

**SLEEPING BEAUTIES OR LAUGHING MEDUSAS:
MYTH AND FAIRY TALE IN THE WORK OF
ANGELA CARTER, A. S. BYATT AND MARINA WARNER**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the use of myth and fairy tale in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and *Morpho Eugenia* (1992) and Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) and *The Leto Bundle* (2001). I argue that these authors rewrite well-known traditional myths and fairy tales in order to demythologize social myths concerning women. The first chapter investigates Carter's revisions of traditional myth and fairy tale narratives, revisions which advocate new possibilities for male-female relationships. It offers a Cixousian reading of the journeys of transformation which Carter's male and female protagonists undergo. This chapter also highlights the affinities between Hélène Cixous's and Carter's approaches to myth and fairy tale and their belief in the liberating potential of revising traditional narratives. The second chapter explores how the use of traditional myth and fairy tale narratives in Byatt's novels is centered on the figure of the female artist/writer trapped by cultural myths of female inferiority and passivity. I argue that Byatt's novels counter these myths by celebrating female sexuality and highlight female creative potential. This reading of Byatt's novels is largely informed by Cixous's idea of bisexuality, and her subversive reading of the Medusa. The third chapter discusses Warner's employment of traditional narratives of myth and fairy tale in order to revise naturalized cultural myths of romantic love and maternal love. I argue that the novels reveal women's entrapment within these social myths, particularly by giving prominence to the voice of previously marginalized, and often victimized or monsterized, female figures. Here I draw on Cixous's work on the hysteric and the monstrous female. The thesis suggests that Carter, Byatt and Warner are engaged in

two strategies with regards to traditional myths and fairy tales: the first is a celebratory one, manifested in their revival of powerful mythic female figures which stress female ability and glorify assertive female sexuality; and the second is a revisionist one, aimed at exposing women's entanglement within the cultural narratives of femininity.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the use of myth and fairy tale in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and *Morpho Eugenia* (1992) and Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) and *The Leto Bundle* (2001). Bringing these three authors together for the first time, I present Carter as a source of influence on both Byatt's and Warner's work, especially in their revisions of old tales. The thesis aims to show that these novelists share a project of employing retellings of traditional myths and fairy tales to demythologize social myths concerning women. It offers new readings of some widely studied novels by these authors, and also focuses on novels that have received less critical attention, viewing them as part of the project of demythologization. I am less concerned with the history or the different versions of myths and fairy tales revisited by these authors, than with the significance of the twists they introduce to traditional narratives, and the way they use them to comment on social conditions trying to expose culturally constructed images of femininity and masculinity. Before introducing my project in more detail, it will be necessary to explore various definitions of myth and fairy tale, and chart different feminist approaches to the genre.

Although many critics and folklorists have spared no effort in their endeavour to reach a clear and comprehensive definition, the complex nature of myth and its ability to resist confinement has made, and still makes, their task a very difficult one. William Righter, in *Myth and Literature*, affirms that 'most definitions' of myth 'exist at a very high level of generality, and an admission of the

multiple nature of the subject is built into them'.¹ This broadness is exemplified by a number of attempted definitions. Whereas René Wellek, for instance, sees myth as an anonymous, irrational narrative, 'the explanation a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do', Allan Watts believes that 'myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which ... human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe of human life'.² Although both definitions relate myth to the essential questions man asks about himself and the universe, in Watts's definition myth is not dismissed as irrational. He stresses that there is a factual element within its fantastic framework.

The blurred boundaries between myth, legend, fairy tale, folktale, fable, and other similar genres often make absolute definitions disputable, if not contradictory.³ Michael Bell goes beyond one-dimensional definitions of myth when he comments on the fluctuating meaning of the term: 'The word "myth" inhabits a twilight zone between literature, philosophy and anthropology. It means both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood. We therefore use it relationally; one person's belief is another's myth'.⁴ This ambivalent attitude towards myth and fairy tale is another characteristic of the debate. Laurence Coupe refers to this doubtful attitude towards the word myth in cultural and literary studies as he maintains it is often 'being used to imply some sort of illusion'.⁵ Coupe explains that 'in literary and cultural studies "myth" is frequently used as synonymous with "ideology", as in

¹ William Righter, *Myth and Literature* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 5.

² Quoted in Righter, *Myth and Literature*, p. 5. Righter gives a very detailed explanation of the theories of myth.

³ One example of this argument can be found in the essays collected in *Myth and the Modern Imagination*, ed. by Margaret Dalziel (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967). This book reveals the various points of contention over the overlapping elements between myth and legend and other similar genres manifested in the contributing scholars' attempts to reach a definition of myth.

⁴ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁵ Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 1.

“the myth of progress” or “the myth of the free individual”. In entertainment it is frequently used as synonymous with “fantasy”.⁶ When used in this sense, myth becomes also interchangeable with fairy tales, as when Lorna Sage says: ‘Using the term “fairy tale” in its colloquial sense: a sugar-coated lie; or more grandly, a “myth”, a cultural construct naturalized as a timeless truth’.⁷ Coupe objects to this view of myth, stating: ‘While it is true that there is some overlap between myth and ideology, and between myth and fantasy, it is not helpful to use them interchangeably’, for, as he aims to show in his book, ‘there is a lot more to myth than deception or distraction’.⁸ I will return to these divided views of myths as conveyers of eternal truth or as perpetuators of social ideologies later in my discussion.

The attempt to give a specific definition of fairy tales also divides scholars of the genre. Jack Zipes opens his introduction to *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* with that statement that ‘[t]here is no such thing as *the* fairy tale; however, there are hundreds of thousands of fairy tales. And these fairy tales have been defined in so many different ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can be categorized as a genre’.⁹ The vastness and variance of the stories included under the term ‘fairy tale’ is only one difficulty in the way of defining it. Another difficulty lies in the fact that many readers show no interest in defining what a fairy tale is or what differentiates it as a genre from other literary genres. ‘There is even a strong general tendency among many readers in the West to resist defining the fairy tale’, as Zipes confirms. ‘It is as though one should not tamper with sacred material. By

⁶ Coupe, *Myth*, p. 1.

⁷ Lorna Sage, ‘Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale’, in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 65-62 (p. 68).

⁸ Coupe, *Myth*, p. 1.

⁹ Jack Zipes, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Jack Zipes (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xv-xxxii (p. xv). Emphasis in original.

dissecting the fairy tale, one might destroy its magic, and it appears that this magic has something to do with the blessed realm of childhood and innocence', he explains.¹⁰ Despite all this, critics' interest in what a fairy tale is, and their attempts at scrutinizing its nature, features and functions are still very high.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer seems to challenge Zipes's distinction between oral and literary fairy tales on the premise that 'the existence of oral fairy tales [...] among any folk before the nineteenth century cannot be demonstrated'.¹¹ She maintains that

[t]he term 'oral' and 'literary' usefully distinguish between literary styles in fairy tales. But in terms of the *history* of fairy tales, terms like 'oral' and 'literary' inaccurately and misleadingly suggest that a set of distinctions exist that cannot be proven to have existed before the nineteenth century. Their use serves only to advance an unproveable theory of oral origins and transmission.¹²

Bottigheimer rejects the widespread assumption of the oral origin of the literary fairy tale.¹³ Even more recent studies of fairy tales, however, have failed to give any definite definitions of them. Jessica Tiffin speaks about 'the impossibility of

¹⁰ Zipes, *The Oxford Companion*, p. xv.

¹¹ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: a New History* (Albany: Excelsior, 2009), p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. Emphasis in original.

¹³ For example, Steven Swann Jones asserts that fairy tale as a genre 'was originally a product of oral tradition, this genre dates back, not just to the Middle Ages or biblical times, but to well before recorded history itself'. Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale: the Magic of the Mirror* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1. Maria Tatar states that 'Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm may not have collected their tales from the lips of untutored peasants, as they occasionally claimed, but they did transform the fables, yarns, and anecdotes of an oral storytelling tradition into literary texts destined to have a powerful influence on cultures the world over'. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, expanded 2nd edn (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. xiv. Unlike Tatar, Bottigheimer believes that 'in the case of the Grimms, it was long – and erroneously – believed that they had made great efforts to preserve existing, but nearly extinct, fold versions of the tales published in their collection, whereas in fact their fifty years of editing can be fairly characterized as having turned widely available tales from literary sources into carefully crafted reflections of contemporary bourgeois beliefs about folk social values'. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: a New History*, p. 7.

defining fairy tale through any single factor. Instead, a constellation of central characteristics creates an overall, instantly recognizable *effect*'.¹⁴

This idea is echoed by Kate Bernheimer: 'I often refer to my own method of identifying fairy tales as my sensing (through feeling and through close-reading) what I call a *fairy-tale feel*. The fairy-tale-ness of a work'.¹⁵ She argues that 'applying [Gilles Deleuze's] concept of *affect* to new fairy-tale literature, one sees how these works may be identified atmospherically, scientifically, telepathically: in certain books, fairy tales are in the air'.¹⁶ This ever-going discussion of what a fairy tale is only confirms its double nature and its various manifestations in different literary forms, that is to say, being highly elusive but easily recognizable.

Carter refers to this illusive aspect of the term in the introduction to her collection of fairy tales, pointing out that, in spite of its title, the reader 'will find very few actual fairies' in the book:

[F]or the term 'fairy tale' is a figure of speech and we use it loosely, to describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a time and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth – stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the permanently refreshed entertainment of the poor.¹⁷

In her definition of fairy tale, Carter stresses the oral origin of these stories and their entertaining function. It seems that Carter is talking here about what Zipes calls the oral folk tale to distinguish it from the literary fairy tale. Zipes asserts that

¹⁴ Jessica Tiffin, *Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), p. 6. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Kate Bernheimer, 'Forward: The Affect of Fairy Tale', in *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*, ed. by Susan Redington (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2009), pp. 1-4 (p. 3). Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Angela Carter, 'Introduction', *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. by Angela Carter (London: Virago Press, 2001), p. ix.

what we generally refer to as a fairy tale is quite often a folk tale which has its roots in the experience and fantasy of primitive peoples who cultivated the tale in oral tradition. And it was this oral tradition which engendered the literary fairy tale which has assumed a variety of distinct and unique forms since the late Middle Ages.¹⁸

This close relationship between fairy tale as a folk tale and the mostly illiterate people who have produced it is echoed in Carter's views. She asserts that 'fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created the world'.¹⁹ These affinities between Zipes's and Carter's views of fairy tales, Marina Warner would argue, are not there by chance.

Warner traces the change in Carter's views about fairy tales and their origin. She first quotes from a note added by Carter to the first edition of *Fireworks*, which was removed in later editions, in which Carter expresses her belief that the tales with their implausible events and exaggerated characters 'do [...] not log everyday experience through a system of imagery derived for subterranean areas behind everyday experience, and therefore the tale cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge of everyday experience'.²⁰ Later in her work, Carter 'changed her mind about what tales were up to in relation to reality', as her introduction to the *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* shows, 'she became very interested in the way they conveyed the materiality of their tellers' and inventors' lives. Fairy tales came to represent the literature of the illiterate'.²¹ Warner mentions a number of critics whose writings

¹⁸ Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, revised and expanded edn (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), P. xi.

¹⁹ Carter, *The Virago Book*, p. ix.

²⁰ Quoted in Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (1994) (London: Virago, 2001), pp. 243-256 (p. 244).

²¹ Warner, 'Bottle Blonde', p. 245.

may have influenced Carter's new approach to fairy tales. She refers to essays by Walter Benjamin, Robert Darnton, and, more importantly, the work of Zipes, adding that Zipes and Carter 'made friends through corresponding about their mutual interest in fairy tales'.²² Zipes, in turn, 'acknowledges that Angela Carter opened his eyes to the possibilities of fairy tales and his own theoretical criticism changed direction under the influence of her writing from attacking the materialism and coercive conformism he had found inherent in the genre to stressing its utopian possibilities'.²³ This exchange of views between Zipes and Carter, Warner suggests, could be the main reason behind her changed attitude to fairy tales. Despite acknowledging this close relationship between reality and fairy tales, Zipes equates myth with fairy tale relying on Roland Barthes's definition of myth. I will return to Zipes's argument about fairy tale as myth, which I adopt in this thesis, after introducing the two main approaches to myth represented by C. G. Jung and Barthes.²⁴

Myth and Fairy Tale between Jung and Barthes

Some critics tend to equate myth with fairy tale when they interpret them in relation to two very different schools of thinking represented by C. G. Jung and Roland Barthes. Nonetheless, Jung's and Barthes's very influential and frequently quoted definitions of myth and fairy tales stand in obvious contrast in relation to the significance and status with which they endow myth. While Jung and his followers view myth as a rich source of universal truths about human psychology, Barthes

²² Ibid, p. 246.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See also Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. by Laurence Scott (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1958). In an attempt to reach a definition of fairy tale, Propp analyzes one hundred Russian fairy tales, and derives from them thirty one commonly occurring themes.

asserts that myth falsely presents ideologies as natural truths. Although Barthes's definition seems to rob myth of its importance, it actually renders it even more important to many writers for it provides them with the opportunity of revising and rewriting traditional mythic narratives, and the possibility of using them to serve their own different purposes, as this thesis shows. Jung's conception of the meaning and importance of myth and fairy tale is built upon his psychoanalytical theory of archetypes which I will very briefly summarize. Jung states that his theory is based upon dividing the conscious into two layers: a 'superficial' one which he calls 'the *personal consciousness*', and a 'deeper' layer which he calls 'the *collective unconscious*'.²⁵ This collective unconscious, Jung says, 'has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals'; they are universal.²⁶ These contents of the collective unconscious 'are known as *archetypes*'. Jung defines the archetype as 'an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens'. Depending on this theory Jung sees in myth and fairy tales a 'well-known expression of the archetypes'.²⁷ So myths for Jung are not allegories of the processes of nature but 'symbolic expressions of the inner unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection – that is mirrored in the events of nature'.²⁸ Unlike those who view myth as fiction, Jung gives it an outstanding position differentiating it from allegory:

²⁵ C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes And The Collective Unconscious: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. by Sir Herbert Read *et al.*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, 9 vols, 2nd edn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 3-5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

The primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them. Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happening, and anything but allegories of physical processes. Such allegories would be an idle amusement for an unscientific intellect. Myths, on the contrary, have a vital meaning. Not merely do they represent, they *are* the psychic life of the primitive tribe, which immediately falls to pieces and decays when it loses its mythological heritage, like a man who lost his soul.²⁹

Jung strongly rejects the possibility of any connection between myth and actual or historical events. For him myth can only be the representation of the psychic world of the primitive man.

Among the critics who try to apply this Jungian theory to their analyses of the traditional fairy tales is Marie Louise von Franz. Echoing Jung's definition, she claims that 'fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes. Therefore their value for the scientific investigation of the unconscious exceeds that of all other material. They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest, and most concise form'.³⁰ She finds that the only distinction between fairy tale and myth lies in the fact that, 'in myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic pattern of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural material. But in fairy tales there is much less specific conscious cultural material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly'.³¹ She contends that this is the only way to account for the emergence of the same themes in numerous variations time and time again all around the world. The influence of the Jungian theory on scholars of the genre still appears in recent studies of fairy tales. For example, Bettina L. Knapp's work is a Jungian study of a number of well-known French fairy tales. The 'archetypal

²⁹ Ibid, p. 145. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Marie Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996), p. 1.

³¹ Ibid.

analyses' in her book, Knapp states, 'are designed to enlarge the views of the readers, to develop their potential, and, perhaps, to encourage personal confrontations'.³² While some critics have rejected this theory, others look for ways to manipulate it for their own purposes. Susan Sellers suggests that 'if this theory is correct, then it would also shed light on why myth continues to exert such a compelling hold, since the motifs it employs derive from our most basic motivating instinct'. Instead of totally rejecting this theory, Sellers tries to draw attention to some of its persuasive aspects. 'Given that we are no longer, thankfully, living at the time of Homer when – as anyone who has read his *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* can testify – war dominated and women figured as prizes to be possessed and exchanged by men', she explains, 'Jung's theories offer a compelling manifesto for feminist myth-makers despite the many objections, ranging from mysticism to a tendency to universalize on the basis of Western sources, that can be laid against them'.³³ Acknowledging some of the negative points related to this theory, Sellers suggests using it against itself to serve the feminist purpose of rewriting myths. In a more recent book, Zipes asserts his rejection of the Jungian approach to fairy tale: 'Even though numerous critics and psychologists such as C. G. Jung and Bruno Bettelheim have mystified and misinterpreted the fairy tale because of their own spiritual quest for universal archetypes or need to save the world through therapy', he writes, 'both the oral and literary forms of the fairy tale have resisted the imposition of theory and manifested their enduring power by articulating relevant cultural information necessary for the formation of civilization and adaptation to the environment'.³⁴

³² Bettina L. Knapp, *French Fairy Tales: A Jungian Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 3.

³³ Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 5.

³⁴ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 1. This book gives a comprehensive view of the history of traditional

Thus, Zipes's objection to Jungian approaches to fairy tale is mainly built on the fact that they tend to sever the relation between the development of the genre and its historical context. This naturalization process is what Barthes reveals in his influential study of myth.

Barthes, looking at myth through the lenses of structural linguistics, deprives myth of the Jungian 'vital meaning' and special ranking as he insists that 'myth is not defined by the object of its message but by the fashion in which it presents it. There may be formal limits to myth but not ones of substance. So anything may be a myth? Yes, I think so'.³⁵ So myth for Barthes is pure invention and it has nothing to do with a universal human psyche. Barthes stresses the idea that myth inevitably has a historical foundation, 'for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things'.³⁶ More significantly, he reveals the fact that myth 'transforms history into nature'.³⁷ He describes the working of myth as follows:

Myth consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, ideological, the historical into the 'natural.' What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a 'matter of course'; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the *doxa* (which is the secular figure of the Origin).³⁸

fairy tales, including the French fairy tale, the Arabian Nights, the Grimms, Hans Christian Andersen, Victorian fairy tales, and others.

³⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Myth today' (1956), in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 93-149 (p. 93).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁸ Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth: Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 6.

This revelation of the mechanism of naturalization of social and historical norms through myth is very illuminating. It opens endless possibilities for writers to revise and rewrite myths that have previously held a semi-religious status.

Carter appears to share Barthes's views on myths. Having been asked in what sense she defines myth in one of her interviews, she replies: 'In a sort of conventional sense; also in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in *Mythologies*—ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean, without trying to work out what, for example, the stories of the New Testament are really about'.³⁹ She states that myths are 'consolatory nonsenses' that were invented to obscure 'the real conditions of life'; they deal 'with false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. And in no other area this is more true than in that of relations between the sexes'.⁴⁰ This view of myth has led her to rethink the naturalized images produced by traditional myths: 'I'm basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them'.⁴¹ These statements summarize the logic behind Carter's project of demythologizing myths and fairy tales.

Warner also expresses her indebtedness to Barthes in her approach to myth, especially his 'famous essays of 1957, *Mythologies*, and his analysis of contemporary French culture'.⁴² She shares Barthes's main principle that 'myths are

³⁹ Anna Katsavos, 'A Conversation with Angela Carter', *Dalkey Archive Press*, <<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa=customcontent&GCOI=15647100999300&extrasfile=A075EA74%2DB0D0%2DB086%2DB694017AA0966E82%2Ehtml>> [Accessed August 22 2010].

⁴⁰ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1990), pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁴² Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1944), p. xiii.

not eternal verities, but historical compounds, which successfully conceal their own contingency, changes and transitoriness so that the story they tell looks as if it cannot be told otherwise, that things always were like that and always shall be'.⁴³ She believes that Barthes's work is very influential because his 'study almost amounts to an exposé of myths, as he reveals how it works to conceal political motives and secretly circulate ideology through society'.⁴⁴ She, however, insists on the fact that her views on myth are 'less pessimistic' than those of Barthes's in the sense that myth can be re-told and can provoke change.⁴⁵ Warner 'believe[s] the process of understanding and clarification to which Barthes contributed so brilliantly can give rise to newly told stories'. She asserts, it 'can sew and weave and knit different patterns into the social fabric and that this is a continuous enterprise for everyone to take part in'.⁴⁶ This firm belief in the possibility of stimulating change is the driving force behind Warner's work on myths, '[a]ncient myths [...] are perpetuated through cultural repetition – transmission through a variety of pathways', she says, 'but this does not mean they will never fade, that they cannot yield to another, more helpful set of images or tales'.⁴⁷ Warner reinforces this idea when interviewed by Richard Kearney. The novelist states that: 'The great myths and narratives are precious stores of experience and even if – as in many European myths – they affirm the order of the masculine state against female wildness these stories can be retold, either to explain the past or perhaps to create a new future'.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid, p. xiii.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. xiii- xiv.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Richard Kearney, 'Interview with Marina Warner', in *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 93-100 (p. 99).

This belief in the liberating potential of rewriting myths seems to be the driving force behind Warner's project of demythologization.

Barthes's concept of myth also proves to be crucial to many feminist critics and fairy tale scholars, and Zipes is one representative example. Classical myths and fairy tales, Zipes declares, 'are contemporary myths that pervade our daily lives in the manner described by Roland Barthes'.⁴⁹ Embracing Barthes's notion of myth, Zipes concludes that 'the fairy tale is myth. That is, the classical fairy tale has undergone a process of mythicization'. According to him, moreover, 'even the classical myths are no longer valid as Myths with a capital "M" but with a small "m"'. That is, the classical myths have also become 'ideologically mythicized, dehistoricized, and depoliticized to represent and maintain the hegemonic interests of the bourgeoisie'.⁵⁰ With regard to the fairy tale Zipes notes that '[a]ny fairy tale in our society, if it seeks to become natural and eternal, must become a myth. Only innovative fairy tales are anti-mythical, resist the tide of mythicization, and comment on the fairy tale as myth'.⁵¹ However, this process of mythicizing and naturalizing the traditional fairy tales, by necessity, renders the new fairy tales alien, and sometimes shocking, as Zipes clarifies:

When we think of the fairy tale today, we primarily think of the classical fairy tale [...] it is *natural* to think mainly of these fairy tales, as if they have always been with us, as if they were part of our nature. Newly written fairy tales, especially those that are innovative and radical are unusual, exceptional, strange, and artificial because they do not conform to the patterns set by the classical fairy tale. And if they do conform and become familiar, we tend to forget them after a while, because the classical fairy tale suffices.⁵²

⁴⁹ Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: from Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 209.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 208. Emphasis in original.

Nonetheless, it is this same nonconformity and the possibility of shocking the reader by violating his/her horizon of expectations that might help the innovative writers in strongly stating their points. This is not to imply that any unified feminist strategy does exist among feminist writers and critics in their analysis, usage and rewriting of fairy tales. In fact, the conflicting controversial attitudes toward myth and fairy tales seem to be the main characteristic of feminist work in this field, as I will show hereafter. Taking Zipes's ideas into consideration, it is no wonder that the strategy of demythologizing has been chosen by many feminist critics and women writers in their examination and rewriting of traditional fairy tales.

In a collection on adaptation and transformation, Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams Jefferson note that '[s]everal essays in this collection analyze fairy tales that have been transformed or make use of fairy-tale allusions in the texts analyzed'.⁵³ Although they acknowledge the fact that '[f]or fairy-tale retellings, there is rarely one "original" story, but rather a host of stories that inform the writing', Frus and Jefferson explain: 'Nevertheless, it can be difficult to remember the wide range of stories from different cultures and historical periods when certain Western tales – those of Perrault, Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen – are so canonized and reproduced so frequently that they carry the weight of an "original"'.⁵⁴ Byatt also declares that:

My developing idea of the "real" (authentic) fairy tale centred on the brothers Grimm [...] It included some of Perrault and some English tales - "Jack and the Beanstalk", for instance. These tales might be funny or horrible or weird or abrupt, but were never *disturbing*, they never twisted

⁵³ Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams Jefferson, 'Introduction: Making the Case for Transformation', in *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works*, ed. by Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams Jefferson (Lanham: McFarland & Co., 2010), pp. 1-18 (p. 6).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

your spirit with sick terror as Andersen so easily did. They had a discrete, salutary flatness.⁵⁵

This generally agreed on canonization of a certain body of fairy tales seems to compensate for the wide lack of agreement on what a fairy tale is, or should be, for most fairy tale revisionists turn to these tales. When I talk about traditional fairy tales, I mainly refer to the best-known canonized tales of the Grimms, Charles Perrault, and Andersen.⁵⁶ When I talk about traditional myths, I usually mean Roman and Greek myths that are well-known in Western culture.⁵⁷ It is, however, worth noting that, as Warner puts it:

the approach of contemporary retellers of myths [...] makes clear that the readers they have in mind aren't concerned with sacred matters and are impatient with spiritual meaning. These writers have adopted a looser, secular conception of myth, which flattens hierarchies between faith and superstition, and doesn't discriminate, as a Victorian anthropologist would have done, between high and low culture, between stories about gods, which are rooted in belief and enacted through ritual, and tales of goblins and fairies and witches, told to raise shivers of pleasurable fear on a dark winter night. By uncoupling itself from belief, the vision of myth/fairy tale can be angled more sharply towards other tasks.⁵⁸

This also applies to the way Carter, Byatt and Warner approach myth and fairy tale. I, therefore, will treat the two terms as synonymous, unless I am referring to a particular myth or fairy tale, where distinctions should be made. In what follows, I will provide a survey of the main scholarly work in the field of myth and fairy tales before moving on to introduce my project.

⁵⁵ A. S. Byatt, 'Introduction', in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. by Maria Tatar (London: W. W. Norton, 2004), pp. xvii-xxvi (p. xvii). Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ For more on the history of reception and tales by the Grimms, see Maria Tatar's *Annotated Brothers Grimm*; for more on Andersen, see Jack Zipes, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005) or Maria Tatar, *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen* (London: W. W. Norton, 2008); for more on Perrault, see Angela Carter's *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (London: Gollancz, 1977).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Bulfinch's *Greek and Roman Mythology: The Age of Fable* (New York City: Dover Publication, 2000).

⁵⁸ Marina Warner, 'Witchness', *London Review of Books*, 31-16 (27 August 2009) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n16/marina-warner/witchiness>> [Accessed March 3 2010].

Feminist Revisions of Myth and Fairy Tale

Feminist criticism became aware of the role played by traditional myth and fairy tales in endorsing false archetypal gender roles that marginalize women and portray them negatively as early as the 1970s. However, even when looking at the very beginnings of this open feminist discussion of fairy tales and women, it is important to recognize the critics' ambivalent attitude towards this complicated genre, a matter which, I think, proves to be very enriching to feminist fairy-tale scholarship. The year 1970 witnessed the publication of Alison Lurie's article 'Fairy Tale Liberation' in *The New York Review of Books* which she republished later under the title 'Folktale Liberation' in *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children's Literature*. Lurie's argument in favour of the liberating effect of fairy tales during the 1970s started a dispute over the significance of fairy tales and their effect on children. Lurie places fairy tales among 'the most subversive texts in children's literature' as they 'support the rights of disadvantaged members of the population – children, women, and the poor – against the establishment'.⁵⁹ Lurie objects to some of the feminists' attacks on fairy tales for being a 'chauvinist form of literature', saying that popular tales like Disney's are 'highly unrepresentative', and that 'the traditional tale, in fact, is exactly the sort of subversive literature of which a feminist should approve'.⁶⁰ Conversely, Marcia K. Lieberman opens her article 'Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale' by quoting Lurie and explicitly expressing her total disagreement with her: 'It is hard to see how children could be "prepared" for women's liberation by reading fairy tales; an analysis of those fairy tales that children actually read indicated

⁵⁹ Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), p. 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

instead that they serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles'.⁶¹ While Lieberman agrees with Lurie that popular fairy tales are not typical of the genre, she underlines the fact that '[o]nly the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected masses of children in our culture'.⁶² Therefore, she chooses to concentrate on such tales in her analysis of the role played by fairy tales in the formulation of the female consciousness.

The main point of agreement between both critics seems to be taking for granted the great influence of fairy tales on children, and subsequently on adults. Lieberman affirms that '[m]illions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales'.⁶³ However, these two critics radically differ in their perception of the nature of fairy tales' effect on women. Lurie reminds us that many of the classical fairy tales

portrayed a society in which women were as active as men, at every age and in every class. Gretel, not Hansel, defeated the witch; and for every clever youngest son there was a youngest daughter equally resourceful. The contrast continued in maturity, when women were often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine came most often from a fairy godmother or wise woman, and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother.⁶⁴

Lieberman, on the other hand, stresses the fact that 'even so, Gretel is one of the most active of the girls, but her company is small' as most of the fairy tales'

⁶¹ Marcia K. Lieberman, "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale", in *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, ed. by Jack Zipes (London: Scholar Press, 1993), pp. 185-200 (p. 185).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁶⁴ Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*, p. 18.

heroines have nothing of her resourcefulness and her control over her own destiny. Lieberman's more important objection to the image given of women in fairy tales seems to be inherent in Lurie's own language, a language borrowed from the rhetoric of the fairy tales themselves. Lieberman refers to the fact that these stories 'establish a dichotomy between those women who are gentle, passive, and fair and those who are active, wicked and ugly'. 'Women who are powerful and good are never human', says Lieberman, referring to the different forms of fairies. And those women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive' - wicked queens and stepmothers.⁶⁵ Lieberman ends her argument by raising the question, 'to what extent is passivity a biological attribute of females; to what extent is it culturally determined?' Furthermore, she expresses her suspicious attitude towards the 'archetypal female behavior' depicted in the tales when asking 'to what extent they reflect female attributes, or to what extent they serve as training manuals for girls?'⁶⁶

By the same token, Mary Daly and Jennifer Waelti-Walters, among others, express their concern about the negative effect fairy tales could leave on children's minds. Commenting on what she sees as the deadly effect of fairy tales on children, Daly writes: '[t]he child who is fed tales such as *Snow White* is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple'. She goes on to refer to women's unawareness of their role as accomplices in their own victimization: 'and the Wicked Queen (her mother / teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime (death-time), is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot'.⁶⁷ Waelti-Walters argues that '[n]obody in her right mind could possibly want to be a

⁶⁵ Lieberman, 'Some Day', p. 199.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 200.

⁶⁷ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1979) (London: The Women's Press, 1987), p. 44.

fairy tale princess. After all, what do they do except play dead across the path of some young man who has been led to believe that he rules the world?’⁶⁸ In her vigorous attack on fairy tales, Waelti-Walters condemns them as perpetrators of the patriarchal value system and its suppression of women. ‘The reading of fairy tales’, she thinks, ‘is one of the first steps in the maintenance of a misogynous, sex-role stereotyped patriarchy, for what is the end product of these stories by a lifeless humanoid, malleable, and interchangeable – that is, “feminine woman” who is inherited, bartered or collected in a monstrous game of Monopoly’.⁶⁹ Daly seems to share common ground with Waelti-Walters when she asserts that ‘Patriarchy perpetuates its deception through myth’.⁷⁰ She, however, argues that, although ‘a radical feminist analysis reaches the point of recognizing patriarchal myths as lies in the deepest sense, as distortions of our depths’, it would be too simplistic to conclude ‘that traditional definitions should be dismissed’. Feminist criticism should, instead, carefully examine these patriarchal myths trying to use their ‘*stolen* mythic powers’ against themselves.⁷¹

Donald Haase is critical of the type of criticism which, he believes, has done nothing but ‘reconfirm stereotypical generalizations about fairy tale’s sexist stereotypes. Such studies are oblivious to the complexity of fairy-tale production and reception, sociohistorical contexts, cultural traditions, the historical development of the genre, and the challenges of fairy-tale textuality’.⁷² Haase exerts notable effort trying to give a comprehensive assessment of the wide range of fairy-tale scholarship by feminist writers advocating the need to adapt more complex

⁶⁸ Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁰ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 44.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47. Emphasis in original.

⁷² Donald Haase, ‘preface’, in *Fairy Tale and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. by Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), pp. vii-xiv (pp. ix-x).

approaches toward fairy tales, ones that take into consideration their ambiguity, their context and their history. While he objects to Lieberman and her followers' 'oversimplifications of the fairy tale's problematic relation to social values and the construction of gender identity', Haase views Cristina Bacchilega's work in a positive light.⁷³ She 'undertook a much more sophisticated reading of revisionist fairy tales by both male and female authors', he comments.⁷⁴ Bacchilega in turn states that '[c]onsidering that questioning the fairy tale's magic has been a feminist project for several decades at least, with its own several phases and problematics, we fortunately do not need to reject fairy tales as inherently sexist narratives'.⁷⁵ The ability to see beyond the sexist aspects of fairy tales is what makes the project of revising them, undertaken by many contemporary writers, possible and potentially liberating. In 2009, Zipes also stresses this idea when he asserts that 'in reconsidering where women's writing of fairy tales stands today, or, rather, feminist writing, I want to suggest that women have never broken with the past. Rather, they seized it, made the past their own, and in the case of fairy tales, have greatly influenced and inspired male writing'.⁷⁶ Talking about the influential rewritings of fairy tales by Angela Carter and Anne Sexton, Zipes declares that '[i]f there was something "revolutionary"' about their work, 'it had nothing to do with a break with the past'.⁷⁷ Zipes rightly observes that such writers 'took these [canonical] tales and made them part of their lives, felt them, sensed them, digested them, and re-generated them to comment politically on the situation of women in their times and on the struggles between the sexes. They appropriated and transformed the canonical

⁷³ Haase, *Fairy Tale and Feminism*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁵ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 9.

⁷⁶ Jack Zipes, *Relentless Progress: the Reconfiguration of Children Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* (New York, London: Routledge, 2009), p. 124.

⁷⁷ Zipes, *Relentless Progress*, p. 126.

tales for themselves and their times'.⁷⁸ This statement also applies to the work of both Byatt and Warner, as well as Carter, and it is the aim of this thesis to show how they have adopted fairy tales and myths and used them to their own purposes.

Carter, Byatt, Warner

With the rewriting of myths and fairy tales in the novels of British women writers as my starting topic of interest, Carter is an obvious choice. She openly announces that she is 'in the demythologizing business', because myths for her are 'extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree'.⁷⁹ Her relationship to fairy tales is also exceptional, for over the years many critics have discussed both the way in which Carter has helped to revise fairy tales and to claim an important position for it as a previously marginalized genre. At the same time, other critics talk about the role played by fairy tales in canonizing Carter's work. Lorna Sage draws attention to the vital change in Carter's position as a writer following the publication of her most famous collection of revised fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*: 'Nineteen seventy-nine was Angela Carter's annus mirabilis as a writer, the hinge-moment or turning point when she invented for herself a new authorial persona, and began for the first time to be read widely and collusively, by readers who identified with her as a reader and re-writer'.⁸⁰ Thus, unlike any other writer, Carter has gained a reputation as a writer for her pioneering work on the genre. Zipes declares that 'the two most significant books that brought about a thoughtful, sensitive, and radical approach to the long entrenched tradition of patriarchal classical fairy tales were Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, ed. by Jenny Uglow (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), p. 38.

⁸⁰ Sage, 'Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale', p. 65.

and Other Stories (1979)'.⁸¹ Zipes maintains that '[a]s a genre, the fairy tale has benefited greatly from a feminist re-vision and re-writing of the canonical tales generally represented by the works of Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen'.⁸² He further believes that these two works were particularly influential, for they 'changed and expanded the genre in the 1970s so that it soon flourished in unimaginable ways in the next three decades and continues to flourish'.⁸³ This emphasis on Carter's influential revisions of the genre is taken a step further by Stephen Benson when he talks about what he calls the 'the fairy-tale generation' or the 'Angela Carter generation'.⁸⁴ The collection of articles in Benson's book discusses fairy tale elements in the work of a number of writers who, he believes, belong to this generation. Although the book includes an article on Byatt by Elizabeth Harris, it does not read Byatt's use of fairy tales in relation to that of Carter's. The book, moreover, does not include a study of Warner's novels, although Benson mentions that fact that she can be included within the Carter generation.⁸⁵ I here build on Zipes's and Benson's ideas to examine Carter's feminist revisions of traditional narratives of myths and fairy tales, and to show the influence of her demythologizing project on the work of Byatt and Warner.

In many of her interviews and her articles of non-fiction, Byatt has often stated the importance of myths and fairy tales and the inexhaustible possibilities opened up by revising them. She believes that 'myth is related to the human need to know what was before, and what will be after the individual life, the living

⁸¹ Zipes, *Relentless Progress*, p. 121.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Stephen Benson, 'Introduction: Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale', in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

society'.⁸⁶ Although she finds people's need to fairy tales odd, she thinks that '[t]hese "flat" stories appear to be there because stories are a pervasive and perpetual human characteristic, like language, like play'.⁸⁷ Moreover, she maintains that 'they form, or until recently formed, the narrative grammar of our minds'— hence her interest using fairytale frameworks in her writing.⁸⁸ Like Carter, and Warner, Byatt has contributed to the revisiting and revising the genre of myth and fairy tale in several ways. She repeatedly uses myth and fairy tale motifs and themes both explicitly and implicitly in her work. As Jessica Tiffin puts it, 'Byatt's fascination with folktale and fairy tale becomes partially subordinate to her writing of novels and novellas. Actual stand-alone fairy tales are rare in her literary output: most of her tales are called into service to develop thematic and structural aspects of longer texts'.⁸⁹ The only collection of fairy tales published by Byatt, namely *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* contains two tales that she has already embedded in her novel *Possession*.⁹⁰ She has also published a number of collections of short stories that are replete with mythical and fairy tale motifs including *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* and *The Matisse Stories*.⁹¹

As Jeffery K. Gibson points out, Byatt 'may also be placed among those who heed Donald Haase's call to continually revise and reinvent the fairy tale for the

⁸⁶ A. S. Byatt, 'Happy ever after', *The Guardian*, (January 3 2004) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jan/03/sciencefictionfantasyandhorrr.fiction> > [Accessed October 17 2009].

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Jessica Tiffin, 'Ice, Glass, Snow: Fairs Tale as Art and Metafiction in the Writing of A. S. Byatt', *Marvels & Tales*, 20-1 (2006), 47-66 (p. 49).

⁹⁰ A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994). For a study of these fairy stories see: Celia M. Wallhead, 'Made-believe as Metaphor: Fairy Tales and Dream in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*', in *A. S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (Peter Lang: Bern, 2007), pp. 113-152.

⁹¹ A. S. Byatt, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998). A. S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998). See Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *A. S. Byatt* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), pp. 36-62, for a study of Byatt's short stories, including 'Medusa's Ankles' form *The Matisse Stories* which she reads in relation to Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa'.

current and subsequent generations'.⁹² Byatt expresses her discovery of the genre of myth and fairy tale as a rich source of inspiration as a moment of revelation when she says: 'There was a wonderful moment of liberation when I realized I could write tales that came out of my childhood love of myth and fairy stories'.⁹³ She also acknowledges a change in her attitude towards writing brought about by this kind of realization: 'I found myself wanting to write tales and stories, having described myself in my early days as a "self-conscious realist", and slowly came to see that the alternative tradition of the literary tale, or fairy tale, and that related anecdote was one of the things that made it possible to talk meaningfully about European literature'.⁹⁴ She often makes explicit her belief in the project of rewriting myths and fairy tales and its liberating potential for she contends that a 'myth derives force from its endless repeatability'.⁹⁵ For Byatt, moreover, 'Godmothers and witches and princesses and frogs and woodcutters can and should be free to behave differently'.⁹⁶ It is because she is aware of 'what stories can do to the way we put the world together' that Byatt inhabits her novels with those characters from famous myths and fairy tales in different scenarios to question current ways of thinking.⁹⁷

Commenting on Warner's pioneering work in the field of myth, Laurence Coupe says: 'When Marina Warner began writing about myth, in the mid-1970s, "myth critic" was a term of abuse. It meant that one was probably an unthinking

⁹² Jeffery K. Gibson, "'And the Princess, Telling the Story": A. S. Byatt's Self-Reflexive Fairy Stories' in *Fairy Tales Reimagined*, pp. 85-97 (p. 85).

⁹³ Philip Hensher, 'A. S. Byatt, The Art of Fiction', *The Paris Review*, (November 15 2010) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/481/the-art-of-fiction-no-168-a-s-byatt>> [Accessed January 27 2011].

⁹⁴ A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 132.

⁹⁶ Byatt, 'Happy ever after'.

⁹⁷ Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, P. 132.

admirer of Carl Jung'.⁹⁸ Warner, however, adopted a totally different approach from that of Jung under the influence of Roland Barthes. Coupe even believes that 'perhaps we are now in a position to see that her contribution to the interpretation of myths is by far the more valuable: in going beyond his narrow agenda, she opens up their infinite potential'.⁹⁹ Unlike Barthes who rejects myths as ideological lies, Warner believes that 'Myths aren't lies or delusions', and that 'knowing old stories, and retrieving and reworking them, brought about illumination in a different way from rational inquiry'.¹⁰⁰ Warner has written a several studies of mythology, and I agree with Coupe when he says that 'Warner's mythography is especially impressive for its historical sense, which often leads her to original and incisive insights'.¹⁰¹ In *Joan of Arc The image of female heroism*, Warner places Joan in the context of mythology of the female hero without ignoring the historical context.¹⁰² Similarly, Warner relies on documented historical evidence in her tracing of the formation of the image of Virgin Mary in Christian Mythology, in order to reveal the dangerous effects of the ideological naturalization of mythic images of the passive female and the perfect mother.¹⁰³ Another significant work of hers is *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* in which she investigates the idea of metamorphosis and its relation to personal identity by exploring the world of classical mythology and fairy tales.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Laurence Coupe, 'The comedy of terrors: reading myth with Marina Warner', *PN Review*, 25-6 (July-August 1999), 52-55 (p. 52).

⁹⁹ Coupe, 'The comedy of terrors', p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ Marina Warner, 'On Myth', *The Liberal: Poetry, Politics, Culture*, <http://www.theliberal.co.uk/issue_11/artsandculture/myth_warner_11.html> [Accessed December 22 2010].

¹⁰¹ Laurence Coupe, *Marina Warner* (Northcote: British Council, 2006), p. 1.

¹⁰² Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc The image of female heroism* (London: Vintage, 1981).

¹⁰³ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1976).

