothing (furs, evening dresses, etc), as well as jewellery and lingerie, whose function is ritual, not protective, and which are items of conspicuous consumption (*cf.* Barcan, 2004, p. 16)

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consumption by others than the 'master' 'can take place only on a basis of sufferance' (Veblen, 2007, p. 51). The ominous beauty of the 'cruel necklace' (Carter, 1979, p. 13) is a kind of warning for the young wife, a symbolic anticipation of the planned immolation of an unfortunate 'Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial' (*cf.* "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon"; *ibidem*, p. 45), who has innocently consented to self-destructive submission. For Carter, clothing reflects the general distinction between 'beings under social restraint and beings that are not' (qtd. in Barcan, 2004, p. 67); in "The Bloody Chamber", this intimation takes on a gendered inflection: the young bride does not only have to adjust to a more restrictive social code, paying with boredom, desolation, and loneliness the privilege of luxury and infinite leisure, but she finds herself in the complete sexual power of an inscrutable creature who can manipulate her *desire*, a 'mysterious being who, to show his mastery over me, had abandoned me on my wedding night' (Carter, 1979, p. 22). The conspicuous expensiveness of the garments and 'nongarments' that he lavishes upon his prisoner wife in return for her total surrender reflects the Marquis' position of social dominance coupled with gender ascendancy. His exposure of the girl to the treasures of erotica and licentious art stored in his castle, a perversely refined way of making her acknowledge her 'potentiality of corruption' (*ibidem*, p. 11), may be seen as the equivalent of a ritual, initiatory 'robing': the master bestows on her the cultural trappings of the objectified woman.

The extreme manifestation of this double power in "The Bloody Chamber" is the Marquis' secret chamber of torture and punishment for his disobedient wives; as a scene of deadly bondage and ultimate subjection, the 'bloody chamber' is a symbol of both class oppression and gender inequality. The most effective metaphorical expression of woman's unfreedom in the world of the Marquis is the Iron Lady, the clothes of death, the mutilating apparel, whose hundred spikes penetrated the 'newly dead, so full of blood' in a dark, gothic parody of erotic embrace. The fearful torture device mocks both the protective and the ceremonial function of clothes, which constitute a secondary, exterior body, by canceling the distinction outward–inward and by substituting, with its dull 'metal shell' (Carter, 1979, p. 29), the rich jewelry which identified the woman as possessed object. There is nothing more unsettling in the whole collection of tales than this opening hypothesis about the relationship between clothes and the politics of gender.

This dark version of the Beauty and the Beast story ends, however, on a relatively positive note, with an alternative model of femininity standing up against the criminal oppressor: the heroic mother come to rescue, equipped with her own husband's revolver as an unconventional piece of 'nongarment' – another substitute for jewelry, which, instead of imprisoning her in a circuit of conspicuous waste, takes on a liberating function. Compared to the submissive daughter, who is willingly accepting her dollification, the warrior-like mother appears almost masculine in her fierceness – she is the man-eating-tiger killer saving her daughter

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from her predatory, 'meat-eating' husband; an elemental force set in contrast with the broken piece of cultural machinery into which this spectacle of gender confusion has turned the stunned Marquis:

> You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver (…). And my husband stood stock-still, as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs. (Carter, 1979, pp. 39–40)

By introducing the figure of the mother, whose unconventional dress appearance suggests a certain freedom from 'social restraint,' Carter also implies that this freedom may be acquired by an acknowledgement of the fluid nature of gender, by blurring and transgressing gender boundaries. In her approach, we may find echoes of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, whose narrator includes, among several 'theories' relating the cultural fact of clothing to the nature of gender identity, the idea that there is no such thing as pure femininity or masculinity; they are fixed, culturally and socially, by conventional outward appearance:

> Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often *it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness*, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. Of the complications and confusions which thus result every one has had experience (…). (Woolf, 2002, p. 112; emphasis mine)

A further instance of Carter's postmodern strategy of 'de-mythologising' gender as fixed in the patterns of the fairy tale, of imagining it as liberatingly unstable, may be found in "The Werewolf," a short rewriting of "Little Red Riding Hood" which eliminates all traces of the bourgeois moralization and sexual cautioning of its literary version by Perrault. The symbolic garments and nongarments in Carter's version suggest precisely this 'intermixture' of the sexes which, as Bruno Bettelheim argues, it is the very function of the fairy tale to reduce. There is no red cloak ('a symbol of premature transfer of sexual attractiveness' – Bettelheim, 1977, p. 173) for the precocious girl sent by her mother to take food to her grandma across the woods, but a sheepskin, which ambivalently indicates the girl as both the traditional victim of male power and the confident heroine, feeling protected against the dangers of a hostile nature.[3] In