¹⁰⁴ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Definitely, Warner's work in the field of fairy tale is not less impressive. It starts from collecting and editing old fairy stories, writing introductions to fairytale collections, lecturing about fairy tales, using fairy tale frameworks in her short and larger fictions, to writing a substantial study of fairy tales and their teller in her celebrated book *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*.¹⁰⁵ In this book, Warner offers an illuminating study of the history of fairy tale and their different interpretations in relation to their tellers, emphasizing the significant historical relation between fairytale as a genre and women. Warner has collected six French fairy tales written by women storytellers from the 17th and 18th centuries, one of them, 'The Great Green Worm', is translated by A. S. Byatt.¹⁰⁶ She has also written a collection of short stories in which she offers a number of interesting rewritings of some biblical myths like that of the fall and the flood, using various fairy-tale motifs. This wide range of Warner's work on fairytale has established her as a very influential figure in the field.

Warner repeatedly declares that it is under the influence of Angela Carter that this interest in the field has come to light: 'The Bloody Chamber wasn't the first book by Angela Carter that I read, but it was the one that turned the key for me as a writer. It opened onto a hidden room, the kind that exists in dreams, that had always somehow been there, but that I'd never entered because I'd been afraid'.¹⁰⁷ Warner's initial hesitation to approach the genre in a serious way is derived from the traditional view of fairy tales as trivial writings that are fit for children and only related to women: 'It is still, in English, an ambiguous phrase: an old wives' tale

¹⁰⁵ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1994).

¹⁰⁶ Marina Warner, ed. *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (Chatto & Windus, 1994).

¹⁰⁷ Marina Warner, 'Ballerina: The Belled Girl Sends a Tape to an Impresario', in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 250-57 (p. 250).

means a piece of nonsense, a tissue of error, an ancient act of deception, of self and others, idle talk [...]similarly fairytale, as a derogatory term, implies fantasy, escapism, invention, the unreliable consolations of romance’, Warner writes.¹⁰⁸ However, Warner asserts that ‘Fairytale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas’- hence is her interest in the genre as an informer of women’s past, and in its revisions as device of liberating women.¹⁰⁹

The thesis aims to demonstrate that by placing traditional mythical and fairy tale motifs in new contexts, thus investing them with new meanings, Carter, Byatt and Warner successfully manage to expose and challenge artificial gender paradigms that serve to limit female potentialities. Understandably, a large amount of criticism has been written on Carter’s rewritings of myths and fairy tales. Little, however, has been written on the demythologizing aspect of Byatt’s use of myths and fairy tales in her writings, and even less work has been done on Warner’s use of the genre in her novels. Most of the novels written by the three authors are awash with references to well-known myths and fairy tales, which makes the novels I have chosen representative, in a way, of their use of the genre. With the suitability of the novels to the themes I am discussing as the main basis of choice, I have also deliberately chosen one relatively ignored novel by each author to study alongside a more extensively studied novel. By offering completely new readings of each two novels, I do not only point out similarities in themes and characterizations previously ignored, but also highlight the continuity of the novelists’ project of demythologization.

¹⁰⁸ Marina Warner, ‘The Absent Mother, or Women Against Women in the “Old Wives” Tale’, inaugural lecture (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991), p. 15.

¹⁰⁹ Warner, ‘The Absent Mother’, p. 24.

The main theme that I have chosen to explore in these authors' novels is 'love'. I apply the ideas of the influential French feminist Hélène Cixous to these novels in order to illustrate how they revise traditional narratives of both romantic and maternal love. Critics have often stressed the change in Carter's style of writing starting from *Nights at the Circus*, which has led them to relate it more strongly to her subsequent novel *Wise Children* (1991) that has been written in the same carnivalesque mode apparent in *Nights at the Circus*. This view, though definitely valid, helps separate these two novels from Carter's earlier novels, like *The Magic Toyshop*, that bear the seed of her demythologizing project.¹¹⁰ I introduce a new in-depth Cixousian reading of Carter's male and female protagonists' journeys of transformation, drawing attention to affinities in Cixous's and Carter's utopian visions, borrowed partly from the imaginative world of fairy tales. Both of Byatt's works studied here often attract attention as neo-Victorian narratives, and little consideration has been given to any feminist aspect of her writings. Most of Byatt's novels revolve around female artists, as her *The Frederica Quartet* shows, and *Possession* and *Morpho Eugenia* are no exception. These two novels, however, also deal with revisions of romantic fairy tale narratives of love. They depict male protagonists who start the novel with the wrong partner, go through a journey of transformation, and end up having a more healthy relationship with another equally transformed female partner. I bring this aspect to light by applying Cixous's idea of bisexuality. The demythologizing aspect of Warner's work is often celebrated in her

¹¹⁰ For Paulina Palmer, *Nights at the Circus* marks a new stage in Carter's writing because it demonstrates a shift in Carter's work from 'the analytical and 'demythologizing' impulse' to '[t]he focus on the celebratory and utopian'. Paulina Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Realism' in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. by Sue Roe (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1987) pp. 179-208 (p. 180).

non-fiction writings.¹¹¹ No discussion of this aspect in her novels is fully developed before now. *Indigo* is the most studied of her novels, and critics usually concentrate on post-colonial aspects of her work. I, however, will read it in conjunction with *The Leto Bundle* as a rewriting of narratives of romantic and maternal love, in the light of Cixous's work on the hysteric and the monstrous female.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1976), or *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

CHAPTER ONE

ANGELA CARTER: REVISION AND VISION

For a fantasist with wings, Angela kept her eyes on the ground,
with reality firmly in her sights. ~Marina Warner¹

‘I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I’m a feminist in everything else and one can’t compartmentalize these things in one’s life’, writes Carter in ‘Notes from the Front Line’.² This statement encourages a feminist reading of the use of myths and fairy tales in her novels. In most of her novels, Carter has made use of the fantastic symbolic world of traditional myths and fairy tales which has served her as a ‘palimpsest’, to borrow Righter’s expression.³ Talking about the concept of the ‘palimpsest’, Righter writes: ‘the word “myth” itself has become a palimpsest at least in terms of its accumulated associations if not through the continuity of its history, and we have in it now the newest surface on a palimpsestic ground – probably the most plastic and adaptable form of an ancient concept reworked to modern ends’.⁴ On what Righter calls the ‘palimpsestic ground’ of myth, Carter rewrites *traditional* myths and fairy tales in order to demythologize *social* myths that are ‘extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree’.⁵ Carter believes that many myths are invented to obscure ‘the real conditions of life’; that

¹ Marina Warner, ‘introduction’, in *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. by Angela Carter, (1992) (London: Virago Press, 1998), pp. ix-xvii (p. xi).

² Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, ed. by Jenny Uglow (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), pp. 36-42 (p. 37).

³ William Righter, *Myth and Literature* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 38. Emphasis added.

they ‘deal [...] with false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances’.⁶ In her exploration of the world of myths and fairy tales, Carter intends to investigate cultural myths that govern people’s lives. She aims at the exposure of the ‘old bottles’ of the social myths by pouring the ‘new wine’ of her feminist ideas into them.⁷

However, Carter’s use of myths and fairy tales raises a lot of controversy among her critics and exposes her to a range of charges, from escapist utopianism to a re-inscription of misogynic ideas. As Rebecca Munford notes, ‘[o]ne of the most recurrent and mordant charges levelled at Carter is that her fiction thematizes – even fetishizes – the surface so that words and images are divorced from their context’.⁸ Michael Bell is one critic who believes that Carter places her novels in a totally imaginary world that has no relevance to everyday experience. Analyzing *Nights at the Circus*, Bell claims that ‘[t]he narrative bravura distinguishes itself from the larger historical process from which it increasingly diverges into its own carnivalesque time’, and as the novel ‘places itself on a midnight hour between centuries’, it is ‘explicitly [...] a fantasy tale falling outside of history’.⁹ Bell is not alone in his view of Carter’s novel as lacking any historical context and subversive potential.¹⁰ Such criticism of Carter’s use of myths and fairy tales largely reflects critics’ own attitudes towards the genre itself. Patricia Duncker, who looks at fairy tales as a closed genre irrecoverably steeped in misogyny, blames Carter for

⁶ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1990), pp. 5-6.

⁷ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 37.

⁸ Rebecca Munford, ‘Introduction’, in *Re-visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts*, ed. by Rebecca Munford (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

⁹ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 218-9.

¹⁰ See Munford, ‘Introduction’, *Re-visiting Angela Carter*.

choosing ‘to inhabit a tiny room of her own in the house of fiction’.¹¹ She asserts that ‘[t]he infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale, which fits the form to its purpose, to be the carrier of ideology, proves too complex and pervasive to avoid. Carter is rewriting the tales within the straitjacket of their original structures. The characters she re-creates must to some extent, continue to exist as abstractions’.¹² Duncker’s refusal to acknowledge the liberating potential behind rewriting traditional fairy tales is a direct reason behind such a reductive reading of Carter’s work.

Sarah Gamble is one of the critics who have addressed Duncker’s criticism of Carter.¹³ Gamble argues against ‘loading Carter’s adaptations of fairy stories with too many utopian associations, thus underplaying the genuinely unsettling aspects of these tales’.¹⁴ She opposes Duncker’s reading of Carter’s rewriting of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* as she reads them ‘as largely successful exercises in the deconstruction of a form that has become appropriated by those who have a vested interest in upholding the status quo’.¹⁵ ‘In doing so’, she asserts, ‘Carter uncovers a deeper, more subversive history of the fairy tale, bringing to the surface not only what Warner terms its “harshly realistic core” but also “the suspect whiff of femininity” from which it has never been completely disassociated’.¹⁶ In my reading of Carter’s novels, I share common ground with Gamble’s argument here, as I will show how Carter makes use of this subversive potential of rewriting myths and fairy

¹¹ Patricia Duncker, ‘Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter’s *Bloody Chambers*’, *Literature and History*, 10-1 (1984), 3-14 (p. 6).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See also Elaine Jordan’s ‘Enthralment: Angela Carter’s Speculative Fictions’, in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, ed. by Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp. 19-42, and ‘The Dangers of Angela Carter’, in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 119-31. In both, Jordan defends Carter against criticism by Duncker, Robert Clark and Susanne Kappeler. Another to counter Duncker’s criticism is Merja Makinen, ‘Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality’, *Feminist Review*, 42 (1992), 2-15.

¹⁴ Sarah Gamble, ‘Penetrating to the Heart of the *Bloody Chamber*: Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale’, in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 20-46 (p. 21).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

tales in her novels. Carter makes it obvious that her exploration of the world of myth and fairy tale is meant to comment on the real world and evoke social change. In one of her interviews, Carter stresses the fact that ‘there’s a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously’.¹⁷ Establishing this link between the material world and Carter’s imaginative one is essential to realizing the far-reaching potential of her demythologizing project.

Carter’s attempt to demolish confining social myths, using the weapon of retelling traditional myths and fairy tales, is built upon a thorough investigation of prevailing social conditions. Her fantastic writing is deeply rooted in the social realities on which it comments. I agree with Aidan Day when he asserts that ‘[T]he fantastic elements in Carter’s fiction do not anarchically disrupt established orders; they do not introduce liminal possibilities which veer off into the rationally unaccountable and unrecoverable. [...] 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’.¹⁸ Carter shows her awareness of this close relation between the fantastic fiction and reality in the introduction she wrote to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990). She writes ‘fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created the world’.¹⁹ She also argues that those tales lie at the heart of her field of interest because ‘most fairy tales and folk tales are structured around the relations between men and women, whether in terms of magical romance or of coarse domestic realism’.²⁰ It is

¹⁷ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 85.

¹⁸ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁹ Carter, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, p. ix.

²⁰ Day, *Angela Carter*, p. xviii.

the fairy tales' ability to twin the magical and the domestic, and the romantic and the realistic, which attracts Carter to their world.

In *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carter rewrites a number of well-known fairy tales, making some significant changes that have altered their meanings. In her reworking of 'Bluebeard', for example, Carter replaces the third person point of view of the anonymous narrator with the first person point of view of the heroine. By using this technique, she manages to introduce a new image of the female character to reverse the traditional negative one that perpetuates social myths of female passivity. In this chapter, I will show how instead of revising and retelling traditional myths and fairy tales, by making direct changes in plots and characters, Carter, in her novels, adapts a more subtle and complex strategy. She places traditional well-known figures and images from myths and fairy tales in different contexts to imbue them with different meanings, and to enable the reader to subject them to different interpretations. Her main aim, I will argue, is to demythologize social myths of femininity and masculinity prescribed by these stories. Carter says: 'From *The Magic Toyshop* onwards I've tried to keep an entertaining surface to the novels, so that you don't have to read them as a system of signification if you don't want to'.²¹ This seems to be one reason behind her interest in fairy tales, for she believes that 'the loose symbolic structure of fairy tales leaves them so open to psychological interpretation, as if they were not formal inventions but informal dreams dreamed in public'.²² Thus, Carter adapts symbolic structures of popular fairy tales and myths, that easily lend themselves to various interpretations, in order to achieve her double goal of entertaining her readers and questioning social conditions. Carter believes that 'reading is just as creative an activity as writing, and

²¹ Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 8.

²² Quoted in *Ibid*, p. xx.

most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts'.²³ She, therefore, depends on the accumulated associations related to fairy-tale characters and mythic figures in the reader's mind in order to shed light on the characters of her novels. Using this strategy helps to alter the reader's attitude towards these characters and their choices by the shocking reversal of her/his expectations.

Carter's use of elements of myths and fairy tales to expose the falsity of social myths of femininity and masculinity, and to suggest new alternative relationships between the two sexes will be explored here through a close reading of two of her novels: *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. My analysis of these two novels is largely informed by my reading of Cixous's ideas and her views on myth and fairy tale, as I will explain in the following section. I will also rely on Luce Irigaray's ideas in my reading of the character of Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop*. One reason behind my choice of *The Magic Toyshop* is the scarcity of in-depth criticism of this novel. Gamble believes that it has not received enough attention from critics: 'Given that *The Magic Toyshop* is probably the most widely-read of her early works, it is surprising that a greater number of detailed critical analyses of it have not been published'.²⁴ In addition to that, I have chosen to read this novel in relation to *Nights at the Circus*, possibly Carter's most scrutinised novel, to suggest that despite many critics' emphases on the huge shift in Carter's style and interest between these two novels, there are many more similarities between them than such critics would acknowledge. Both novels, I argue, are part and parcel of Carter's project of demythologizing social myths of femininity and masculinity by rewriting traditional myths and fairy tales. I will show that in *Nights*

²³ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 37.

²⁴ Sarah Gamble, ed. *The Fiction of Angela Carter: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 32. See this book for a survey of the major criticism of Carter's novels.

at the Circus, Carter develops many of the themes, techniques, and ideas she has already introduced in *The Magic Toyshop*. Moreover, the heroes and heroines in both novels undergo very similar transformations that lead to establishing a new type of male-female relationship based on equality and acceptance of each other's differences. In both novels, Carter subverts cultural myths of femininity and masculinity through a rewriting of traditional myths of romantic love that celebrate male violent desire and idealize female passive beauty. Carter's version of romantic love highlights the existence of active female desire, and depicts men who are strong enough to accept it. Carter's heroines are capable of rejecting traditional roles allocated for women and of expressing their desire. And her heroes are willing to give up traditional images of male heroism, and to replace their passive Sleeping Beauties with powerful Medusas.

Carter and Cixous

Commenting on Carter's approach to myth, Nicola Pitchford notes that '[a]t the time of Carter's writing, many feminists were exploring the possibilities of reclaiming female mythic/archetypal figures as positive images of female power'.²⁵ Pitchford mentions Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, Hélène Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* as exemplary texts of this trend. I agree with Pitchford that, like '[m]ost of these texts', Carter's novels 'engaged in the double project of challenging traditional mythic images of women but then revamping them, uncovering the female strength latent in these figures', and I will show how this idea works in Carter's novels.²⁶ In the course of my discussion, I will take this idea a step further to argue that, in her approach to fairy tale and myth,

²⁵ Nicola Pitchford, *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (London: Associated University Press, 2002), p. 131.

²⁶ Ibid.

Carter shares common ground specifically with Hélène Cixous's approach to myth and fairy tale, not only in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' but also in 'Sorties', 'Castration or Decapitation?', and *The Newly Born Woman* which she wrote in collaboration with Catherine Clément. As my readings of the novels will show, the affinities between Carter and Cixous are most apparent when she recalls images of the passive female from traditional well-known fairy tales and myths only to reject and subvert them. At the same time, she celebrates images of powerful mythic female figures, like Medusa, for their empowering and liberating potential. Carter, I will argue, also shares Cixous's interest in subverting social myths of femininity and masculinity advocating a new type of male-female relationship based on equality. In 'Castration or Decapitation?', significantly, Cixous starts her analysis of sexual difference by telling a number of well-known myths and fairy tales including those of Zeus, Hera and Tiresias, 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Red Riding Hood'. For Cixous 'Sleeping Beauty', for example, is a story that is 'particularly expressive of woman's place': 'Woman, if you look for her, has a strong chance of always being found in one position: in bed. In bed and asleep— "laid (out)" She is lifted up by the man who will lay her in her next bed so that she may be confined to bed ever after, just as the fairy tales say'.²⁷ Cixous tries to reveal the fact that the binary opposition, upon which the narrative of such stories is built, is a reflection of how cultural myths work in every other aspect of people's life. The re-rewriting of those traditional narratives is one way of revealing the process of naturalization of female passivity, and of destabilizing this system of binary oppositions which entraps women and men. '[I]t's on the couple that we have to work if we are to de-construct and transform culture', Cixous asserts. 'The couple as terrain, as space of cultural

²⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans. by Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, 7 (1981), 41-55 (p 43).

struggle, but also as terrain, as space demanding, insisting on, a complete transformation in the relation of one to the other', Cixous goes on.²⁸ It is the revising of traditional narratives of myths and fairy tales to achieve this kind of transformation in the male-female relationship that I will trace in Carter's novels.

The similarity in their approaches to the myth and fairy tale genre is reflected in the fact that both Cixous and Carter receive similar kinds of criticism, such as the claim that their writing evokes utopianism and lacks a historical context. Some feminist critics, like Hélène Vivienne Wenzel and Ann Rosalind Jones, express their unease about Cixous's tendency towards what could be deemed an ahistorical mythologisation of 'Woman'. Wenzel maintains that Cixous's 'écriture féminine perpetuates and recreates long-held stereotypes and myths about woman as natural, sexual, biological, and corporal by celebrating her essences'.²⁹ Jones also objects to Cixous's way of writing that, in her view, ignores 'variations in class, in race and in culture among women'. Jones raises the question: 'If we concentrate our energies on opposing a counterview of Woman to the view held by men in the past and the present, what happens to our ability to support the multiplicity of women and the various life possibilities they are fighting for in the future?'.³⁰ This kind of criticism is also present in Toril Moi's discussion of Cixous's work that I will discuss here in some detail.

Like Wenzel and Jones, Moi finds Cixous's writing lacking in its analysis of women's real conditions within specific social contexts as she says: 'Cixous's global

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, 'The Text as Body/Politics: An Appreciation of Monique Wittig's Writing in Context', *Feminist Studies*, 7 (1981), 267-287 (p.272). See also Gayatri Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 134-153.

³⁰ Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of *l'Écriture Féminine*', in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 86-101 (pp.93-94).

appeal to ‘woman’s power’ glosses over the real differences among women, and thus ironically represses the true heterogeneity of women’s powers’.³¹ Moi criticizes Cixous’s utopianism for similar reasons as she emphasizes the gap between Cixous’s poetic writing and political and social realities about women when she writes:

Within her poetic mythology, writing is posited as an absolute activity of which all women *qua* women automatically partake. Stirring and seductive though such a vision is, it can say nothing of the actual inequities, deprivation and violation that women, as social beings rather than as mythological archetypes, must constantly suffer.³²

Moi seems to find utopian writing unable to achieve political change in society. Responding to Moi’s criticism, Anu Aneja acknowledges ‘Cixous’ predilection of the poetic over the political’ and states that ‘to accuse Cixous of being completely apolitical would be like saying that the poetic does not interrupt or interact with the political’.³³ Aneja points out that ‘Cixous herself views writing as the place where political changes commence’.³⁴ These two different views of the writer’s ability of evoking socio-political changes when dealing with the poetic and the mythic might also inform the debate over the possibility of achieving such changes through rewriting myths and fairy tales.

Moi’s disbelief in the liberating potential of Cixous’s deconstructive approach to myth leads her to accuse Cixous of not facing the contradictions of the real world

³¹ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 123.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³³ Anu Aneja, ‘The Medusa’s Slip: Hélène Cixous and the Underpinnings of *Écriture Féminine*’, in *Hélène Cixous: Critical Impressions*, ed. by Regina Barecca and Lee A. Jacobus (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach, 1997), pp. 58-75 (p. 64).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64-5.

and escaping to the safe detached world of myth. In a discussion reminiscent of Duncker's criticism of Carter, Moi claims that Cixous's

constant return to biblical and mythological imagery signals her investment in the world of myth: a world that, like the distant country of fairy tales is perceived as pervasively meaningful, as closure and unity. The mythical or religious discourse presents a universe where all difference, struggles and discord can in the end be satisfactorily resolved.³⁵

Unlike Cixous and Carter, Moi does not see any sort of connection between the material world and that of myth and fairy tale, nor does she find a liberating potential in the project of rewriting them. Although she acknowledges the fact that '[u]topian thought has always been a source of political inspiration for feminist and socialists alike', this view of myth makes her conclude that it is the 'absence of any specific analysis of the material factors preventing women from writing that constitute a major weakness of Cixous's utopia'.³⁶ However, Cixous's views on myth represented in 'Sorties' do not support Moi's argument. Moi attacks Cixous for what she calls her obvious 'predilection for the Old Testament', and her 'investment' in biblical and traditional myth exemplified in her 'endless' 'capacity for identification' with mythic figures.³⁷

I, however, argue that it is Cixous's dissatisfaction with representations of masculinity and femininity embodied in mythic figures that drives her to bring them to light. She asserts: 'I have gone back and forth in vain through the ages and through the stories within my reach, yet found no woman into whom I can slip'.³⁸ Cixous aspires 'to meet women who love themselves, who are alive, who are not

³⁵ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 115.

³⁶ Ibid, p.12. For counter-discussions of Cixous see Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 94-8.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 115.

³⁸ Ibid, p 78.

debased, overshadowed, wiped out'.³⁹ This is the kind of female character Carter presents through Fevvers by rewriting different mythic images of women. Despite the fact that she finds such characteristics in Joan of Arc, she says that her being 'a Jew and suspicious of anything related to the Church and its ideological rule', makes a figure like Joan of Arc 'totally uninhabitable' for her.⁴⁰ This statement shows no fascination with biblical mythology but a realization, and disapproval, of the ideology working behind it. This is similar to Carter's own approach to biblical mythology in *Nights at the Circus*, as I will show. Moreover, directly contradicting Moi's claim that she 'constantly seeks refuge from the contradictions of the material world' in 'the closure of the mythological universe', Cixous asserts that she resorts to books of myth, 'No! Not to shut myself up in some imaginary paradise. I am searching: somewhere there must be people who are like me in their rebellion and in their hope'.⁴¹ Cixous, like Carter, finds in the world of myth a potentially subversive space that, when discovered and rewritten, can confirm hopes of change and liberation. I am going to explore how these ideas are reflected in Carter's novels.

Melanie as Sleeping Beauty

Under the title 'Sorties', Cixous and Clément write: '*Once upon a time . . . once . . . and once again*. Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beauties, but passive; hence desirable'.⁴² Like Carter, Cixous and Clément write about these sleeping beauties because they realize the interrelatedness between their stories and women's experience: 'One cannot yet say of the following

³⁹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 72.

⁴² *Ibid*, p 66. Emphasis in original.

history “it’s just a story”. It’s a tale still true today. Most women who have awakened remember having slept, *having been put to sleep*.⁴³ At the start of *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter introduces us to one of these sleeping beauties, a young girl named Melanie. The world of the novel is made of a mixture of blended elements of fantasy, myths, and fairy tales with a touch of the gothic. Melanie lives, with her family, in a big house in a fairytale-like world of wish-fulfillment ‘with a bedroom each and several to spare, and a pony in a field, and an apple tree that held the moon in its twiggy fingers up outside Melanie’s window so that she could see it when she lay in her bed’.⁴⁴ We witness the fifteen-year-old Melanie at the beginning of her journey of transformation from childhood to womanhood. It is a journey of self-discovery in search for a distinctive identity. Melanie starts with exploring her body as she ‘discovered she was made of flesh and blood’ (*MT*, 1). She, however, can only see herself as a sexual being in the eyes of men: ‘For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe, she used the net curtains raw material for a series of nightgowns suitable for her wedding night which she designed upon herself’ (*MT*, 1-2). She is depicted as a Sleeping Beauty waiting for her prince.

Carter also borrows from fairy tales the image of the ‘mirror’, which is directly related to the myth of female beauty, as I will show. The mirror image is usually used to symbolize the perception of the self. In the novel, however, it is used as a symbol of the female’s socially-imposed identity- an identity that is only a reflection of the image a male-dominated society has designed for her. Olga Kenyon indicates that the mirror is one object which Carter gives a ‘symbolic value’: ‘Mirrors also appear frequently, objectifying us being looked at by ourselves.

⁴³ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p.7. All subsequent page references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *MT* after quotations in the text.

Carter's mirrors are self-reflecting tyrannical prisons'.⁴⁵ This objectifying effect is apparent in Melanie's case: 'She stuck moon-daisies in her long hair and looked at herself in her mirror as if she were a photograph in her own grown-up photograph album. "Myself at fifteen"' (*MT*, 6). Like the passive heroine in Cixous's story 'she has the perfection of something finished'.⁴⁶ In a mirror that reflects the values of a male-dominated society, Melanie can only see herself as a mere object of the male desire; 'she gift-wrapped herself for a phantom bridegroom taking a shower and cleaning his teeth in an extra dimensional bathroom-of-the-future in honeymoon Cannes' (*MT*, 2). Carter's use of the mirror image helps to reveal the social myth of female beauty deployed to construct false definitions of femininity as passivity. As a result of her perceiving the world and herself through the critical eyes of the male, Melanie adheres to the social myth of female beauty. She must be beautiful to be loved by males so that she can find a place in her society; this is the only way of living for a female in the world of the novel.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of the imagery of the 'mirror' in the Grimms' tale of 'Little Snow White' sheds light on this argument. 'To be caught and trapped in a mirror', Gilbert and Gubar write, 'is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self', and the conflict in the mirror is a conflict between 'mother and daughter, woman and woman, self and self'.⁴⁷ Moreover, they argue that the 'voice of the looking glass [is] the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's – and every woman's – self-evaluation'.⁴⁸ Like a heroine in a fairy tale, Melanie seeks her self-image in the 'mirror', not

⁴⁵ Olga Kenyon, *Writing Women: Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), p. 16.

⁴⁶ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 66.

⁴⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 38.

realizing that it would only reflect one of those images that are ruled by the same alienating voice of judgment of the male:

She opened her mother's wardrobe and inspected herself in the long mirror. She was still a beautiful girl. She went back to her own room and looked at herself again in her own mirror to see if that said different but, again, she was beautiful. Moonlight, white satin, roses. A bride. Whose bride? But she was, tonight, sufficient for herself in her own glory and did not need a groom (*MT*, 16).

Exploring her body in front of the mirror, Melanie cannot see beyond the images of beauty and passivity. As Cixous argues, 'she has been made to see (= not-see) woman on the basis of what man wants to see of her': a passive beautiful bride with no sense of active sexuality.⁴⁹ Women like Melanie, who are imprisoned within social myths that suppress female sexuality, 'haven't had eyes for themselves' to explore their own bodies and desire.⁵⁰ They instead internalize male views of them as mere objects of desire. This idea is also apparent when, later in the novel, she views herself in the eyes of Finn as he kissed her in the garden: 'Stiff, wooden and unresponsive, she stood in his arms and watched herself in his eyes. It was a comfort to see herself as she thought she looked like' (*MT*, 105). Unable to embrace her own desire, Melanie is content with seeing herself as the object of Finn's desire. Moreover, the start of Melanie's journey of disillusionment, her journey of self-discovery outside the world of the mirror, is signified by her breaking of the mirror; 'she picked up the hairbrush and flung it at her reflected face. The mirror shattered' (*MT*, 24). This symbolic action signifies the end of the first stage of Melanie's self-discovery: 'She was disappointed; she wanted to see her mirror, still, and the room reflected in the mirror, still, but herself gone, smashed' (*MT*, 25). She is no longer

⁴⁹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the little girl who can identify herself with the young princess she sees in the mirror dreamingly meditating on her future, and thinking that, one day, her prince will come to rescue her and sweep her off her feet. Leaving the world of her childhood dreams behind, Melanie realizes that she is no longer a child; she is no longer ‘a free agent’ (*MT*, 31). She is painfully turning into a woman: ‘Part of herself, she thought, was killed, (*MT*, 31). Before following Melanie’s transformation, I will continue my discussion of Carter’s demythologizing of the myth of female beauty.

Carter underlines a link between the myth of female beauty and the appetite for food, and she might have derived this idea from her own personal experience: ‘There is, as we all know, considerable pressure on young girls to conform to the cultural standards of conventional aesthetics in Western society. *Fat* is emphatically not beautiful’.⁵¹ Women are ‘tacitly encouraged to sacrifice much for the sake of appearances’, Carter asserts.⁵² She highlights this idea in the novel through the bitterly ironic justification she provides for the scene in which Melanie refrains from eating the ‘fatal’ bread pudding: ‘Melanie grew to fear the bread pudding. She was afraid that if she ate too much of it she would die a virgin. A gargantuan Melanie, bloated as a drowned corpse on bread pudding, recurred in her dreams and she would wake in a sweat of terror’ (*MT*, 3-4). Carter admits that her own ‘entry into the world’, with the ‘firm conviction that fat was ugly, ludicrous, and disabling. And thin was wonderful’, had turned her into an anorexic.⁵³ At this stage of her life, Carter herself seems to share Melanie’s concerns about fitting into the male-inscribed image of the female ideal beauty: ‘I assumed that no man in his right mind could ever have been attracted to Fat Angie. [...] (I had, of course, tended to regard

⁵¹ Angela Carter, ‘Fat is Ugly’, in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, ed. by Jenny Uglow (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), pp. 56-9 (p. 57). Emphasis in original.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-8.

marriage as the only possible release from [my] home environment)'.⁵⁴ Far from being a mere personal problem, anorexia reflects women's entrapment within cultural myths of female beauty at its highest degree.

This idea is reflected in Susan Bordo's work on anorexia.⁵⁵ Bordo relates anorexia to women's pursuit of 'an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity'.⁵⁶ She highlights how dangerously the social myth of female beauty works as a mechanism of containment and control: 'Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body [...] has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control'.⁵⁷ The novel seems to present a critique of the myth of female beauty as a strategy of social control by emphasizing Melanie's attempts to control her appetite in accordance with the rules of society, so that she will not end up unmarried. Bordo goes on to analyze how social myths of femininity are inscribed on the body of the anorexic, stating that 'the control of female appetite for food is merely the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger – for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification – be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited'.⁵⁸ Thus, the social myth of female beauty imposed on women, with the constraints it puts on women's appetites, is one way of containing their hunger for power. This idea can also inform the stress on Fevvers's unlimited appetite in *Nights at the Circus*, signifying her potential ability to defy social rules. This is also emphasized by Sarah Sceats, who contends that Fevvers's appetite is not only for food and drink, but also

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.58.

⁵⁵ Susan Bordo, 'The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity', in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Katie Conboy *et al.* (New York: Columbia University, 1997), pp. 90-110 (p.95).

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 91.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 95-6.

‘for life, experience and change’.⁵⁹ Thus, Carter’s handling of the theme of appetite in both novels, in relation to her two heroines, is very similar; she introduces two sides of the same coin.⁶⁰ She uses the theme of appetite to comment on the myth of passive female beauty and to explore ways of subverting it.

Awakening Sleeping Beauty

As the novel follows the structure of a fairy tale, the unexpectedly orphaned children move from the excessive luxury and tenderness of their parents’ home to the excessive poverty and cruelty of the house of Uncle Philip, the Bluebeard figure. On more than one occasion in the novel, Uncle Philip’s house is described as ‘Bluebeard’s castle’ (*MT*, 82). It is also depicted as: ‘Mr Fox’s manor house with “Be bold, be bold but not too bold” written up over every lintel and chopped up corpses neatly piled in all the wardrobes and airing cupboards, on top of the sheets and pillowslips’ (*MT*, 83).⁶¹ Moreover, like the women in the ‘Bluebeard’ fairy tale, Melanie enters Uncle Philip’s forbidden workshop in spite of Aunt Margaret’s warning: ‘But please do not go to the workroom’ (*MT*, 80). Melanie is horrified by the ‘partially assembled puppets of all sizes, some almost as tall as Melanie herself; blind-eyed puppets, some armless, some legless, some naked, some clothed, all with strange liveliness as they dangled unfinished from their hooks’ (*MT*, 67). This description of Philip’s secret theatre recalls Bluebeard’s bloody chamber where his mutilated victims are dangling from hooks. By building the character of Uncle

⁵⁹ Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 57.

⁶⁰ For an exploration of the theme of consumption in *Nights at the Circus* see Margaret E. Toye, ‘Eating Their Way Out of Patriarchy: Consuming the Female Panopticon in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*’, *Women’s Studies*, 36-7 (2007), 477- 506.

⁶¹ ‘Mr Fox’ is the second fairy tale in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, edited by Carter. In this fairy tale there is a mention of a severed hand discovered by his last victim that was saved at the last moment. Melanie thinks that she sees a severed hand in a drawer in Uncle Philip’s house (*MT* p. 118).

Philip on typical one-dimensional characterizations in fairy tales, Carter succeeds in heightening the violent, aggressive aspect of his nature: 'his presence, brooding and oppressive, fill[s] the house' (*MT*, 87), even when he is away. He is a representative character of the dominating father figure: he has 'his own, special, pint-size mug which had the word "father" executed on it in rosebuds' (*MT*, 73). Uncle Philip is an imposer of myths of passively obedient femininity, for we are told that he 'can't abide women in trousers', and he likes 'silent women' (*MT*, 62-3). We are told that he even 'suppresse[s] the idea of laughter' (*MT*, 124). Significantly, his violence poses a threat not only to the females but also to the males of his household: 'Finn [often] emerge[s] from the workroom with a bruise on his cheekbone or a swollen eye' (*MT*, 92). He, however, like Bluebeard, is a victimizer of women who adopts a dehumanizing attitude towards them. He continuously ignores Melanie and does not even know her name. Aunt Margaret is another female victim of Uncle Philip who 'never talked to his wife except to bark brusque commands' (*MT*, 124). The more she knows her uncle the more frightened of his 'irrational violence' Melanie becomes (*MT*, 92). His hunger for power and control is also symbolized by his emphasizing his strong appetite.

As a toy-maker, Uncle Philip is depicted as an insensible tyrant who can only think of everybody else as puppets who must blindly obey his instructions. The puppet-puppeteer relationship between Melanie and Uncle Philip has been foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Melanie remembers that 'when she was a little girl, he sent her a jack-in-the-box, [...] [and] when she opened the jack-in-the-box, a grotesque caricature of her own face leered from the head that leapt out at her' (*MT*, 12). Later in the novel Uncle Philip literally puts Melanie on the stage and forces her to act with one of his beloved puppets in the play 'Leda and the Swan'.

This scene is based on the Greek myth of Zeus's rape of Leda. The god Zeus disguises himself as a swan to seduce the mortal Leda who bore him four children.⁶² To illustrate the change in interpretation Carter's account brings to the original myth, we might compare it with the following account of the same story, from a late Latin retelling of 1499, quoted by Marina Warner in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*: 'The swan was kissing her with its divine beak; its wings were down, covering the bare parts of the noble lady, as with divine and voluptuous pleasure the two of them united in their delectable sport ... Nothing was lacking to contribute to the increase of delight'.⁶³ This erotic performance, the author continues, 'gave especial pleasure to the onlookers, who responded with praise and applause'.⁶⁴ The elevated language employed by Warner is echoed and made fun of in Carter's novel when Uncle Philip's dignified comments are contrasted with the violence of the real action and its effect on the victim, as I will show in more detail in the coming section. There is no sign of the destructive effect the raping swan leaves on its victim in the version quoted by Warner. Commenting on the scene that she quotes, Warner writes: 'the swan is doing duty in this myth as an active, animating, inspiring agent'.⁶⁵ By contrast, Carter turns this life-giving, 'impregnating agent'⁶⁶ into an 'unknown and unknowing' violent rapist (*MT*, 161): 'The swan made a lumpish jump foreword and settled on her loins. She thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came all around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The glided beak dug deeply into the soft flesh' (*MT*, 167). As

⁶² Robert J. Lenardon and Mark P. O. Morford, *A Companion to Classical Mythology* (New York: Longman, 1997), p. 127.

⁶³ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 95. This quotation is a translation of an episode from Francesco Colonna's *The Strife of Love in a Dream* (1499).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Linden Peach points out, through this scene, Uncle Philip ‘appears to be performing a surrogate rape’.⁶⁷ Moreover, unlike the happy audience in the scene quoted in Warner’s book, the audience in this novel, namely Aunt Margaret, Finn and Francie, are applauding Uncle Philip’s show out of fear. They feel obliged to fake the enjoyment to please the tyrant and to avoid his anger. This delineation reeks with violence and aggression, which indicates that it is not meant to give the audience pleasure - as the version quoted by Warner claims to offer - but to evoke indignation and disillusionment in the reader. In what follows, I will analyze Carter’s depiction of this scene in further detail.

When she first moves into her uncle’s house, Melanie is explicitly depicted as a Sleeping Beauty: ‘Melanie opened her eyes and saw thorns among roses, as if she woke from a hundred years’ night, *la belle au bois dormante*, imprisoned in a century’s steadily burgeoning garden’ (*MT*, 53). Uncle Philip prepares for this passive princess to be sexually awakened by a symbolic violent scene of rape. Melanie, however, manages to write her own version of the story by using a new form of female language to counter Uncle Philip’s patriarchal discourse, as I will show. In this section, I will read Carter’s use of language in her depiction of the rape scene, staged by Uncle Philip, in the light of Cixous’s idea of voice as a form of female language that can liberate women from phallogentric discourses. Carter expresses her interest in language as an essential device in the process of liberation of women in her novels. Explaining the role that can be played by a female language, Carter says: ‘It is enormously important for women to write fiction as women, it is part of the slow process of decolonialising our language. We must work to develop a neutral language, *without pain, shame or embarrassment*. Language is

⁶⁷ Linden Peach, *Angela Carter* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 83.

power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation'.⁶⁸ Carter's views on language bear strong affinities with Cixous's idea of a liberating female language when she asserts that '[w]omen must write their body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves, including the one of laughing off the word "silence"'.⁶⁹ Suggesting the possibility of using voice as an alternative female language in texts, Cixous writes: 'First I sense femininity in writing by: a privilege of *voiced writing* and *voiced* are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voiced's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries'.⁷⁰ Carter, I argue, uses Voice in her novel in the same innovative way as Cixous.

In the rape scene, Uncle Philip's rhetorical language is undermined by the language of his victim; what Cixous would call 'voiced'-language. Carter unveils the way male-created mythic language hides the reality of the female marginalization throughout history: Uncle Philip prefaces the scene with his own title 'Leda attempts to flee her heavenly visitor but his beauty and majesty bear her to the ground' (*MT*, 166). However, from Melanie's point of view, there is nothing beautiful or majestic about this 'grotesque parody of a swan' (*MT*, 165). At first the swan makes Melanie laugh, for '[i]t was nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings. It was dumpy and homely and eccentric' (*MT*, 165). However, she soon becomes frightened to think of what violent actions it is capable. The effect of this experience on Melanie is already mentally devastating and terribly alienating so that 'all her laughter was snuffed out. She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself,

⁶⁸ Kenyon, *Writing Women*, p 14. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, pp. 94-5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 92. Emphasis in original.

wrenched from her personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place' (MT, 166). The presentation of this scene, through Melanie's consciousness, robs the myth of its false male-made glory, and turns it against itself, uncovering the violence lying at the heart of its poetical solemn discourse.

This contradiction between Uncle Philip's ceremonious words and savage actions empties the language of the tyrant of meaning and gives space to the baffled screams of his victim to be heard: "Almighty Jove in the form of a swan wrecks his will". Uncle Philip's *voice*, deep and *solemn as the notes of an organ*, moved dark and sonorous against the moaning of the fiddle' (MT, 166; emphasis added). In direct opposition to this authoritative discourse that is related to order comes Melanie's voice:

She *screamed*, hardly realising she was *screaming*. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her *screaming* face. The obscene swan had mounted her. She *screamed* again. There were feathers in her mouth. She heard the curtains swish amid a patter of applause and thought it was the sound of the sea (MT, 166-7; emphasis added).

Uncle Philip, who 'was resenting her because she was not a puppet,' (MT, 144) is totally unsatisfied with Melanie's performance: 'You overacted [...] You were melodramatic. Puppets don't overact. You *spoiled the poetry*' (MT, 167; emphasis added). Melanie refuses to be an obedient puppet and expresses her feelings freely. To raise awareness of the contradictory relation between rhetoric and reality, Carter chooses a 'good screamer' as her female heroine.⁷¹ When viewed in the light of Cixous's ideas, the subversive potential of Carter's use of voice as an alternative female language cannot be missed. Melanie's voice has the power to disrupt the masculine oppressive discourse, as Cixous puts it: '*Voice-cry*. Agony – the spoken

⁷¹ Olga Kenyon, 'Interview with Angela Carter', in *The Writer's Imagination: Interviews with Major International Women Novelists* (Bradford: University of Bradford, 1992), p. 32.

‘word’ exploded, blown to bits by suffering and anger, demolishing discourse: this is how she had always been heard before, ever since the time when masculine society began to push her offstage, expelling her, plundering her. Ever since Medea, ever since Electra’.⁷² Melanie’s screaming emphasizes the lack of a female language through which she can articulate her feelings and desires. It is, at the same time, an act of rebellion for it breaks the silence of the female in a typical scene of male sexual oppression. This oppression covered up with the elevated language of myth.

In a similar way, in *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers’s use of ‘coarse language’ is opposed to the grand mythical sort of language used to describe her.⁷³ When read in light of Cixous’s ideas, Fevvers’s use of language is equally subversive. The novel negotiates the role played by male language in the formation of false images of women, and the possibility of undermining these images by using a female language to reflect women’s everyday experience and release them from mythical representations. In a representative example of the kind of grand male language that is used to estrange women from their real experience, we are told that ‘[e]verywhere Fevvers went, rivers parted for her, wars were threatened, suns eclipsed, showers of frogs and footwear were reported in the press and the King Portugal gave her a skipping rope of egg-shaped pearls, which she banked’ (NC, 11). However, Fevvers uses a different, female language which asserts the corporeality of her body, breaking taboos enforced by male language with no embarrassment. She tells Walser, for instance, that ‘until the time came when my, pardon me, bleeding started up along with the beginnings of great goings on in, as you might put it, the bosom

⁷² Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays’, in *The Feminist Reader: Essays on Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 101-16 (p. 112). Emphasis in original.

⁷³ Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 40. All subsequent page references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as NC after quotations in the text.

department' (NC, 23). Moreover, Fevvers's behaviour is often depicted in a humanizing manner. In direct subversion of the myth of the winged angel, she eats gluttonously and spills food on herself. On one occasion she 'shifted from one buttock to the other and – "better out than in, sir" (addressing Walser) – let a ripping fart ring round the room' (NC, 11). Fevvers's behaviour and her use of language undermine the mythic images within which she is imprisoned.

In addition, Carter's use of the loss and regaining of voice as an emblem of losing and gaining power in her novels accords with Cixous's assertion: 'Voice leaves. Voice loses. She leaves. She loses'.⁷⁴ Carter employs the lack of voice as a symbol of oppression and lack of agency, and regaining voice as a sign of liberation. This is true of her depiction of Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop*, and of the Princess and the black male servant in *Nights at the Circus*. Significantly, when The Princess is liberated by her love for Mignon, she starts to speak for the first time. Moreover, the language of the liberated Princess is as coarse as that of Fevvers. To Fevvers's own astonishment, 'I'd never heard the Princess say so much as "good morning", before, so it came as a shock, the real, rough French of Marseilles and, as one might have expected, a low voice, like a growl. "Fuck and shit", she said. "That piano needs a screwdriver"' (NC, 248). A further point of resemblance between Carter's and Cixous's subversive use of voice, lies in representing the singing voice as potentially liberating: 'Within each woman the first, nameless love is singing', writes Cixous.⁷⁵ In Carter's novels, Mignon's freedom is achieved through love and expressed through singing:

⁷⁴ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 94.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 111.

Mignon's song is not a sad song, not poignant, not a plea. There is a grandeur about her questioning. She does not ask you if you know that land of which she sings because she herself is uncertain it exists – she knows, oh! How well she knows it lies somewhere, elsewhere, beyond the absence of flowers. She states the existence of that land and all she wants to know is, whether you know it, too (*NC*, 249).

Her singing is liberatory in the sense that it asserts the possibility of change without prescribing particular changes. Thus, in absence of an alternative female language, the different forms of voice, suggested by Cixous and dramatized by Carter, can be used to liberate women from the confines of a dominating male language.

Mimicry: Aunt Margaret as a Masked Medusa

In one of the very few detailed discussions of this novel, Jean Wyatt reads Uncle Philip's play 'Leda and the Swan' as a 'parodic enactment of the violence implicit in father-daughter relations'; she reads the whole scene as female initiation process which turns Melanie into a passive object of desire.⁷⁶ Thus, she acknowledges no effective act of resistance on Melanie's part. Wyatt claims that *The Magic Toyshop* 'explores how woman as castrated, silenced object supports the ideal of masculinity as mastery, self-sufficiency, control'.⁷⁷ In her reading of female characters in the novel, Wyatt fails to apprehend Carter's strategies of resisting oppression by offering a liberating alternative female language through the character of Melanie, and asserting an active type of female sexuality through the character of Aunt Margaret, as I will discuss in detail in the coming section. I agree with Wyatt that the 'silent, passive and compliant Margaret appears to be the perfect "castrated

⁷⁶ Jean Wyatt, 'The Violence of Gendering: Castration Images in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and "Peter and the Wolf"', in *Angela Carter*, ed. by Alison Easton (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 58-83 (p. 68).

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 73.

woman”’.⁷⁸ However, I argue that Aunt Margaret puts on the mask of passive ‘femininity with a vengeance’, and she proves ‘to have the power of taking it off’, by the end of the novel.⁷⁹ Carter’s representation of the character of Aunt Margaret as a reflection of the male-inscribed image of the castrated female is a strategic one. Carter contends that ‘female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men’s attitude towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transfer women from human being into wounded creatures who were born to bleed’.⁸⁰ Carter seems to criticize the reliance on Freudian psychoanalytic discourse that articulates the female’s inferiority and subordinates her to the superior male master. Therefore, it is in defiance of the suppressive structure of the patriarchal system and its marginalizing discourse that the novel, in its representation of the feminine, follows the idea of ‘mimicry’ suggested by Luce Irigaray. In one of her interviews, Irigaray affirmed that ‘destroying the discursive mechanism’ of a male-dominated system is a very difficult task for women. However,

[t]here is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one ‘path’, the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 76.

⁷⁹ Mary Russo, ‘Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory’, in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Katie Conboy *et al.* (New York: Columbia University, 1997), pp. 318-86 (p. 331).

⁸⁰ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 23.

⁸¹ Luce Irigaray, ‘The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine’, in *The Irigaray Reader: Luce Irigaray*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 118-32 (p. 124). Emphasis added. Mary Russo notes that ‘[w]hat is called mimesis here is elsewhere, with various modifications, called masquerade. (Irigaray herself reserves the latter term to refer negatively to the false position of women experiencing desire only as male desire for them)’, in ‘Female Grotesques’ pp. 329-30. Paulina Palmer indicates a similarity between ‘Irigaray’s theory of mimesis and [Judith] Butler’s concept of gender as performance’, in ‘Gender as Performance in the fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood’, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 24-42. (p. 26). Notions of the carnivalesque, masquerade, and gender performativity are commonly used in reading *Nights at the Circus*.

It is a necessity for women to resist their oppressors and find a place for themselves within the social order, but they should not resort to violent confrontations. Instead, as Irigaray recommends, they should impersonate the social role that is imposed on them as females so that they can uncover its reality.

To clarify the strategy of mimicry and what women can possibly achieve through it, Irigaray goes on to explain that

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to submit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible’, of ‘matter’ – to ‘ideas’, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.⁸²

I read Carter’s characterization of Aunt Margaret in the light of Irigaray’s statement. Aunt Margaret does assume the role of the passive female who appears to be a mere accomplice to her own and Melanie’s victimization. Moreover, she encourages Melanie to act the role of the obedient woman. During one of Uncle Philip’s puppet shows, Aunt Margaret scribbles a secret message on a toffee paper and passes it to Melanie: ‘Look as though you’re enjoying it, for my sake and Finn’s. Melanie, to please her, put on a false, bright smile’ (*MT*, 128). In this scene, Aunt Margaret seems to be giving Melanie a lesson in ‘mimicry’. She encourages her to wear her smile as mask so that she can avoid punishment. Under the cover of her apparent speechlessness, which is an exaggerated dramatization of Uncle Philip’s idea of the ideal obedient woman, Aunt Margaret finds her own way of expressing herself and of supporting Melanie.

⁸² Irigaray, ‘The Power of Discourse’, p. 125.

Aunt Margaret's reception of the children comes in direct contradiction to this hostile environment. Her image radically departs from the traditional image of the evil, ugly old woman who usually competes with the young, beautiful orphaned heroine. Far from being the monstrous stepmother who replaces the dead mother in traditional fairy tales, Aunt Margaret is described by Melanie as 'an angel just dropped from the skies' (*MT*, 50). From the first night, she makes a perfect mother for the orphaned children; she warmly welcomes them to the house and takes good care of little Victoria. Putting her to bed, Aunt Margaret 'brooded over the little child with a naked, maternal expression on her face which Melanie found both embarrassing and touching' (*MT*, 48). She even surprises Melanie when she kisses her goodnight: 'her kiss inhibited, tight-lipped but somehow desperate, making an anguished plea for affection' (*MT*, 49). Through this warm relationship between Aunt Margaret and Melanie the novel seems to suggest a new pattern of the mother-daughter relationship in a male-dominated world where, as Gilbert and Gubar put it, 'female bonding is extraordinarily difficult'. They assert that 'in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other'.⁸³ This absence of the inimical mother-daughter relationship in the novel is symbolized by the absence of the 'mirror' itself from Melanie's new bedroom – the fact which can also be read as a symbol of Melanie's alienation from her self in this transitory stage of her life. The competitive hostile female-female relationship imposed upon women by the beauty myth - which is embodied in the looking glass image - is replaced with a positive harmonious one: 'I do not know how I coped before you came. It is lovely to have another woman in the house', says Aunt Margaret (*MT*, 123). The novel seems to value the role women's

⁸³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, pp. 38-39.

solidarity plays in their liberation. This idea is also emphasized in *Night at the Circus* through Lizzie and Fevvers's relationship, and that of the Princess and Mignon, as I will discuss.

Moreover, the several signs of the powerful character hidden under the disguise of passivity imply that Aunt Margaret is a mimicker who has deliberately assumed the role of the passive, silent female. At the beginning of the novel, we are told that she had willfully succumbed to silence at her wedding day. And at the end of the novel, when she chooses to break her silence and give up the masquerade, she recovers her voice. More importantly, we discover, later in the novel, that Aunt Margaret and her brother Francie have been having an affair behind her husband's back. She is, after all, not the passive obedient wife she pretends to be. Even when we first meet this dumb woman, our attention is immediately drawn to her potential ability of rebellion through the symbolic mythic associations of the images Carter uses to describe her appearance: 'Aunt Margaret. The light shining through her roughly heaped haycock of hair made it blaze so you might have thought you could warm your hands at it' (*MT*, 40). Although she is 'painfully thin', Carter writes, 'her narrow shoulders jutted through the fabric of her sweater like bony wings' (*MT*, 40). These images of the winged creature and the fiery hair are frequently associated with Aunt Margaret throughout the novel. For example, 'Aunt Margaret was bird-like herself [...] A black bird with a red crest and no song to sing' (*MT*, 42), and 'hairpins fell like steel rain' (*MT*, 48) from her 'flaming hair' (*MT*, 50). These avian, perhaps Icarus-like, images are used not only to point out her lack of freedom, but also to emphasize the fact that she has a potential power which one day she is going to unleash and free herself.

The female hair and voice are strongly present in traditional mythology as female wiles that are used to seduce men and lure them to their destruction. The most famous one is the myth of the Sirens – ‘nymphs that were (encountered by Odysseus) often depicted with bird-like bodies’, whose singing voice no man can resist.⁸⁴ We think also of the Medusa who ‘has snakes for hair’ and a ‘gaze so terrifying’ that it has the power to scare the strongest men and turn them to stone.⁸⁵ This relation between Aunt Margaret and the Medusa, and the fact that she ends up throwing off the mask of passivity and embracing her sexuality, as I will show, relates her to Cixous’s powerful laughing Medusa. Thus, Carter first establishes Aunt Margaret’s relation to Medusa through hair imagery, a significant and very recurrent motif in traditional myths and fairy tales. The female’s hair in the novel is used in two different senses, as is the case in myth. Carter reveals two different mythic connotations of the female’s hair: one contributes to the construction of social myths of femininity, and the other asserts female potential. Finn finds Melanie’s loose hair attractive and he combs it for her so that she becomes ‘pretty’; ‘you will be the belle of the ball,’ he says (*MT*, 46). And Melanie, in turn, combs her hair and tosses it loose ‘to please Finn’ (*MT*, 97-125). Aunt Margaret’s hair, however, is not described employing seductive male imagery but with female imagery of power that is reminiscent of the spell-binding hair of the Medusa: ‘Her hair, red snakes struggling to free themselves from the hairpins, was the only vital thing about her’ (*MT*, 273). This connection established between Aunt Margaret and Medusa is significant when we read the last scene in the novel.

By the end of the novel Aunt Margaret knows that something is going to happen and that ‘[n]othing will be the same, now’ (*MT*, 186). This implies that Aunt

⁸⁴ Lenardon and Morford, *A Companion*, p. 279.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 273.

Margaret is planning to take action and to change her life. And to Melanie's surprise, 'she seemed to be examining the possibility of her own tomorrow, where she could come and go as she pleased and wear what clothes she wanted and maybe even part her locked lips and speak . Or sing' (*MT*, 184). Now that she is ready to revolt against the tyranny of her husband 'her hair kept escaping from the pins' (*MT*, 188). Then she decides: 'No. today shall be different'. And she pulled out all the pins again and let the hair fall down 'like a shower of sparks. A firework display' (*MT*, 188-9), celebrating her new transformation. By committing incest, and thus breaking one of the taboos imposed by a tyrant, Aunt Margaret is turning into an active agent. She is now explicitly resisting oppression by breaking one of the most sacred laws within the marital institution. This transformation is emphasized when Aunt Margaret symbolically regains her lost voice and 'with her voice, she had found her strength, a frail but constant courage like spun silk. Stuck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day she was freed' (*MT*, 197). Carter's final delineation of Aunt Margaret, using the same mythic imagery I have already discussed, highlights the fact that she has an important part in the rebellion:

She kissed [Finn's] mouth. Melanie, ever afterwards, remembered the stately formality with which they kissed, like fellow generals saluting each other the night before a great battle where one of them is like to die and, later, it seemed to her that she saw them framed in fire, but she knew she imagined this. Her aunt was *a goddess of fire*; her eyes burned and her hair flickered about her (*MT*, 197; emphasis added).

The kind of language used to describe Aunt Margaret here suggests that she has been hiding behind the mask of passivity a powerful fiery Medusa. Like Cixous's laughing Medusa she is capable of voicing her desire and asserting her sexuality.

Transforming from the dumb passive victim she was to the outspoken active agent she is, she manages to get rid of Uncle Philip and to rescue Victoria.

Envisioning a Different Future: Finn and Melanie's Reunion

Despite her emphasis on male violence, in her characterization of Uncle Philip, Carter, I argue, shares Cixous's belief that men have an important role to play in women's liberation. Carter states that to subvert oppressive power structures the male protagonist has also to 'put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow' (*NC*, 283). 'Men's loss in phallogentrism is different from, but as serious as women's. And it is time to change. To invent the other history', Cixous declares.⁸⁶ As Sarah Gamble notes: Carter 'was [...] a feminist who liked men, and who was therefore, she claimed, "less dismissive of the entire gender than some of my sisters"'.⁸⁷ This is apparent in the role played by Finn in *The Magic Toyshop* and Walser in *Nights at the Circus*, as I will show. Despite Uncle Philip's attempts to control his behaviour, Finn often shows signs of resistance and plays on Uncle Philip's nerves. In an attempt to perpetuate the cycle of violence, Uncle Philip orders Finn to '[g]o up and rehearse a rape with Melanie in her bedroom' (*MT*, 152). But he does not fall for this trap: 'I am not going to do what he wants even if I do fancy you' (*MT*, 152), he tells Melanie. By refusing to adhere to this order, Finn defies Uncle Philip's 'logic of desire, the one that keeps the movement towards the other staged in a patriarchal production, under Man's law'.⁸⁸ The fact that Finn refuses to rape Melanie marks a newly gained awareness of his situation, and Melanie's: 'Suddenly I saw it all, when

⁸⁶ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 83.

⁸⁷ *The Fiction of Angela Carter: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 11.

⁸⁸ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 79.

we were lying there. He's pulled our strings as if we were his puppets, and there I was, all ready to touch you just as he wanted' (*MT*, 152), says Finn. And now he decides to cut the strings that relate them to their controller so that they will be able to start a new kind of relationship on their own.

Finn finally joins Melanie in the active rebellion against the figure of the patriarch when he seeks comfort in her bed. He tells her that he has destroyed Uncle Philip's beloved swan, 'I dismembered it down in the work-room ... I chopped it into small pieces. It was easy' (*MT*, 171). It is made obvious in the novel that the swan symbolizes the phallus: 'as if I was indecently exposing myself, when the swan's neck stuck out', Finn explains, 'but it was a pleasure to destroy the swan' (*MT*, 173), he adds. Wyatt sees in the character of Finn 'a deviation that upsets the power balance of gender: a young man, refusing to aspire to the mastery his gender entitles him to, rejects the phallic legacy – most graphically by chopping off and throwing away a clear and obvious symbol of the phallus.'⁸⁹ Wyatt, moreover, highlights Finn's role as a catalyst of change: Finn 'refuses the masquerade of masculinity' and he 'acknowledges his own castration' thus 'subvert[ing] the power relations of patriarchy'.⁹⁰ Wyatt's reading ignores, as I have discussed before, the role played by Carter's female characters in this subversion of power. I take Wyatt's point a step further to read Finn's transformation as part of Carter's vision of a new-male female relationship. This change in Finn, I argue, is important in terms of his being now more capable of accepting women as equals rather than seeing himself as a saviour, as Wyatt suggests. By refusing to join Uncle Philip, in his 'Empire of the selfsame', Finn becomes one of Cixous 'exception[al]' men 'who have not let themselves be reduced to dummies programmed by pitiless repression of the

⁸⁹ Wyatt, 'The Violence of Gendering', p. 60.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

homosexual element'.⁹¹ Finn's act of rebellion brings him closer to Melanie: 'She felt that somehow their experience ran parallel' (*MT*, 173). They both have gone through a transforming experience, and this opens up the possibility for them to establish a new type of relationship outside the logic of violence and domination presented by Uncle Philip.

The novel ends with Melanie and Finn '[at] night, in the garden, [...] fac[ing] each other in a wild surmise' (*MT*, 200). This controversial ending has provoked many debates among Carter's critics. Sara Mills, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spall and Elaine Millard give a very pessimistic reading of the novel as they claim that '[i]n Carter's vision of this patriarchal nightmare world, it would appear that there is no escape'.⁹² They think that as 'Finn has finally "won" her from his Uncle Philip', Melanie's 'enclosure within patriarchal structure is complete'. This reading wholly ignores Finn's own rejection of the perpetuating of patriarchal power structures. Elaine Jordan believes that '[i]n the end Melanie and Finn escape to confront a future which is open, unwritten, potentially quite different'.⁹³ Sarah Gamble takes a more complex approach when she draws attention to the dangers 'in engaging in this process of deconstruction, for at the other end of change lies ... what?'.⁹⁴ Gamble sees Finn and Melanie in the final scene of the novel as 'Adam and Eve at the beginning of a new world. Yet, strangely bereft in the absence of the patriarch, neither of them know where to go from here'. 'Melanie's fairytale journey', Gamble goes on, 'may have brought her her prince, but what exactly happens in their 'happily ever after' future – the point at which stories end and systems are

⁹¹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, pp. 78, 83-4.

⁹² Sara Mills *et al.*, *Feminist Readings/Feminist Reading* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 135-6.

⁹³ Jordan, 'Enthralment', p.29.

⁹⁴ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p.69.

overthrown?’⁹⁵ Although the novel does promise a different future for Finn and Melanie’s relationship it does not claim that it will be a ‘happily ever after’ one.

The open ending of the novel can be read in the light of Zipes’s statement: ‘the aesthetics of the feminist fairy tale demands an open-ended discourse which calls for the readers to complete the liberating expectations of the narrative in terms of their own experience and their social context’.⁹⁶ Zipes’s words accord with Carter’s own: ‘I try, when I write fiction, to think on my feet – to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions’.⁹⁷ This means that the novel’s open ending is an intended strategy that aims to engage the reader in the process of imagining the future after he/she applies the novel’s propositions to his/her own private conditions. This scene can be read as – stressing the possibility of creating a completely different male-female relationship – that of love between two autonomous equal beings. Now that Uncle Philip’s violent version of male-female relationship is rejected, and that female silence is broken, Melanie and Finn can experience a new kind of relationship free from fear, oppression and violence. Carter’s ending poses the same question Cixous tries to raise in ‘Castration or Decapitation?’: in order to free women and men from the trap of a relationship built on binary oppositions, ‘work still has to be done on the couple on the question, for example, of what a completely different couple relationship would be like, what a love that was more than merely a cover for, a veil of, war would be like’.⁹⁸ The fact that the novel’s ending poses such questions highlights the possibility of change, and the answers to these questions are not inscribed by Cixous, nor by Carter. Similarly,

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.73.

⁹⁶ Zipes, *Don’t Bet on the Prince*, p. xi.

⁹⁷ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 37.

⁹⁸ Cixous, ‘Castration or Decapitation?’, p. 44.

Carter's *Nights at the Circus* ends with its newly transformed hero and heroine united at the beginning of a new era advocating a new male-female relationship liberated from confining social myths of femininity and masculinity.

Demythologizing Myths of Male Heroism

In my reading of *Nights at the Circus*, I argue that Carter and Cixous share common ground in their revisions of myths and fairy tales, and in their vision of new narratives that can subvert the social myths of femininity and masculinity inherent in them, and advocate a new male-female relationship based on equality and acceptance.⁹⁹ Talking about the possible alternative narratives that would subvert traditional myths and envision a better future, Cixous and Clément write:

There have to be ways of relating that are completely different from the tradition ordained by the masculine economy [...] a scene in which a type of exchange would be produced that would be different, a kind of desire that wouldn't be in collusion with the old story of death. This desire would invent Love, it alone would not use the word love to cover up its opposite: one would not land right back in a dialectical destiny, still unsatisfied by the debasement of one by the other. On the contrary, there would have to be a recognition of each other, and this grateful knowledge would come about thanks to the intense and passionate work of knowing. Finally each would take the risk of *other*, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather delighting to increase through the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Two critics who try to apply Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine* to Carter's work are Ruth Robbins and Nicole Ward Jouve. Robbins finds Carter's *Nights at the Circus* an example of 'what such a writing might look like', especially as Carter subverts binary oppositions, such as magic and reality, male and female, and high and low. Ward Jouve seems to adopt a more complicated attitude. She declares that 'Carter does not write "feminine" texts. No "tactility", as Cixous puts it; no voice of the mother, no "innermost touch". No "giving" [...]. Yet to my surprise, as I think more about it, in other ways she does. Cixous also describes a feminine text as "wandering", full of excess, unpredictable, disturbing. This fits the bill'. They, however, do not mention the use of myth and fairy tale in Carter's and Cixous's work. See Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 168-84 (p.179). Nicole Ward Jouve, 'Mother is a Figure of Speech ...', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (1994) (London: Virago, 2001), pp. 136-70 (p. 164).

¹⁰⁰ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 78. Emphasis in original.

The scene described here seems to be the very kind of scene Carter tries to create at the end of both of her novels. I will show how Carter's female and male protagonists undergo a journey of transformation during which their identities are reconstructed – freed from confining social myths – and their knowledge of themselves and each other is bettered. Then, when they have 'hatched out of the shell of unknowing' (*NC*, p.294), the kind of relationship identified by Cixous above becomes possible. Carter rewrites well-known narratives from traditional myths and fairy tales that, for Cixous, 'record phallogentrism and its schema of opposition and concomitant destruction', in order to introduce new subversive narratives of love between equals.¹⁰¹ I will show how Carter introduces the possibility of achieving this kind of new male-female relationship after her male and female protagonists undergo a long journey of transformation. At the beginning of the novel, the journalist Walser's perception of Fevvers is governed by traditional images of femininity, and he describes her in a language that clearly adopts a traditional male perspective. For him, she is 'like an Iowa cornfield' (*NC*, 16) which is a reflection of the traditional image of women as a symbol of fertility. His attraction towards her is expressed in mythic terms when he sees her as a seductive Siren: her hair 'yellow and inexhaustible as sand, thick as cream, sizzling and whispering under brush. Fevvers head went back, her eyes half closed, she sighed with pleasure' (*NC*, 19). This connection between Fevvers and the Siren becomes more explicit when Walser talks about the alluring quality of her voice, using, significantly, an exaggerated, dreaming language:

Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, somber voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her

¹⁰¹ Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p. 55.

voice of a celestial fishwife. [...] Her voice, with its wrapped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping, imperious as a siren's. (NC, 43)

This myth of the Siren's dangerously enchanting voice reflects the male idea of threatening female temptation.

In another example, Walser's fears and anxieties are projected onto Fevvers as he sees the determination of a new woman in her eyes. This projection imbues her with magical powers in his eyes. Faced with Fevvers's great ambitions and her view of the future, he imagines that her 'pupils had grown so fat on darkness that the entire dressing-room and all those within it could have vanished without trace inside those compelling voids. Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialiste* were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world, an infinite polarity of worlds' (NC, 29-30). The fact that this is only the work of his imagination is apparent as he says: 'these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold' (NC, 30). This foreshadows the process of transformation Walser is going to undergo that will change his perception of Fevvers and of himself. At the beginning of the novel, Walser's lack of inner inspection is stressed when we are told that until this point in his life 'his inwardness had been left untouched. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection' (NC, 10). He does not have first-hand knowledge of himself: he is described as 'an *objet trouvé*' (NC, 10). Moreover, at this point in the novel, he seems uninterested in achieving any kind of self-knowledge: '*himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought' (NC, 10; emphasis in original). To get a better knowledge of himself and a different relationship with Fevvers, Walser sets out on a journey of metamorphosis that I will trace in what follows.

Walser's journey of self-discovery starts as soon as he decides to join the circus. Through Walser's journey of transformation, Carter mocks traditional images of the strong, fearless male hero recurrent in many traditional myths and fairy tales. Like a typical fairy tale's hero, or a traditional myth's hero, Walser does not know how to be afraid. When we first meet Walser, he is compared to the boy from the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale 'The Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was': 'If he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave'. Like the hero of this tale, Walser 'did not know how to shiver, Walser did not know *how* to be afraid' (NC, 10; emphasis in original). Talking about the violent type of male heroism presented through the biblical character of Samson, Ruth Robbins mentions that Walser 'tries to live up to that ideal of heroism - for example, in his attempt to rescue Mignon from the tiger'. She rightly points out that '[t]he narrative, however, had little time for this brand of heroism, for the machismo of masculinity, as can be seen in Walser's humiliation after the tiger episode [...], or in the treatment of Samson, the Strong Man, before his development of sensibility'.¹⁰² In this significant scene in the circus, the helpless Mignon is threatened by a fierce tigress, and '[i]nvoluntary as his heroics, Walser let rip a tremendous, wordless war-cry: here comes the Clown to kill the Tiger!'. 'Kill it, how? Strangle it with his bare hands, perhaps?' (NC, 112), the narrator mockingly comments. As opposed to this irrational heroism, the Princess simply turns on a hosepipe to scare the tigress and rescue the victims. Walser's 'comic wound' (NC, 153) has prevented him from practicing his job as a journalist, turning him into a real clown, a 'type of the "wounded warrior" clown' (NC, 145). The fact that Walser himself realizes the foolishness of such an act begins the process of his self-transformation; he is

¹⁰² Ruth Robbins, *Nights at the Circus: a Note* (London: York Press, 2000), p. 97.

‘painfully aware that, by the very “heroicness” of his extravagant gesture, he had “made a fool of himself”’ (NC, 114). Walser starts to discover the falsity of many social myths that define femininity and masculinity, mainly those of female passivity and male heroism.

Another significant scene in Walser’s transformation is the one in which he dances with the tigress. As Sally Robinson notes, ‘[f]or Carter, gender is a relation of power, whereby the weak become “feminine” and the strong become “masculine”. And, because relations of power can change, this construction is always open to deconstruction’.¹⁰³ It is helpful to read this scene in the light of Robinson’s statement. In what follows, I show that the scene of Walser dancing with the tigress reflects Carter’s ability to blur boundaries between the feminine and the masculine. It also shows Walser’s new awareness of the changeability between these two identities: ‘Walser supported by the unforged steel of the tigress’s forepaws, thought: There goes Beauty and the Beast’. Then, ‘he allowed himself to think as the tigers would have done: Here comes the Beast, and Beauty!’ (NC, 164). Walser is associated again with the figure of Sleeping Beauty when the group of escaping women prisoners find him unconscious after the accident and try to wake him: “The old tales diagnose a kiss as the cure for sleeping beauties”, suggest Vera, ‘with some irony’ (NC, 222). The kiss that brings Walser back to life, however, is a maternal kiss: ‘Olga’s maternal heart did not heed the irony. She pressed her lips to his forehead and his eyelids slowly fluttered, slowly opened’ (NC, 222). Walser here is depicted as a child: he calls Olga ‘Mama’ (NC, 222), he then ‘toddle[s] with increasing confidence’, and she gave him ‘milk’ (NC, 223). This symbolic language represents the birth of Walser’s new self. Taking the role of Sleeping Beauty usually

¹⁰³ Sally Robinson, *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 77.

played by passive females marks the birth of a new transformed Walser who is capable of building a different relationship with Fevvers.

This does not mean that this novel is about ‘the domestication of the male’, as Sara Martin claims.¹⁰⁴ Martin seems to give little importance to Walser’s transformation, as she believes that Fevvers’s choice of Walser as her ‘companion [...] oddly recalls the right exercised by countless fairy-tale princes who choose meek, charming princesses as wives. And if we, women, dislike these fairy-tale images of ourselves, why would men praise us for creating the likes of Walser?’¹⁰⁵ I, however, argue that a Cixousian reading of Walser’s character can be much more fruitful. ‘Accepting the other sex as a component makes [men or women] much richer, more various, [and] *stronger*’.¹⁰⁶ Cixous’s statement casts positive light on the significance of Walser’s transformation. These positive changes in Walser’s character are emphasized more than once in the novel: by the end of his journey, ‘Walser acquired an “inner life”, a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own’ (NC, 260-1). This newly gained ability of self-introspection liberates him from ready-made identities designated for men by society. Walser is now capable of creating his own identity: ‘He contemplated, as in a mirror, the self he was so busily reconstructing’ (NC, 293). We are also told that he is not that fearless hero anymore and that his “self” would never be the same again for now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love’ (NC, 292-3). This sort of fear that comes with love does not make any of the lovers weaker. On the contrary, Walser now is no longer threatened by Fevvers’s

¹⁰⁴ Sara Martin, ‘The Power of Monstrous Women: Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 8-2 (1999), 193-210 (p. 198).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁶ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 84. Emphasis added.

difference; he is strong enough to accept her for what she is: ‘He saw, without surprise, she indeed appeared to possess no navel but he was no longer in the mood to draw definite conclusions from this fact’ (NC, 292). Only after this long journey of transformation is Walser able to accept Fevvers’s difference. However, for the new type of male-female relationship advocated by Carter and Cixous to be possible, Fevvers also goes through a similar journey of transformation.

A Winged Puppet: Fevvers’s Entrapment

After exploring images of women in traditional myths and fairy tales Cixous is unable to identify herself with the mythic woman in all her incarnations. She complains that ‘the “dark continent” trick has been pulled on her: she has been kept at a distance from herself’.¹⁰⁷ This has resonance with Fevvers, who

could never have exclaimed: The house I live in is my own, I never copied anyone . . . She has not been able to live in her “own” house, her very body. She can be incarcerated, slowed down appallingly and tricked into apartheid for too long a time – but still only for at time.¹⁰⁸

In this section, I will examine Fevvers’s state of entrapment within her winged body and the different mythic images associated with it. I will argue that, after a decisive moment of disillusionment, Fevvers goes through a transforming journey of self-discovery that liberates her from the confines of social myths of femininity, mainly those of female virginity and passivity. Carter declares that ‘[t]he central character, Fevvers, is created out of many of the images men project onto women such as angel, bird, phoenix, comforter, rescuer, actress, performer . . . or shut in a gilded

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

cage'.¹⁰⁹ I will show that for a large part of the narrative Fevvers remains entrapped within one of these images or another. Unsatisfied with any of them, she, however, suffers from an identity crisis before she is able to overcome the myth of her 'legendary' 'inaccessibility' (NC, 19) by making love to Walser, affirming the corporeality of the female body and associating herself with Cixous's laughing Medusa. Fevvers, the winged heroine of the novel, is introduced in the first part of the novel as a 'Cockney Venus' (NC, 7), as a 'Helen of the High Wire' (NC, 7), a 'Cupid' (NC, 23), a 'Titan' (NC, 28), and as 'Winged Victory'. We are told that she 'never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*' (NC, 7; emphasis in original). This hatching relates Fevvers's story to the myth of Zeus's rape of Leda which is viewed in this novel not as a representation of violent male sexuality but as 'a demonstration of the blinding access of the grace of flesh' (NC, 28). Fevvers sees in a picture that portrays this myth 'what might have been [her] own primal scene, [her] own conception, the heavenly bird in a white majesty of feathers descending with imperious desire upon the half-stunned and yet herself impassioned girl' (NC, 28). Carter tells these traditional myths with a twist; unlike the original Helen, Fevvers 'took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts' (NC, 7). Significantly, unlike Helen of Troy, Fevvers's 'notorious and much-debated wings, [and not her beauty], are the source of her fame' (NC, 8). Equipped with wings that she does not know how to use yet, Fevvers says:

I was seized with a great fear, not only a fear that we might discover the hard way that my wings were as those of the hen, or as the vestigial appendages of the ostrich, that these wings were in themselves a kind of physical deceit, intended for show and not for use, like beauty in some women (NC, 34).

¹⁰⁹ Kenyon, *The Writer's Imagination*, p. 32.

She does not want to be another Helen of Troy whose beauty is the only source of her fame.

This identity of the famous winged showgirl is not fulfilling for Fevvers, and, as Julia Simon notes, 'Fevvers' winged body [can be] both a symbol of the confinement of women in patriarchal representations and a powerful image of liberation and transformation'.¹¹⁰ Although Fevvers is under the illusion that her wings might liberate her from social myths of female beauty, the narrator makes it obvious that she is seen as a mere object of male desire: 'Heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise, this Helen launched a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side' (*NC*, 8). The contrast between Fevvers's on-stage and off-stage presence reveals her hidden dissatisfaction with this role. The artificiality of Fevvers's on-stage character is exposed when compared with her off-stage one. When she is on-stage, Fevvers wears a glamorous mask: her 'face thickly coated with rouge and powder so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, is wreathed in triumphant smiles' (*NC*, 18). Away from the lights of the stage, in the privacy of her room, '[t]he lightbulbs round Fevvers' mirror threw a naked and unkind light upon her face but could flush out no flaw in the classic cast of her features, unless their very size was a fault in itself, the flaw that made her vulgar' (*NC*, 20). Fevvers seems to be much more at ease with her off-stage self: removing her make up after one of her shows 'Fevvers reappeared, flushed, to peer at herself eagerly in the mirror as if pleased and surprised to find herself again so robustly rosy-cheeked and shiny-eyed' (*NC*, 16). Fevvers's satisfaction with this unmasked self becomes obvious when compared with the 'impersonal gratification' with which she views herself with her make-up on (*NC*, 8). Even her wings, in broad

¹¹⁰ Julia Simon, *Writing the Body: Desire, Gender and Power in Selected Novels by Angela Carter* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 154.

daylight, can be no more than the sign of ‘her conspicuous deformity, the twin hills of the growth she had put away for those hours she must spend in daylight or lamplight, out of the spotlight’ (NC, 19). With them, in real everyday life, ‘she was always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye and people stood on chairs to see’ (NC, 19). Thus, Fevvers’s wings, just like peroxide, are only part of her artificial identity as a performer; as an object of desire. Ironically enough, Fevvers’s entrapment within this mythic icon of liberation lasts much longer than other women’s imprisonment in this novel.

This relation between Fevvers and the image of the pure virgin is introduced earlier in the novel as Fevvers is ironically associated with the figure of Virgin Mary from Christian mythology. Describing a poster of Fevvers and her fellow performers, Carter writes: ‘they all seemed sheltered by Fevvers’ outspread wings in the same way that the poor people of the world are protected under the cloak of the Madonna of Misericordia’ (NC, 125). Warner has traced the myth of the Virgin Mary, revealing the dangerous effects of the ideological naturalization of the image of the passive female and the perfect mother. Warner stresses the fact that ‘[t]he twin ideal the Virgin represents is of course unobtainable’ to ordinary women.¹¹¹ This is what the novel seems to suggest through the character of Fevvers, who, obviously, does not fit into this image of the loving, caring mother, nor does she fit into the image of the pure virgin, as we will see by the end of the novel. Until this stage in the novel, Fevvers has been portrayed as an uncaring woman who is characterized by ‘sheer greed’ (NC, 181). The night she was going to meet the Duke, we are told that Fevvers ‘was feeling supernatural. She wanted to *eat* diamonds’ (NC, 182; emphasis in original). The association between Fevvers and the Madonna

¹¹¹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 337.

is obviously ironical as the following statement implies: 'the Madonna of the Arena waggled her bum from the poster' (*NC*, 126). And in another occasion we are told that this 'Misericordia was in a vile temper' (*NC*, 127). Even when Fevvers plays to the image of woman as the loving, protecting mother in her behaviour towards the crying Strong Man, she is depicted to be performing the role with no personal interest: 'The Strong Man took a swallow of tea and then his tears burst forth afresh. Fevvers, with impersonal motherliness, took his curly head in her arms and pillowed it on her bosom' (*NC*, 166). In addition, the novel emphasizes the fact that Fevvers lives in a kind of environment that is totally different from the one in which other performers in the circus live: 'Fevvers, nestling under a Venetian chandelier in the Hotel de l'Europe, has seen nothing of the city in which Walser lodges. She has seen swans of ice with a thick encrustation of caviare between the wings; she has seen cut-glass and diamonds; she has seen all the luxurious, bright, transparent things, that make her blue eyes cross with greed' (*NC*, 104). Thus, Fevvers's character does not fit the image of the all-giving mother, nor that of the protective patron of the needy. Moreover, in her exploration of the figure of the Virgin Mary, Warner asserts that '[t]he virgin is not the innate type archetype of female nature, the dream incarnate; she is the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as a God-given code'.¹¹² This idea is also endorsed in the novel, especially in the final scene when Fevvers laughs at the myth of female virginity and asserts her sexual desire.

Fevvers is also associated with the mythic image of woman as a passive sleeping beauty, Carter attaching her to the character named Sleeping Beauty in the novel. This character is an emblem of female passivity, taking more than her name

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 338.

from the traditional fairy tale's heroine Sleeping Beauty.¹¹³ Like her, 'pretty as a picture' (*NC*, 63), she was 'bright and merry as a grig, until, one morning in her fourteenth year, the very day her menses started, she never wakened' (*NC*, 63). She is displayed asleep in Madame Schreck's museum, for 'proneness was her specialty' (*NC*, 61). Unlike the traditional heroine, however, this Sleeping Beauty wakes up at sunset to eat and fill a bedpan. This emphasis on the bodily functions of Sleeping Beauty does not include her sexuality. Her story is not about a passive female sexual awakening by a male savior any longer, for we are told that '[h]er female flow grew less and less the time she slept, until at last it scarcely stained the rag and then dried up altogether' (*NC*, 64). More importantly, this Sleeping Beauty is not a 'dreamless sleeper' (*NC*, 64). The novel shifts the emphasis from Sleeping Beauty's waiting to be awaked by a prince's kiss to 'this dreamer[']s' own dreams (*NC*, 64). Instead of waking,

she sleeps. And now she wakes each day a little less. [...] it seems as if her dreams grow more urgent and intense, as if the life she leads in the closed world of dreams is now about to possess her utterly, as if her small increasingly reluctant wakings were an interruption of some more vital existence, so she is loath to spend even those few necessary moments of wakefulness with us, wakings strange as her sleepings. Her marvelous fate – a sleep more lifelike than the living, a dream which consumes the world (*NC*, 86).

In this novel, Sleeping Beauty quits her passive waiting and dreams of change: 'We do believe ... her dream will be the coming century', says Fevvers (*NC*, 86). Cixous and Clément write about what could a Sleeping Beauty's dream possibly be: 'What does she want? To sleep, perchance to dream, to be loved in a dream, to be approached, touched, almost come (jouir). But not to come: or else she would wake

¹¹³ I argue that Carter is drawing on Perrault's version of this fairy tale as she edited a collection of his tales.

up. But she came in a dream, once upon a time'.¹¹⁴ When read in the light of this statement, Sleeping Beauty's dream can be seen as a way of escaping male versions of the myth of romantic love to one that would not deny female desire and sexuality. Through the character of Fevvers, who is directly related to Sleeping Beauty, Carter introduces another more liberating version of this myth, as I will show.

The link between Fevvers and the character of Sleeping Beauty is made clear when they share the same place in Madame Schreck's show: 'as for me and the Sleeping Beauty, it was "look, don't touch", since Madame Schreck chose to dispose us in a series of tableaux', Fevvers explains (*NC*, 62). This link is also established through the nature of Sleeping Beauty's dreaming sleep which is similar to the nature of Fevvers's own waiting when she talks about her playing Winged Victory in Ma Nelson's house. 'I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over', she says (*NC*, 39). Fevvers's depiction of herself is reminiscent of Sleeping Beauty's, and like her, she tries to escape entrapment within the myth of passive female beauty. 'Yet, inside this appearance of marble', Fevvers asserts, 'nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! (*NC*, 39). Like Sleeping Beauty, Fevvers rejects the traditional function of women as passive objects of male desire: 'Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited, I waited ... although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever!' (*NC*, 39; emphasis in original). It seems, however, that Fevvers here is still playing the role of the passive object. While Sleeping Beauty finds a way of asserting her desire through dreaming,

¹¹⁴ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 67.

Fevvers not only waits for change but also achieves it after going through a journey of self-knowledge that turns her from a living toy into a powerful woman, as I will show in what follows.