[3] The whole imagery in Carter's tale evinces her acquaintance with the traditional, folk versions, which, as Catherine Orenstein points out, are 'not stories of fantasy, but of observation', rooted in

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Carter, the equivalent of the red riding hood is rather the knife; the heroine's affiliation is not with the feminine line, but with the absent father. The emphasis, in Carter's tale, is displaced from the symbolic clothing object associated with female sexuality to the equally symbolic, blatantly phallic knife, a sartorial signifier generating ambiguity of gender positions. Equipped with this accessory, the young girl acquires more masculine features than the wolf himself, the traditional figure of predatory maleness, seems to possess.

Angela Carter's peculiar brand of postmodern feminism, impatient with the fixity of binary, normative categories, celebrates this gender vacillation as truly liberating; inflexible identities and immovable labels engender oppression and suffering and preclude any possibility of positive change. In order to achieve this emancipatory destabilization of gender perception and representation, Carter takes distance from the opposition between Nature and Culture, on which much feminist thought relies, and brings it into play, subverting it and questioning its validity.

This strategy has been shown to partake of the sensibility of Camp. For Susan Sontag, the main theorizer of this phenomenon, 'the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration' (Sontag, 1964, p. 275); Camp involves the canceling or obscuring of Nature in the emphasis on style; it is 'a certain mode of aestheticism', 'one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization' (*ibidem*, p. 277). This emphasis on style, on artifice, on outward form, presupposes a neutral attitude towards content, or its treatment as inconsequential. A Camp perception of gender cannot accommodate an essentialist view, that is, the emphasis on Nature, the idea of gender distinction as given.

Carter's bias towards a Camp approach to gender, sexuality, and femininity in her fiction has been researched: Sarah Gamble, for instance, identifies elements of a camp aesthetic in Carter's writings of the '60s and cites Lorna Sage, who also notes the writer's fascination with this 'faultline running through contemporary culture, where the binary opposition of masculine and feminine broke down' (Sage, qtd. in Gamble, 1997, pp. 39-40). What certainly appealed to Carter was the refusal of 'seriousness, sincerity, authenticity' (Sage, *ibidem*) – in other words, of an essentialist approach – that was characteristic for Camp. Gamble points out that Carter's revaluation of the fairy tale must be seen as 'an interesting correlative to her fascination with camp' (1997, p. 66), as, according to Carter's own view of the fairy tale, there are certain affinities between the Camp sensibility and the strategies

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the harsh reality of peasant poverty and of the constant threat of mortality and starvation (*cf.* Orenstein, 2002, p. 76).

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of this narrative form, which is 'innately performative and deliciously aware of its own fictitiousness' (Gamble, 1997, p. 67).

The idea of gender as performance is indeed tackled by Carter in her fairy tale re-writings in the purest spirit of Camp, with emphasis on identity as cultural artifice and with delight in the stylization and exaggeration of the social masks and disguises that signify or subvert gendered attributes. In her tales, we witness a *masquerade* of gender, a flaunting of femininity or masculinity, which, as Mary Ann Doane points out, manufactures 'a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image' (qtd. in Gamble, 1997, p. 175). Doane's concern is with femininity as masquerade, with '[w]omanliness as a mask which can be worn or removed' and whose role is to ensure a position of resistance to patriarchal control by the 'denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as itself (…)' (*ibidem*). In Carter's tales, this manufacturing of a resistant distance is not exclusively the strategy of femininity. All the main characters experience gender difference as potentially adverse and threatening, and as a mysterious, intriguing reality, undefinable except through the rhetorical masks of *metaphor*. The fact that they perceive their partners as *carnival* figures, for instance, suggests their intimation that the latter wish to create the same distance, to prevent the possibly annihilating danger of closeness.

This motif of the *carnivalesque* nature of gender identity is established in the very first tale. In "The Bloody Chamber," the young girl, flattered though she might be by the courtship of the Marquis, has from their first encounters the apprehension of the fundamental elusiveness of the truth about him, of its recession under an artificial social self.