A Moment of Disillusionment

I argue that the scene in which Fevvers visits The Grand Duke's house dramatizes an important moment of disillusionment for Fevvers as she is faced with the possibility of spending the rest of her life playing the role of a helpless toy. The Grand Duke's house, with all its toys and artifices that reflect the nature of the owner, is reminiscent of Uncle Philip's toyshop and Fevvers's realization of her function as a mere toy in this scene also reminds us of Melanie's role within his world. Paulina Palmer is one of the critics who stresses Carter's new mode of writing in *Nights at the Circus*, and she finds it much more liberating for women. She claims that 'The image of the puppet', Carter often uses to depict women's position in society, 'is no longer central to the text'. For Palmer, in *Nights at the Circus* this image is 'replaced by the images of Fevvers's miraculous wings which make her body "the abode of limitless freedom", and the egg from which she claims to have been hatched. These images', Palmer asserts, 'represent ideas of liberation and rebirth'.¹¹⁵ Unlike Palmer, I suggest that Fevvers's winged body does not automatically free her from the role of the toy that is usually attached to Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop*. As I have shown, her wings, just like the egg white printed on her as winged Venus, play a role in entrapping her within different mythic images of femininity, and only give her the illusion of power that she will soon lose, as I show. The Grand Duke is related to the Emperor in the well-known fairy tale of 'The

¹¹⁵ Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin"', p. 180.

Emperor's Nightingale', written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1844: 'The Grand Duke surveyed his clockwork orchestra with a satisfied air. A bored Emperor commissioned them long ago, in China' (NC, 188). Like Andersen's famous Emperor, who makes the mistake of preferring the artificial nightingale to the real, natural one, the Grand Duke declares: 'Of all things, I love best toys – marvelous and unnatural artifacts' (NC, 187). Fevvers thinks that the Grand Duke might have thought that she herself is a toy. This idea is foreshadowed as one of the newspapers spreads a rumour that 'Fevvers is not a woman at all but a cunningly constructed automaton made up of whalebone, India-rubber and springs' (NC, 147). The fact that Fevvers mainly functions as an object in the eye of the beholder is established very early in the novel: 'She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off! LOOK AT ME!' (NC, 15). However, it is only now that Fevvers herself questions the images within which she is entrapped. The novel suggest that the Grand Duke loves the toys because '[t]hey had the authentically priceless glamour of objects intended only for pleasure, the impure allure of the absolutely functionless' (NC, 188). This reflects Lizzie's perception of Fevvers's character which Fevvers recalls in this scene: 'all you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure of the eye, or else you're good for nothing', says Lizzie (NC, 195). This implicitly indicates Fevvers's entrapment within the male gaze as a mere object of male desire.

Fevvers comes face-to-face with this image of herself as an artifice as she sees, in the house of the Grand Duke, 'herself, in ice. And life sized' (NC, 186). This is reminiscent of Uncle Philip's toyshop with its life-size toys and the Grand Duke himself, like Uncle Philip, can be viewed as a Bluebeard figure who wants Fevvers

to ‘add to his collection of toys’ (NC, 239). As this ‘ice-sculpture’ (NC, 186) of her slowly melts, Fevvers becomes more and more conscious of the dangers of her imprisonment and the reality of her exploitation. And only when she decides to give up her role as a toy, ‘the ice-carving of herself collapsed’ (NC, 192). The scene through which Fevvers comes to the decision of breaking free from containment within this image can be read as a variant on the story of the three caskets which is a recurrent motif in fairy tales. Fevvers has to choose between a number of the Grand Duke’s glass cases, and only one of them is the right choice which leads to her survival. In this version of the story, ‘each glass case contained an egg, truly an egg, a wonderful egg that never came from a chicken but out of a jeweler’s shop and he told her she could have whichever egg she chose’ (NC, 189). The contents of the first two eggs, I argue, shows Fevvers’s current image of herself with which she grows more and more dissatisfied. And while that third egg, which she has chosen, represents a possibility of change through a journey of self-knowledge, the fourth shows the future of eternal entrapment she would have faced, had she failed to make the right choice. The first egg contains a ‘golden hen. Inside the hen, a golden egg. [...] [I]nside the egg there is the tiniest of picture-frames, set with minute brilliants. And what should the frame contain but a miniature of the *aerialiste* herself’ (NC, 189). This can be read as a reflection of Fevvers’s current function as the Colonel’s golden hen who lays, as it were, golden eggs in her role as the main star of his circus. And the photo within the frame indicates that Fevvers is defined merely by her job as a performer.

Inside the second case, we see a ‘simple egg of jade’ that contains a tree with fruits and when it opened ‘out flew the smallest of all possible birds, made of red gold. It moved its head from side to side, flapped its wings and opened its beak and

a shrill sweet warbling came out: “Only a bird in a glided cage” (NC, 190). This bird is reminiscent of the Emperor’s artificial nightingale which replaces the natural one, and it plays the song that usually accompanies Fevvers’s performance. Fevvers’s reaction to this scene shows that she is growing more conscious of her own predicament: ‘she found this tree and its bird exceedingly troubling and turned away from it with a sense of imminent and deadly danger’ (NC, 190). Fevvers seems to realize that this bird’s entrapment can be a reflection of her own situation as she faces the threat of turning into one of the Duke’s antiques, for she noticed that ‘there were no windows anywhere’ in that room (NC, 191). Moreover, in the context of the novel’s revising of biblical narratives, one cannot ignore the connection between the tree and its fruits and the myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in which the forbidden fruit plays an essential part in women’s current association with the myth of Original Sin. The novel’s drawing on the symbolism of this myth continues as Fevvers ‘gathered together her scattered wits as well as she could and moved resolutely on to the next case’ (NC, 191). The third case contains a silver egg and inside it Fevvers ‘found, to her incredulous delight, nothing less than a model train – and engine, in black enamel, and one, two, three, four first-class carriages in tortoiseshell and ebony, all coiled round one another like a snake’ (NC, 191). In Christian mythology, the snake, in the Garden of Eden, persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge after which Adam and Eve had the knowledge of good and evil, including sexual knowledge. Thus, the train represents for Fevvers an opportunity to go on a journey of self-discovery. This journey symbolizes hope and the possibility of change: ‘The train, slowly, slowly, began to pull its great length out of the station, dragging with it its *freight of dreams*’ (NC,

192; emphasis added). By choosing the third egg, Fevvers manages to survive the prison of male control. The Duke has chosen for her the fourth egg:

It was white gold and topped with a lovely little swan, a tribute, perhaps, to her putative paternity. And, as she suspected, it contained a cage made out of gold wires with, inside, a little perch of rubies and of sapphires and of diamonds, the good old red, white and blue. The cage was empty. No bird stood on that perch, yet. (NC, 192)

Fevvers refuses to be this caged bird any longer: 'I've learned my lesson' said Fevvers. Her disillusionment sets her on a journey of self-knowledge that will liberate her and assure for her a different future with her transformed lover, as we will see.

From Sleeping Beauty to Medusa

I continue my reading of Fevvers's transformation and the reconstruction of her identity in the light of Cixous's ideas. Fevvers's transformation, I argue, is only complete when she is reunited with the transformed Walser who is able to accept her new identity: 'For Cixous's, writes Susan Sellers, 'it is the other-who-is-loved who [...] challenging our preconceptions and opening us to new visions which have then to be inscribed'.¹¹⁶ 'This opening to/by the other does not, however, preclude self-knowledge', Sellers continues, 'which Cixous identifies as a necessary prerequisite to equality, since without it one would merely repeat the paradigm and become the object of the other's desire. Cixous believes that such a relation subverts the current hegemony, and suggests a new mode of perception and expression founded on mutual respect'.¹¹⁷ In line with this argument, Carter's protagonists embark on a journey of self-knowledge before they acknowledge their liberating love for each

¹¹⁶ Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

other. After ‘she lost her weapon to the Grand Duke in his frozen palace’ (NC, 273), Fevvers’s false ‘feeling of invulnerability’ she had once derived from her wings ‘was gone’ (NC, 273). As a result of this disillusionment, Fevvers faces an identity crisis until she meets Walser again. The start of Fevvers’s journey of self-knowledge, that is going to liberate her from ready-made mythic identities, is first symbolized by the loss of two of the illusionary mythic signs of power and freedom, her sword and her wings: ‘what of my own journey, what of that?’, Fevvers asks herself, ‘Bereft of my sword, as I am; crippled, as I am ... yesterday’s sensation, a worn-out wonder – pull yourself together, girl’ (NC, 274). Despite her bewilderment, Fevvers is now able to separate herself from the mythic images of femininity within which she was previously imprisoned; she is now ‘[n]o Venus, or Helen, or Angel of the Apocalypse, not Izrael or Isfahel ... only a poor freak down on her luck’ (NC, 290). If Peach thinks that here ‘Fevvers begins to lose the control she has won over her own life’, I find this an essential step towards a new perception of herself outside the mould of mythic images.¹¹⁸ Her literally broken wings, which Peach sees as ‘a parody of ageing’, can be read as a symbolic sign left to remind us of the ruined traditional myth of passive femininity, represented as a winged angel, that has confined Fevvers for most of the narrative.¹¹⁹

The importance of the role played by Walser in reconstructing Fevvers’s identity is emphasized even before they meet: ‘When she thought how it was the *presence of the other* that made Mignon so beautiful, little tears pricked the backs of her eyes’ (NC, 274; emphasis in original). At this stage, Fevvers is still at loss in search of an identity, and she still expects to see in Walser’s eyes the same look that will assure her that she is a wonder not a woman: ‘she longed for him to tell her she

¹¹⁸ Peach, *Angela Carter*, p. 157.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

was true. She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes. She longed; she yearned' (*NC*, 273). When they meet, however, 'she saw that he was looking at her as if, horror of horrors, she was perfectly natural – natural, but abominable' (*NC*, 289). To Fevvers's astonishment, Walser now does not see her as a wonder or a freak, but as a normal woman. Her identity crisis reaches a climax as she looks the transformed Walser in the eye: 'she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (*NC*, 290). Fevvers's dilemma here shows how her entrapment within mythic images has prevented her from developing any sense of a distinctive identity of her own. With the help of Walser, for the first time in the novel, Fevvers asks herself the question people have been asking about her identity. This shift of focus in Fevvers's interest from the way she is perceived by others to the way she perceives herself highlights a significant change in her character.

The novel also stresses a change in the way she is perceived by Walser. Fevvers realizes that the change in the reflection of her image in his eyes is not only the result of the change in her own appearance, but also of a change in his own character, and '[f]or a moment, she was anxious to whom this reconstructed Walser might turn out to be' (*NC*, 291). Walser shows that he is now ready to love her for the woman she is, and that he is no longer interested in her being different: 'What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?' (*NC*, 291), he asks her. The liberating potential of this newly achieved love can be well appreciated when we read it from a Cixousian point of view. For Cixous, as Sellers clarifies, 'love is the medium whereby such changes can occur, since love has the capacity to undo the deadly

mechanism of the other's appropriation, freeing both lovers to become autonomous and equal'.¹²⁰ Walser's love empowers Fevvers and makes her transformation complete: 'When she heard that, her heart lifted and sang. She batted her lashes at him, beaming, exuberant, *newly armed*' (NC, 291; emphasis added). And as Cixous puts it, 'a person well loved is a person well armed'.¹²¹ Fevvers does not need to be armed by wings, sword or peroxide, nor does she need to hide behind any other myth of femininity in order to get his acceptance. By the end of the novel, Carter also uses traditional myths and fairy tales with twists to reflect transformations in the characters of its hero and heroine, advocating a new male-female relationship based on love and equality. Aidan Day refers to this idea when he talks about Carter's use of the myth of 'Leda and the Swan' with a twist in the scene of sexual intercourse between Walser and Fevvers. With the winged Fevvers on top: 'The difference at the end of *Nights at the Circus*', Day states, 'is that this scene inverts the classical stereotype of a male figure with wings overwhelming a woman'. Day also realizes that this 'is not just an inversion, as if the feminism of this novel were inscribed within what Carter termed a "female supremacist" mode'. The relationship between Walser and Fevvers is not grounded in the principle of dominator and dominated but on the idea of love between equals'.¹²² This new relationship is based on the abolition of the phallogocentric logic of domination. However, as I have shown, Carter seems to suggest that this new type of male-female relationship is not easily achieved. Fevvers and Walser are able to meet as equals only after the long journey of transformation I have traced.

¹²⁰ Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, pp. 55-6.

¹²¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Lemonade Everything was so Infinite', in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. by Susan Sellers (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 105-17 (p. 111).

¹²² Day, *Angela Carter*, pp. 192-3.

Conclusion

The importance of the theme of love is emphasized by many of Carter's critics. Commenting on Carter's employment of romantic love in the novel, Gamble writes: 'Practised dissimulator that she was, I think Carter momentarily drops her habitual mask of irony here, and is being absolutely serious in maintaining the desirability, as well as the perils, of romantic love'.¹²³ As Gamble points out, Carter's acknowledgment of the dangers of romantic love, represented in the fear of losing the loved one, does not lead her into ignoring its potential. Michael suggests that '[t]he novel rejoins desire and love, which it depicts as divorced from sex in most instances – since it depicts sex as most often nothing more than pornography – and presents love and desire as containing emancipatory potentials'.¹²⁴ It is true that the novel rejects a male's violent version of sex, represented, for example, in Samson and Mignon's sexual relationship. However, the fact that the novel ends with the transformed Walser and Fevvers making love does not support Michael's claim of the novel's separation between love, desire and sex. The liberating potential of both love and sex is evident in Walser's own words when he declares: 'And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a bow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again' (*NC*, 294). Michael refers to another 'liberating strategy' of Carter's; namely Fevvers's 'Carnavalesque laughter'.¹²⁵ Fevvers's laughter with which the novel comes to its open ending is a

¹²³ Gamble, *Writing from the front Line*. p. 165.

¹²⁴ Magali Cornier Michael, 'Fantasy and Carnivalization in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*', in *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 171-208 (p. 185).

¹²⁵ Michael, 'Fantasy and Carnivalization', p. 206. For a discussion of Carnavalesque laughter, see also Magali Cornier Michael 'Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies', *Contemporary Literature*, 35-3 (1994), 492-521 (pp. 517-9). For a reading of the novel in the light of theories of the carnivalesque, spectacle, and gender performativity see Cristina Britzolakis, 'Angela Carter's Fetishism', in *The Infernal Desire of Angela Carter*, pp. 43-58; Abigail Dennis, 'The Spectacle of her Gluttony: The Performance of Female Appetite and the Bakhtinian Grotesque in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*', *Journal of Modern*

representative example of the way Carter's writing lends itself to various, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations. Not only do different critics read Fevvers's laughter differently, but also individual critics often acknowledge the various layers of meaning conveyed by it. 'I read Fevvers' laughter as, in part, the delight of the victor', Day declares, 'the delight Carter herself has retrospectively and that her character has prophetically, in knowing that the war for women's rights, even if not ultimately won, would score notable victories in the twentieth century'.¹²⁶ This reading contradicts Clare Hanson's analysis of the novel in which she highlights 'the discrepancy between Fevvers' extravagant claims for the future and the actual extent of the changes in women's lives over the last hundred years'.¹²⁷ Day suggests the possibility of reading Fevvers's laughter on a personal level: 'Fevvers is ecstatically happy to have found someone to love who loves her in return'.¹²⁸ Similarly, Gamble writes that 'whether this signals anything more than a private happy ending for two individuals is left up to the reader to surmise'.¹²⁹ At the same time, Gamble refers to the subversive nature of this laughter: 'It is Bakhtinian laughter, as well as the laughter of Cixous's subversive Medusa, whose role is 'to blow up the law, to break up the "truth"'.¹³⁰ We hear the echo of this type of revolutionary laughter in the laughter of Byatt's Eugenia and of Warner's Astrid and Leto, as we will see.

Critics like Michael and Palmer, who approach the novel as a dramatization of the carnivalesque, find in Fevvers's laughter the power to undermine. For Michael, 'Fevvers' loud uncontrollable laughter problematizes the meaning of the

Literature, 31-4 (2008), 116-130; Daniel Punday, 'Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story', *The Modern Language Review*, 97-4 (2002), 803-820; Joanne Trevenna, 'Gender as Performance: questioning the "Butlerification" of Angela Carter's fiction', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 11-3 (2002), 267-276.

¹²⁶ Day, *Angela Carter*, p. 194.

¹²⁷ Clare Hanson, "'The Red Dawn Breaking over Clapham": Carter and the Limits of Artifice', in *The Infernal Desire of Angela Carter*, pp. 59-72 (p. 67).

¹²⁸ Day, *Angela Carter*, p. 194.

¹²⁹ Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line*, p. 166.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

novel's ending at the same time as it releases a liberating energy'.¹³¹ Fevvers's 'ambivalent form of laughter' is 'plural and dynamic' as the critics' different interpretations of it show. Moreover, Michael emphasizes the liberating potential of this laughter which 'disrupts the male-centered established order; it is a manifestation of release from the status quo that is directed toward an as yet undelineated feminist version of a new better world'.¹³² Reading the carnivalesque in the novel, Palmer thinks that the 'novel ends aptly on a note of carnivalistic mirth'.¹³³ Moreover, Palmer claims that Fevvers's laughter is not 'merely festive'; it is 'irreverently mocking the existing political order, [and] it is socially and psychically liberating'.¹³⁴ Marina Warner, however, does not see this liberating potential in the novel's ending. On the contrary, she thinks that it is the realization of the impossibility of providing a happy ending that 'pushed Angela Carter towards laughter'.¹³⁵ *Nights at the Circus*, writes Warner, 'erupts laughter, closing with the end of Fevvers' long, sustained joke, her heavenly disguise'.¹³⁶ So instead of undermining social structures, as Palmer suggests, Fevvers's laughter undermines the image of the winged woman itself. Warner draws our attention to the fact that Carter is fully aware of the 'limits of merrymaking burlesque and masquerade'.¹³⁷ In an interview, Carter states that '[t]he carnival has to stop. The whole point about the Feast of Fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped'.¹³⁸ This statement informs Warner's not so optimistic reading of the carnivalesque in the novel. Although Warner's reading is perhaps justifiable, the fact that the union

¹³¹ Michael, 'Fantasy and Carnivalization', p. 206.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹³³ Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin"', p. 201.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (1994) (London: Virago, 2001), pp. 243-256 (p. 252).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

between Carter's hero and heroine only happens after a long journey of metamorphosis, and is based on totally new perceptions of themselves and one another free from all mythical preconceptions of femininity and masculinity, as I have shown, emphasizes the opportunity of establishing a new male-female relationship and stresses the possibility of change.

I share common ground with Gamble when she asserts that it is the realization of the importance of love rather than 'material transactions' that has brought the change in Fevvers's character. Fevvers, states Gamble, 'ends the novel, no longer "Winged Victory" nor the "Cockney Venus", nor under any of the other sobriquets that have been freely attached to her throughout the narrative, but as simply a "happy young woman" whose laughter rings out across the dawn of a new century'.¹³⁹ She goes on to assert that the novel's conclusion is not 'wholly unproblematic', referring to the fact that Fevvers has been tricking Walser to believe that she is a virgin.¹⁴⁰ Gamble believes that

[t]he issue of her wings has functioned as a red herring (so to speak), diverting both Walser's and the readers' attention away from the real secret in a narrative in which the sexual defloration Fevvers must have experienced somewhere along the way has simply been edited out.¹⁴¹

I, however, suggest that Fevvers's virginity is no longer an issue of importance for Walser, particularly after the journey of transformation he has undergone. In the last scene in the novel, Walser not only witnesses the destruction of another social myth traditionally attached to women, that of the passive virgin, but he is now strong enough to accept it. Fevvers would not have laughed rejoicing in her freedom without the help of her transformed partner, for now she no longer needs to hide her

¹³⁹ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 172.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

reality as an active sexual subject and not an angelic virgin. Like Cixous's Medusa, Fevvers laughs at the joke of the female intacta that alienates a woman from her body and 'half the world break[s] out laughing' with her: 'The spiraling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing' (NC, 295).¹⁴² This laughter symbolizes Fevvers's liberation as she embraces her body and asserts female power after breaking free from traditional mythic images of femininity as passivity. Fevvers seems to answer Cixous's call for women to embrace the Medusa not as a mother goddess to replace God the Father, for this idea is rejected by Carter, but as a powerful female figure that can open up female potentiality and possibilities of change by embracing the oppressed female body and affirming female active sexuality.¹⁴³ Anna Kérchy identifies Cixous's 'The Laugh of Medusa' as a 'major intertext of Fevvers' communal laughter'. She asserts that 'Fevvers re-embodies the Cixousian "new woman (re)writing her endless body without end" in an innovative, insurgent corporeal-textual space resisting discursive conventions'.¹⁴⁴ She also highlights the subverting potential latent in this type of laughter: 'The Cixousian writing tactic, like carnival, like [*Nights at the Circus*] celebrates ruptures, transformations, material upheavals, destabilizing symbolic (social, representations, institutional) order from within, "break[ing] up the 'truth' with laughter".¹⁴⁵ Kérchy's discussion here is very similar to that of Gamble. I have shown that this sort of subverting potential, as both Cixous's and Carter's writings demonstrate, can

¹⁴² Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 69.

¹⁴³ See Gamble, *A Literary Life*, pp. 146-8 for a discussion of Carter's rejection of the idea of returning to the Mother Goddess.

¹⁴⁴ Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), p. 192.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

only be achieved after a long transforming journey of discovery of oneself and one another. Moreover, while my reading of the novel supports both Kérchy's and Gamble's Cixousian reading of Fevvers's laughter, I have shown that Cixous's work can shed light on Carter's whole project of revising myths and fairy tales and not only Fevvers's laughter. I also expand the Cixousian approach to read Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus* as part of this project, highlighting the similarities between these two novels.

As we have seen, Carter and Cixous share common ground in their revisions of myths and fairy tales and in their vision of new narratives that can subvert the social myths of femininity and masculinity inherent in them and advocate a new male-female relationship based on equality and acceptance. Talking about the possible alternative narratives that would subvert traditional myths and envision a better future, Cixous and Clément write:

Let us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is to say, a transformation of each one's relationship to his or her body (and to the other body an approximation to the vast, material, organic, sensuous universe that we are. This cannot be accomplished, of course, without political transformations that are equally radical. (Imagine!) Then 'femininity' and 'masculinity' would inscribe quite differently their effects of difference, their economy, their relationship to expenditure, to lack, to the gift. What today appears to be 'feminine' or 'masculine' would no longer amount to the same thing. No longer would the common logic of difference be organized with the opposition that remains dominant. Difference would be a bunch of new differences.¹⁴⁶

Carter's protagonists succeed in achieving this sort of transformation by the end of both *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. Like Cixous, Carter uses the power of imagination to rewrite myths of femininity and masculinity. As I have shown, Carter's female and male protagonists undergo a journey of transformation

¹⁴⁶ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 83.

during which their identities are reconstructed – freed from confining social myths – their knowledge of themselves and each other is bettered. Cixous's ideas cast light on the new Finn and the 'reconstructed Walser' (NC,291) as new male characters strong enough to accept Carter's rewriting of the myth of romantic love and her exchanging of the figure of the passive Sleeping Beauty with that of the powerful laughing Medusa. Drawing on Cixous's and Irigaray's ideas, I have shown that Carter uses such powerful mythic female figures not only to comment on her female characters' entrapment within myths of female passivity, but also to reveal the rebellious side that lies within even the most submissive of them, like Aunt Margaret.

The existence of a utopian element in the writings of Carter and Cixous is undeniable, but it is surely a positive subversive presence. The utopian in their work is rooted in their exploration of myths and fairy tales, and its subversive potential is derived from their innovative rewritings of these stories. Carter herself urges us to understand the interrelatedness between the fantastic and the real. She is interested in myth precisely because she 'believe[s] that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business', she asserts.¹⁴⁷ Lucie Armitt discusses the utopian in Carter's work, drawing attention to the fact that '[d]uring the 1970s and 80s, a noticeable increase in the publication of feminist utopias accompanied the more general expansion in the availability of women's writing'.¹⁴⁸ Armitt, however, differentiates between what she calls a 'conventional utopia' in which 'we are confronted by a closed text and reduced parameters' and between 'narratives that

¹⁴⁷ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 38.

¹⁴⁸ Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), p.15.

employ utopia as a destabilizing series unknown and unknowable beyond'.¹⁴⁹ For Armit, the utopian in Carter's work belongs to the second category. She places Carter's *Night at the Circus* among 'such texts [that] will never be guilty of putting words in our mouths; on the contrary, they leave us to do that to them'.¹⁵⁰ This idea is echoed in Carter's assertion that '[o]ne of the functions of fiction is to try to present a set of ideas in fictional prose, but at the same time, fiction should be open-ended; you bring your own history to it and read it on your own terms'.¹⁵¹ Elaine Jordan also places Carter's work in its historical context when she says that '[e]xcitement about "demythologizing" was historically specific, a thing of the 70s. It operated like a myth itself, having the power to activate; it's not dead yet, I hope'.¹⁵² As I will show in the coming two chapters, on Byatt and Warner, fortunately, we have not seen the end of this interest in demythologizing yet. Influenced by Carter, both Byatt and Warner use her strategy of deploying rewritings of traditional myths and fairy tales in order to demythologize different social myths they help to perpetuate.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 16.

¹⁵¹ Gamble, *The Fiction of Angela Carter*, p. 11.

¹⁵² Jordan, 'Enthralment', p. 24.

CHAPTER TWO

A.S. BYATT: THE FEMALE ARTIST BETWEEN THE GLASS COFFIN AND THE ABYSS

I can't say how important it was to me when Angela Carter said 'I grew up on fairy stories - they're much more important to me than realist narratives'. I hadn't had the nerve to think that until she said it, and I owe her a great deal. ~A. S. Byatt¹

Unlike Carter, who is known as a writer of fantasy and declares herself a feminist writer, Byatt is often referred to as a realist, and her attitude towards feminism is often questioned by critics.² I, however, argue that Byatt and Carter not only share a passion for classical myths and fairy tales, but they also use them in similar ways in their novels. Byatt's inclination to use the realist method of writing is obvious, as she gives her characters detailed descriptions, places them in specific historical contexts, and moves them within plausible plots. She, however, often talks about her passion for myths and fairy tale and the way it has affected her writing: 'One passion that runs right across Europe is for primitive narrative forms like classical myths and fairy tales, of which I feel myself to be a part'.³ She believes that while realism is related to 'explanations and orderings', fairy tales are related to 'dreams, which are maybe most people's first experience of *unreal* narrative, and to

¹ Sam Leith, 'Interview: A. S. Byatt', *The Guardian*, (April 25 2009) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/apr/25/as-byatt-interview>> [Accessed October 17 2009].

² See Maroula Joannou, *Contemporary Women's Writing from The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University, 2000), p. 88, for a discussion of Carter and Byatt's different attitudes towards feminism and feminist literary criticism.

³ Christien Franken, *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. xiv.

myths'.⁴ She maintains that great novels 'always draw on both ways of telling, both ways of seeing' the realist and the imaginative. She finds realism 'agnostic and skeptical, human and reasonable', that is why she 'felt it was what I *ought* to do'.⁵ However, at the same time, she stresses the important role played by myth and fairy tale in her life as a writer: 'My impulse to write came, and I know it, from years of reading myths and fairytales under the bedclothes, from the delights and freedoms and terrors of worlds and creatures that never existed'.⁶ Thus it is the world of myth and fairy tale that creates in her the urge to write.

Byatt's enthusiastic attitude towards myth and fairy tale is very encouraging for an attempt to study the way she uses both of them in her novels. Elizabeth Wanning Harris says: 'A. S. Byatt's fiction is shot through with allusions to well-known fairy tales. Hardly a chapter goes by without a prick on the finger, an impenetrable hedge, or an enchanted tower. When her characters aren't meditating on the significance of fairy tales in their lives, her narrators are commenting on it'.⁷ Harris emphasizes Byatt's interest in fairy tales as a form of writing and studies her use of them as a structural element in her novels. Similarly, Jessica Tiffin, who looks at fairy tales as a metafictional element in Byatt's novels, argues that Byatt's 'interest in fairy-tale and folk forms is [...] both subsidiary to and emblematic of her far larger interest in form, writing, and narrative tradition as a whole'.⁸ Other critics have mentioned Byatt's use of fairy tales as intertexts within the narrative of her

⁴ Quoted in Franken, *A. S. Byatt*, p. xiv. Emphasis in original.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Elizabeth Wanning Harris, "'Ancient Forms': Myth, Fairy Tale, and Narrative in A. S. Byatt's Fiction", in Benson, *Contemporary Fiction*, pp. 74-97 (p.74).

⁸ Jessica Tiffin, 'Ice, Glass, Snow: Fairy Tale as Art and Metafiction in the Writing of A. S. Byatt', *Marvels & Tales*, 20-1 (2006), 47-66 (p.47).

novels as a sign of the postmodern in her writing.⁹ Byatt's interest in fairy tales as a genre obviously goes beyond its being a form of writing: 'The literary fairy tale is a wonderful, versatile hybrid form, which draws on primitive apprehensions and narrative motifs, and then uses them to think consciously about human beings and the world'.¹⁰ Lisa M. Fiander is one of the few to give full attention to fairy tales in Byatt's writings. She, however, disregards any feminist implication in these writers' employment of fairy tales. She chooses instead to concentrate on the journeys that their isolated protagonists take towards community, and the ways in which fairy tales are used by them to depict these journeys. She also describes how they borrow from fairy tales to establish their arguments about morality. In a generalizing statement about feminism in their work, she says:

Although the fiction of Murdoch, Drabble and Byatt makes it evident that they are very much interested in the complexities of women's lives in the modern world, and although they handle with particular sensitivity the trouble that female characters can get into by defining themselves as wives and mothers, all three writers have distanced themselves from feminism in interviews. Moreover, while they seem to take fairy tales seriously as offering ways of thinking about adult experiences, their fiction does not pose clear challenges to these narratives, which have alienated many female scholars with their apparent prescriptions for appropriate female behaviour.¹¹

This view fails to capture the implicit feminist concerns that inform Byatt's use of myth and fairy tales in her novels, and the challenging attitude she adapts towards their traditional narratives.

In my study of the use of myth and fairy tale in Byatt's novel and novella, I approach the novels from a feminist perspective that might be challenging, but is

⁹ See, for example, Regina Rudaitytė, '(De)construction of the Postmodern in A. S. Byatt's Novel *Possession*', *Literatūra*, 49-5 (2007), 116-122. See also Louisa Hadley, *The Fiction of A. S. Byatt* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁰ Cited in Lisa M. Fiander, *Fairy Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble and A. S. Byatt* (New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p. xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

definitely rewarding. I will show that, like Carter and Warner, Byatt, in *Possession* and *Morpho Eugenia*, rewrites traditional myths and fairy tales in order to demythologize different social myths and liberate women, and men, from their entrapment within such myths. Like Carter, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Byatt seems to adopt a double attitude in her rewriting of traditional myths and fairy tales: the first, a celebration of powerful mythic female figures advocating female assertive sexuality and creative ability; the second, a revisionist attitude that aims at revealing negative social myths inherent in traditional mythic and fairy-tale narratives, offering alternative possibilities. I will read Byatt's liberating revisions of traditional myths and fairy tales that subvert hierarchal power structures and suggest new male-female relationships in the light of the ideas of Hélène Cixous and Mary Daly. One particular aspect of Byatt's novels that I am going to highlight, and that reflects this two-fold use of myths and fairy tales, is her depiction of the female artist: 'All my books are about the woman artist – in that sense, they're terribly feminist books – and they're about what language is', says Byatt in one of her interviews.¹² Studying the representations of the woman artist in Byatt's novels is one aspect of my study of her use of myth and fairy tale. My exploration of her interest in language and naming is another. Images of the female artist in Byatt's novels draw attention to both the limitations that can stifle a woman artist's talent and the possibilities that can be widely opened in front of her once she is able to take control over her own life. These ideas are often presented in Byatt's novels mainly through the manipulation of mythic or fairy tale narratives, images and motifs. Christabel and Maud in *Possession*, and Eugenia and Matty in *Morpho Eugenia* are

¹² Cited in Jane Campbell, *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), p. 1.

among the major characters through which Byatt's novels investigate the obstacles that face the woman artist, and the possibility of overcoming them.

Rejecting the Hermaphroditic Aspect of the Melusine Myth

One main idea of Cixous's that is particularly significant to my reading of Byatt's novel and novella is 'Bisexuality'. In one of her interviews, Byatt declares: 'I admire some of Cixous's ideas, about multiple heterogeneous "difference", and share her belief in bisexuality'.¹³ In what follows I will introduce Cixous's idea of bisexuality, and how Byatt adapts it in the novel in her depiction of Maud and Roland's relationship. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous and Clément distinguish between two types of bisexuality, or 'two opposite ways of imagining the possibility of and practice of bisexuality'.¹⁴ The first type of bisexuality, of which Cixous does not seem to approve, is '[b]isexuality as a fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference insofar as this is perceived as the mark of a mythical separation – the trace. Therefore, of a dangerous and painful ability to be cut'.¹⁵ Cixous seems to reject this type of bisexuality usually represented in classic mythology by the mythic bisexual figure Hermaphrodite. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hermaphrodite comes into being as a result of the union between Salmacis (female) and Hermaphroditus (male): 'For their two bodies were joined together as they entwined, and in appearance they were made one, [...] they were no longer two but a single form that could not be called girl or boy and

¹³ Olga Kenyon, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', in *The Writer's Imagination: Interviews with Major International Women Novelists* (Bradford: University of Bradford, 1992), pp. 9-21 (p. 18).

¹⁴ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 84.

¹⁵ Ibid.

appeared at the same time neither one, but both'.¹⁶ For Cixous, Ovid's Hermaphrodite is 'less bisexual than asexual, not made up of two genders but of two halves. Hence, a fantasy of unity. Two within one, and not even two wholes'.¹⁷ Similarly, Byatt's Melusine is often read as a bisexual figure: 'Melusine's snake-tail [that can symbolize the phallus] also suggests her self-sufficient sexuality'.¹⁸ The novel, I argue, does not advocate this type of female bisexuality as female self-sufficient sexuality. It, rather, favours Cixous's second type of bisexuality that is not built on excluding the other.

Moreover, in Ovid's version of the myth of Hermaphrodite, this union between male and female is seen in a very negative light, especially in relation to the male. While the female disappears in this type of union, the story concludes as follows:

And so, when *he* saw that the limpid waters into which he had gone as a man had made him half a man and in them his limbs had become enfeebled, Hermaphroditus stretched out his hands and prayed in a *voice that was no longer masculine*: 'Father and mother, grant this gift to your son who bears both your names. Let whatever man who enters this pool come out *half a man* and let him *suddenly become soft* when touched by its waves'. Both parents were moved and granted the wish of their child, who was now of a *double nature*, and they tainted the waters with this *foul power*.¹⁹

In this account, only the male's point of view is emphasized. Although it is stressed at the beginning of this myth that it is the female who lures, and then forces, Hermaphroditus into this union, Salmacis' voice is muted after the union. Moreover, it is the lack of masculinity rather than the gaining of a new feminine side that is highlighted. The feminine side presents itself in negative attributes that are

¹⁶ Mark P.O. Morford, and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 272.

¹⁷ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 84.

¹⁸ Gilbert M. E. Alban, *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's Possession and in Mythology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 20.

¹⁹ Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, p. 272. Emphasis added.

traditionally associated with women such as softness and passivity as opposed to strength, and activity. Thus, the existence of this double nature is seen as a foul thing to happen. Contrary to this, Cixous and Byatt seem to advocate a new type of bisexuality in their rewriting of this myth of destructive bisexuality.

Explaining the second type of bisexuality, Cixous writes: 'To this bisexuality that melts together and effaces, wishing to avert castration, I suppose the *other bisexuality*, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogentric Perfuming Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe'.²⁰ In direct opposition to the kind of threatening bisexuality introduced by Ovid in the myth of Hermaphrodite, Cixous sees bisexuality as

the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body.²¹

As Diane Griffin Crowder puts it, 'this process takes place between the members of a couple rather than within the individual'.²² Cixous, however, does not deny the difficulty of achieving this sort of bisexuality:

This peopling [of one self by the other] gives neither rest nor security, always disturbs the relationship to 'reality', produces an uncertainty that gets in the way of the subject's socialization. It is distressing, it wears you out; and for men this permeability, this nonexclusion is a threat, something intolerable.²³

²⁰ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, pp. 84-5.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 85.

²² Diane Griffin Crowder, 'Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing', *Contemporary Literature*, 24-2 (1983), 117-144 (p.137).

²³ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 86.

This idea is reflected in Byatt's novel on more than one occasion, including the following example when Maud is disturbed by Roland's presence: 'If he went out of the room it would be grey and empty. If he did *not* go out of it, how could she concentrate?', asks Maud.²⁴ The difficulty Maud faces in accepting the other goes on till the end of the novel when she overcomes her fear of bisexuality.

Cixous's idea of bisexuality can shed light on one layer of meaning behind the novel's title. Cixous links the idea of bisexuality to the idea of possession when she says: 'In the past, when carried to a rather spectacular degree, it was called "possession". Being possessed is not desirable for a masculine Imaginary, which would interpret it as passivity – a dangerous feminine position'.²⁵ This danger is clearly reflected in Ovid's *Hermaphrodite*, as I have suggested. Byatt's novel, in accordance with Cixous's ideas, presents a new notion of possession in which the female – and male – artist/writer allows herself to be possessed without abasing herself or losing her own independent identity, as I will show. Byatt's novel, I argue, dramatizes the two types of bisexualities introduced by Cixous above to reject the first and endorse the second. At the beginning of the novel, Maud is associated with the figure of Melusine in her isolation and rejection of the other as a result of her relationship with Fergus. In the light of Cixous's argument about bisexuality, Fergus can be seen as a victim of what Cixous calls 'phallocratic ideology'.²⁶ Maud's rejection of this type of masculinity is manifested in her cold attitude towards men which continues until she meets Roland and sees in him a different, much more agreeable type of man. Gilbert M. E. Alban has identified this hermaphroditic aspect of Melusine but fails to think that, through Melusine, Byatt is investigating

²⁴ A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 430. Emphasis in original. All subsequent page references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *P* after quotations in the text.

²⁵ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 86.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 85.

the ideas of androgyny.²⁷ Linking Byatt's presentation of Melusine in *Possession* to her use of metamorphosis in *Angels and Insects*, Alban writes: '[Byatt] is also fascinated by the theme of metamorphosis which recurs in Melusine's story, and returns to the metaphor of the snake, caterpillar, or worm which takes wing or becomes a butterfly, in *Angels and Insects*'.²⁸ Melusine's changing, hybrid form is one important source of interest for Byatt. She sees in it 'an image of self-sufficient sexuality, both sexes joined in one', Alban asserts.²⁹ 'This self-sufficient, parthenogenetic sexuality suggests the androgynous view of the snake woman as transcending and breaking free of the narrowly female', he adds.³⁰ Alban's reading of the myth of Melusine links it to the first type of bisexuality rejected by Cixous. The novel, however, as I will discuss in detail later on in this chapter, seems also to reject this type of interpretation. This can be seen through the character of Christabel, whose entrapment within this myth, unlike Maud, prevents her from achieving the liberating type of bisexuality suggested by Cixous.

Melusine as an Emblem of Self-Sufficiency

The pastiche of Victorian poetry in Byatt's novel complicates her depiction of Christabel as a female artist in interesting ways. Many critics refer to points of resemblance between the character of Christabel and a number of real Victorian women poets. Catherine Burgass writes: 'Christabel is modelled on Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti, both "spinster" poets who lived secluded lives and fell in love with married men'.³¹ She goes on to say that 'Rossetti is associated with the

²⁷ Franken, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 98.

²⁸ Alban, *Melusine the Serpent Goddess*, p. 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Catherine Burgass, *A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Reader's Guide*. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), p. 52. Kathleen Coyne Kelly thinks that

Pre-Raphaelite poets, who favoured mystical symbols and subjects from medieval myth'.³² It is also worth noting that Rossetti, like Christabel has used fairy tales in her poetry. One famous poem of hers that has aroused an on-going debate is 'The Goblin market' that has been read as a fairy story that celebrates woman-to-woman bonds.³³ The myth of Melusine remains the main framework within which the development of the character of Christabel can be understood.

A study of the use of the myth of Melusine in *Possession* not only reflects the double nature of the myth itself, but also Byatt's double attitude towards myths. This idea is manifested in a reviving of powerful mythic female figures and a celebration of female sexuality, while at the same time revealing a type of female entrapment within a myth of self-sufficiency. Christien Franken, Gilbert M. E. Alban, and Nancy Chinn claim that Byatt was first introduced to the myth of Melusine through a study of her by Luce Irigaray.³⁴ Chinn quotes from Byatt's lecture 'The Reader as Writer, the Writer as Reader: The Writing of *Possession*' in which she talks about how she decides to use the myth of Melusine:

I heard the feminist critic, Luce Irigaray, give a paper on the Fairy Melusine, half snake, half woman, as one of the few mythic versions of female power not maiden or mother, and thought to myself, there should have been a Victorian epic on that subject by a woman, wrote a modern feminist critique of such an epic's imagery, sexually overcharged to the nth degree, and then

'Christabel LaMotte is a composite of Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with a dash of George Eliot and the Brontës thrown in', in Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *A. S. Byatt*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 80. Christen Franken thinks that 'Christabel LaMotte, whom Byatt has created somewhat in the image of Emily Dickinson or Christina Rossetti, in Franken, *A. S. Byatt*, p. 15. See also Campbell, *A. S. Byatt*, pp. 109-111.

³² Burgass, *A. S. Byatt's Possession*.

³³ Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, ed. by Candace Ward. (N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1994), pp. 1-15. For different readings of this poem see: Harold Bloom, ed., *Christina Rossetti* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), pp. 14-72.

³⁴ Franken, *A. S. Byatt*, p. 92; Alban, *Melusine the Serpent Goddess*, p. 16, and Nancy Chinn, "I am my Own Riddle": A. S. Byatt's Christabel LaMotte: Emily Dickinson and Melusina', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 37-2 (2001), 179-204 (p. 193).

wrote the corresponding section of the epic, which both upheld and exceeded the interpretation.³⁵

Byatt, then, like Carter and Warner, is interested in reviving mythic female figures that celebrate female power. What interests her in Melusine is not her being a wife or a mother, but her being a powerful female figure. As her last statement indicates, Byatt is advocating a new image of Melusine as an independent powerful female figure in order to challenge the traditional stereotypical images of females being either monster-like or tragic victims of love.

Franken, however, reads this connection between Byatt and Irigaray differently. She notes that Byatt ‘read[s] the essay “Divine Women” on the Melusine mythology by Luce Irigaray, the philosopher she is critical about in her interviews’.³⁶ Franken chooses to read revisions of the Melusine mythology in the light of Irigaray’s essay in which Irigaray ‘investigates what Melusine has to tell contemporary readers about love, motherhood, femininity and divinity’, ‘to show that both writers imagine Melusine in feminist ways’.³⁷ Although I agree with Franken that Byatt’s novels lend themselves to a feminist reading more readily than Byatt is often willing to admit, I find that her reading of Byatt’s use of Melusine as an enactment of Irigaray’s idea of the recovery of a mythic mother is not very convincing. Franken introduces different interpretations of the figure of Melusine in myth criticism and in literature that concentrate on the demonic ‘unnatural’ side of her character: ‘myth criticism which followed D’Arras has a “tendency to overemphasize Melusine the demon. The story tends to be read as a warning against female seduction and against the danger the woman presents to men’s spiritual

³⁵ Chinn, “I am my Own Riddle”, p. 193.

³⁶ Franken, *A. S. Byatt*, p. 92.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 92-3.

welfare and salvation””, a reading reminiscent of many readings of the myth of Medusa.³⁸

This image of Melusine as ‘embodiment of evil’ in literature has given rise to themes related to femme fatale:

An obsession experienced by men with Melusine’s secret; the complete dependence of the woman on a female existence legitimized by the love for one man; and men’s fear of Melusine’s unnatural powers, resulting in a desire to domesticate her. If this fails, which it is bound to do in these narratives, the woman Melusine has to die.³⁹

Franken stresses that this emphasis on the monstrous does not apply to Byatt’s Melusine who is ‘both a mother and a daughter,’ and who is presented as a victim of her circumstances.⁴⁰ Franken does not fail to recognize Byatt’s use of Melusine to ‘write a woman artist’s story’, a point that is absent from Irigaray’s discussion of this myth.⁴¹ She, however, thinks that both Byatt’s and Irigaray’s analyses of Melusine concentrate on the theme of motherhood embodying the lack of ‘maternal continuum’ and opposing the ‘idealization of motherhood’.⁴² My reading of the myth of Melusine in the novel differs from these two readings, and sheds new light on Christabel’s character by reading it in the light of Cixous’s idea of bisexuality, and in relation to the character of Randolph. In what follows I analyze Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte’s relationship in the light of Cixous’s idea of ‘bisexuality’, and in relation to the different fairy-tale and mythic figures Byatt uses in her depiction of this relationship. I show that despite obvious hints of her being actually bisexual in the traditional sense of the word - that is, being physically

³⁸ Ibid, p. 94.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 99.

⁴² Ibid, p. 97.

attracted to both sexes - Christabel does not fit into Cixous's type of liberating 'bisexuality' which I have discussed above. This is symbolized by relating her to Melusine, the emblem of female self-sufficiency till the very end of the novel, and this can be the reason behind her inability to write anything after completing her poem 'The Fairy Melusine'.

I argue that Christabel's 'bisexuality' stops before the traditional, and not the Cixousian, meaning of the word: that is, having a sexual relationship with both a woman (Blanche) and a man (Randolph). Her inability, or unwillingness, to accept a male presence in her life is highlighted by her repeated emphasis on the importance of her solitude as an artist and as a woman; 'my Solitude is my Treasure', she says (*P*, 137). Her seclusion comes as the first priority in her life. She explains: 'I say nothing of Honour, nor of Morality - though they are weighty matters - I go to the Core, which renders much disquisition on these matters superfluous. The core is my solitude, my solitude that is threatened, I that you threaten, without which I am nothing' (*P*, 195). She often sees male presence as a direct threat to her anatomy. From the very first letter she writes to Randolph, she uses the metaphor of an egg to describe her way of life: 'Shattering an Egg is unworthy of you, no Pass time for men. Think what you would have in your hand if you put forth your Giant strength and crushed the solid stone. Something slippery and cold and unthinkably disagreeable' (*P*, 137). This statement depicts male presence as violent, threatening, and unwelcome. The self-sufficiency of her independency relates Christabel to the mythic figure of the fairy Melusine, to which she is linked in other ways too, as I will show in the course of my discussion: 'I have always gone on in a solitary and self-sufficient way', Christabel asserts (*P*, 177). The other ways she uses to express her need for seclusion include a bird singing in a 'gold cage' (*P*, 137), a princess in a

tower (*P*, 197), and the Lady of Shalott ‘who chooses not the Gulp of outside Air and the chilly river-journey deathwards - but who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web - to ply an industrious shuttle - to make - something - to close the Shutters and the Peephole too’ (*P*, 187). These are mostly mythical and fairy-tale motifs which have negative connotations of female entrapment which Christabel uses to express the artist’s need for a space of her own. Commenting on this idea, Byatt says: ‘Preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for women as well as artists, be a way of preserving life’.⁴³ At the same time, this overwhelming interest in protecting her space prevents Christabel from accepting the presence of an equal, understanding male partner, presented through Randolph, and blinds her to the possibility of experiencing a more liberating type of ‘bisexuality’ than the one she has chosen.

The fact that Christabel shares her solitude with a female friend not only suggests a total exclusion of the male, who is viewed as an intruder, but also hints at a possible lesbian relationship between them. Although it is not directly mentioned, a lesbian relationship between Christabel and her friend Blanche Glover is clearly hinted at in the novel:

Where is our frankness of intercourse? Where the small, unspeakable things we used to share in quiet harmony? This Peeping Tom has put his eye to the nick or cranny in our walls and peers shamelessly in. She laughs and says he means no harm, and is incapable of seeing the essential things we know and keep safe, and so it is, so it must be, so it must always be. (*P*, 47)

The emphasis on this all-female sexuality is also reflected in the myth of Melusine which can be read as self-sufficient female sexuality, as the novel itself suggests.

⁴³ A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 158.

Through introducing the figure of Melusine, at one level, as a self-sufficient sexual female being Byatt introduces another type of bisexuality, that which excludes the other – the male – the first being the type of bisexuality introduced in the myth of Hermaphrodite, which I have discussed in a previous section. And even when she is out of her tower she is unable to open totally to Randolph. I will discuss Randolph's character not as a poet but as a partner who is capable of having a 'bisexual' relationship with a woman in a Cixousian sense of the word. Byatt seems to differ from Cixous when she says: "woman is bisexual"; man – it's a secret to no one – being poised to keep glorious phallic monosexuality in view', as she depicts men who are more 'bisexual' than women represented in the characters of Randolph and Roland, as we will see.⁴⁴ Randolph's character shows many signs of having the 'bisexual' mind that Cixous describes. Randolph, just like Finn and Walser at the end of Carter's novels, is one of those men of whom Cixous says: 'There are some men (all too few) who aren't afraid of femininity'.⁴⁵ The novel makes this point obvious: 'When he took her in his arms,' before they make love, 'it was she who said, harshly, 'Are you afraid?' (*P*, 283). And he answers: 'Not in the least, now, [...] My selkie, my white lady, Christabel' (*P*, 283). These words imply that he is aware of all mythical images related to dangerous female sexuality, and he is capable of loving her with no fear. As Cixous explains, men, motivated by their fear of femininity, tell women that: 'writing is at once; too high, too great for you'.⁴⁶ Randolph is definitely not this type of man as his wife thinks that he would have encouraged her had he known of her desire to write. He 'would tell [her] it is never

⁴⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminism: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp. 245-64 (p. 254).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

too late', she tells us (*P*, 122). Randolph also often tries to engage his wife in his work, and reads for her.

Moreover, Randolph always respects Christabel's abilities, to her own surprise: 'why not an Epic? Why not a mythic drama in twelve books? I can see no reason in Nature why a woman might not write such a poem as well as a man - if she but set her mind to it' (*P*, 165). His views are more remarkable if we take into consideration the spirit of the time Byatt is depicting in her novel, and the inferior position usually held by women in Victorian society. The novel introduces some examples of men who, unlike Randolph, see women as inferior beings, or see them only in particular domestic and social roles, while at the same time adopting a patronizing approach towards women who try to write. This view of women's abilities as limited is illustrated through the character of Herbert Baulk. He plays chess with Ellen Ash; 'He was pleased to tell me that I played very well for a lady - I was content to accept this, since I won handsomely' said Ellen (*P*, 227). Moreover, even educated men do not usually take women's writings as seriously as Randolph Ash takes Christabel's. Christabel writes:

Now mark - you must write no more of your interest in my work as a possible Intrusion. You do not seem aware, Mr Ash, for all your knowledge of the great world I do not frequent, of the usual response which the productions of the Female Pen - let alone as in our case, the *hypothetick* productions - are greeted with. The best we may hope is - oh, it is excellently done - for a woman. (*P*, 180; emphasis in original)

She relates to him her experience with a well-known poet to whom she sends her work, asking for his opinion. She quotes his response: 'they would do well enough to give me an interest in life until I had - I quote him exactly - "sweeter and weightier responsibilities"' (*P*, 180). This indicates that not many men, not even educated ones, are capable of treating women as equals.

Randolph realizes the fact that he is exceptional in his ability to approach Christabel knowing how threatening her strong character can be to other men. 'Most men, he judged, if they had seen the harshness and fierceness and absolutism, yes, absolutism, of that visage, would have stood back from her' (*P*, 278). Randolph can see through Christabel's mask of meekness and modesty, but does not fear her female power. This knowingness suggests that he is offering her a different type of relationship that is not 'governed by phallogocentric values', as Cixous would put it.⁴⁷ Traditionally, being the strong female that she is, as Randolph himself puts it, '[s]he would have been destined to be loved only by timid weaklings, who would have secretly hoped she would punish or command them' (*P*, 278). Or, if she succeeds in her masquerade, she would be loved 'by simpletons, who supposed her chill look of delicate withdrawal to indicate a kind of female purity, which all desired, in those days, at least ostensibly' (*P*, 278). What Randolph is offering her is a relationship which is not based on what Cixous calls '[o]pposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death (one master-one slave, or two nonmasters two dead)'.⁴⁸ Randolph tries to establish a different relationship with Christabel, one that is built on liberating 'bisexuality': 'He *knew* her, he believed. He would teach her that she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings' (*P*, 279; emphasis in original). The question is, however, is she ready for this type of relationship? Her defensiveness suggests that she is still entrapped within the phallogocentric logic of mastery and slavery. Randolph realizes this and hopes to change it, to show her another possible way of living freely within a male-female relationship, but he seems to have failed.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ It is here necessary to acknowledge the limits of *Possession*'s relation to Cixous's vision of 'bisexuality' as a utopian subjectivity, not only in the sense that it is not lived yet, but also in the

The Language of Hair: Dramatizing Female Entrapment

I introduce the different mythic and fairy-tale images with which Maud, as a woman and as a writer, is associated, and the social myths from which she is trying to escape by studying the depiction of her hair which is frequently emphasized in the novel. To clarify my argument, I will read Maud's golden hair in the light of Elizabeth G. Gitter's study of hair imagery. She specifically traces images of 'magically powerful golden hair the Victorians thoroughly explored and greatly enriched', and which is 'a well established literary tradition with roots in ballads, fairy tales, and Teutonic and classical myths'.⁵⁰ 'While women's hair, particularly when it is golden, has always been a Western preoccupation', Gitter writes, 'for the Victorians it became an obsession. In painting and literature, as well as in their popular culture, they discovered in the image of women's hair a variety of rich and complex meanings, ascribing to it powers both magical and symbolic'.⁵¹ Byatt seems to follow this Victorian tradition in her depiction of the golden-haired Maud, only to subvert it and to free women from all restricting mythic images associated with hair, as I will demonstrate.

The novel draws our attention to Maud's hair, or its concealment, when we first meet her. What strikes Roland when he first sees Maud is her elegance which

deeper sense that the novel has possibly failed to go beyond the transformation of heterosexual relations (the male/female 'couple'). This idea is explicitly expressed by Christian Gutleben when he writes about Byatt in *Possession*: 'she just abides by the romantic conventions, but when she has homosexual Leonora Stern (improbably) turn to introvert James Blackadder, there seems to be a desire to standardize the possibilities of happiness – as if the suppression of homoeroticism were indispensable for a happy ending. And just as the deviations in sexual matters are condemned, so the forms of radicalism in literary criticism'. See Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic postmodernism: the Victorian tradition and the contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 81. Carter and Warner, by contrast, seem to go much further in their treatment of woman-to-woman bonds, as in the case of *The Princess and Mignon* that I have discussed in *Nights at the Circus*.

⁵⁰ Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*, 99-5 (1984), 936-954 (p. 936).

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 936.

does not fit the cultural view of women in academia: 'She was dressed with unusual coherence for an academic, Roland thought' (*P*, 38). Significantly, he also notices the fact that her hair is completely covered: 'He could not see her hair, which was wound tightly into a turban of peacock-feathered painted silk, low on her brow' (*P*, 38). We only know that it is blonde because '[h]er brows and lashes were blond' (*P*, 38). Taking into consideration that fact that 'Golden hair', as Gitter asserts, is traditionally associated with 'female sexual power', Maud's hair being pinned and covered can be read as a sign of contained sexuality. To emphasize this point, Maud is generally presented as a cold and detached woman: 'Her voice was deliberately blurred patrician', Roland thought (*P*, 39), '[h]er voice lacked warmth (*P*, 40), it, the narrator asserts, is a 'frigid voice' (*P*, 40). The fact that Maud's hair is often hidden is stressed time and again in the novel: 'She had not taken off the headdress' (*P*, 40), 'her head still scarfed' (*P*, 69), 'the bright hair, visible last night at dinner in the Baileys' chilly hall, again wholly swallowed by a green silk knotted scarf' (*P*, 128), 'so dragged and ruthlessly hair-pinned was hers' (*P*, 260). Before examining the significance of the few scenes in the novel in which Maud lets her hair loose, I will probe into the reasons behind the covering of her hair, some of which are given by Maud, while others are suggested by the novel and the mythic imagery with which she is associated.

Introducing some of the mythic images traditionally related to women's golden hair, Gitter says: if 'golden-haired women are not the passive, helpless objects of a gooseboy's desire: they are, at best, accomplices, knowing participants in sexual barter; at worst, they are instigators, destructive and dangerous femmes fatales who use their gold to tempt, to corrupt, to strangle'.⁵² This is the kind of

⁵² Ibid, p. 947.

mythic connotations to golden hair from which Maud is trying to escape by shaving, then covering her hair. The golden hair is here symbolic of female entrapment within two myths: passive female beauty and destructive female monstrosity, and Maud tries to break free from these myths by rejecting this symbol. We watch Maud combing her hair in private in a depiction reminiscent of the Siren: 'She slipped on her nightdress, long-sleeved and practical, and loosed from her shower-cap all her yellow hair. She brushed fiercely, supporting the fall, and considered her perfectly regular features in the mirror' (*P*, 57). Maud cannot identify herself with this image of seductive female beauty: 'The doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing', she insists (*P*, 57). What worries her about being a beautiful blonde is that people will not take her seriously as an academic: 'The feminists had divined that, who once, when she rose to speak at a meeting, had hissed and cat-called, assuming her crowning glory to be the seductive and marketable product of an inhumanely tested bottle' (*P*, 57). As a reaction, Maud 'had worn it almost shaved in her early teaching days, a vulnerable stubble on a white and shivering scalp' (*P*, 57). The hair here, as in Yeats's poem quoted by Fergus (*P*, 57), is not associated with any sort of power, it is rather part of the image of a passive yellow-haired doll, a mere object of desire.⁵³ Rejecting this myth of passive female beauty, Maud shaves her hair.

Later in the novel, when she was obliged to remove her scarf, Roland looked at '[t]he pale, pale hair in fine braids [which] was wound round and round her head, startling white in this light that took the colour out of things and only caught gleams and glancings' (*P*, 259). The sight of her hair also provokes the image of the doll in Roland's mind: 'She looked almost shockingly naked, like a denuded window-doll, he at first thought' (*P*, 259). Even when she grows her hair after having been dared

⁵³ See *Ibid*, p. 953.

by Fergus, Maud's entrapment within this myth, signified by her desperate attempts to escape from it, will last for most of the narrative. 'You should be ashamed to believe that,' said Fergus, 'and you are so wise and clever about every other thing, my dear' (*P*, 57). Maud's assertion that she does not 'believe that or care,' and the fact that she had grown her hair during their affair, does not mean that she is no longer inhibited by this myth, for although 'for pride, she would not crop it,' 'she would not so much mark the occasion', now that they have parted, 'but [she would] instead w[ear] it always inside some sort of covering hidden away' (*P*, 58). Maud's behaviour, although intended to liberate her from the myth of passive beauty, only marks her imprisonment within this myth.

The golden hair, as Gitter suggests, is also linked to 'female sexuality'.⁵⁴ Maud's abundant, long yellow hair, often hidden under a scarf, is associated with contained female sexual desire. Significantly, her hair is revealed in two main scenes through which the novel seems to rewrite the myth of female monstrosity or destructive female sexuality implicit in the myths of Melusine and Medusa. The first scene directly recalls Melusine's husband peeping on her while in the bath. In this scene, Maud suddenly comes out of the bath when Roland was trying to see if it was empty through the keyhole. Byatt's version, however, departs from the original myth partly because of the emphasis on the hair which Roland has never seen before, now exposed on her shoulders: when Maud emerges from the bathroom, '[h]er hands were pink and slightly damp; the fringes of the pale hair were damp too. It was down, he saw the hair, running all over her shoulders and neck, swinging across her face' (*P*, 174). The fact that this scene is sexually charged for Roland, is obvious: 'And there it was, what Randolph Henry Ash had called the *kick galvanic*, the

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 936.

stunning blow like that emitted by the Moray eel from under its boulders to unsuspecting marine explorers' (*P*, 147). Byatt, however, introduces a twist to the original tale, for Roland 'meekly supposed she would be furious', but he 'saw, when he looked, [that she, unlike Melusine] was simply frightened' (*P*, 147). Maud does not fit into the image of a sexually self-sufficient Melusine figure who gets angry and frightened in front of male intrusion. Her sexual coldness is again projected on her 'pale hair' that 'gleamed coldly', as Roland watches her leave (*P*, 148).

The interrelatedness between Maud's deliberately self-oppressed sexuality and the constant pinning of her hair is apparent in the second scene when, upon Roland's request, she uncovers her hair:

The plaits were like streaked and polished oval stones, celandine yellow, straw-yellow, silvery yellow, glossy with *constricted life*. Roland was moved - not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the rigorous constriction all that mass had undergone, to be so structured into repeating patterns. If he closed his eyes and squinted, the head against the sea was crowned with knobby horns. (*P*, 272; emphasis added)

Roland is indirectly urging her to enjoy her life, '[l]ife is so short,' he says. '[your hair] has a right to breathe'. And indeed his feeling was for the hair, a kind of captive creature' (*P*, 272). If Maud's hair represents her captive sexuality when tied up, it becomes a reflection of female powerful active sexuality when she frees it in a moment of intimacy with Roland:

And then she put down her head and shook it from side to side, and the heavy hair flew up, and the air got into it. Her long neck bowed, she shook her head faster and faster, and Roland saw the light rush towards it and glitter on it, the whirling mass, and Maud inside it saw a moving sea of gold lines, waving, and closed her eyes and saw scarlet blood. (*P*, 272)

This description relates Maud not only to the figure of Medusa with her fiery hair and destructive power, but also to Cixous's Medusa who is capable of

acknowledging her powerful sexuality. This image of Maud as a Medusa figure seems also to be liberating for Roland who ‘felt as though something had been loosed in himself, that had been gripping him. He said, “That feels better”’ (*P*, 272). This is the first time Maud gives up the mask of coldness and decides to go a step closer to him, and unlike Fergus, he does not relate her hair to that of a pretty doll, but to a powerful Medusa-like sexual being. I will discuss the development of Maud and Roland’s new type of male-female relationship in detail in what follows.

Breaking Free from Melusine’s Hold

Byatt, like Carter and Warner, uses narratives, motifs and characters from traditional, well-known myths and fairy tales in order to reveal, and thus subvert, the social and cultural myths that entrap the female artist/writer and limit her creative energy. At the same time, she introduces strong mythic female figures to assert the existence of female potentiality and the necessity for women to embrace the powerful creative side within themselves. These two ideas are reflected in her depiction of their condition as women and their potential as artists/writers using two main myths: namely the Lady of Shalott and Melusine. In *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*, Jane Campbell notes that the Lady of Shalott’s story is recurrent in Byatt’s work. In Byatt’s *The Game*, ‘the dominant myth is the story of the Lady of Shalott’, she asserts, suggesting that Byatt uses this myth to dramatize the relationship between the two sisters, Cassandra and Julia.⁵⁵ Byatt reuses this myth in *Possession*, Campbell argues, to represent ‘the biological dilemma embodied for her by the Lady of Shalott’.⁵⁶ She goes on quoting Byatt: ‘Cassandra Corbett in *The Game* and Christabel LaMotte in *Possession* are both [...] “the

⁵⁵ Campbell, *A. S. Byatt*, p. 53.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 21.

woman closed in the tower who has given her soul for her writing but is also somehow destroyed. They're all the Lady of Shalott".⁵⁷ I will come back to explore the implication of this statement later on in my discussion.

Campbell also links Maud to the Lady of Shalott when she says: 'Christabel and her descendant Maud utter the same "cry" to the men they love: "You are taking away my autonomy, you're giving me something wonderful that I regard as secondary, my work is what matters"'.⁵⁸ Maud, however, is more closely related to Melusine than the Lady of Shalott. More importantly, she is related to the mythic figure of the Medusa through which she is finally able to embrace her sexuality without the fear of losing her creative energy. Byatt counters the myth of the isolated female artist represented by the Lady of Shalott and Melusine by identifying Maud with Cixous's laughing Medusa in a call for women with talent to embrace their bodies and face the outside world without fearing the destruction that could be brought about by accepting the other, I will demonstrate. When Maud, and, for a limited period, Christabel celebrate their sexuality, this is shown to be very liberating, especially when viewed in the light of Cixous's ideas. I will analyze the hair symbolism that relates Maud to the Medusa, and the language used in the love scene between Christabel and Ash to reveal the novel's advocacy of an active liberating sexuality as a way of releasing female creative energy without the need for total solitude.

In what follows, I trace the development of Maud and Roland's relationship into a liberating Cixousian bisexual relationship. One reason behind Maud's denial of her sexual desire from the beginning of the novel is her fear that, by embracing it, she might risk losing her private space which is vital to her existence as an

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

academic. I will first discuss the nature of Maud's relationships with Fergus and Leonora to show how they differ from her future relationship with Roland. When Roland asks Maud why she hides her hair she replies, '[i]t's to do with Fergus. With Fergus and with its colour' (*P*, 271). As I have discussed, she does not like the colour because it gives the impression that she is 'dyeing it to please men', which makes her a mere object of male desire (*P*, 271). The first reason she gives for this – her relationship with Fergus – shows her refusal of his version of sexual relationship that appropriates her space and hinders her work: 'We tormented each other. I hate that, I hate the noise, the distraction' (*P*, 270). Fergus seems to be threatened by Maud's success, and he tries to hide his anxiety by attempting to show that he is superior simply because he is a man:

He got up very early. He used to *prance around* the flat - with nothing on - quoting Freud crying that "at no point in one's analytic work does one suffer more from a suspicion that one has been preaching to the winds than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis". (*P*, 271; emphasis in original)

Thus, Fergus' version of sexual relationship seems to be built on Freud's idea of female inferiority and phallus supremacy. Cixous's critique of this Freudian idea of the supremacy of the phallus can illuminate my discussion:

By insisting on the primacy of the phallus and implementing it, phallographic ideology has produced more than one victim. As a woman I could be obsessed by the scepter's great shadow, and they told me: adore it, that thing you don't wield. But at the same time, man has been given the grotesque and unenviable fate of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 85.

In the light of this statement, Fergus can be viewed as more of a victim than Maud. Some women might fall victims to Freud's idea of phallus supremacy by internalizing the feeling of lack and being content with an inferior subordinate position. Maud, however, does not believe this myth and cannot approve of being an inferior partner as she does not believe in this type of relationship: 'I don't think he - Freud - is right about that anyway', she says (*P*, 271). Full of himself and his superior phallus, Fergus invades Maud's space and is insensitive to her privacy: '[T]here was something intrinsically ridiculous about his silly shouting - before breakfast - letting it all hang out - I couldn't work. That was how it was. I - I felt battered. For no good reason' (*P*, 271). This idea of penis envy is only a projection of men's fear of female powerful sexuality.

This fear of female active sexuality also manifests itself in the image of the female monster. This is apparent in the kind of language Fergus, and initially Roland, repeatedly uses to describe Maud: 'Will she eat me?', asks Roland when Fergus first talks about Maud, '[s]he thicks men's blood with cold,' said Fergus, in a type of language reminiscent of that with which the Medusa is described (*P*, 34). On another occasion, '*Will I be torn by Maenads?*', Fergus wrote to Maud, referring to feminist academics, '*Don't eat him, dear Maud*', he says referring to Roland (*P*, 138; emphasis in original). The attempt to appropriate female potential by entrapping women within the contrasting images of the angel and the demon is also mentioned by Christabel: 'men saw women as double beings, enchantresses and demons or innocent angels', she says (*P*, 373). She realizes that this is partly related to their fear of women's talent and abilities. Women are 'largely thought to be unable to write well, unlikely to try, and something like changelings or monsters

when indeed they do succeed, and achieve something', she tell her cousin Sabine (*P*, 350).

Unlike Christabel, who chooses to live with a female partner despite Blanche's attempt to control her life, especially when she steals Randolph's letter, Maud rejects Leonora's advances. The presence of an intimate forceful figure, be it male or female, seems to threaten Maud as an artist for fear that, if she is to succumb to it, she will have to compromise her work. On one occasion, Leonora tries to seduce Maud as she 'appears in the doorway, largely naked except for an exiguous and unbelted crimson silk dressing-gown', and asks for 'a good-night kiss' (*P*, 316). Maud who resisted Leonora's forceful desire, 'couldn't *push*, that was as bad as submitting. To her shame, she began to cry' (*P*, 317; emphasis in original). The fact that her rejection is motivated by a sense of threat to her being as an artist/writer is symbolized by her view of '[t]he bulk of Leonora lay on her sofa in her living-room, *between her and her books*' (*P*, 317; emphasis added). This threat of invading her space, which is often related to sexual intrusion, can prove to be destructive: 'A kind of desperation overcame Maud. [...] She noticed a kind of rigorous aching of her limbs, from tense confinement, which was reminiscent of the last terrible days of Fergus Wolff. She wanted to hear her own voice, saying something simple and to the point' (*P*, 317). But the over-protectiveness of this private secluded space can be equally confining and similarly destructive. Through the character of Maud, the novel suggests that the artist's need to be protective of her private space should not lead her to total seclusion and denial of sexual desire. Leonora comments on this lack of communication with the other in Maud's life when she writes to her: '*but you aren't happy, are you, Maud? There is an emptiness in your life*' (*P*, 140; emphasis in original). Maud herself goes through a crucial moment of self-

questioning when she blames herself for being ‘not very polite to’ Roland, and ‘[e]ven bossy’ (*P*, 136): ‘Why could she do nothing with ease and grace except work alone, inside these walls and curtains, her bright safe box?’ (*P*, 136-7). Maud is obviously not satisfied with her isolation. Her shared journey with Roland in quest of Ash’s and LaMotte’s story will not only bring them closer to each other, but will also change the way they view themselves: ‘Christabel, defending Christabel, redefined and alarmed Maud’ (*P*, 137). As I will show, the novel seems to suggest one solution to this dilemma in which the female artist will not be obliged to isolate herself, and will totally deny her sexual desire in order to avoid being annihilated within the other’s appropriating desire.

Through Maud and Roland’s relationship, the novel seems to advocate a new type of male-female relationship within which the partners are autonomous and equal. Unlike Fergus, who seems to be ‘some kind of macho boss-man’, Roland is ‘not forceful’ (*P*, 426). Although Roland’s gentleness is seen by Blackadder as Roland’s ‘major failing’ (*P*, 426), this very characteristic is one of the major reasons behind Maud’s acceptance of his presence in her life, as a love and a partner, as we will see. Maud thinks of Roland as ‘a gentle and unthreatening being. Meek, she thought drowsily, turning out the light’ (*P*, 141). This can be read as a positive attribute when opposed with Fergus’ threatening, undesired presence. Both Maud and Roland appreciate the artist’s need for a private space. The novel suggests this by replacing the image of the ‘tormented bed’ (*P*, 141), a symbolic image of aggressive sexual and personal invasion which Maud usually associates with her affair with Fergus, with that of the ‘white bed’ (*P*, 270). Both Maud and Roland use this image to represent their need for a private space of their own: ‘Only it doesn’t work. Not for any good reason. But because of the - because - I have this vision of

the white bed', Maud comments on the failure of her affair with Fergus (*P*, 270). Roland expresses his desire for a private space in similar terms: 'clean narrow white beds' (*P*, 332). The gradual change in their characters, which made a new type of male-female relationship between Maud and Roland possible, can be better understood in the light of Cixous's ideas in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', as I will show in what follows.

The change in Roland's character throughout the novel is significant to the reading of his relationship with Maud. At the beginning of the novel, we are told that although '[h]e had done what was hoped of him, always', he 'now [...] saw himself as a failure and felt vaguely responsible for this' (*P*, 11). His relationship with Val was motivated by 'will and calculation, not desire' (*P*, 126). Moreover, at one point in the novel, it is made clear that he occupies a subordinate position to Maud: 'That was the problem. He felt marginal. Marginal to her family, her feminism, her ease with her social peers. There were many circles here, all of which he was outside. [...] [H]e hated eating dinners he could not have paid for. He hated living off Maud' (*P*, 437-8). Roland often occupies this marginal position usually reserved for the female. This direct reversal of power structure, however, would not last for a long time before the balance is restored, and Roland's position becomes that of an equal partner. This idea is apparent when Roland receives the letters that tell him he is accepted for the jobs he has applied for: 'Roland was so used to the pervasive sense of failure that he was unprepared for the blood-rush of success. He breathed differently' (*P*, 468). This success is also reflected in his ability to write poems of his own and not only analyzing those of Randolph Henry Ash: 'He had time to feel the strangeness of before and after; an hour ago there had been no

poems, and now they came like rain and were real' (*P*, 275). This newly gained voice of his own marks the fact that Roland's transformation is now complete.

This is not to indicate that he rejects the position of the female to assert his supremacy as a male. On the contrary, Roland's ability to accept the feminine side of his character accords with Cixous's call to "de-phallocalize" the body, relieve man of his phallus, return him to an erogenous field and a libido that isn't stupidly organized round that monument, but appears shifting, diffused, taking on all the others of oneself', as the following example shows.⁶⁰ Far from being a copy of a traditional fairy tale's forceful hero, Roland is associated with female figures from fairy tales: 'There was an incapable sleeper somewhere in his mind, a sleeper bruised and tossing on heaped feather mattresses, the Real Princess, suffering the muffled pea' (*P*, 58). This is reminiscent of the scene in which Walser dances with the tigress and is related to Beauty, in Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Byatt seems to use this technique to an end similar to that of Carter; mainly to indicate that male and female traditionally constructed identities are interchangeable. Roland is aware that it is an image usually associated with female figures: 'Blanche Glover called Christabel the Princess. Maud Bailey was a thin-skinned Princess', he thinks to himself. This can be read as a comment on his gentle nature as opposed to the forceful nature of his rival Fergus, whose wolfish nature is presented in a negative light, as we have seen. This is also symbolically presented when Maud asks him which bed he would like to take: 'Do you prefer top or bottom?', she asks (*P*, 332). 'I'm indifferent', he answers (*P*, 332). However, at this stage of the novel when Maud is still defensive in her insistence on the top position, Roland shows that he is strong enough to accept shifting positions: "I don't see that it matters, top or

⁶⁰ Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', p. 51.

bottom,” Roland said stolidly, perfectly aware of the absurd range of this comment between mythography, sexual preference and distribution of bolted bunks. He felt happy’ (*P*, 333). The fact that he is aware of all these connotations shows that he is willing to accept a relationship free from the phallogocentric logic of male supremacy. This attitude of Roland plays an essential role in creating the new male-female relationship built on equality which the novel seems to advocate.

Roland’s new type of desire is one main reason behind the change in Maud’s own character. The development of Maud’s ‘bisexuality’ is reflected in her opening to the other. This is apparent in the final conversation between the two characters before they make love to each other. ‘A woman, by her opening up, is open to being “possessed”, which is to say, dispossessed of herself’, writes Cixous.⁶¹ This threat of loss of identity by turning into a mere object of desire enlightens Maud’s dilemma when she complains to Roland: ‘People treat you as a kind of *possession* if you have a certain sort of good looks’ (*P*, 506; emphasis in original). This is especially problematic in relation to the woman artist/writer, as Maud indicates: ‘I keep my defences up because I must go on *doing my work*. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy’ (*P*, 506; emphasis in original). Thus, Maud’s often emphasized coldness is only a defensive strategy through which she tries to protect her independent identity. The novel, however, seems to share Cixous’s assertion that: ‘there is nonclosure that is not submission but confidence and comprehension; that is not an opportunity for destruction but for wonderful expansion’.⁶² Maud realizes this possibility of accepting the other without losing her identity when she compares Fergus’ character with that of Roland: ‘Fergus is a devourer. I haven’t got much to offer. But I could let you be, I could’ (*P*, 507).

⁶¹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 86.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Maud explains her fear of losing her autonomy: ‘You can become a property or an idol. I don’t want that. It kept happening’ (*P*, 506). Roland, however, like Cixous, assures her that ‘[i]t needn’t’ (*P*, 506). Unlike Fergus, Roland shows no identification with traditional male images of ‘invasion’ and ‘irruption’, which inform Maud’s isolation: ‘It’s not my scene. I have my own solitude’, Roland assures Maud (*P*, 506). Maud now realizes that she can trust Roland: ‘I know. You - you would never - blur the edges messily’ (*P*, 506). This possibility of keeping a space of freedom between the partners is what makes their ‘bisexuality’ liberating: ‘Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, *not to do away with the space between*, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can’.⁶³ Maud and Roland prove to be able to achieve this kind of bisexuality by their acceptance of each other’s autonomy.

Through establishing a new relationship with Roland, Maud’s character undergoes a crucial transformation that can be better understood in the light of Cixous’s liberating idea of bisexuality as ‘the possibility of extending into the other, of being in such a relation with the other that I move into the other without destroying the other: that I will look for the other where s/he is without trying to bring everything back to myself’.⁶⁴ At the beginning of their final conversation in the novel, Maud starts by expressing her fears: ‘When I feel - anything - I go cold all over. I freeze. I can’t - speak out. I’m - I’m - not good at relationships’ (*P*, 506). Underneath the mask of coldness lies her inability to trust the other, or to release her sexual desire: ‘What a coward you are after all’, says Roland when he is able to see through her mask (*P*, 506). Her silence, however, does not last forever, for only at

⁶³ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Cixous, ‘Castration or Decapitation?’, p. 55.

this stage in the novel is she capable of revealing her desire and expressing her love to Roland: ‘Oh no. Oh no. I love you. I think I’d rather I didn’t’ (*P*, 506). She finally proves to be one of the bisexual women imagined by Cixous, who are ‘neither dupe nor domestic, those who will not fear the risk of being a woman; Will not fear any risk, any desire, any space still unexplored in themselves, among themselves and others or anywhere else’.⁶⁵ Maud overcomes her fears and lets go of her desire, as the final scene in which she appears shows:

So they took off their unaccustomed clothes, Cropper’s multicoloured lendings, and climbed naked inside the curtains and into the depths of the feather bed and blew out the candle. And very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries, and he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, *uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph*. In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell (*P*, 507; emphasis added).

By dramatizing Cixous’s idea of bisexuality, Byatt opens new possibilities and presents a new male-female relationship within which Maud can respond to Cixous’s call for woman to ‘[s]peak of her pleasure and, God knows, she has something to say about that, so that she gets to unblock a sexuality that’s just as much feminine as masculine’, and Roland can possess Maud without abasing her or effacing her identity.⁶⁶ This type of relationship that is based on equality and understanding is also presented in *Morpho Eugenia*. This time, it is Matty the female artist who manages to introduce William to a new type of relationship, within which he is capable of treating her as an equal partner, as I will discuss in detail in what follows.

⁶⁵ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 263.

⁶⁶ Cixous, ‘Castration or Decapitation?’, p. 51.

Rescuing the Prince: William's Disillusioning Journey

In this section I trace the fairy-tale narrative that underlines William Adamson and Eugenia Alabaster's relationship in *Morpho Eugenia*, highlighting the significant twists Byatt introduces to traditional fairy-tale narratives. I will show that William thinks about himself as the hero prince in a fairy tale, who woos the princess and who is faced with a number of tasks. If he passes the tasks, William thinks, he will be awarded the princess, Eugenia, with whom he will live happily ever after. Is not this how the reader would expect a traditional fairy narrative to end? 'William found himself at once detached anthropologist and fairytale prince trapped by invisible gates and silken bonds in an enchanted castle'.⁶⁷ He expresses his attraction towards Eugenia in the language of a fairy tale he has read as a child:

He remembered a fairy story of his childhood, a sentence spoken by a prince of Araby about the lovely Princess of China, brought briefly to him in her sleep by mischievous spirits. "I shall die if I cannot have her," the Prince had said, to his servants, to his father and mother. William poised his pen above his paper and wrote. "I shall die if I cannot have her". (*ME*, 13)

This passage also implicitly comments on the nature of William's irrational attraction toward Eugenia; he hardly knows anything about her. The first task William is set to perform is that of sorting. This famous mythic motif is introduced through Miss Mead's narration of the well-known story of Cupid and Psyche in which Venus, the jealous Goddess, forces Psyche to sort a heap of mixed seeds so that she can be reunited with her lost lover. William's mission was to sort the 'half-full of the tin boxes, the wooden crates, the tea-chests of things Harald had

⁶⁷ A. S. Byatt, *Morpho Eugenia*, in *Angels and Insects* (1992) (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 21. All subsequent page references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *ME* after quotations in the text.

purchased – apparently with no clear priority of interest – from all over the world. [...] “Set it all in order, don’t you know? Make sense of it, lay it all out in some order or other”, says Harald (*ME*, 24-5). This task proves very difficult for William to complete. Commenting on Miss Maid’s story, Matty says to William: “It is odd, is it not, how *sorting* often makes a part of the impossible tasks of the prince or princesses in the tales. There are a great many frustrated lovers who are set to sorting seeds [...] I hope your sorting may be completed to everyone’s satisfaction” (*ME*, 43-4; emphasis in original). Matty’s words show that she is aware of the fairy tale narrative in which William is involved just as much as he himself is aware of it. Although he seems to doubt the possibility of his success in getting Eugenia, William does think of her as a reward for accomplishing his task: ‘He had moments [...] when he began to weary of his task of sorting. He figured it to himself, in some sense, as a labour of love, but he could see no reward at the end of it. What reward could there be? Eugenia was not for him’ (*ME*, 44). Harris points out that William ‘sees his sorting as a set task, with Eugenia, Harald’s daughter, as his reward. And yet he becomes less and less convinced that his task is possible or even meaningful; “he could not devise an organizing principle”’.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the fairy-tale narrative that governs William’s relationship with Eugenia continues.

William, still following the pattern of a prince wooing a fairy tale’s princess, asks Eugenia to set another task for him to carry out, as a compensation for his lack of wealth and his inability to offer her anything of material value. ‘I want so much to be able to do something for you. Anything at all. I own nothing in this world, as you know, so it is all folly. But please command me if I can help in the least way, ever’, he says. Eugenia’s answer is: ‘You once promised me a cloud of butterflies. That

⁶⁸ Harris, ““Ancient Forms””, p. 77.

was a pretty idea' (*ME*, 48). William not only succeeds in his task and proves to be a 'miracle worker', just like a fairy tale hero, but he also wins his princess; he and Eugenia get married (*ME*, 51). Before introducing the twist into this narrative just where it is supposed to end, Byatt reveals a new surprising image of Eugenia which counters all that is expected of a fairy tale princess. As is typical of the image of a fairy tale princess, Eugenia is seen by William as a manifestation of ideal female beauty, purity, innocence, passivity and inexperience. In his journal, William articulates his perception of Eugenia, drawing on images of whiteness and purity borrowed from one of Ben Johnson's poem:

Have you seen but a bright lily grow,
Before rude hands have touched it?
Have you marked but the fall o' the snow,
Before the soil hath smutched it?
Have you felt the wool o' the beaver?
Or swan's down ever?
Or have smelt o' the bud o' the briar?
Or the nard in the fire?
Or have tasted the bag of the bee?
Oh so white! Oh so soft! Oh so sweet is she (*ME*, 12).

All through the novella, Eugenia is associated, especially in William's mind, with such iconography. At the night of their wedding, '[h]e was afraid of hurting Eugenia. He was, also, more obscurely and more urgently, afraid of smutching her, as the soil smutched the snow in the poem. He did not come to her pure' (*ME*, 67). He goes on to contemplate how 'the innocent female must fear the power of the male, he thought, and with reason, so soft, so white, so untouched, so untouchable' (*ME*, 67). Byatt challenges these romantic depictions of women inscribed by male fantasies and social conventions, and represented both in poetry and in fairy tales. She questions the image of the female as a mere sexual object for the male

imagination to feed on. Byatt highlights female sensuality, and endows women with the sexual power that is usually attached to men only, as I will show in detail in my discussion of Eugenia's character.

The twist in William's fairy tale narrative, as the prince who has got his princess and is supposed to live with her happily ever after, lies in his frustration with this 'happy ending' in spite of its conforming to traditional narratives. 'For he was not happy. He had perhaps never been exactly happy, though he had had what he desired. What he had written in his journal he had desired' (*ME*, 72). The day after William's and Eugenia's wedding night, which is supposed to end their suffering and secure for them an everlasting happy married life in a dream-like world, the narrator wittingly parodies this supposed happy ending:

And so he lived happily ever after? Between the end of the fairy story with its bridal triumph, between the end of the novel, with its hard-won moral vision, and the brief glimpse of death and due succession, lies a placid and peaceful pseudo-eternity of harmony, of increasing affection and budding and crowing babes, of ripe orchards and heavy-headed cornfields, gathered in on hot nights. William, like most human beings, expected this in some quiet corner of his emotions, and, although he would not have said so, if asked, he would have been properly cautious about the unknown future (*ME*, 69).