> And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask. Or else, elsewhere. As though he had laid by the face in which he had lived for so long in order to offer my youth a face unsigned by the years. (Carter, 1979, p. 9)

Her unsettling initiatory experience of their wedding night is accompanied by the same perception of her husband's overwhelming masculinity in terms of artifice: 'I could see his white, broad face as if it were hovering, disembodied, above the sheets, illuminated from below like a grotesque carnival head' (Carter, 1979, p. 12). This may suggest not so much the projection of sexual fear as the unconscious realization of the Marquis' reluctance to establish true intimacy. The elaborate décor – often an extension of body clothing in Carter's tales – in which the expected (but not fulfilled) consummation is staged, along with the 'formal disrobing of the bride' and the contrast between her nakedness and the clothed body of the groom, still 'in his London tailoring' (*ibidem*, p. 15), gives a theatrical

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character to the whole scene and indicates again the production of distance from the (supposed) real self, an identity gap associated with masquerade and carnival.

Carter's representation of gender identity as artifice may be seen as a parodic hyperbolization of the classic view of femininity and masculinity as social and cultural constructs. The pervasive reference to carnival in *The Bloody Chamber* is part of a rhetorical strategy aimed at complexifying the primary opposition Nature/Culture or Nature/History. Against the classic, Bakhtinian view of carnival as a site of liberation, of temporary subversion of authority by a staged reversal of roles, Carter seems to suggest that the perceived theatrical posture of some of her characters is rather the outcome of their imprisonment in convention and received ideas. This weight of tradition and prejudice confers to their identity an irreducible rigidity, signified by Carter's representations of men and women as inanimate automatons. In "The Lady of the House of Love," for instance, the vampiric – liminally human – Sleeping Beauty, completely innocent in her unselfconscious sensuality, is doomed to carry the burden of an inescapable image of female sexuality as voracious and dangerous, a patriarchal inheritance that makes her a prisoner of her own history and limits severely the possibilities of emancipation. This inexorable role ('she is herself a cave full of echoes, a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit' – Carter, 1979, p. 93), which she is painfully reluctant to play and for which the only escape is the unreality of the dream, is signified as artificial 'nature' by the reference to her carnivalesque apparel, combined with the emphasis on simulated, mechanical life[4]:

> [S]he is like a doll, he thought, a ventriloquist's doll, or, more, like a great, ingenious piece of clockwork. For she seemed inadequately powered by some slow energy of which she was not in control; as if she had been wound up years ago, when she was born, and now the mechanism was inexorably running down and would leave her lifeless. This idea that she might be an automaton, made of white velvet and black fur, that could not move of its own accord, never quite deserted him; indeed, it deeply moved his heart. The carnival air of her white dress emphasized her unreality, like a sad Columbine who lost her way in the wood a long time ago and never reached the fair. (Carter, 1979, p. 102)

A similar conjunction between the carnivalesque and the mechanical tinges the perception of the heroine in "The Tiger's Bride." Here, the doll(-like) maid who attends her in the Beast's *palazzo* is a kind of double, a 'marvellous machine' (Carter, 1979, p. 60), fashioned and programmed after man's taste, mirroring the

[4] In this particular story, the superposition of the carnivalesque and the mechanical may be interpreted in the light of Mary Russo's finding that real, historical carnivals were often sites not of emancipation, but of brutal violence directed against marginal groups, including women, as 'in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies (…) are always already transgressive – dangerous and in danger' (qtd. in Booker, 1991, p. 220).

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heroine's own womanhood as the artificial creation of men and reminding her of her own subservience (*cf.* Macsiniuc, 2002, p. 269). Her description of the Beast himself as a 'a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair', a 'clumsy doll' with a 'masked voice' represents more than a mere strategy of defamiliarization or of de-naturalization of gender and its definition as a cultural construct – which would have been so appealing to some feminists. It rather opens up a metaphorical space, in which the radical indecision, the failure to settle, rhetorically, for the natural (the animal) or the cultural (the human) engenders a sense of perceptual provisionality, of relativity, an *aesthetic* middle ground which is more reassuring. The artificiality of the Beast's carnivalesque appearance signifies, ultimately, the unknowability of the nature of gender except through metaphorical mediation.