The very existence of this 'unknown future' for our hero to be wary of is a new element that is introduced to the traditional narrative to challenge and mock the falsehood of the imaginary happy ending. Byatt's narrator continues to consciously reverse the reader's expectations, remarking that 'as quickly as the door to [William's] bliss had opened, it snapped shut again' (*ME*, 69). The two main sources of William's unhappiness are the lack of communication between him and his princess – apart from the sexual one – and his constant longing for his former life in the Amazon. He now realizes that, like all fairy tale princes, he knows very little

about his princess. His attraction toward her was merely lustful, and he now finds that his purely sexual relationship with her is very unsatisfactory- although, up to this point, he simply blames that on the fact that he believes women's specialty is emotion and not knowledge. 'Women were experts in emotional matters, and much of what preoccupied him – his ambition, his desire to make discoveries, his wish to travel – seemed inappropriate subject matter for such delicate exploring' (*ME*, 96). William is torn between his responsibilities as a husband and a father and his ambitions as a scientific explorer; '[m]ost of all, and everyday, he worried that he had lost his sense of purpose, even vocation' (*ME*, 72). The fact that his passion for exploring and observing proves to be more important to him than the blessed life of fairy tale marriage is made clear through his response to Eugenia and Edgar's incestuous relationship.

The main twist in the fairy-tale narrative of William's story is the discovery of Eugenia's incestuous relationship with her half-brother. Byatt's use of this fairy-tale motif of incest in *Morpho Eugenia* is similar to Carter's use of it in *The Magic Toyshop*. Although Uncle Philip's reaction after discovering the incestuous relationship between his wife and her brother cannot be any more different from that of William's reaction to his own discovery, I suggest that both Carter and Byatt have used incest in their novels as a liberating device. While Uncle Philip, the Blue-Beard figure in Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, makes a terrifying scene, trying to kill Aunt Margaret, his oppressed wife, and her brother, William receives the shock of seeing Eugenia with Edgar in the bedroom very calmly. The consequences of this discovery, however, are very similar in both cases. The long-delayed confrontation between the silenced Aunt Margaret and her aggressive husband ends with her burning the toyshop and freeing herself from his imprisonment. Similarly, faced

with Eugenia's deception, William finally finds the chance and strength to release himself from her enchantment, and to pursue his dream of exploring the world. When, in one of her interviews, Byatt is asked about the motif of incest, she explains: 'I thought about how [William] could leave when he had all those children [...] and I actually thought up the idea of the incest in order to explain why he didn't feel any obligation to the children'.⁶⁹ This idea is reflected in William's own words when he explicitly admits to Matty: 'I find that – my most powerful feeling is that I am free'. He goes on explaining 'I ought to feel – shocked, or vengeful, or – or humiliated – and from time to time I do feel all these things – but mostly, I feel – I can go now, I can leave this house, I can return to my true work' (*ME*, 155). It is evident that escaping marriage rather than entering it constitutes the climax of William's fairy narrative. I will return to William's character and the development of his relationship with Matty after discussing the character of Eugenia in the following section.

The Language of the Body

Eugenia, who is compared to a fairy-tale princess throughout the novella, can be read as a frustrated female artist who gets trapped in the functions of domesticity and reproduction. The first scene in the novella, where we first meet Eugenia and her sisters dancing in a ballroom, provides insight into the contradiction between a woman's freedom expressed through art, and her entrance into the consuming role of reproductivity through marriage in a patriarchal society. The significance of this scene is two-fold. On the one hand, 'dancing in folklore is often associated with enchantment, taboo, deception, captivity'. This is related to Eugenia's character as

⁶⁹ Jonathan Noakes, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', *A. S. Byatt: The Essential Guide*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 11-34 (p. 23).

manifested in her relationship with William and her incestuous affair with Edgar.⁷⁰ On the other hand, this scene, through the allusion to the fairy tale of the Dancing Princesses, is also intended to give us hints about the restrictions forced by marriage on the woman artist. Comparing themselves to the heroines in the original fairy tale who reject marriage because they love dancing, Byatt's women live in a world where they 'can "dance" (be artists, be "themselves," be "free") *or* marry (be conventional, be-for-others, conform to social roles), but they cannot do both'.⁷¹ Dancing as a form of art through which women are able to express themselves and celebrate their freedom necessarily clashes with the confining role of the self-sacrificing wife and mother to which most women are destined in a patriarchal society. However, 'some married ladies still dance', the novella reassures us. 'There is Mrs Chipperfield, in the bright green. She dances *very* well' (*ME*, 6; emphasis in original). The exception of Mrs Chipperfield shows how keen the novella is on placing the revelation of the difficulties that might restrain a woman artist's talent side by side with the assurance that there is always a possibility that women can, and will, overcome such obstacles and embrace their artistic abilities. This is also true in relation to Eugenia's character, as I will show.

As for Eugenia, she 'used to be the best [dancer] of all, before she was unhappy' (*ME*, 6). She is unhappy, as we discover later in the novella, because she was engaged to be married, but lost her potential husband because he discovered her relationship with Edgar. She is now completely occupied with the idea that no one can love her, which means that no one will want to marry her, and thus she will not be able to meet the social expectation. This preoccupation with marriage in itself symbolically limits her ability to dance because it limits her freedom and self-

⁷⁰ Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 121.

⁷¹ Wilson, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 121.

dependence. It also foreshadows the negative effect marriage and childbearing shall have on her as an artist. The potential artist in Eugenia is also introduced not only through the theme of dancing, but also through the emphasis on her aesthetic merit. She used to artistically arrange some of the species randomly collected by her father who seems unable to appreciate the value of what he accumulates: 'I have made a beautiful display – a kind of quilt, or embroidery almost – out of some earlier specimens you sent my father', she tells William. 'I have pinned them out very carefully – they are exquisitely pretty – they give a little effect of a scalloped cushion, only their colours are more subtle than any silks could be' (*ME*, 7). The depiction of this work by Eugenia reflects her skillful handwork, her appreciation of natural beauty, her sensitivity to colours, and, more importantly, her powerful imagination.

Eugenia's artistic skills are also manifested in the work of embroidery she and her sisters have done on the cushions in their mother's room, which are 'all embroidered with flowers and fruits and blue butterflies and scarlet birds, in cross-stitch on wool, in silk thread on satin' (*ME*, 26). In fact, these colourful pictures with their images inspired by nature and usually related to women imply that all these girls have an artistic side in their personality that can only be expressed through the female art of embroidery. Even Lady Alabaster 'has always an embroidery frame by her, but William never saw her take it up, though this proved nothing – she might have laid it aside out of courtesy' (*ME*, 26). One way of reading the untouched embroidery frame can be as a sign of the remnants of the artistic self of a woman who is now completely consumed by her devotion to the function of the mother, a woman who spends her lifeless days in her room. Byatt turns the traditional function of the marriage plot in fairy tales from being the only guarantee of a life lived

happily ever after to being the inescapable fate that seals women in confinement and kills their talents. Following her mother's fate, '[w]ith her pregnancy, Eugenia disappeared into a world of women' (*ME*, 70). After her marriage, every sign of Eugenia's artistic self seems to disappear, and she no longer shows any interest in William's work. Instead, she leads the same idle life her mother lives: '[h]er ankles swelled; she lay upon sofas ... staring into vacancy' and the 'unopened book' in her hand can be read – like her mother's embroidery – as a sign of her lost artistic self. The stress which the novella lays on Eugenia's enslavement to a woman's reproductive role can be seen through her exaggerated fertility: she is pregnant most of the time and often gives birth to twins. She is mired within the traditional function of reproductivity. Paradoxically enough, it is through the same symbolic resonance of dancing that the novella seems to offer Eugenia a way out of this trap.

The opening scene in *Morpho Eugenia* portrays a dancing party in which the 'young ladies have made themselves beautiful in [the] honour' of William Adamson, to further explore its implications (*ME*, 3). At the beginning of the novella, Byatt shows the importance of the fairy tale narrative in her novella when she introduces the fairy tale of the Dancing Princesses. Enid and William alternate in telling the story. Enid says:

Matty plays the piano and we dance and dance. [...] Some days, I think we could dance forever, like the princesses in the story. Who wore their slippers out secretly every night. And were exhausted in the mornings, and no one could understand it' And refused to marry because they loved dancing so much. [...] Eugenia used to be the best of all, before she was unhappy. (*ME*, 5-6)

This fairy story fulfills different functions within the novella. It shows that Byatt's characters think of themselves in terms of fairy tale narratives. In addition to that, the story implicitly links Eugenia to a fairy tale princess and introduces us to the

sense of mystery that surrounds her. Cixous's interpretation of this fairy tale can clarify this idea and shed light on Eugenia's character. Under the title 'The School of Dreams is Located Under the Bed', Cixous retells this very fairy tale: 'I have a faint recollection from an apparently naïve Grimms' Tale of king whose daughters were ruining him. He kept them carefully locked in, as is proper, and didn't know why each day they needed to change their shoes'.⁷² It is significant that Cixous maintains that this fairy tale is 'about doing what is forbidden: sexual pleasure'.⁷³ This reading hints at a hidden rebellious side to Eugenia's character.

In what follows I will show how the novella gradually brings to light this subversive side of Eugenia's character and uncovers her rebellion. Interrogating Eugenia's character and her relation to the language of the body through the feminist models offered by Cixous and Mary Daly reveals powerful renditions of the passive princess, the self-sacrificing mother and the incestuous sinner. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Cixous presents a feminist reinterpretation of the myth of the Medusa. According to the Greek myth, Medusa is one of the three Gorgons, and was famous for her beauty. She was punished by Athena for having sex in the latter's temple by being turned into a monster with snakes for her hair. One look at her face would turn the viewer into a stone. This myth has proven to be a rich source of inspiration. As Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers explain, the 'tension between the beautiful Medusa and the monstrous one is intrinsic to the story, to the figure of Medusa herself, and to the twin strands of feminism and misogyny that have attached themselves to retellings of the Medusa myth throughout the ages'.⁷⁴ Cixous's feminist interpretation of this myth opposes the misogynist appropriations of the

⁷² Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 63-4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷⁴ Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, 'Introduction', *The Medusa Reader*, ed. by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

Medusa, especially Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical reading of the myth as an image of the castrated female which arouses great fear in the heart of the gazing male, a reading that defines femininity as lack.⁷⁵

Cixous evokes the monstrous Medusa to uncover the dilemma women experience in a patriarchal society, entrapped 'between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss'.⁷⁶ A woman has to face the difficult choice between the image of the transgressing monstrous figure and the state of silent, passive non-being in a patriarchal society. Eugenia's entrapment within the alienating language of the patriarchy replicates the Medusa's double image of beauty and monstrosity. At the beginning of the novella, she is presented, through the eyes of William the male hero, as the embodiment of beauty and innocence. However, when he discovers her incestuous affair with Edgar, he thinks of her as a whore, '[i]t is like a whorehouse', he says (*ME*, 150). By using the phallogocentric discourse to name women as either passive princesses to be worshiped or monstrous prostitutes to be punished, men can silence women, contain their desire, and enhance their domination over them. Eugenia adapts the languages of the body and laughter suggested by Cixous when she recalls the Medusa and transforms her hideous image: 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing'.⁷⁷ By liberating Medusa from the monstrous association, Cixous suggests ways of liberating the female by calling her to embrace 'that part of [her] ... [that] urges [her] to inscribe in language [her] woman's style'.⁷⁸ By freeing her own body, a woman can create the subversive language of laughter as an alternative pattern of language through which she can

⁷⁵ See Freud's 'Medusa's Head' in *The Medusa Reader*, pp. 84-7.

⁷⁶ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 255.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

undermine the phallogentric language of the patriarchy. The latter is a language within which men ‘theorized their desire for reality’,⁷⁹ and use to entrap women within images of passivity or monstrosity so that they always occupy ‘the place reserved for the guilty’.⁸⁰ Cixous tries to raise women’s consciousness to the importance of body and language in the process of their liberation:

We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty ... women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence”.⁸¹

Cixous suggests that a woman’s return to her body, from which she has been estranged for a long time, is to use as an alternative liberating language of expressing herself, and is her only way out of her entrapment within the Medusa myth. Eugenia is an example of a woman who cannot find her own voice within the patriarchal discourse. She uses her body and her laughter to articulate her desires, and thus disturbs the symbolic order of the male-authorized language. Eugenia’s character goes through two main phases introduced by Cixous: the phase of entrapment, which is not only the result of the values enforced upon her by patriarchal society, but also the result of her own internalization of these values that create in her guilt and self-hatred; and the phase of self-liberation as she reveals the Medusa side of her character and rejects the deceiving values of her society. These two phases can only be read in an interrelated way as we can clearly understand the first one only when Eugenia goes through the second.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 250.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 256.

At the beginning of the novella we are often told that Eugenia is distressed and unhappy. Although the apparent reason we are given is the death of her fiancée, the source of her distress can be nothing but her self-contempt with which she punishes herself for breaking the moral roles of her society: 'I wish I were dead', says Eugenia in an obvious remark of self-hatred, then goes on to say 'I am not able to be loved, it is my curse' – this is also the Medusa's curse: she has transgressed, so she has become hideous and must be punished. She 'ought to be dead'- decapitated (*ME*, 47). Like the suppressed female described by Cixous in her essay, she is 'kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogentrism ... surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives, [she] accused herself of being a monster'.⁸² By the end of the novella, Eugenia seems able to better understand her former situation and thus, reconciling herself with her sexuality, she now places the blame outside herself. She complains that she has 'never been able to speak to any other living soul of' her sexuality. '[I]f I could have spoken to anyone, I might have been brought to see how wrong it was' (*ME*, 159). She can now see that she has been silenced and forbidden from talking about such taboos. In a broken interrupted language she tries, in vain, to explain to William that what she has with Edgar is just another form of her suppressed sexual desire that she has to bury in order to be accepted in her society: 'it was just something – secret – that was you know – like other things you must not do, and do. Like touching yourself, in the dark. You don't understand' (*ME*, 160). Marriage for her is not the happy ending of her fairy tale but only a mask under which she can be a part of hypocritical society, 'I wanted to be married, and good, and – like other people'

⁸² Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*, p. 246.

(*ME*, 151). As I will show in what follows, under this mask of lies is a rebellious Medusa-figure.

The relation between Eugenia and the figure of the Medusa is established through the description of Eugenia's hair in the wedding night scene. William enters the room to find the maid stroking Eugenia's hair: 'I need at least two hundred strokes every evening if my hair is to have any *life* in it', she says (*ME*, 66; emphasis added). This is reminiscent of the living snaky hair of the Medusa. There is the impression that her hair has a life of its own: 'her maid was unpinning her hair. It fell in crimped runnels over her shoulders. ... [T]he maid ... was brushing out this hair, stroke by silky stroke. It lifted electrically to meet the brush, and clung here, ballooning, before the next stroke began. It crackled' (*ME*, 66). As we have seen in *Possession*, the depiction of Maud's hair, in a scene that reveals her assertive sexual desire, also connects her to the Medusa. It is worth noting, as I have discussed in my chapter on Carter, that the relation between Carter's heroine Aunt Margaret, in *The Magic Toyshop*, and the figure of the Medusa is introduced in similar terms. At the end of the novel, Aunt Margaret's loose, red, fiery hair becomes, like the Medusa's, a symbol of her newly won female power. Through this link with Medusa both females regain the power of expression, stolen from women under patriarchy. While the dumb Aunt Margaret literally gets back her ability to speak, Eugenia resorts to her body in search for the alternative language suggested by Cixous. On Eugenia's wedding night, expecting to find the innocent numb Eugenia of his thoughts, William 'approached her, slowly, slowly, in fear of his own wrongful knowledge and power', while 'she gave a little laugh, suddenly blew out the candle, and plunged herself under the bedclothes' (*ME*, 68). In an embodiment of Cixous's theory of the liberating laughter of the Medusa, Eugenia's adoption of the language

of the body – of laughter – radically undermines the language of the male represented by William. Eugenia uses laughter and body language in the way suggested by Cixous to express her desires freely, thus undermining William’s discourse: “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, and her little moans and cries and intimations of pleasure and invitation increased in urgency as she twisted, laughing, first against him, then away’ (*ME*, 68)- thus, she ‘break[s] up the “truth”’, the false male version of the truth, ‘with laughter’.⁸³ Juxtaposing these two patterns of language shows how Eugenia’s laughter and body language create a new liberating space of expression for the female outside the patriarchal discourse that alienates her and obscures her own desire, turning her into a lifeless object of male desire. The relationship between female monstrosity, laughter and liberation discussed in Mary Daly’s book *Amazon Grace: Recalling the Courage to Sin Big* can also illuminate this subversive aspect of Eugenia’s character. ‘Strong, hearty hags have always known the power of Elemental Laughter to crack man-made pseudo-reality’, says Daly.⁸⁴ Eugenia’s laughter, like ‘[t]he Elemental Laughing of’ Daly’s ‘Wild Women’, is a ‘declaration of independence from the prevailing mentality, [...] an expression of deep Knowing’.⁸⁵ Eugenia’s inability or unwillingness to act in accordance with the prevailing norms of her society is symbolically presented through her incestuous relationship with her brother.

This repudiation of the role of the ideal pure, passive fairy-tale princess of William’s dreams turns Eugenia into one of Cixous’s revolutionary women ‘who, with a single word of the body, have inscribed the vertiginous immensity of a history’. Those women who undermine all engraved roles ‘with their carnal and

⁸³ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 258.

⁸⁴ Mary Daly, *Amazon Grace: Recalling the Courage to Sin Big* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

passionate body words, ... with their inaudible and thundering denunciations, dazzling more than naked underneath the seven veils of modesty'.⁸⁶ Eugenia's use of modesty as mere camouflage, in the way suggested by Cixous, is manifested in the following scene:

And she chuckled, and rolled on her back, and pulled at him, and asked for more. And when they slept, uneasily, he woke in the dark dawn to see her huge eyes fixed on his face, and found her touching his private places, and the little sobbing sounds starting again, asking for more, and more, and still more. And then the maid knocked at the door [...] Eugenia rolled way, quick as a lizard on a hot stone, and disposed herself, immobile, a sleeping beauty, her rosy face peaceful under her hair. (*ME*, 69)

Instead of conforming to the values imposed on her as a woman by stories such as *Sleeping Beauty*, Eugenia uses them to her own purpose. She masquerades under the disguise of *Sleeping Beauty* to hide her powerful rebellious character and inscribe her own values. Byatt challenges romantic depictions of women inscribed by male's fantasies and social conventions, and represented in fairy tales. She questions the image of the female as a mere sexual object for the male imagination to feed on, and highlights female sensuality, endowing her with the sexual power that is usually attached to men only.

Mary Daly declares that '[t]he beginning of liberation comes when women refuse to be "good" [...] by prevailing standards. [...] This means going beyond the imposed definitions of "bad woman" and "good woman," beyond the categories of prostitute and wife'⁸⁷. This first step towards emancipation is what Eugenia achieves when she fails to 'be married, and good, and – like other people' (*ME*, 151). Eugenia succeeds in transforming herself from a self-torturing woman who scorns herself for

⁸⁶ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', P. 257.

⁸⁷ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: The Women's Press, 1973), pp. 65-6.

not being able to live up to the behavioral patterns attached to fairy tale princesses of men's dreams – that would guarantee her the reward of a happily-ever-after- married life – to a strong confident woman who is able to challenge the double standards of male morality. Daly insists on the necessity of 'a re-naming of morality which has been false because phallogocentric, denying half the species the possibility not only of naming but even of hearing our own experience with our own ears'.⁸⁸ Correspondingly, Eugenia is now able to come to terms with her own experience, to name her own values and to defend them against the phallogocentric discourse which uses labeling as a tool of domination over women. She undermines William's argument which depends on the same phallogocentric discourse and links her to monstrous image of the Medusa; 'you are horrible to see', says William (*ME*, 150). While William calls her a 'whore', Eugenia stresses the naturalness of her behaviour, 'it was *natural*', she insists, 'nothing in us rose up and said – it was – *unnatural* (*ME*, 159; emphasis in original). Thus, Eugenia names new values outside the limits of the traditional moral values of the patriarchal society. Renouncing those values that allocate for her the role of the object, she claims the role of the subject in her sexual relationship with William. However, Eugenia's failure to complete this process of liberation at the end of the novella by remaining stuck within the same social structure while William leaves with Matty suggests the insufficiency of her efforts.

The deficiency in Eugenia's route of liberation is two-fold. First, as Marjean D. Purinton puts it, the 'language of the female body [...] always risks being ignored, misinterpreted, misunderstood'.⁸⁹ Eugenia's body language is often ambiguous for William; 'she answered with little sighs – of fear, of content, he did

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 100.

⁸⁹ Marjean D. Purinton, "'The Laugh of the Medusa" and Laughing Anne: A Feminist Reading of Joseph Conrad's Play', *Conradiana*, 34-2 (2002), 77-94 (p. 8).

not know' (*ME*, 68). William's incapability of interpreting Eugenia's language makes her success in establishing a form of communication between them through her body language very short-lived:

For the first few weeks of his marriage he felt that their bodies spoke to each other in a kind of fluttering bath of molten gold, a kind of radiant tent of silky touch and shimmering softness, so that long, tender silences were a natural form of communication during the mundane grey daylight. (*ME*, 69)

Eugenia's bodily words are still read as silences by William whose satisfaction with this kind of communication lasts only for a few weeks. After this short period, rather than bringing them together, Eugenia's language seems to widen the gap between her and William more and more: 'William looked at his wife. She was panting. It was no doubt of fear, but it resembled closely enough the pants of pleasure, which he knew' (*ME*, 149). He is bewildered by the signs given to him by his wife, and fails to read her properly. Her language seems to exclude the male and, therefore, isolate the female too. That is why her process of liberation is destined to fail. The second obstacle that can hinder Eugenia's liberation is her inability to translate her desire into action or to twin her words with practice. Therefore, it is no surprise that William tends to ignore her words, especially as she expresses her wish to change to 'be different'. The fact that 'William could not take that seriously, as he watched her compose her mouth, and open her wide eyes, and look hopefully up at him', implies a shortage in Eugenia's method of liberation by expressing herself through the language of the body (*ME*, 195). For Eugenia's hopes to come true, she needs not only to include men in the new discourse, but also to support her words with practical actions. As a result, in *Morpho Eugenia's* fairy-tale narrative, Eugenia's beauty is not enough for her to keep her role as the heroine of the story or to win her prince: 'It has not done me good ... to look pretty, to be admired. I would like to be

different' (*ME*, 195). These are the last words we hear from her. Despite a rebellious aspect to her character, represented in Eugenia's assertive sexual desire, she fails to liberate herself from the confines of the image of the passive woman behind which she hides. While Eugenia is left behind, Matty, the resourceful and powerful heroine, rescues the prince, as I will show in the following section.

The Metamorphosing Artist

In this section I will explore the transformation in Matty's character as a woman and as a writer, in addition to the development of her relationship with William, comparing it with his relationship with Eugenia. Among the many writers in the novella – all of whom male, except for one – Byatt has only built the characterization of her female writer upon that of fairy tales. She explains that '[t]here is a belief, strong enough by now to have become a cliché or a stereotype, that the fairy story is the province of disregarded or neglected women and their wisdom'.⁹⁰ Byatt believes that this is not 'a complete truth,' drawing attention to the fact that 'most influential fairy stories of the nineteenth century were mediated by men'.⁹¹ Identifying herself with Matty as a woman writer, Byatt says: 'both I and Matty, two tough and clever women, are exploiting that stereotype in this story'.⁹² This chosen form of writing does not make Matty's work any less important than those of the male writers in the novella, as I will show. Byatt herself admits the crucial role played by fairy tales in the construction of her character and her views about the world. She even says that her faith in the power of such imaginative stories to convey reality is stronger than her faith in religious or historical stories:

⁹⁰ A. S. Byatt, 'Fairy Stories: the Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', *A. S. Byatt Homepage*, (1995) <<http://www.asbyatt.com/Onherself.aspx>> [Accessed March 1 2007]. Emphasis in original.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

I remember *not believing* the story of the Resurrection, and feeling a mixture of guilt and distaste because what was required was historical belief and not imaginative assent. So I learned the world from Asgard, and from the Greek myths, and from Grimm and Andersen, for the world is clearly not only what it appears to be in the pages of history books.⁹³

The title of the fairy story - *Things Are Not What They Seem* - might be read as a call to distrust those versions of the truth given in religious and historical books, such as the one written by Harald Alabaster, encouraging the reader to examine the world through the power of the imagination. Matty's fairy story does give a more realistic view of the world of the novella as it comments on William and Eugenia's relationship.

Matty's fairy story comes as a sub-narrative within the main one. She writes her own version of William and Eugenia's story, drawing upon the myth of Circe, and giving herself the role of the good fairy, the female helper, Mistress Mouffet. Seth, the shipwrecked sailor who stands for William in Matty's fairy story, faces the Circe-figure, Mrs Cottitoe Pan Demos, who is 'not unrelated to the "enchanted" Eugenia who had captivated William Adamson'.⁹⁴ Seth is only able to flee from this enchanted domain with the help of Mistress Mouffet. In her book *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock*, Marina Warner describes Circe as the woman who tempts the most famous wayfarer of all to an alternative, eternal dwelling'.⁹⁵ Likewise, Eugenia seems to be able to stop William from pursuing his exploring trips to the Amazon until Matty helps him out. Moreover, Warner's analysis of the myth of the Circe can illuminate the real nature of William's attraction to Eugenia that threatens his identity. 'Circe, the enchantress who turned

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*, p. 270.

men into beasts,' Warner writes, 'inspired one or two of the Greek heroes to remain with her, in the shape of beasts, and to embrace the animal life of instinct, pleasure, and play: she is a mistress of metamorphosis, a profound threat to the integrity of the self'.⁹⁶ In Byatt's novella, William's lustful love for Eugenia dangerously threatens his sense of self-integrity as he feels torn between his instinctual sexual drive and his rational reasoning as a scientific explorer. When he is beside Eugenia, William feels that he is 'inside the atmosphere, or light, or scent she spread, as a boat inside the drag of a whirlpool, as a bee is caught in the lasso of perfume from the throat of a flower' (*ME*, 53). However, '[w]hen Eugenia was not in the party he felt his old self again, scanning everything with a minute attention that in the forests had been the attention of a primitive hunter as well as a modern naturalist' (*ME*, 29). His relationship with Matty, nonetheless, proves to be very fruitful for he finds in her an equal partner, and they collaborate in producing a book.

Byatt describes Matty's work as 'an English fairy story, a didactic nineteenth-century fairy story, with elements of religious allegory and sentimental moments - that is to say, it is a fairy story of a type I do not love as I love Grimm and Perrault and Malory'. However, as in her other fairy stories, Byatt has enriched this one with many fantastic elements from the fairy tales of the Grimms, including the speaking animals, the forest, the underground journey and the enchantress. 'I picked these elements,' Byatt says, 'because they glittered at me more than other equally powerful motifs in Grimm; I picked them by instinct and remade them, as old storytellers must have done'.⁹⁷ Although Byatt declares her indebtedness to the Grimms, her fairy stories are very different from their well-known stories which Maria Tatar sees as 'tales with an emphatic bias in favor of passive heroes and

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

⁹⁷ A. S. Byatt, 'Fairy Stories'.

heroines – figures who start off as victims but live happily ever after because they are beautiful and lucky’.⁹⁸ This is evident in her collection of stories entitled *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eyes* which contains two fairy stories that appeared in *Possession* as well: ‘The Glass Coffin’ and ‘Dragon’s Breath’. As Campbell puts it, Byatt ‘cleverly subvert[s] the fairy-tale genre, subjecting the form to feminist revision without slipping into the propagandizing [she] so dislikes’.⁹⁹ She manages to achieve this in her novel and novella too, partly through her female heroines who also write fairy tales, like Christabel in *Possession* and Matty in *Morpho Eugenia*. Through the character of Matty, the dilemmas that might face the female artist as a woman writer are more explicitly depicted, and more optimistic resolutions are offered. Through this character, as I will argue, the text demonstrates the effects of the social myths prevailing in patriarchal societies, which generally perpetuate men’s domination over women, with particular focus on the woman writer. Nonetheless, Matty’s portrayal in the work asserts the liberating role that can be played by the woman writer as a metamorphosing being and a catalyst of change. I will return to Cixous’s ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ to analyze the social conditions that surround Matty as a representative of women writers in a patriarchal society. Cixous’s ideas also illuminate the transformation in Matty’s character and her subversive role in the novella. Traditional myths, like that of the Medusa, and fairy tales have an essential role in conveying many of the patriarchal social myths used to dominate women. Marcia K Lieberman’s main objection against many of the famous fairy tales of the Grimms and of Perrault is the fact that they ‘establish a dichotomy between those women who are gentle, passive, and fair and those who

⁹⁸ Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tale and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xxi.

⁹⁹ Campbell, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 179.

are active, wicked and ugly'.¹⁰⁰ The female artist, in turn, often faces the version of this social myth that enacts a dichotomy between the 'feminine' side and the 'intellectual' side of a woman writer. According to this myth, a woman can not be both an attractive sexual being and an intelligent thinking one.

Although Byatt claims that she does not write according to a feminist agenda, she defends women writers against the patriarchal confining social myths in obvious feminist terms. In defense of women writers against such claims, Byatt argues that '[t]he accusation of being too intelligent is one that is usually levelled at women and very rarely levelled at men'. Byatt, as a woman writer, goes on to complain from such widespread misconceptions from which she herself is suffering:

What happens to intelligent women – and it still happens – is that, if you are known to be serious, if you are known to have done a lot of hard thinking, it is not supposed that you could have a sense of humour, that you could rumbustuously go off and write a passionate scene, because if you are *intelligent* you will not be *passionate*.¹⁰¹

Thus, hard thinking is a manly attribute which, if found in a woman, will necessarily be at the expense of her femininity. To avoid a crisis of identity, the woman writer faces the difficult task of reconciling two aspects of her character, namely those of a passionate woman and a passionate writer. Byatt suggests that a woman writer can conciliate both identities and be 'efficient, if you can just (switch gear and switch gear from one to the other', 'but if you let them all run together organically, something messy would occur and you would get overwhelmed'.¹⁰² To succeed in undermining the dichotomies created by social myth a woman writer does not have

¹⁰⁰ Lieberman, "Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale', in *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, ed. by Jack Zipes (London: Scholar Press, 1993), pp. 185-200 (P. 199).

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Franken, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 26. Emphasis added.

¹⁰² Franken, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 28.

to choose one or the other but to achieve a balanced unity between her different layers of identity.

In *Morpho Eugenia*, Matty's rejection of these myths is one essential step towards achieving her freedom. William, whose views are limited within the logic of his patriarchal society, can see that Matty is 'keen' and 'resourceful' so he cannot think of her as feminine. He significantly thinks of her as a 'sexless being' and finds her 'dry' (*ME*, 105). Matty is a tough and intelligent writer; she is conscious of these false ideas that govern the world of the novella and William's perception of her talent. 'You think a great deal, Miss Crompton', says William. 'For a woman', answers Matty, '[y]ou were about to add, "for a woman", and then refrained, which was courteous. It is my great amusement, thinking' (*ME*, 41). Although she likes to be seen as a thinking being, and at this point she shows little resistance to male views of her as a woman and a writer, Matty's silence will not last for a long time. By achieving the sort of harmony Byatt suggests between her different layers of identity, Matty reveals to William by the end of the novella a new being who is completely different from the one we meet at the beginning. In an important scene of confrontation between her and William, Matty stands up for herself and asks him to see her as a woman: 'You do not know that I am a woman', she protests, 'You have *never seen me*' (*ME*, 156; emphasis in original). Matty attains her goal of securing William's respect for her as a thinking being and his admiration of her as a sexual being. He now can bring the two images of Matty together; he can see between his arms both 'the unyielding Matty Crompton' and 'the new hungry Matilda' (*ME*, 158). He can see through the limitations of his previous views; he realizes that Matty is both a watchful intelligent writer and a passionate sensual woman.

Matty lives a woman artist's struggle against isolation and male domination over women through the image of female monstrosity. Accompanying Matty in her journey towards freedom will reveal the new pattern of female empowerment suggested in the text. Unlike Eugenia, Matty's embrace of her female body is accompanied by the power of verbal and written forms of communication that does not exclude the male, and by the ability to take action. She goes through a significant process of transformation, and finally succeeds in achieving her freedom and winning her prince at the same time. I suggest that Matty represents 'the female artist's transformation from patriarchal Medusa monster in Rapunzel tower to woman artist courageous enough to draw on Medusa wisdom and her own artistic vision'.¹⁰³ At the beginning of the novella, Matty is portrayed as an alienated woman, a relative of the Alabasters who belongs neither to the masters of the house nor to the servants. As a manifestation of the isolated female artist, she lives in her own tower, in a small room upstairs that is full of books. Matty's bedroom 'was narrow, like a high box, with one hard upright chair and a narrow bed [...]. There was a tiny bookcase, in dark oak, and books everywhere there could be, under the chair, sticking out in boxes under the bed, under the dressing table' (*ME*, 154). The two outstanding features of Matty's room, namely its being full of books and its stifling narrowness, reveal Matty's status as an entrapped female artist. She is even described as a 'prisoner in a cell, in a little room' (*ME*, 156). This is reminiscent of the way the idea of the female artist's isolation is also depicted in *Possession* through the characters of Christabel and Maud as I have discussed. The depiction of Matty's marginal position and her seclusion is often intertwined with hints of her unutilized abilities and unfulfilled aspirations; 'I suppose we all feel we have greater

¹⁰³ Wilson, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 20.

capacities than are called for in our daily life', says Matty (*ME*, 92). William himself recognizes in her 'all sorts of frustrated ambitions contained in that sharp, bony body, behind those watchful black eyes' (*ME*, 105). The fact that her potential talent, like that of the monstrous Medusa to which Cixous has referred, strikes fear in a man's heart is reflected in William's thoughts on more than one occasion:

He was beginning to be a little afraid of Matty's sharpness [...]. He sensed a kind of suppressed fierceness in her which he was not wholly sure he wanted to know more about. She had herself very much in her own control, and he thought he preferred to leave things that way. (*ME*, 92)

This is an explicit expression of the threat a man feels of a woman's strength of character and her contained capacities. As we have seen, Byatt introduces this idea of men's fear of women's talent in *Possession*. While female artists like Christabel and Maud succeed in realizing and overcoming this obstacle, other female characters, like Ellen Ash and Blanche Glover, seem to internalize this fear, the matter which has affected their artistic potential.

Matty's initial internalization of this fear is manifested in her down rating of her work and belittling her abilities. When she gives her fairy story to William to read she insists that she 'meant it for no more than an illustratory fable,' and she is afraid that 'for a simple puzzle-tale', it is '*over-ambitious*' (*ME*, 118-9; emphasis in original). This is a typical symptom of what Daly calls a female's 'false humility'. It is, Daly explains, 'an internalization of masculine opinion in an androcentric society. This means never aspiring "too high"; imposing on the self a strangely ambivalent fear of success [...]. This avoidance of success is rooted partially in guilt feelings over being a "rival" to males or "threatening the male ego"'.¹⁰⁴ Although she is, as

¹⁰⁴ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 53.

William himself can see, the ‘inventive mind’ behind the whole project and the writing of William’s book, Matty declares: ‘I do not see myself as a writer. But as an *assistant*. Mr Adamson, if you would accept me. I would be honoured. I can draw – and record – and copy if necessary’ (*ME*, 91-93; emphasis in original). Matty cannot see herself as a writer in a patriarchal society which tries to stop women from writing by convincing them that writing is ‘reserved for the great – that is for “great men”’.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, Matty finally refutes these claims and obtains her freedom mainly through writing. Cixous starts ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ by saying ‘I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do’. Writing is a woman’s effective weapon in her ‘inevitable struggle with conventional man’.¹⁰⁶ According to Cixous, to win this struggle a woman has to not only resist man’s attempts to plant his own fears in her heart but also to ‘break out of the snare of silence. [She] shouldn’t be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem’.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the novella Matty is able to gather her courage and to overcome the Medusa complex within her. She writes a complete collection of fairy tales and sells it. This not only helps her in proving herself as a female writer, but also in achieving her economic independence. In an explicit reference to the mythic Medusa figure, Byatt gives her name to the ship on which Matty and William leave the Alabaster, sailing towards the Amazon. Byatt relates Matty’s talent and her final achievement to the Medusa figure which is often interpreted as a representation of ‘female wisdom and art’,¹⁰⁸ a ‘sign of powerful womanhood,’ and an ‘emblem of emancipation’.¹⁰⁹ Through writing a woman can make her entry into the process of naming, previously

¹⁰⁵ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 246.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁰⁸ Wilson, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*, pp. 1-3.

allocated for men, and thus she will pave the way for the changes that will guarantee for her the right, independent position in her society and in history.

Conclusion

In both of her novel and novella, Byatt dramatizes scenarios of the entrapped female figure recurrent in many myths and fairy tales, which traditionally end with the interference of a male rescuer who frees the passive female and possesses her in marriage (as in Rapunzel's story). This interference is viewed as particularly destructive when a male invades the private isolation of a female artist (as with Melusine), or even when the imprisoned female takes the risk of getting close to a male figure, venturing out of her seclusion (as with the Lady of Shalott). When viewed in the light of Cixous's ideas, both of Byatt's novel and novella seem to offer a rewriting of such traditional scenarios where, although the need for privacy and autonomy for the talented female is stressed, stepping out of her isolation does not entail suffering and destruction. Maud and Matty, like Carter's Melanie and Fevvers, are lucky enough to find male partners who are capable of establishing a Cixousian bisexual relationship with them. The endings of the novel and the novella, however, are not always read by critics with such optimism. Margaret Pearce states that '[a]lthough Matty has engineered her escape from Bredely Hall, Byatt does not conclude that all will be well for her. Now the symbols and signs of darkness, once part of Adamson's reductive categorization of the world, appear again'.¹¹⁰ For Pearce, 'The darkness now represents fear of the unknown as they travel toward the Amazon'.¹¹¹ This sort of darkness can be read differently.

¹¹⁰ Margaret Pearce, 'Morpho Eugenia: Problems with the Male Gaze', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 40-4 (1999), 399-411 (p. 409). Emphasis in original.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

It is true, as Pearce points out, that Byatt's ending is far from a fairy tale's conventional happy ending with its promise of everlasting happiness. The presence of darkness, however, is not a sign of pessimism. On the contrary, when read in relation to Cixous's idea of exploring the dark continent, darkness here can be read as a sign of a promising future with new possibilities and discoveries. In her reading of the ending of *Possession*, Jennifer M. Jeffers claims that when Maud and Roland come together '[t]he boundaries between beloved and lover seem to melt into "white coolness", but, as we know, that is a fleeting event. This transitory experience is also the condition of reading. Reader and text meet between the covers of the book in that "white coolness" of the page'.¹¹² This reading of Maud and Roland's intimate scene as a fleeting event, however, is not accurate, simply because it ignores the long journey of transformation both of them have undergone to reach this stage in their relationship. Thus, while Christabel and Eugenia remained unable to take a final step towards liberation, Maud and Matty have continued their journeys of transformation, resisting myths of female passivity and inferiority without being obliged to reject the other by establishing a new male-female relationship with their partners, following the pattern of a Cixousian bisexual relationship.

¹¹² Jennifer M. Jeffers, 'The White Bed of Desire in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*', *Critique*, 43-2 (2002), 135-147 (p. 146).

CHAPTER THREE

MARINA WARNER: REWRITING THE 'HERSTORY' OF LOVE AND MOTHERHOOD

When I was young, and highly robust, I still felt great hunger for fairy tales; they seemed to offer the possibility of change, far beyond the boundaries of their improbable plots or fantastically illustrated pages. The metamorphoses promised more of the same, not only in fairy land, but in this world, and this instability of appearances, these sudden swerves of destiny, created the first sustaining excitement of such stories. ~ Marina Warner¹

Talking about Carter's influence on her work, Warner declares that '[m]y writing is much more entwined with hers. She had a huge effect on me. [...] She really gave me permission to think about fairy tales'.² Like Byatt, Warner follows in the footsteps of Carter's project of using myths and fairy tales to demythologize social myths designed to constrain women and limit their abilities. Warner repeatedly warns that many of the myths that inform our life can be deluding. '[O]ne has to be vigilant [...] and try to spot falsehoods, examples of mythmaking in the stories that people tell about the world. I would say that there is an element of my work which is de-mythologising', she declares.³ The main purpose of this chapter is to show how, like Carter and Byatt, Warner, in *Indigo* and *The Leto Bundle*, revives

¹ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. xi-xii.

² Richard Marshall, 'Restless Hauntings: Richard Marshall Interviews Marina Warner'. *3:AM Magazine*, <<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/restless-hauntings-richard-marshall-interviews-marina-warner/>> [Accessed March 3 2010].

³ Laurie Taylor, 'Exiled from Redemption: Laurie Taylor interviews Marina Warner', *New Humanist: The Magazine for Free thinkers*, 11-2 <<http://newhumanist.org.uk/710/exiled-from-redemption-laurie-taylor-interviews-marina-warner>> [Accessed April 3 2006].

powerful mythic figures to achieve the double aim of celebrating female creative ability and assertive sexuality, and of revealing female entrapment within the dichotomy of the destructive monster and the sacrificing mother. In both of these novels, Warner revises myths of motherhood, love and the monstrous female to denounce androcentric assumptions about women. Renewing the tradition of oral storytelling by women, she encourages the reader to engage in the process of ‘uncoupling the story from the reality,’ and introduces different feminist themes that celebrate female power, female sexuality and female freedom.⁴ In her demythologising efforts Warner gives especial attention to the revision of monstrous women, believing that ‘interpreting imaginary figures provides an endless store of inspiration’.⁵ Answering a question about the reason behind such interest, she says: ‘I come from the generation of postwar daughters who wanted to make our way on equal terms with men and looked for examples [of women] in history and literature and mythology who had been muffled or eclipsed by dominant [male] ways of telling the past’.⁶ Hence her reinvention of the story of Shakespeare’s silenced witch Sycorax in *Indigo*, and her revival of the story of Leto in *The Leto Bundle*, as I will discuss in detail.

I will start this chapter by giving an account of Warner’s views about myth and fairy tale, their functions and the way they can be deployed by both writer and reader. ‘I love wonders of all kinds – weather portents, miracles, weird tales of magic and metamorphosis,’ she says. ‘I also think’, Warner continues, ‘that values and principles are profoundly shaped by fantasies conveyed in such materials and that they therefore need to be explored and appraised as such in order to apply them

⁴ Taylor, ‘Exiled from Redemption’.

⁵ Marina Warner, ‘Interview: Marina Warner on “*Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media*”’, *New Writing Anthology*, British Council, <<http://newwriting.britishcouncil.org/authors/>> [Accessed December 21 2007].

⁶ Ibid.

less dangerously'.⁷ These words inform Warner's work on myth and fairy tale and explain the main reason behind her interest in revisiting and reversing them. Her writings aim at uncovering biased social myths perpetuated through such stories, and at advocating helpful and constructive myths that might provoke change in society and life in general, often by rewriting traditional myths and fairy tales. Warner's approach to myth and fairy tale is two-fold: on the one hand, she believes that they can be informative of people's, especially women's, lives in the past and the way they perceive themselves and the world around them. On the other hand, she realizes that they can be deluding, and can perpetuate false social myths. As I will discuss in detail in what follows, Warner's ambivalent attitude towards myth and fairy tale defines the nature of the double task of mythmaking and mythbreaking she undertakes in her writing as she tries to provoke change; '[w]hen I write fiction I do think of my words as creating acts', she asserts.⁸ She seems to share common ground with Carter and Byatt in their belief in the liberating potential of rewriting old stories.

In a lecture she gave at the National Film Theatre, Warner states that 'Fairy tales have been interpreted in innumerable ways'.⁹ She, however, notes the existence of two main modes of fairy tale interpretation: one which generally views the genre as 'scriptures of the spirit, recording universal themes of love and death'.¹⁰ This applies to Freudian and Jungian interpretations. 'In counterbalance to these universalising interpretations', Warner suggests, 'a socio-historical school – rather pragmatic, rather earthbound – has emerged which is interested in fairy tales as a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Taylor, 'Exiled from Redemption'.

⁹ Marina Warner, 'The Uses of Enchantment: Lecture at the National Film Theatre', in *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment: Lectures, Seminars and Essays by Marina Warner and Others*, ed. by Duncan Petrie (London: British Film Institute, 1993), pp. 13-35 (p. 16).

¹⁰ Warner, 'The Uses of Enchantment', pp. 16-17.

more direct impression of reality'.¹¹ Warner seems to be in favour of this school of thinking, as is apparent in her own use of fairy tales, 'The fairy tale, subjected to this approach, becomes a tool for thought, a multicoloured skein of images with which to think about the real, both reiterating and shaping the real in restructured narratives, reassembled images'.¹² This interchangeable relationship between fairy tale and historical context, overlooked by the universalizing approach, is what draws Warner to the second one. Both approaches, however, accept 'that the fairy tale contains instruction of some sort, and that the stories cannot be seen as purposeless entertainments'.¹³ This idea of the fairy tale containing a certain message to decipher 'allows the interpreters to wrinkle out their own meanings in order to press the tale into doing service to their own viewpoint'.¹⁴ 'I must confess', Warner says, 'that I'm guilty of that too – we are all interpreters'.¹⁵ In this sense, Carter and Byatt can also be viewed as interpreters of the genre. In the face of this 'Babel of interpretations', Warner chooses to derive different meanings by concentrating on the different tellers and audiences of fairy tales.¹⁶

In *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, Warner insists on the importance of interpreting fairy tales in relation to their historical and social context. She objects to Bruno Bettelheim's universalizing Freudian analysis of different famous fairy tales: 'This archetypal approach', she objects, 'leeches history out of fairy tale. Fairy or wonder tales, however farfetched the incidents they include, or fantastic the enchantments they concoct, take on the colour of the actual

¹¹ Ibid, p. 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

circumstances in which they are or were told'.¹⁷ Bettelheim, for example, analyzes the death of the good mother at the beginning of popular fairy tales like 'Cinderella' or 'Snow White' and her being replaced with a monstrous female figure in terms of the Freudian principle of 'splitting': 'the wicked mother acts as the Janus face of the good mother, who can thus be saved and cherished in fantasy and memory, split from the bad mother'.¹⁸ The wide acceptance of Bettelheim's theory, Warner argues, has its dangerous effects; it has 'effaced from memory the historical reason for women's cruelty within the home and have made such behaviour seem natural, even intrinsic to the mother-child relationship'.¹⁹ When such tales are studied in relation to the time they were written, one can come out with totally different interpretations.

One reason behind myth and fairy tale's attraction for Warner is that she finds in the genres a space for the downtrodden and the marginalized to have their say. Under the title 'Myth and Faerie: Rewriting and Recoveries', Warner suggests different theories that might illuminate the reasons behind the return to myth and fairy tale and the renewal of mythic themes in contemporary literature. One of the ideas she proposes is particularly informative in relation to her return to myth and fairy tale in her own novels, especially in *Indigo* and *The Leto Bundle*. Warner believes that through fiction we can recover 'memories that have been effaced by the conquerors of history'.²⁰ As her novels' rewritings of history show, 'where documents no longer exist, imagination provides new witnesses'.²¹ Of all forms of fiction 'Myth and faerie' have the most effective role in this process of recovery because they are often 'perceived as survivals from ancient oral culture (orature),

¹⁷ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 231.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 213

²⁰ Marina Warner, 'Myth and Faerie: Rewriting and Recoveries', in *Signs and Wonders: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), pp. 444-59 (p.446).

²¹ *Ibid.*

long despised as suspect and even ignorant atavism, and consequently identified with women, children and primitive peoples'.²² Therefore, they 'rediscover a special affinity with unfettered, self-generated fantasy and offer the means to reinhabit the lived experience of the Other – of exile, slaves, the disappeared'.²³ Warner uses myth and fairy tales in her novels to give voice to the traditionally marginalized categories of the colonized, the outcast, the homeless, slaves, refugees and women. She uses the power of imagination to re-live their experiences and to question the social myths that has helped in the perpetuation of their exclusion. In this myth of home and belonging, Warner argues, many other myths reside: 'monstrous mothers, warrior heroes, diabolical innocents, wild beasts and savage strangers – all belong in the larger story of home, which is being told'.²⁴ Warner's novels are retellings of this myth in the voice of those who do not belong.

The Myth of All-Giving Love: Xanthe's Life Under a Magic Spell

In *Indigo*, I argue, Warner uses myths and fairy tales to rewrite traditional narratives of romantic and maternal love to demythologize cultural myths of female passivity and inferiority. In my study of these themes in the novel, I will concentrate on two female characters that are often neglected by critics, namely Xanthe and Astrid. Before starting my discussion of these characters, I will introduce the character of Serafine as a mother goose figure whose stories comment on and foreshadows events in the main narrative of the novel. Commenting on Serafine's character, Warner writes that she 'wanted *Indigo* [...] to pay tribute to the oral culture of women, to all pre-Gutenberg female voices, including the storytellers of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 87.

the Caribbean'.²⁵ In one of her interviews, the novelist expresses her interest in women storytellers, saying: 'I have altered my focus from great figures (empresses, geniuses) to the ordinary stratagems women have used to survive or perhaps exercise influence, such as story-telling and singing lullabies'.²⁶ Serafine, the storyteller in *Indigo*, is an example of these imaginary figures whose low social status does not prevent them- if it does not actually help them- from gaining power through the weapon of storytelling. However, Warner's depiction of Serafine is ambivalent, as is the historical attitude towards the original figure of the 'Mother Goose', which Serafine represents. This is discussed by Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, where she thoroughly investigates this figure of the female storyteller, tracing its origin back to the Sibyls and The Queen of Sheba. Mother Goose 'is a figure of fun, a foolish, ignorant old woman, a typical purveyor of old wives' tale'; but she is also 'established [...] as Sybil-Nurse – who instils morality and knowledge of the world, and foresees the future of her charges and prepare them for'.²⁷ Similarly, in *Indigo*, Serafine is typically an old woman, 'older than Miranda's grandfather, though she did not seem it to the child'.²⁸ She is described by Gillian as an 'ignorant woman' and a 'savage' (*I*, 54-5). At the same time, Gillian sees her as a 'witch' (*I*, 54). This brings to mind Sycorax's supernatural powers.

Moreover, Miranda thinks that Serafine has power over the changing nature of things when she 'fancied that Serafine had something to do with the change that had overtaken the tree's nature and turned it into a rock; in her stories everything

²⁵ Marina Warner, 'The Silence of Sycorax' (1992), in *Signs and Wonders*, pp. 263-69 (p.266).

²⁶ Warner, Interview on 'Phantasmagoria'.

²⁷ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 79.

²⁸ Marina Warner, *Indigo or Mapping the Waters* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 4. All subsequent page references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *I*, after quotations in the text.

risked changing shape'; it is the power of the imagination Serafine deploys in her stories which is the source of her own power (*I*, 4). As Kate Chedgzoy indicates, 'Miranda's own story is itself framed by the tales told by her nurse, Serafine'.²⁹ Like the Sybil-Nurse's, Serafine can be seen as foreseeing the future; Serafine's stories clearly reflect the narrative of the novel, foreshadowing many of its events and shedding different lights on their meanings, as I will discuss in detail. Another aspect of the Mother Goose figure is her educational role in the life of children. As Warner puts it, 'Mother Goose the wonderful and wonder-making crone was destined for a long career in pedagogy'.³⁰ The stories told by Serafine to Miranda and Xanthe as little girls are didactic; they obey the pedagogical function of fairy tales as they are partly meant to draw social outlines of accepted female behaviour for the girls and to warn them against trespassing them. 'Never be mean, it'll make you suffer' says Sycorax to Miranda while telling her the story of the princess who turns into gold (*I*, 9). And in another example, she interrupts the narrative to instruct Miranda; 'He tossed his head – you mustn't do like him, never' (*I*, 9). And she ends her story by saying: 'Don't you let anyone know what you are, or notice you too much. Always be a secret princess, sweetheart' (*I*, 12). Serafine's stories, however, seem to have hidden messages to be deciphered behind their traditional plots. Reading these stories in relation to the novel's narrative and characters, mainly Xanthe and Astrid, can be very rewarding, as I will show in what follows

In her discussion of Serafine's stories, Eileen Williams-Wanquet first refers to their structurally 'unifying function'.³¹ Looking for what she calls the 'moral message' of the stories, she claims that they 'all present the same lesson, illustrating

²⁹ Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 124.

³⁰ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 160.

³¹ Eileen Williams-Wanquet, 'Marina Warner's *Indigo* as Ethical Deconstruction and Reconstruction', *Critique*, 46-3 (Spring 2005), 267-83 (p. 278).

the dangers of greed and selfishness and preaching generosity'.³² Adopting Serafine's interpretations of the stories, she believes that in the first story 'the king is punished for his greed and overly possessive love for his daughter by her transformation into gold'.³³ She reads the second story as 'an illustration of the power of generous love' that 'clearly echoes Beauty and the Beast'.³⁴ Then she notes that the third story 'insists on the dangers of self-love'.³⁵ Although I agree that the three tales are about love, I will argue that the novel implicitly rejects not only the kind of selfish love introduced in the first tale, but also the all-sacrificing love, usually related to a mother, that is illustrated in Serafine's second tale. The third tale shows the destructive effects of this kind of love on women. The novel seems to suggest that a change in power structure is required for women to achieve balance between love and wit. The novel seems to suggest that one only needs to use common sense, symbolized by Xanthe's spell, to see through the social myth of love. Within oppressive social power structures, male love is necessarily exploitive and selfish and female motherly love is unreasonable and self-consuming. To illuminate this argument, I will rely on Adrienne Rich's discussion of love and motherhood under patriarchy in reading the character of Xanthe in relation to Serafine's tales. I will read the third tale in relation to the character of Astrid and in the light of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément's ideas.

Xanthe rebels against male exploitation of women under the name of paternal love, represented in traditional fairy tales and exemplified in Serafine's first story, when she rejects her father's possessive love. She refuses to be exploited in the name of husbandry love when she chooses Simon. Moreover, she refuses to

³² Williams-Wanquet, 'Marina Warner's *Indigo*', pp. 278-9.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

conform to the role of the all-loving mother who bears and raises children at the expense of her personal success. We watch Xanthe through Miranda's eyes, and we are invited to think about her life and death in relation to the stories told by Serafine and remembered by Miranda later in her life. Xanthe seems to be entrapped within a fairy-tale narrative that has led to her death. When we join Miranda and her father at Xanthe's christening party, we are told that Kit's gift for the little baby would be 'goodness of heart, a loving nature, all the female things – pity and gentleness, you know. A voice that's gentle, soft and low, as the bard says' (*I*, 31-2). He wants Xanthe to have the characteristics of giving, loving and passivity a male traditionally wishes, and expects, to find in a woman. Her godmother, however, wishes her 'Good, hard common sense'. Princess Alicia asserts that 'that's what a girl needs, these days', (*I*, 57). Princess Alicia believes that '[y]ou can't be harmed if you don't feel much. It's having a heart that allows the hurt'. Therefore, she wishes Xanthe 'the heartlessness of a statue, utter heartlessness' (*I*, 60-1). In Greek mythology, Thetis, Achilles' mother, dipped him as an infant in the river Styx to make him invulnerable. Achilles's only weakness lies in his heels because they were not touched by the water of the magical river. While Thetis wants to protect her son from death, Xanthe's godmother will 'have her dipped in the Styx, not forgetting to put her heel in too', only to protect her from love that might, and will, be her downfall (*I*, 61). Thus, in an indirect manner, the novel seems to equate love with death, suggesting that the way women are being exploited in the name of love works against simple common sense. This idea is re-emphasized by the end of the novel when Xanthe dies as soon as the spell stops working.

We next see Xanthe as a young girl when she and her father visit Miranda in Paris. We learn that Xanthe's father is over-protective of her and the analogies

between her situation and that of the princess of the tale with which Serafine opens the novel are apparent. As Laurence Coupe notes, Serafine's tale is 'a variant upon the story of King Midas'. He, however, emphasizes the fact that the tale 'is rendered more personal by the narrator's mentioning that during his feasting the fat man talks about having visited a wonderful island'; Serafine's island.³⁶ This leads him to conclude that 'the tale might be seen to be Serafine's way of addressing, whether consciously or unconsciously the theme of colonial greed'.³⁷ It is true that a tale, as Warner often suggests, is directly influenced by its teller, but the fact that Serafine's stories come to us through Miranda's memory, while telling Xanthe's story, invites a different reading. One way of reading Serafine's opening tale would be as a tale of a father's possessive love of his daughter; a tale that uncovers the selfish nature of male love and shows the total subjection of the female. As typical of a fairy tale heroine, the princess is 'innocent, white as snow, pink as roses, gold hair like corn, and her mother is dead' so she is left in the care of her father (*I*, 5). The king locks his daughter away; she is fifteen years old and 'she's never seen anyone outside her father's palace' (*I*, 5-6). He fears young men, and 'he gets to feel scared he'll be bound to lose her' one day (*I*, 9). He explicitly expresses his love to her in terms of possessiveness; 'I want her safe', he says, 'she's the most precious thing I have' (*I*, 9). This comments on the traditional role of the obedient daughter who, when she reaches adolescence, gets married and moves to the possession of the husband. This objectification of the passive female is emphasized in a symbolic manner as the princess literally turns into gold.

By the same token, when Xanthe comes of age her name symbolically changes, 'Goldie's no longer a little girl!' says her father (*I*, 213). She now can be

³⁶ Laurence Coupe, *Marina Warner* (Northcote: British Council, 2006), p. 72.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 73.

seen as a sexual object of male desire and her father wants to keep her away from all other men; ‘he had never wanted anyone to come near her, ever’ (*I*, 299). Anthony Everard is a character the tale introduces as a gentle man known with his excellent manners, but when it comes to Xanthe, he would ‘assert his possession with the most uncharacteristic violence’ (*I*, 299). Although Xanthe looks like the princess of the tale with her beautiful white face and bright blonde hair, she is not as passive, and ‘[a]s for innocence, it doesn’t mix with common sense’, as her godmother asserts (*I*, 33). The role of the princess in the story is marginal. She often looks lost and ‘stands quietly by, wishing, wishing – for something, she wishes she knew what’ (*I*, 10). Contrary to this, Xanthe is in full control of her life; she understands her situation and makes her own choices. She realizes the over-possessive nature of her father’s love; ‘Poppa would have liked to marry me himself if he could’, she says. She knows he would like to keep her ‘[u]nder lock and key, lock and key, in the tower for ever’ just like the princess (*I*, 329). When her father ‘provoked her visiting friends to compete with him’, physically or mentally, she ‘knew they were fighting over her allegiance and it was gratifying’ (*I*, 273,298). Unlike the princess, Xanthe is able to defy her father’s attempts to control her; she ‘was not merely facing his fury, but actively desiring it’ (*I*, 328). She asserts her volition by choosing Simon Nebris, a man whom she does not love and whom her father calls a ‘pansy’, for a husband (*I*, 298). This shows that she has chosen Simon to challenge her father’s will. Xanthe’s decision is significant because it proves that marriage for her is a ‘completely legit’ setup to achieve independence (*I*, 328). She is obviously not happy with the marital institution but she ‘accept[s] it as part of the way things are for little girls’ under a patriarchal system (*I*, 329). Xanthe tells Miranda that, within the power structure of a patriarchal system, rejecting marriage would be a ‘naïve’

solution (*I*, 328). ‘To be free you’ve got to be able to write in your particulars on the form the way it’s set out: husband’s occupation, permanent address, department store customer accounts. You’ve got to have all that to get round it’, she explains (*I*, 328). This indicates that Xanthe plays the social game of marriage in order to fit into her society and to get her economic independence ‘so that she need not charm others in order to survive’ (*I*, 290). She chooses Simon because she ‘liked his wealth, and the carelessness with which he spent it’ (*I*, 290). Xanthe wants only to fool people into believing that she lives by their social rules. She tries to use the system of marriage to her own advantage by using it only to have access to power and money. The hotel she has established with Simon ‘afforded her the pleasures she wanted in all sufficiency: it was always growing, changing, acquiring a new character under the impulse of her fantasy’ (*I*, 344). She has achieved her goals depending on her own skills.

Under the protection of the spell of common sense, both wifely and maternal love do not have a role in Xanthe’s life. She refuses to be sexually and emotionally exploited by men. She only wants to get married so that she will be ‘able to get on with things, [and] won’t have to worry about finding a mate, squandering time and energy looking for love’, and Simon is the perfect choice for her to escape love (*I*, 330). We are told that ‘a eunuch-like butteriness characterised [Simon’s] flesh’ and that his ‘obvious fondness laid no claim on’ Xanthe (*I*, 290). After getting married, she and Simon ‘have always had separate bedrooms’, so she is not even physically committed to this marriage (*I*, 343). By picking Simon, she has managed to escape the oppressive sexual power structure that usually characterizes a traditional marriage. She trusts Simon but ‘she would never want to belong to him’, or to any other male in the name of love or marriage (*I*, 291). She does not want to exchange

the tyrannical control of a father by that of a husband. Maternal love also means nothing to Xanthe at this stage: 'It stood to reason, nobody with any common sense would have children', she believes (*I*, 371). Having children is not the kind of fulfillment Xanthe is looking for. And it is significant that 'The Spice of Life', Xanthe's hotel, 'did not allow children as guests'. We are told that 'the proprietress decreed they were a nuisance' (*I*, 344). Thus, by virtue of her godmother's spell that protects her from falling in love, Xanthe has turned into a happy successful business woman. The significance of the spell and Xanthe's invulnerability to love can be fully understood when we look at the consequences of the breaking of this spell and Xanthe's sudden death in what follows.

By the end of the novel, we are told that the spell that has empowered Xanthe for most of the narrative by rendering her invulnerable to love 'was wearing off' (*I*, 373). This is reported in a tragic tone as the narrator says:

The godmother had made her wish in good faith thirty-five years before, at the christening, to undo the family curse of angry, avid restlessness. She'd granted that the baby should grow up impervious, because she herself had suffered so and remained so long unfulfilled, and she imagined that inspiring wild emotion and feeling almost nothing in return might lead to a happy life. In this she was not altogether wrong as it turned out. Only at the very last minute, when so much was coming apart around Xanthe, did that fairy decree of long ago stop working and Xanthe Everard become vulnerable to love. (*I*, 373)

Xanthe, now unprotected by common sense, has radically changed many of her attitudes. '[S]he was making many promises to herself and to others, but mostly to Sy, [...] she would try to show him love, she swore it. Maybe they could even have a child, maybe even more than one, they could adopt' (*I*, 371). She now wants to satisfy her father and to 'present him with a clutch of grandchildren' (*I*, 371). Xanthe is now exposed to 'love' as defined by her society; she now wishes to conform to the

maternal function she is expected to fulfill. She loses her wits and gives up to her emotions by rushing to Simon on a leaky boat. As a result, she loses her life; she ‘disappeared into the mouth, the maw, deep into the innards of Manjiku’ the fearful sea-monster (*I*, 373). I will investigate the figure of Manjiku to reveal the implications of Xanthe’s sudden death. Xanthe’s death by sea is symbolic and some critics interpret it optimistically by focusing on sea-change and reading it as a celebration of love. Williams-Wanquet maintains that Xanthe’s death is ‘clearly a spiritual rebirth, from egocentricism to openness to the other’ which she thinks is called ‘love’ in the novel.³⁸ Similarly, Chantal Zabus believes that, by her death, Xanthe ‘embraces the eternity of love’.³⁹ The novel, however, distinguishes between two kinds of sea-change:

Sea-changes never come to stillness for *some* among the dead; they can speak and move in the water, and make themselves heard, [...] like Dulé who stirs fathoms down, and swims as if his legs had never been crippled, as a child who is handicapped becomes lithe in a swimming pool. (*I*, 376; emphasis added)

This positive sea-change is contrasted with Xanthe’s as the narrator goes on: ‘[b]ut for Xanthe Everard this was the *final transformation*: a pearl of rare size and beauty, she had become *incapable of further motion in mind or body*’ (*I*, 376; emphasis added). The emphasis on the freedom sea-change brings to Dulé in contrast to the static and final nature of Xanthe’s transformation refutes the optimistic critical interpretations. Xanthe, however, can be viewed as another victim of Manjiku. When Miranda heard of Xanthe’s death ‘the memory came to her of sharing a bath with Xanthe in their childhood; how they had shouted with the thrill of fear at the

³⁸ Williams-Wanquet, ‘Marina Warner’s *Indigo*’, p. 280.

³⁹ Chantal Zabus, *Tempests after Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 243.

coming of the monster' (*I*, 362). This directly relates Xanthe's death to the story of Manjiku which Serafine told both Xanthe and Miranda who was nine years old. This story is the focus of my discussion in what follows.

I suggest that the story of Manjiku talks about not only the danger of physical death a mother faces when she gives birth, but also the threat of the symbolic death of a woman who believes in the myth of all-giving motherly love. We repeatedly hear about Manjiku's story in different versions and in relation to various characters in the novel. This makes the monster's story open to different interpretations.⁴⁰ Serafine's second story foreshadows the threat of Manjiku: "Manjiku!" Miranda shouts out the name and then covers her face, giggling; Xanthe turns, buries her head in Feeny's breast' (*I*, 219). Manjiku is a potential threat to all girls; especially when they 'get old enough to be mothers' (*I*, 221). Amadé, the heroine of the story, is the wife of the fisherman Amadou who finds a little mermaid and falls in love with her, keeping her away from his wife. This little silver woman can be read as the daughter figure who often takes the place of the mother as the object of the father's love in fairy tales. 'Amadou thinks of nothing but his glittering starfish, of pleasing her, of taking care of her. He forgets Amadé and their life together' (*I*, 222). When the little woman dies, Amadé literally gives her her life back at the expense of her own. Serafine tells the frightened girls that Manjiku turns into a charming man because Amadé 'understands real loving' (*I*, 224). But she then admits that she fabricates this happy ending only to hide the 'savage' reality of the story; '[t]he stories of Manjiku she had heard on the island, when she was herself a girl', she asserts, 'had not had happy endings: Manjiku

⁴⁰ For a reading of Manjiku as a savage colonizer see Williams-Wanquet, 'Marina Warner's *Indigo*', p. 279; and Coupe, *Marina Warner*, p. 78. See also Chantal Zabus, 'Mingling and Metamorphing', in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. by James Acheson and Sarah Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 118-128 (p. 123).

continued to raid the inland waters for women' (*I*, 224). Thus, considering Amadé's death a 'rebirth as the bride to a new Manjiku' is not a convincing interpretation.⁴¹

In the real story, by symbolically giving birth to the daughter-figure of the little mermaid, Amadé sacrifices herself to Manjiku the frightening sea-monster who 'likes to eat women [...] especially women with babies inside them waiting to be born' (*I*, 221). Manjiku represents the threat of death that faces mothers while giving birth to their babies. '[T]his is very much my argument about fairy tales', says Warner, 'they are about women's things that are being discussed in a kind of code'.⁴² Moreover, Manjiku stands for the threat of the symbolic death of a woman when she loses her original identity by adopting a maternal identity. Adrienne Rich depicts this dilemma as she writes: 'The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother (linked implicitly with suffering and with the repression of anger) will spell the "death" of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies for herself – especially when those fantasies have never been acted on.'⁴³ Xanthe's death can be better understood when read in the light of Rich's discussion. Xanthe cannot be both the successful business woman she is and the self-sacrificing mother she is expected to become. As we have seen, Xanthe, like Amadé, loses her life to Manjiku when she becomes willing to give up her dreams and achievements in order to give her father and her husband the love she is supposed to offer, mainly by having children. The novel seems to suggest that heartlessness is a women's only way to escape attempts to keep them locked within specific social role, especially that of motherhood and reproduction. Since women do not have 'a splinter of ice in [their] heart from the Snow Queen's mirror', they have often fallen victims to the

⁴¹ Zabus, *Tempests after Shakespeare*, p. 143.

⁴² Marshall, 'Restless Hauntings'.

⁴³ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 166.

social myth of self-sacrificing love by shouldering the heavy responsibilities of marriage and childbearing (*I*, 274). And their ‘wildest strikes have most often taken the form of physical or mental breakdown’, as I will show through the character of Astrid.⁴⁴

The Return of the Repressed: Astrid as a Hysterical Figure

In this section I read the character of Astrid as a hysterical figure in relation to Sycorax, the figure of the witch in both Shakespeare’s play and Warner’s novel. ‘*The Tempest* is central to *Indigo*’, Warner writes, ‘not only because it’s a shared area of contest around the issues of empire, but precisely because it’s a play in which the voices of women aren’t heard’.⁴⁵ These colonial and feminist aspects of the novel’s rewriting of the *Tempest* are the focus of readings by different critics. Eileen Williams-Wanquet, for example, points out how different autobiographical facts in *Indigo* that show Warner’s writing of the history of the Everard family mirrors the history of Warner’s own family. In “Siren/Hyphen; or ‘The Maid Beguiled’”, Marina Warner reads the history of Sir Thomas Warner, ‘English governor of St Christopher’s and Nevis’, one of Warner’s ancestors, and his Indian wife.⁴⁶ *Indigo*’s Anthony Everard is the literary counterpart of Warner’s own grandfather, Sir Thomas Warner, and Ariel, Shakespeare’s servant, is based on his Indian mistress. Marina Warner says: ‘I used to be furious with my father when he boasted of this ancestry, and used to say, “[w]e come from a long line of

⁴⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Warner, ‘The Silence of Sycorax’, p. 267.

⁴⁶ Marina Warner, ‘Siren/Hyphen; or The Maid Beguiled’ (1998), in *Signs and Wonders*, pp. 309-22 (p.309). For more details of the relation between the colonial history of her family and her novel, see also Chantal Zabus, ‘Spinning a Yarn with Marina Warner’, in *Into the Nineties: Post-Colonial Women’s Writing*, ed. by Anna Rutherford, Lars Jensen and Shirley Chew (Armidale, Hebden Bridge: Dangaroo Press, 1994), pp. 519-29, and ‘Marina Warner with Robert Fraser’, in *Writing across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 364-373.

pioneers”’.⁴⁷ These memories of her childhood were one reason behind Warner’s writing of *Indigo*: ‘the history nagged at me [...] I began researching the story, and *Indigo* is the result’.⁴⁸ For Warner, *Indigo* is a novel of reconciliation, a narrative that recalls the past in order to try and heal its wounds; it is ‘about being foreign and strange in the eyes of someone else, and about undoing this strangeness in order to find what can be held in common’.⁴⁹ This call for accepting the other is echoed in *The Leto Bundle* as Warner discusses the possibility of a more harmonious way of living, this time between migrants and natives.

The character of Astrid is generally overlooked by critics who study the newly gained voice of women in *Indigo*. Williams-Wanquet believes that Warner ‘deconstructs traditional history to reveal another story, that of the silenced other’ by telling the story of colonization from the native’s point of view. And she shows how Warner rewrites *The Tempest* to ‘fill in the gaps and restore other feminine voices’ not only of Sycorax, but also of Ariel and Miranda.⁵⁰ Zabus also ignores Miranda’s mother when she writes ‘In *Indigo*, womanhood is split into a matriarchal unholy trinity: Ariel-Sycorax-Miranda’.⁵¹ Caroline Cakebread notes how, in her revising of Shakespeare’s play, ‘Warner focuses her attention upon the silent or dead women of *The Tempest*: Miranda’s mother, the absent, silent Claribel, and the Sycorax of

⁴⁷ Warner, ‘The Silence of Sycorax’, p. 265.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Williams-Wanquet, ‘Marina Warner’s *Indigo*’, p. 269.

⁵¹ Zabus, *Tempests after Shakespeare*, p. 140. For a discussion of the revival of Shakespeare’s Sycorax in Warner’s novel, see Chantal Zabus, ‘The Power of Sycorax: Gynocracy in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Marina Warner’s *Indigo*’, in *Voices of Power: Co-operation and Conflict in English Language and Literature*, ed. by Marc Maufort and Jean-Pierre van Noppen (Liège: Liège Language and Literature, 1997), pp. 141-49. See also Julie Sanders, *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth-Century Women Novelists and Appropriation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 132-150.

Prospero's history'.⁵² Here Cakebread refers clearly to Sycorax and Claribel being replaced in *Indigo* 'by female characters who give the novel its focus and power'.⁵³ However, when she discusses the role played by these new female characters in *Indigo*, Cakebread fails to mention Miranda's mother Astrid – Claribel's substitute – when she writes: 'As the main focus of her own novel, Sycorax, Ariel, and Miranda are used by Warner to portray the effects of Prospero's power upon female characters, as each struggles in various ways to overcome the silence imposed upon them by two hierarchical systems, patriarchy and colonialism'.⁵⁴ Tobias Döring chooses to shift the focus to the character of Ariel. He thinks that, despite the fact that Ariel occupies a comparatively short space within *The Tempest* and its rewritings, including *Indigo*, Ariel's role is a mediator between the colonizer and the colonized, which creates a possibility of communication which has been overlooked by other critics.⁵⁵ Coupe merely mentions that Kit 'marries a girl named Astrid, who turns out to be alcoholic'.⁵⁶ This wide disregard of Astrid in *Indigo*'s history of criticism leaves another silenced female figure to which the novel gives a voice unheard, namely the hysteric.

Talking about the history of treatment and analysis of hysteria, Elaine Showalter points out in 1993, '[u]ntil recently, stories about hysteria were told by

⁵² Caroline Cakebread, 'Sycorax Speaks: Marina Warner's *Indigo* and *The Tempest*', in *Transforming Shakespeare: Twentieth-century Women's Re-visions*, ed. by Marianne Novy (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 215-35 (p. 225).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 226.

⁵⁵ Tobias Döring, 'Woman, Foundling, Hyphen: the Figure of Ariel in Marina Warner's *Indigo*', *Oracle*, 974 (2004). He not only sees Ariel 'as an active agent of cross-cultural negotiations', but also finds her figure as a 'foundling and a hyphen' a 'liberating' one 'pointing us towards new forms of social organization' that is 'no longer based on blood relations and ties of family descent, but on social interaction, on adopted familiarity and acquired neighbourhood', pp. v, iv. For a discussion of Ariel's character see also Zabus, 'Mingling and Metamorphing', pp. 124-5.

⁵⁶ Coupe, *Marina Warner*, p. 74.

men, and women were always the victims in these stories rather than the heroines'.⁵⁷ In contrast to the long history of antagonism towards women with hysteria that Showalter traces in her article, recent studies argue that 'hysteria is caused by women's oppressive social roles rather than by their bodies or psyches, and they have sought its sources in cultural myths of femininity and in male domination'.⁵⁸ This kind of argument informs my reading of Astrid's character as a hysteric. With special reference to feminist discussions of Dora, the hysteric patient Freud writes about in *Studies on Hysteria*, Showalter asserts that '[f]eminists saluted the hysterics of the past as heroines of resistance to the patriarchal order', exemplified in the work of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément.⁵⁹ Moreover, Showalter says: 'What we might call the "herstory" of hysteria is the contribution of feminist social historians to this project, in works that concentrate on the misogyny of male physicians and the persecution of female deviants in witch-hunts.'⁶⁰ Warner's novel, I suggest, contributes to this rewriting of the "herstory" of hysteria through the character of Astrid, relating her to the figure of the witch. The fact that she stands for the figure of the hysteric is apparent from the moment we first meet her. We watch Astrid during one of her fits through the eyes of little Miranda:

Her mother was dragging out the kitchen drawers one by one and banging them in again, till she jerked at one so hard it fell out of the dresser altogether and the cooking utensils inside crashed on to the worn lino in a twisted heap of knives and ladles and pierced spoons and potato mashers and

⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter, 'Hysteria, Feminism and Gender', in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. by Sander L. Gilman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 286-336 (p. 287). See also Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1985). Warner has written a review of this book in which she writes: 'Showalter does not perhaps look closely enough at the strategic opportunities madness could present to women'. '[C]ould there be a sense in which women could rise "armed with madness"?', she asks. This question echoes Cixous, and it is this idea that Warner tries to investigate through the character of Astrid. See Marina Warner, 'In the Mirror of Madness: Elaine Showalter' (1987), *Sings and Wonders*, pp. 158-62 (p.161).

⁵⁸ Showalter, 'Hysteria', p. 287.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 331-2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 287.

meat-mincing discs of different gauges. [...] She could be wild, as Miranda knew, and there were many tools scattered within her reach. So Kit made no move to assuage her. (*I*, 15)

This detailed description of the kitchen utensils as objects of the wild Astrid's anger reflects the condition of female imprisonment within the domestic life. Astrid's dissatisfaction with the patriarchal institution of marriage is emphasized through her constant anger and her repeated fights with her husband under the burden of their financial problems.

Through Sycorax and Astrid, I argue, Warner tells the untold stories of the witch and the hysteric as female figures sentenced to exclusion by the patriarchal symbolic order because of their inability to conform to social myths of femininity and motherhood:

If women begin to want their turn at telling this history, if they take the relay from men by putting myths into words (since this is how historical and cultural evolution will take place) [...] it will necessarily be from other points of view. [...] It is a history, taken from what is lost within us of oral tradition, of legends and myths – a history arranged the way tale-telling women tell it.⁶¹

Like Cixous and Clément, '[i]n telling [this history], in developing it, even in plotting it', Warner 'seek[s] to undo it, to overturn it, to reveal it, to *expose* it'.⁶² Drawing on the female tradition of storytelling, Warner writes her own version of a history of female oppression, calling attention to its absence from male history books. To account for this absence, Warner gives the silenced females their voices back so that they can tell their own stories of suffering, guilt and alienation. Cixous and Clément explain that 'societies do not succeed in offering everyone the same way of fitting into the symbolic order'. The people who are 'afflicted with what we

⁶¹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

call madness, anomaly, perversion' are those who are 'afflicted with a dangerous symbolic mobility'.⁶³ However, when women 'who are elsewhere bearers of the greatest norm, that of reproduction, embody *also* the anomaly', as witches or hysterics, 'the cracks in an overall system' start to show.⁶⁴ Women's dangerous status comes from the fact that they are 'allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances, their regular periods, which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder'.⁶⁵ As women elude any definite representation, and they cannot see themselves through the male logic of either/or, they pose a serious threat to the symbolic and social structures of patriarchy. Therefore, they have to be repressed and this repression lies behind the ambiguity of the feminine role in patriarchy. Calling up the marginalized female figures, the novel underlines a subversive potential in their very inability to act in accordance with social expectations. What most significantly links the figure of the hysteric to that of the witch is the fact that they share a history of repression under patriarchy. Thus, '[t]he heart of the [the newly told] story linking the figures of sorceress and hysteric lies in the subversive weight attributed to the return of the repressed'.⁶⁶ The witch and the hysteric 'epitomize a universal female oppression', and when they return they will be imbued with the same kind of subversive power.⁶⁷ In one scene, in *Indigo*, Astrid's powerful entry into the party disturbs everybody else: as she 'flung her hair back on to her shoulders and patted it with a self-caressing movement of her fingers' so that 'the company hung back from her'. And she brings to their minds 'a dark hybrid that lives on water, half-mermaid, half-stormy petrel, like the woman- faced feathered

⁶³ Ibid, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 7-8. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Showalter, 'Hysteria', p. 286.

siren of myth who blow about on the wind and plummet down to call the sailors to come their way' (*I*, 57-8). She is able to disturb others and to evoke images of powerful mythic female figures possessing supernatural abilities.

Moreover, later in this scene a direct connection between Sycorax, the witch, and Astrid, the hysteric, is established, reflecting Cixous and Clément's idea that 'the hysteric, resumes and assumes the memories' of the witch.⁶⁸ Astrid 'had a glimpse in her mind's eye of a volcano and a sweep of beach, palm trees bending under the trade winds' (*I*, 58). It is a memory of Sycorax's island which she has never visited. Talking about the witch and the hysteric, Cixous and Clément assert that 'we can follow the thread connecting them, or rather, we can read them in the same scene, caught in the same networks of language'.⁶⁹ Assuming the role of the witch, Astrid arrives late to baby Xanthe's christening party, and she curses the little baby 'with the most bitter curse she could dream up. It was a simple one, and she was confident that it wouldn't need much priming to work. It was easily visited on the golden girls she knew' (*I*, 59). Astrid 'had only imagined that she had not been asked to the christening'; this is reminiscent of the evil fairy in 'Sleeping Beauty' who curses the princess to eternal sleep (*I*, 27). Unlike the evil fairy, Astrid curses not only the little girl, but also all the Everards. She starts with Sir Anthony: 'May he lose everything he loves'. May Gillian 'find all doors closed against her when she most wants them open. I hate Kit's vague and hopeless loyalty, I hate his forgiveness. May he burn and burn – for love and lust and fury at me', she curses (*I*, 58). And like a secret witch, 'Astrid ha[s] made up the sequence of imprecations as carefully as an inventory and ha[s] gone over them in her mind, checking each one was firmly uttered and could be performed; then she'[s] chuckled to herself and

⁶⁸ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

crossed her legs and settled to her advent at the Everards' (*I*, 59). This is reminiscent of the power of utterance traditionally associated with witches and of their subversive laughter, and this reinforces the connection between Sycorax and Astrid.

Astrid's rebellion is expressed through her hysterical fits and her subversive festive laughter. Analyzing hysterical women's fits, Cixous and Clément write:

These women, to escape the misfortune of their economic and familial exploitation, chose to suffer spectacularly before an audience of men: it is an attack of spectacle, a crisis of suffering. And the attack is also a festival, a celebration of their guilt used as a weapon, a story of seduction. All that, within the family.⁷⁰

This idea of the festive revolt, of the show of suffering and mutiny performed by the body of the hysteric is best exemplified in the following scene. Astrid enters the party of Xanthe's christening 'in nothing but her underwear'. She wears 'the kind of black thing a French whore would wear'. Then,

Miranda came into the hall beside her father saw him rush at her mother and grab the coat she had taken off and wrap her up in it again. [...] He was pushing her along the corridor towards the kitchen, and she was leaning on him, impeding him, but nevertheless complying, as she went on babbling, 'You don't need to shove me, I'm coming. But I'm all wet, this coat's on the wrong way, ugh, can't you see I don't want it on. I look terrific, it makes a gorgeous dress. You gave it to me, darling, you like it, you know you do. [...] Kit [...] tossed his wife on to the bed, all legs and arms flailing as she still struggled to get free of the coat [...]. Astrid, [...] was now in a *fit of giggles*. (*I*, 59-60; emphasis added)

Astrid's broken, nonsensical speech and her twisted weak body speak of a history of women's suffering and oppression. In Astrid's laughter we can hear the laughter of Sycorax, the laughter of the Medusa and the laughter of all wild women in literature. It is a laughter that 'breaks up, breaks out, splashes over'; it is a laughter that has the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

power to undermine.⁷¹ Astrid's liberating laughter echoes the laughter of Carter's Fevvers and Byatt's Eugenia.⁷²

In what follows, I show how the novel uses the hysterical Astrid to assert active female sexuality usually eclipsed by women's productive function and to question one of the patriarchal myths that confine women, namely motherhood. In my discussion of the novel's attempt to demythologize the myth of motherhood, I will rely on Rich's vigorous criticism of motherhood as a manipulative patriarchal social institution. It is worth noting here that the novel stands in direct contrast with *The Tempest* in its emphasis on female sexuality. On more than one occasion, we find an explicit expression of sexual practices from a female point of view, whereas in the original play, as Ann Thompson puts it, the 'text seems, on the one hand, to deny the importance – and even in some cases the presence – of female characters, but which simultaneously attributes enormous power to female chastity and fertility' and not active female sexuality.⁷³ *Indigo* seems to suggest the existence of forms of female sexuality other than the violent male version; 'you may want to bang like a shithouse door in a thunderstorm', Xanthe tells Miranda, 'I actually don't like shagging. Penetration, abandon, they're not my line' (*I*, 306). Like Byatt in *Possession*, Warner seems to reject Freud's theory of penis envy on which he builds his views about the construction of the sexuality of the 'normal' woman which he equates with passivity.⁷⁴ In one version of the story of Manjiku, Warner seems to introduce the idea of womb envy: 'What Manjiku wants – more than food,

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 33.