The sartorial régime in Carter's tales transcends, therefore, the realistic level of the utilitarian function of clothes and even the symbolic and often fetishistic value of clothes in fairy tales; in the metaphorised perceptions of many of her confused, speculative, and highly imaginative narrators, the socially constructed gender consciousness – ultimately almost as deterministic as its conception in biological terms –, seems to be suspended in favour of an open embracing of ambiguity, irony, paradox and rhetorical playfulness. Their quest for a 'true nature' behind the metaphorical masks of femininity or masculinity ends up creating a distance between signifier and signified, a distance which leaves room for a re-negotiation of gender definitions, in the spirit of a new perception of the opposition between Nature/'essence' and Culture/'appearance'.

Carter's programme of perplexing the comfortable divisions by which we claim to render the notion of gender intelligible includes the subversion of the opposition between the clothed and the naked body and their cultural relevance. The age-old debate around the relationship between culture, nature, and identity, as summed up by Ruth Barcan (*cf.* 2004, p. 11), falls into two extreme conceptual positions: identity as the product of culture – in which case the naked body represents 'the neutral, raw material out of which identities are fashioned according to social circumstances' – and identity as a natural given reflected by culture – the naked body standing, in this case, for 'the authentic self that social circumstances allow to shine forth in particular ways' (*ibidem*).

In Carter, these two possibilities are equally and sometimes simultaneously subverted, usually within the frame of a further opposition that she explores: the human vs. the animal (which, in fairy tales, offers often a metaphorical mediation for gender and sexual issues). In the first instance, the precedence of Culture over Nature makes clothes, a human attribute, an essential signifier of gender and social institutions and a device for social control. The foregrounding of nakedness would thus be a gesture of contestation, of resistance to symbolic authority and a reversion to a utopian realm of absolute freedom. Carter plays humorously with the stereotypical opposition culture–human–clothed body vs. nature–animal–nakedness in "Puss-in-Boots", where steaming eroticism is tempered with the comic capers of

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the resourceful Cupid-like cat, who helps lovers overcome social impediments by all kinds of farcical stratagems, including carnivalesque disguise. Here, clothes are explicitly designated as 'anti-nature' by means of the defamiliarizing perspective of the animal-narrator, who sees in the human 'rags' only incoherence and insincerity:

> Accustomed as I am to the splendid, feline nakedness of my kind, that offers no concealment of that soul made manifest in the flesh of lovers, I am always a little moved by the poignant reticence with which humanity shyly hesitates to divest itself of its clutter of concealing rags in the presence of desire.' (Carter, 1979, p. 78)

In the next story, "The Erl-King," on the other hand, Carter seems to contest the idea of Nature as liberating. Entranced by the strange and dangerous creature of the woods – 'the tender butcher who showed [her] that the price of flesh is love' (Carter, 1979, p. 87) –, the young protagonist is quick to obey the command of her seducer: 'Skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes' (*ibidem*, 97), or passively accepts her disrobing. Divested of the sartorial cultural shield, the sign of her humanity, the beastified woman is returned to a primal state of sexuality and desire, in which, paradoxically, she feels entrapped in a more insidious way. The naked body is subject to a process of infantile regression in which the act of love is part of a fantasy of regaining the primal 'clothing' of the maternal womb, as the insistent references to water as an enveloping, enclosing (or en-clothing) element suggest:

> 'He strips me to my last nakedness, that underskin of mauve, pearlized satin, like a skinned rabbit; then dresses me again in an embrace so lucid and encompassing it might be made of water. And shakes over me dead leaves as if into the stream I have become.
> (…)
> I go back to him to have his fingers strip the tattered skin away and clothe me in his dress of water, this garment that drenches me, its slithering odour, its *capacity for drowning*. (*Ibidem*, p. 89; emphasis mine).

In the erotic encounter, the naked body of the Other becomes the equivalent of a primal 'garment' – '[h]is skin covers me entirely' (*ibidem*) – which is perceived in its radical ambivalence: catering protectively to a fundamental human need, but also posing the threat of self-annihilation, of the Other taking over and submerging one's identity. Shedding, together with her clothes, the humanly (*i.e.* culturally) acquired expectations and perceptions, the girl hopes in renovation and rebirth: '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 (…). Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me' (*ibidem*). Poeticizing these hopes of transcending the cultural confines of individuality and self-identity and

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immersing herself in the continuum of Nature, the protagonist reaches, nevertheless, the revelation of the truth that rhetoric disguises: Nature is a trap and its apparent freedom is another form of imprisonment. The 'green eye of the Erl-King,' a metaphor for the natural world of instinct, governed by the pleasure principle, becomes, for her, 'a reducing chamber': 'If I look into it long enough, I would become as small as my own reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish. (…) I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty' (Carter, 1979, p. 90). Carving off the mane of the unsuspecting lover and strangling him with ropes made of his hair is the only way she finds to escape the engulfing vortex of desire, as the 'freedom' of Nature may be unbearable. The gesture has sartorial connotations: following Ruth Barcan, who points out that hair, a significant 'boundary marker', delimiting the human from the animal (especially body hair) (*cf.* 2004, p. 144), may be also seen as a liminal form of clothing (*ibidem*, p. 25), we may see in the heroine's solution of cutting off the Erl-King's hair the analogue of her own disrobing, an act of retaliation which places him in an equivalent situation of vulnerability and danger.

Somehow, Carter intimates that true 'nakedness', i.e. complete divestiture of cultural 'trappings,' is impossible; the skin itself is a piece of garment, a costume even, as in "The Bloody Chamber," where the young wife feels that her nakedness, requested by the depraved Marquis, casts her in the role of a courtesan. Nakedness, ultimately, is not so much an unproblematic fact of nature as a matter of cultural perception. In "The Tiger's Bride," Carter seems to suggest this by the motif of the metamorphosis. Lacking the vulnerability of the girl in "The Erl-King," who oscillates between Nature and Culture, the protagonist of this story accepts the Beast's challenge of a naked confrontation with a shared mixed sense of curiosity and fear, ready to cross over into the realm of the Other and test the truth of the '[n]ursery fears' instilled in her during childhood, foremost among them being the 'earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment' (Carter, 1979, p. 67). In the extended final scene of self-disrobing, The Beast abandons his awkward, carnivalesque attire, 'the purple dressing gown, the mask, the wig' – the grotesque insignia of his patriarchal masculinity –, assuming diffidently his majestic feline form, while the heroine decides that, instead of letting herself be 'peel[ed] down to the cold, white meat of contract' (Carter, 1979, p. 66), she should embrace the experience with equal responsiveness, and in spite of her own fear. It is this mutually acknowledged combination of fear and desire that allows for their mutual transformation. We witness a spectacular reversion from the artificiality of culture (including the falsity of perceiving gender difference in antagonistic terms) to the pristine realm of nature and the truth of desire, always subverting and threatening with disintegration the acquisitions of civilization ('The reverberations of his purring rocked the foundations of the house, the walls began to dance' – Carter, 1979, p. 67), a realm in which gender relations are based on difference without opposition. The woman's nakedness, although connoting vulnerability ('white,

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shaking, raw' – *ibidem*), represents an offering of peace and her opening to a revisionary, metamorphic experience. The encounter between Beauty and the Beast reverses the roles of the traditional fairy tale: the girl abandons herself to the transformative embrace of her 'animal groom' in an ecstasy which transfers the perception of gender relations in the sphere of the aesthetic, signified in sartorial terms:

> And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (Carter, 1979, p. 67)

We may see in the girl's metamorphosis, as Catherine Orenstein does, her willingness to discard 'the sheen of culture, or domesticity, or perhaps just her acquired sense of femininity' (Orenstein, 2002, p. 165), but the double transformation also suggests new possibilities of understanding and constructing gender relations, a kind of utopian projection in which conflicting gender images are reconciled. The image of the layers of skin peeled off by the Beast's tongue ambiguates the opposition Culture/Nature: if there are abysmal degrees of nakedness, then the opposition naked/clothed body does not entirely dovetail with that between Nature and Culture. The animal form becomes, in this tale, not the expression of regression to essentialism, but the metaphor of an ideal conciliatory perspective, divested of all cultural lies.

Carter's spectacular rewritings of widely circulated fairy tales gathered in her volume *The Bloody Chamber* reveal, once more, her commitment to an anti-realist agenda and to its strategies of parody, irony, magic realism, and fantasy, which evince her genuine postmodern sensibility. Her assumed stance precludes an unambiguous, affirmative representation of 'positive' femininity, expected by many feminists to serve the politics of transformation and change. Instead, her fiction, faithful to a postmodernist programme of de-mythologization and unsettling interrogation, explores a multitude of possibilities of conceiving and representing not only femininity, but gender relations as well. Sartorial images emphasizing artificiality, spectacle and ceremony, carnival, and the cultural implications of nakedness constitute a rhetorical strategy by which Carter creates the most surprising angles to approach difference and otherness, subverting entrenched perceptions – including feminist ones.

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