⁷² This festive laughter is linked to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque.

⁷³ Ann Thompson, "'Miranda, Where is Your Sister?': Reading Shakespeare's *The Tempest*", in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Susan Sellers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 45-56 (p. 50).

⁷⁴ See Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institution of Psycho-analysis, 1964), pp. 145-169 (p. 150).

more than drink, more than sweet life itself – is to have a child of his own. [...] he wants to be a mother, to bring the child out of his mouth, spit out a little Manjiku' (*I*, 224). It is significant that the first syllable of this monster's name is 'Man'. This story suggests that it is men who are driven by their envy and fear of women's abilities, not the other way around.

I argue that, through the character of Astrid, the novel also seems to challenge Freud's pattern of the development of femininity that replaces female active sexuality with the function of productivity: 'The feminine situation is only established, however, if the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby, if, that is, a baby takes the place of a penis in accordance with an ancient symbolic equivalence', Freud declares.⁷⁵ Astrid manages to escape this trap, and to subvert those Freudian assumptions manifested in social myths of femininity and motherhood in more ways than one, by asserting active female sexuality and separating it from the productive function. From the beginning of the novel we are told that 'Astrid would have no more children; when she bore Miranda so much had gone wrong the doctors had suggested taking out her tubes and most of the rest as well' (*I*, 27). Astrid, however, wanted to be in control of her own body; 'she had managed to keep some of her insides, while thoroughly terrorised into sweating she's taken every precaution not to conceive again'. Thus, the function of the womb in Astrid's case is no longer associated with reproduction. Nevertheless, Astrid's sexual life remains active. Her husband 'was understanding about it, didn't mind making love in safe ways, was rather good at it, truth to tell, enjoyed licking and sucking her with patience and at length till all her restraints were loosed and she

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 126.

flowed for him' (*I*, 27). So Astrid succeeds in separating the sexual and the reproductive functions of her body.

Suggesting that female sexuality need not be dominated by male views, nor practised within social institutions, Astrid says to the nuns: "Think of all that energy that's being lost suppressing urges. Why not play with yourself? God gave you the equipment. You may not want relationships, marriage, the responsibilities, the social duties, the oppression of men, oh yes, I can see that, the tyranny of being attractive, of losing your looks" (*I*, 286). Her sexual views are empowering for women in their emphasis on active female sexuality. She prefers liberating powerful female sexuality that is usually depicted as monstrous to the confining myth of innocent female beauty. Moreover, Astrid's words seem to comment on her own situation as a hysteric as she hints at the female dilemma of being entrapped within the myths of male representations of women, and the difficult conditions of their real life. Investigating hysteria in the late nineteenth century, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes:

The discontinuity between the roles of courted young woman and pain-bearing, self-sacrificing wife and mother, the realities of an unhappy marriage, the loneliness and chagrin of spinsterhood, may all have made the petulant infantilism and narcissistic self-assertion of the hysteric a necessary social alternative to women who felt unfairly deprived of their promised social role and who had few strengths with which to adapt to a more trying one.⁷⁶

Warner's Astrid, although she lives in the first half of the twentieth century, seems to be a victim of similar social conditions. Thus, her hysterical behaviour can be read as a protest against suppression and exploitation of women as wives and mothers. The way the patriarchal society turns women's ability to mother into a trap

⁷⁶ Quoted in Showalter, 'Hysteria', p. 303.

that deprives them of their active sexuality and alienates them from themselves is symbolically presented in the story told by Serafine by the end of the novel. Talking to Astrid about Miranda and her new baby, Serafine says, 'I heard a story these days going round about love that would break your heart, Miss Astrid', Serafine begins. 'It's about a way you can catch a tigress. Have you never heard it then?' (*I*, 400). The story is about how maternal love, under patriarchy, is turned into a device for containing a powerful woman's aptitudes.

The 'beauty of a tigress', in Serafine's story stands for a powerful woman (*I*, 400). Her 'springy and wide [...] step' expresses the openness of her potential, and the 'glossy and deep [...] fur' symbolizes her innate active sexual desire (*I*, 400). The male 'hunters', for hunters are usually males, uses traditional ways to 'catch big creatures' from 'nets that fell from the trees' to a 'pit covered with greenery' (*I*, 400-1). 'But', as Serafine puts it, 'for a tigress they've a different trap: a simple ordinary thing' (*I*, 401). Significantly, this thing is nothing but a mirror. The image of the mirror in fairy tales, and in literature in general, is often related to the way the person in front of it, who is often a woman, perceives herself. And it is usually related to a woman's vanity.⁷⁷ However, there is a meaningful twist in Serafine's story. When the male hunters 'toss[ed] this especial mirror in the tigress's path and then hide themselves downwind', so that they appear to have no hand in this conspiracy, the tigress 'finds the round glass and sees herself in it' (*I*, 401). But '[i]n little', for this mirror has a special function. Instead of seeing herself in the mirror, the tigress is deluded to see a cub, 'maybe even her own cub' (*I*, 401). Serafine explains that 'this kind of mirror', the mirror of motherhood, 'has a trick of shrinking things it sees': it has a reductive effect (*I*, 401). The reflection the tigress,

⁷⁷ Janet Pérez, 'Forms and Functions of the Mirror Image in Contemporary Spanish Women Fiction', in *Writing Women: Essays on the Representation of Women in Contemporary Western Literature*, ed. by Alastair Hurst (Victoria: Antipodas Monographs, 2002), pp. 7-30 (p. 7).

woman, sees in this mirror does not ‘have any smell or fur’ so that all signs of her own sexuality disappear (*I*, 401). The tigress now is ‘all puzzled, she pats the ball with her paw and it pats her back, still in little, she pounces on it, playfully, and it pounces back ... she *gets involved*, she doesn’t hear the net rustle in the branches above her’. She forgets about herself and gives all her attention to the little cub. While she is all absorbed by the consuming maternal role, ‘the hunters let that net drop on her and take her prisoner’ (*I*, 401). Under the illusion of motherhood she becomes a captive of men. Thus, to contain women within marginal roles in society patriarchy deceives women into conceiving of themselves only as mothers with certain duties, and denies them any other identity.

Referring to the hidden politics behind the institution of motherhood in a patriarchal society, Rich affirms that ‘[t]he myth that motherhood is “private and personal” is the deadliest myth we have to destroy, and we have to begin destroying it in ourselves’.⁷⁸ That is why Rich declares that ‘we will need to disabuse ourselves of the myths of motherhood, of the idea of its sacredness, its protected status, its automatic validation of us as women’.⁷⁹ Through Astrid’s rebellious character *Indigo* seems to attempt to free women from the guilt and suffering in their desperate attempts to meet a false ideal of motherhood designed to confine them and contain their abilities. In her mothering of Miranda, Astrid challenges the image of the selfless all-sacrificing mother she is supposed to be. Miranda herself thinks that ‘Astrid loathed the idea of her very existence’ (*I*, 53). This can be understood when viewed in the light of Rich’s analysis of motherhood in a patriarchal society, ‘[u]nder that institution [of motherhood], all women are seen primarily as mothers;

⁷⁸ Adrienne Rich, ‘Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap’ (1978), in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (1979) (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 259-73 (p. 271).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

all mothers are expected to experience motherhood unambivalently and in accordance with patriarchal values; and the “nonmothering” woman is seen as deviant’.⁸⁰ This deviation in Astrid’s character is part and parcel of her hysterical condition, and is the source of her strength as a rebellious figure. She is unable, or unwilling, to sacrifice herself on the altar of motherhood. Astrid, far from being the ‘natural’ mother patriarchy would like to imagine her to be, is not always there for her child. Walking in the streets of London in a foggy night, Miranda ‘was crying too and wanted to take her mother’s hand and hear her voice; but Astrid’s spirit was somewhere else, while her body made the motions of walking’ (*I*, 63). Her needs and desires as a woman do not coincide with those of her child. Thus through the characters of Xanthe and Astrid, the novel demythologizes myths of the self-sacrificing motherly love and reveals the social politics and suppressive power structure that lies behind the myth of motherhood. This project of demythologizing myths of love and motherhood continues in *The Leto Bundle*.

Starting the Journey of Suffering: Leto the Outcast Mother

I argue that the tension between the reality of women’s submission and exploitation, on the one hand, and the duality of the mythic images of the monstrous female and the scared mother, on the other hand, which we have already seen in *Indigo*, is what *The Leto Bundle* presents in the different versions of Leto’s story. In an interview, Warner talks about the essential role myth plays in *The Leto Bundle*: ‘This book, more than some of my others, is trying to enact my theory of myth. It’s trying to say that myth exists around us and it is part of our being, our way of being

⁸⁰ Adrienne Rich, ‘Motherhood in Bondage’ (1976), in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (1979) (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 195-8 (p. 197).

in the world'.⁸¹ Indeed, the whole novel is based on the Greek myth of the Titaness Leto who gets pregnant by Zeus. As a punishment, Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, has denied Leto a place to give birth and condemned her to eternal exile. After a hard journey of suffering, Leto manages to give birth to her twin children, Apollo and Artemis, on the floating island of Delos.⁸² In *The Leto Bundle*, Leto slips through time and her story is retold in different versions during different periods of history. Significantly, in each version, despite her exclusion, Leto is depicted as a harmless victim. Although some of the traditional mythic versions portrayed Leto as Zeus' lover, implying that she consents to his desire, in the novel, the status of the mythic Leto as a rape victim is emphasized as the following description of their union shows:

When Leto was flying from her lover, and the god, now man, now dove, now fish, now hawk, was pursuing her, they had skimmed and swooped over the surface of the water together in their long, hard duel, and it was when his strong wings had beaten to enfold her and his extended neck had gripped her and his soft silken breast had pressed her to the ground under him that she had opened to him; and conceived.⁸³

Leto is forced into this affair and then abandoned by the rapist to face the consequences on her own and to carry the heavy burden of mothering two children with no place to go to and no one to support her.

It is hard to fail to recognize Leto's role in the novel as a victim. Sara Maitland, who objects to what she sees as Warner's lack of 'passionate

⁸¹ Rob Irving, 'Interview with Marina Warner', "On Ghosts and Ground Plans, Nanoverse and *The Leto Bundle*", *Nthposition*, (April 2 2003) <<http://www.nthposition.com/onghostsandground.php>> [Accessed June 2 2008].

⁸² Edward Tripp, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1988), pp. 344-5.

⁸³ Marina Warner, *The Leto Bundle* (2001) (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 10. All subsequent page references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *LB*, after quotations in the text.

commitments to any of her characters’, thinks that Leto is ‘obviously well placed iconically to represent the global woman victim - exile, refugee, immigrant, mother’.⁸⁴ This role of the figure of the victim played by Leto in her wanderings informs the readings of the novel as a celebration of the outcast. Coupe relates the novel to Warner’s book *No Go the Bogeyman*, especially its discussion of the concept of scapegoat figures, and he reads it as a ‘sustained celebration of that most familiar of contemporary scapegoats, the refugee’.⁸⁵ For him, ‘Leto is the recognizable icon of all victims of this postmodern, globalized era, in which nothing is sacred’.⁸⁶ In his analysis of the novel, Coupe also touches upon two of the recurrent themes in Warner’s novels that I have discussed in *Indigo* and will investigate in detail in *The Leto Bundle*. The first is the theme of rewriting history to tell the story of the excluded female. Coupe notes that *The Leto Bundle* shows in a manner similar to *Indigo* how ‘intimately past, present and future are interwoven; but more than ever, we are aware of a broad and deep compassion, willing to explore and celebrate those whom ‘History’ (that grand narrative which we designate by a capital H) has markedly ignored’.⁸⁷ In addition, Coupe observes, ‘the tension between the experience and the representation of women informs this work; but what is new is the attempt to dignify that experience by a defiant rewriting of mythology’.⁸⁸ Warner turns Leto, the rejected mythic figure, into a goddess as a patron of all outcasts.

The second of Warner’s recurrent themes that strongly reappears in *The Leto Bundle* is that of motherhood. As Coupe puts it, ‘*The Leto Bundle* is precisely about

⁸⁴ Sara Maitland, ‘Engaging in only one sense’, *The Spectator*, (June 9 2001) <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/19532/engaging-in-only-one-sense.shtml>> [Accessed June 1 2008].

⁸⁵ Coupe, *Marina Warner*, p. 106.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the denial of the rights of a mother, whose only offence is to survive and to protect her children'.⁸⁹ At the beginning of the novel, the narrator speaks of Leto's 'sense of deep exile, of estrangement from her own self', looking at her two children after giving birth. She is now thinking of the possibilities of their survival (*LB*, 11). As we have seen in *Indigo*, the birth of the child entails the symbolic, and in many cases the actual, death of the mother. This idea is presented again through a story told to Leto by her nurse when she was a little girl. 'The pelican', little Leto was told, 'might peck her own breast till the blood flowed into the open beaks of her young' (*LB*, 9). *The Leto Bundle*, however, poses the question whether this should be the case and argues the possibility of other forms of existence that do not entail the survival of the children at the expense of their mother. Leto secretly rejects this image of the self-sacrificing mother as 'inwardly she thought the pelican sacrificed herself to excess and folly – a weakened or dead mother was no good to anyone. Surely there were sounder strategies for survival' (*LB*, 9). Leto does not take her nurse's story for granted, and she will try to write her own story as a mother. Leto tries to break the image of the all-giving mother in her relationship with her children at the very beginning of her journey. Faced with the two little creatures, she thinks to herself that '[s]he was not prepared for their neediness. Shell and bone, albumen, lymph and milk: could the three of them survive by exchanges of their substance, their fluids, their flesh' (*LB*, 9). She decides that she is not going to follow the pelican's example. Other creatures cope with each other in better ways, Leto thinks:

[T]he little sea-mouse lifts the thick eyelashes of the whale so that it can see where it is going, and in return is allowed to ride on the whale's back and share its feeding grounds; the tiny toothpicker fish that swims into the jaws of huge ocean predators and cleans their triple rows rottenness and toothache

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 111.

for its host, so the shark or stingray or whatever realises where its best interests lie and does not snap, but lets the small fry prosper. This was how she would adapt, how she would struggle and survive. (*LB*, 10-11)

Observing other creatures in nature and how they build their relationships, Leto realizes that the traditional pattern of self-sacrificing relationship between a mother and her children is not an innate natural one.

This rejection of the myth of the all-sacrificing mother is coupled, as in *Indigo*, with an exposure of the myth of exploitative male love but not of active female sexuality. Abandoned by her male lover, Leto is rescued by a strong female creature who is herself a mother. Lycia the she-wolf, who is the only creature to come to Leto's help in her time of need, disapproves of Leto's disappointment with her lover. 'He said he loved me', Leto complains, '[h]e promised to take care of me – he said he would always love me' (*LB*, 29). Disillusioned with the myth of love the she-wolf says: 'Love! You don't have to love someone to enjoy them! You humans justify your actions with grand passions and grander promises. What hypocrisy, in the name of Love! Another god who's full of nothing but excuses' (*LB*, 29). In a very direct message, Lycia warns Leto:

Try not to believe a word men say. They're different, different from us creatures, different from you people, different from women, from mothers, from our kind. And part of their power lies in your belief in that power, remember. Don't give them that satisfaction. I forbid you to love, to believe in love, to let that kind of love rule you'. (*LB*, 29)

It is the kind of love that gives men absolute power over women, '[n]ever make yourself needier than you are, and the love of men does that, believe me', the she-wolf asserts (*LB*, 29). It is the kind of love which ends with abandonment, actual or emotional, to leave women on their own face to face with their responsibilities as

mothers that is discussed in the novel. Although women must be cautious so that they do not get used in the name of love, they should not give up hope; '[d]on't let any of these troubles put you off living', the wolf urged Leto, '[o]r put you off sex either, for that matter! (*LB*, 28). Lycia's rejection of this concept of exploitive love does not entail that women abandon their sexuality.

The Power of Naming

Warner has spoken about the significant influence of Georges Dumézil, the French anthropologist, on her work on myth and I argue that Warner has deployed Dumézil's theory of tripartite society in *The Leto Bundle*. In his study of the implications of myths he suggests that they encode 'a tripartite structure of society'.⁹⁰ Dumézil, Warner explains, 'divided the areas myths address into fertility (the continuation of the species, and the control of generation and children), physical power (the authority of the warrior, and sometimes the king) and sovereignty (which includes priestly authority, magic, and art)'.⁹¹ This scheme proved to be very influential on Warner's work. It 'shaped my line of inquiry, into contemporary struggles for control of women and children, into current images of masculine power; and into the ways history and national identity mesh in tales of strangers, of enemies, of outsiders', she declares.⁹² Leto is significantly presented as a female outcast who poses no threat to her society and whose only power lays in the reproductive function of her body. For Dumézil, Warner explains, 'every human society allots power in three different areas: warrior power, wisdom power and

⁹⁰ Warner, *Managing Monsters*, p xiv. See Georges Dumézil, *Camillus: a Study of Indo-European Religion as Roman History*, ed. by Udo Strutynski, trans. by Annette Aronowicz and Josette Bryson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

fertility, the control of the future through the children'.⁹³ The fertility zone, Warner goes on, 'is usually contested through women's bodies. Sometimes women have power over their own bodies and over the future, and sometimes they are wards of different powers, of different men - they're the wards of their husbands or brothers or fathers'.⁹⁴ And Warner sees Leto as 'a figure of that area of contested power' for when 'she has a love affair and is raped, so the children are [...] hybrids, they're mixed up, they belong to the wrong social group, so she's cast out because it's an illegitimate progeny'.⁹⁵ Warner relies on this idea in her depiction of Leto who turns into an outcast for having illegitimate babies. This account gives sense to the scene where Leto and her children are violently attacked by unknown men while she is merely trying to get some water for all of them to drink. Being a victim of rape, Leto and her children are rejected and they are being called names by the group of men. Getting hold of Leto's baby, a man says: 'Oooh, ooh, what a pretty little creature! Who'd ever think your mother was a whore?' (*LB*, 60). This is related to the creation of the social myth of motherhood as a strategy to preserve the current power structure as discussed by Rich: 'Motherhood is "sacred" so long as its offspring are "legitimate" - that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother'.⁹⁶ Although Leto is the embodiment of a mother seeking nothing but her babies' survival she does not fit the image of 'sacred' motherhood, for her babies have no legitimate father. She is far from sacred in these men's eyes. She and her 'kind' pose a threat to the power structure that sustains male domination; one of the men protests 'teaching our women your dirty ways-' (*LB*, 60). As Cixous and Clément put it, '[m]en's cleverness was in passing themselves

⁹³ Warner, 'On Ghosts'.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 42.

off as fathers and “repatriating” women’s fruits as their own. A naming trick’.⁹⁷ Leto is named a filthy ‘whore’ and her babies are called ‘runt’ and ‘brats’ only because they were not conceived within the acceptable social institution of marriage; ‘they don’t belong’, as one of the men puts it (*LB*, 59). These men have the power of naming which they can use to govern women like Leto.

Leto’s position as a rejected outsider and her naming as a prostitute render her vulnerable to men’s exploitation. We are told that ‘[o]ne of the men grabbed Leto as she struggled to catch her child; he clutched at her breasts under her wet clothes, twisted her round by them and pushed his face into her mouth’ (*LB*, 60). And then ‘[o]ne man tussled now to pin her legs, another at her shoulders to turn her over. Another breathed hard in her face; hands paddled between her thighs. Their knives shone’ (*LB*, 61). This reflects the dehumanization and objectifying process Leto and her body experienced at the hands of her assaulters. Leto tries to save her baby who is being tossed among her torturers; ‘[s]he jerked back and pushed, using her nails, her teeth, until at last, with a supreme effort she leapt to catch her daughter and holding her close, fell to the ground, crouched over her’ (*LB*, 60). The emphasis on Leto’s desperate resistance in the face of these men’s merciless savagery reveals the lack of justice behind their logic: ‘A blow caught her full in the small of the back; they were beating her with something whippy and wet and flat – the rushes they had been gathering in the lagoon. Their panting rose as they lashed her; she curled up more tightly over her baby’ (*LB*, 60). The ruthlessness of these men’s behaviour highlights Leto’s helplessness and her lack of control over her own body. Commenting on this strategy of naming, Cixous and Clément say: ‘There’s work to be done [...] against the pervasive masculine urge to judge, diagnose, digest,

⁹⁷ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly*, p. 101.

name'.⁹⁸ Through Leto's suffering, the novel seems to reveal this masculine urge to name as a strategy of domination and exploitation of women. I take this a step further and talk about the female body as a contested terrain of power through the theme of rape and silence as presented in the novel. I agree with Lisa Propst when she says that '[r]ather than depict women as helpless victims of sexual violence, Warner portrays women actively responding to violation through new forms of creativity and self-expression'.⁹⁹ But rather than focusing on the rape victim's conflicting desire in rape scenes by Warner, as Propst does, I will concentrate on the significance of this new form of expression which gives the rape victim a voice to tell her story. Under the title 'A Witch Duel in the Hellenistic World' Warner gives us an account of the rape scene, showing how Leto loses control over her own body by being forced into the sexual act, and how she regains control by breaking the silence of rape victims. This mythic theme of the stereotypical silent rape victim is discussed by Warner in many of her works. Warner discusses the myth of Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this myth, Tereus rapes his sister-in-law Philomela, then cuts her tongue so that 'she can no longer scald him with it'.¹⁰⁰ Philomela, however, succeeds in breaking her silence as she turns into a singing nightingale. 'The classical myth of violated and muted Philomela', Warner explains, 'gruesomely dramatizes the relation of utterance and freedom, silence and deprivation, song and desire'.¹⁰¹ In *The Leto Bundle*, Leto is able to use her own way of metamorphosing to tell her own story.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p 51.

⁹⁹ Lisa Propst, 'Bloody Chambers and Labyrinths of Desire: Sexual Violence in Marina Warner's Fairy Tales and Myths', *Marvels & Tales*, 22-1 (2008), 125-206 (p. 126).

¹⁰⁰ Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), p. 225.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

The scene starts with Leto actively flirting with the god as ‘she found that she was curving her body towards the slow softness of his voice’ (*LB*, 104). But when her lover ‘brought her face to his dark, hair-curled belly, and held her there and begged her ‘[m]ilk me’, she resisted; ‘she gagged and tore herself away from the suffocating closeness of his heat, his smell, his wanting’ (*LB*, 104). Her lover insists in his chasing and Leto tries, in vain, to escape until ‘her strength was waning in her wingtips’ (*LB*, 104). The god is too strong for her to defeat and ‘she dropped, suddenly, in a flurry of feathers, as if shot from the sky; shrunk into a small ball of quasi-tender dappledness, cooing as she squatted down in the dust, fluttering and dragging a wing to plead her weakness’ (*LB*, 104). Here, the god’s flirting turns into a sadistic brutal assault “‘I know these tricks,” he answered, mocking her, with a flash of pleasure in his round shining eye as he caught her in his claws and pierced her here and there, breast, lips, vulva, buttocks, with his curved falcon beak and his sharp talons’ (*LB*, 104). Despite Leto’s pleading and bleeding her lover forced her into sexual union. The story, however, does not end here; Warner writes the end with a twist by giving Leto the power of expression, challenging the god’s expectation: ‘He hauled her; she hung, a dead weight, dripping, *mute*, and just as he felt that he had at last vanquished her as was his due’ (*LB*, 105; emphasis added). Just when it seems that the story has ended and Leto has given up to the will of her rapist in silence, she collects her powers and decides to break her muteness: ‘she sucked the last of her reserves from her body, summoning all her reserves [...] and flung their full mass of energy at him’ (*LB*, 105). Leto has stopped believing in the power of her rapist and thus she is now able to face him: ‘*He was nothing but a man, and a man well past his first youth at that, and she now knew how to entangle him in her flesh, flesh that was all mouth, fringed about with lips and tongue to lick and*

swallow, to suck and consume' (*LB*, 105; emphasis added). By symbolically turning into a big mouth, Leto's body is going to speak, and through her flesh she will write her story for the coming generations to read: 'She closed the waving tentacles of her new form around his spent energies and with a last throes of her powers, clouded the water that lapped them in the musky jet of her black ink (*LB*, 105). As Propst puts it, '[h]er new shape symbolizes creative power. She is all brain and limbs, which she can use to run, grip, or write'.¹⁰² Thus, by reviving this mythic figure and retelling her story, the novel tries to tell the story of rape from the victim's point of view. Moreover, this ability to tell her story seems to be the very source of Leto's empowerment.

Warner talks about Leto as one of 'a host of girls and nymphs who are raped by the Olympians, who are then condemned for this pollution to terrible punishments'.¹⁰³ For Warner, these mythic figures

prefigure [...] all the women with bundles, the scattered, fleeing figures on the roads of Europe and of Asia and of Africa. But what is *unexpected and important* is that these female heroines of ancient mythology *speak of their sufferings*. They figure, crucially in the imaginary past of humanity; they are the founders of culture.¹⁰⁴

These are wronged women who have the power to tell their stories. This ability to tell the story of rape, of naming it, is what differentiates the character of Leto in this version of her story from that of the powerless refugee Ella who is also a victim of rape, as I will discuss in detail later. In the light of this argument, Propst seems to give little importance to Leto's ability to tell her story, 'Leto's creative power is limited. Like Leda, and like Ovid's Thetis, she achieves self-expression and

¹⁰² Propst, 'Bloody Chambers', p. 135.

¹⁰³ Marina Warner, 'Coda: Who's Sorry Now? Personal Stories, Public Apologies', in *Signs and Wonders*, pp. 459-80 (pp. 465-6).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 466. Emphasis added.

transforms herself but is nonetheless violated'.¹⁰⁵ It might not be possible to get rid of rape as a violent form of male domination over women, but it is absolutely necessary to find ways of telling the story of rape victims. Moreover, by telling her own story, Leto's offspring will no longer be a token of her sin but a witness of her victimization: 'On their downy bodies, beneath the first chick feathers, in the starred interlacing of their epidermis, there will be tiny calligraphy, the spoor of their inky matrix from their mother, the clutterfish, who squirted the sepia at her lover during the rape when they were conceived' (*LB*, 106). So ink can be one of those liquids a mother and her children can exchange to relate the story of her rape and her resistance. From now on, as Cixous would say, she 'writes in white ink', telling about the suffering of mothers previously obscured by male history.¹⁰⁶

Demythologizing Female Monstrosity: Leto, Medusa and Medea

I argue that, like Carter and Byatt, Warner recalls powerful mythic figures, such as Medusa and Medea, to celebrate female power, and to highlight the rebellious aspect of her heroine's character. At the same time she tries to reveal women's entrapment within social myths of female monstrosity and the sacrificing mother. Warner's novel seems to expose the confining scenario where 'the sole alternative to the *mater dolorosa*- the eternally suffering and suppliant mother as epitomized by the Virgin- must be the Medusa whose look turns men to stone' as Rich puts it.¹⁰⁷ These tensions between the image of the monstrous female and sacrificing mother are explored through the character of Leto. By following Leto in her journey through history, I will investigate Warner's use of myths and fairy tales to reveal the workings of the social myth of Motherhood in the light of Rich's ideas.

¹⁰⁵ Propst, 'Bloody Chambers', p. 135.

¹⁰⁶ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 251.

¹⁰⁷ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 168.

At the beginning of the novel Leto is depicted as a rebellious character who is capable of asserting her autonomy. Under the weight of her maternal responsibilities, however, she gradually loses this powerful side of her character, and turns into an emblem of the powerless, self-sacrificing mother. We first have a glimpse of the mutinous Leto when she expresses her resentment of ‘the patience of the pack of ponies and other, well-trained horses as they waited for their feed at the trough’ (*LB*, 156). She wishes to hit them, ‘[b]ut hitting only made them meeker’ she believes. And she asks herself ‘[w]ould they never rebel, toss the hay from the mangers in contempt, refuse to be pacified’ (*LB*, 156). She asserts her rejection of their submission, ‘[t]hat is why I am not the same; Leto told herself, that is why a girl is not a mare. I will not learn patience’ (*LB*, 156). Leto refuses to be tamed and conform to social expectations. This rebellious side of Leto’s character shows itself best when she becomes a mother-to-be and faces the threat of death. We are told that ‘[t]he spirit of the child bride, once cowed by the violence at her nuptials, was now fired up by her impending motherhood; like a mother cat who crawls away to litter, she spat and hissed at the assassin they sent to fetch her’ (*LB*, 155-6). The scene then gets very violent as Leto, when attacked by Karim, ‘took advantage of his awkwardness and was able to sink her teeth into his sword arm until the bone under the muscle stopped her bite. She clamped her jaws tight as she could and held on through his howling till the gouts of blood in her mouth sickened her’ (*LB*, 156). This beastly defense of Leto recalls the image of the monstrous female. At the end of this fight, the narrator tells us that ‘[l]ying in the rocky place where he had left her, the young woman laughed’ (*LB*, 157). Leto’s laughter, like Astrid’s in *Indigo*, Eugenia’s in Byatt’s *Morpho Eugenia* and Fevvers’s in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, echoes the subversive laughter of Cixous’s Medusa.

Leto is often related to monstrous female figures that struck fear in the hearts of the sailors. She is connected to a witch figure: 'If I wasn't a man of good common sense, I'd say she'd bewitched you', said Winwalloe to Skipwith, and on another occasion, he calls her a 'common female criminal' (*LB*, 214). Her look reminds Strugwell of 'the statue of Sarah Malcolm, the indoor servant who'd murdered her mistress and two of her fellow servants', the matter which alarms him (*LB*, 197). The horror Leto's look strikes in him relates her to the figure of the Medusa who is interpreted by Freud as an emblem of castration, as I have discussed before. Other mythic figures used to describe Leto also relates her to destructive female seduction, for she is seen as a 'siren', or as one of the 'mermaids whose songs no man could hear without tearing off his clothes and leaping into the sea to reach them' (*LB*, 197-8). This emphasis on Leto's sexual threat seems at odds with her position as a helpless victim. However, the novel suggests that Leto only serves as a reflection of the men's own fears and desires, as Skipwith explains,

Sirens aren't admiring themselves, they're mirroring the world and other people in the world. They lure you and enthrall you by showing you your own face in their mirror – this must be what Homer meant when he said they'd knowledge of the future and were fatal to men. Narcissus wasn't in love with his own image – he thought it was someone else – that's why he became besotted. (*LB*, 210)

Behind a man's love for a woman lies his real love for himself. Commenting on men's fear of their own desire which they project on women, Rich writes:

He may fear-and long for-being lost again in a female body, reincorporated, pulled back into a preconscious state; to penetrate a woman can be an act filled with anxiety, in which he must ignore or deny the human breathing

person, must conquer or possess her body like a territory, and even so that body remains threatening to him.¹⁰⁸

Leto is seen as a monster because she brings the men face to face with their own monstrosity. Their hatred stems from their own sexual needs which make them weak in front of her.

Female monstrosity, as a reflection of male fear and anxiety, is a myth invented to control the unlimited potential of female active sexuality and her reproductive ability. This idea is emphasized in more than one way in the novel. When Leto reaches adolescence, her nurse tells her that Cunmar is going to find her a husband for 'you being the age you are, you're too *dangerous* to have around', Doris says (*LB*, 146). The she-monster, Warner asserts, is directly related to '[t]he idea of a female, untamed nature which must be leashed, or else will wreak havoc'.¹⁰⁹ The novel also reveals a direct relation between the image of female monstrosity and female active sexuality and her reproductive ability when Doris talks to Leto about men and sex:

[Q]uick types [of men] avoid looking women in the eye. They're scared of a devil who, they've been told, lives curled up in the veins of a woman and can slither out and milk a man silently, invisibly, emptying him out until he becomes that woman's slave. She'll then *eat* all his money, his lands, his *children*, of yes, she's altogether insatiable, is this devil, who comes with webbed claws and forked tail and bat's wings and a pretty face with a little dewy mouth hiding her sharp teeth. [...] This devil has many names'. (*LB*, 146)

This portrayal of the figure of the monstrous female links the mythic figures Medusa, read by Cixous as an emblem of active female sexuality, and Medea the devouring mother. Warner refers to this interrelatedness between these two

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 188-9.

¹⁰⁹ Warner, *Managing Monster*, p. 4.

monstrous female figures: ‘Ungoverned energy in the female always raises the issue of motherhood and the extent of maternal authority; fear that the natural bond excludes men and eludes their control courses through ancient myth’.¹¹⁰ The novel rewrites this myth of the devouring mother, designed to constrain women and limit their abilities.

Through Leto’s character, the novel revises the myth of the monstrous mother Medea. Stressing the importance of demythologizing social myths inherent in myths of female monstrosity, Warner states that ‘chronic scaremongering about female behaviour – about wild sexuality and aberrant maternity – distorts understanding and sinks matters of urgent social policy’.¹¹¹ She, therefore, ‘move[s] onto enemy territory where Medea and other monsters are pacing’ to rewrite her story.¹¹² I suggest that the novel establishes an implicit link between Leto and Medea. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Medea is famous of her great skill at the art of magic and herbs.¹¹³ On one occasion in the novel we are told that Leto ‘applied spider’s silk to Phoebe’s welts after the beating’, then she ‘crushed and packed tight poultices of capsicum leaves, dotted with their fiery seeds, to try and draw out the pliancy that her childhood body deserved’ (*LB*, 164-5). Her knowledge of herbs and natural remedies recalls Medea’s abilities. Leto, moreover, is hurt and abandoned by her lover just like Medea. The parallel between their stories, however, stops here as their reactions to their lovers’ treachery differ. When her lover ‘Jason decides to take another wife more useful to his current ambitions, Medea [...] turns on those she loves in revenge’; she kills her own children only to hurt him.¹¹⁴ The novel

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.13.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 10.

¹¹³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. trans. by Anthony S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <<http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph7.htm>> [Accessed March 2010].

¹¹⁴ Warner, *Managing Monsters*, p. 7.

introduces a twist to Leto's scenario as we are told that, unlike Medea, 'this mother wasn't the sort who'd inflict a hurt on one of her children, even in desperate straits' (LB, 54). Significantly, forsaken by her lover, 'Leto's revenge' is taken on frogs (LB, 166). To reveal the implications of this narrative twist, we need to take a closer look at the scene where Leto kills the frogs.

In a revision of the mythic narrative of the devouring mother Medea, the victims of Leto's 'murders' are not her children but frogs (LB, 166). Leto's image as a monstrous female is emphatically displayed through the depiction of her merciless slaughter of the frogs under the pretext that she wants to retrieve the earrings she has lost when she was attacked:

They palpitated in her hand, with their hearts fit to burst. The creatures' bulgy eyes popped even wider as she pinched each one of them by the neck between finger and thumb and slit the panting belly open. [...] [S]he killed dozens of frogs, no, scores of them, hundreds, one after another. She slit them with her knife from gullet to rectum. Some were puny, too small to be guilty, perhaps, but she did not spare any. (LB, 165-6)

Leto's ruthless killing of the frogs, especially little ones, recalls Medea's cruelty. But why does Leto choose to take her revenge on frogs? In a well-known fairy tale called 'The Princess and the Frog', a beautiful princess kisses a frog and he turns into a charming prince who offers her his eternal love.¹¹⁵ The tale has its traditional happy ending by the prince and princess getting married. Leto's killing, instead of kissing, the frogs marks her disillusionment with the myth of romantic love on which many fairy tale princess rely to survive. By destroying the frogs, Leto symbolically tries to demythologize the myth of romantic love as a false promise of

¹¹⁵ For different versions of this fairy tale, first written by the Brothers Grimm under the title 'The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich', including one version that ends with the princess violently throwing the frog against the wall before he turns into a prince, see Zipes, *Relentless Progress: the Reconfiguration of Children Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* (New York, London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 87-94.

female salvation on the hands of a male hero in disguise. These narratives of romantic love that advocate female passivity and obscure the reality of women's suffering, especially mothers, are under severe attack in this novel, just as we have seen in *Indigo*.

Leto's Loss of Power

The fabrication of images of female monstrosity is depicted by Rich as a policy to control women: 'The divisions of labor and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality: the Virgin Mary, *virgo iniacta*, perfectly chaste'.¹¹⁶ Therefore, any deviation from this stereotyped ideal is viewed as monstrous. To break the polarity between Monstrous and Angelic mother, Warner's novel dwells on Leto's suffering as a mother to reveal that the myth of the good self-sacrificing mother can be just as destructive as that of the monstrous devouring one, as I will discuss in what follows. In Leto's third appearance in the novel as a stowaway on the board of *Shearwater*, the themes of female monstrosity and motherhood are re-introduced. In this version of the story, Leto's role as a mother of two helpless children plays a vital part in subduing the rebellious side of her character. Although she is still related to images of monstrous femininity in the eyes of the males on the ship, as we have seen, Leto, under the burden of motherhood, has chosen to show no sign of resistance to their hostility. Her submission, in turn, renders her an accomplice in the process of her own victimization. The sailors, on the one hand, see her as '*valuable*' for they could exchange her for an amount of money; 'we could bring back some provisions of a better class and quality than what's on board', Strugwell says (*LB*, 199; emphasis in

¹¹⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 183.

original). Her material value for men stems from her reproductive function that can be exploited by, and among them; '[s]he's fertile', stresses Strugwell to the merchant trying to convince him to buy Leto, '[s]he'll have more like this lot. That's worth a lot of money' (*LB*, 230). This literal selling of Leto's body shows her as a mere commodity with material value.

Doris, Leto's nurse, has warned her of the catastrophe this monster can bring her. To discourage her from embracing this frightening beastly side of her character, Doris warns her: 'She is very dangerous to you, not to them. For these men go quickly on to the attack, claiming the attack came first from you' (*LB*, 146). Leto has refused to take this advice of her nurse before, as we have seen, but now that she is a mother of twins she will need to think twice about it. Reading through the papers of the Leto bundle, Kim can understand her decision; he can see 'the sailors in his mind's eye watching her as she sluiced herself down. He could feel her thinking. *I couldn't look up and catch their eye*. They were seeing the body of a woman: had they ever been looked at or touched with love or interest since their mothers had borne them?' (*LB*, 190; emphasis in original). Just as Kim imagines, Leto avoids looking the men in the eye because she does not want to confront them. 'For her to look back at the men', Leto thinks, 'would make them see their lack, and the weakness that lack dug deep into them. (...) She did not want to spark the men's fury by inflicting a request for reciprocity on them' (*LB*, 191). Unwilling to attract the men's hostility, Leto decides to show every sign of submission to save herself and her children. She puts her nurse's advice into practice as she warns herself: '*Keep your claims very weak, very small, very meek (...) or they'll want to break me*' (*LB*, 191; emphasis in original). The reason behind Leto's decision is not difficult to understand. Far from being able to think of the possibility of being

treated as an equal by these men, all that Leto seeks is survival for herself and her children: ‘She had the children to defend, and she desperately wanted [men] not to hurt them, nor use them to have power over her. Long past hoping for any reciprocal understanding with her fellow man, she was wholly bent on circumventing this new danger’ (*LB*, 201). Leto’s children form the main constraint that keeps her from rebelling against these tyrants who manipulate her.

This idea is re-emphasized in many instances where Leto’s maternal love hindered her from fleeing men’s control. ‘*If the twins didn’t exist*’, she thinks to herself, ‘but she stifled the thought even as it rose. Then, again, it presented itself. Insistently: she would have so much more freedom to manoeuvre. There would be things she could do. If they didn’t need her constant vigilance’ (*LB*, 191; emphasis in original). Leto’s capabilities are contained within her maternal function so that she does not have the ability to plan her life as she desires. The close maternal bond that attaches her as a mother to her needy twins gives her only a stifling confining space to move:

The child was still so flimsy, still all fluff and no substance, still a nestling at three years old. She was bound to her offspring; all three of them victims as if buried alike in the same grave, grappling with one another, and as they struggled they only breathed in lore earth to choke them’. (*LB*, 224-5)

The novel dramatizes the conflict between a woman’s need for a distinctive identity, and her loss of any sense of autonomy to the obligating function of motherhood. As Rich puts it, ‘[t]ypically, under patriarchy, the mother’s life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear’.¹¹⁷ This inevitable symbolic death applies to Leto who has to bury her identity as an independent female to fulfill her function as a mother. Rich also draws

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 166.

attention to the suffering of economically dependent mothers like Leto: ‘For a poor woman, or one who has only herself to depend on economically, the birth of an infant can imply another kind of death—a new liability in the struggle merely to survive’.¹¹⁸ The amount of suffering she endures in her struggle to survive makes Leto question this role at times and consider other options that might make her life easier: ‘Their mother felt a rush of fury. Would she never be rid of this burden? Could she have left the girl on board, for Skipwith to take to Albion instead of her for his experiments? Would that have been the better choice?’ (*LB*, 225). But these thoughts has never been translated into actions; ‘[t]he twins were holding her, to an interminable destiny of maternity (*LB*, 225). She is destined to be defined by her being a mother and to be alienated from her former self in the course of fulfilling this function. This theme of loss of female identity to the function of motherhood is, as we have seen, strongly present in *Indigo*.

In *The Leto Bundle*, Warner presents this theme in similar ways as she reuses the mirror image to symbolically show the estrangement a mother suffers from herself when her identity as a woman merges with that of her function as a mother. Moreover, the novel seems to place the blame partly on women, like Leto in this version of her story, who work as accomplices in the process of their own victimization by choosing to be silent and submissive. Carrying the burden of her twins’ survival, Leto is no more able to use the pronoun ‘I’ to express herself. ‘I can’t be weak. Nostalgia for all that I’ve lost will shackle me. *I* – we need the future’, says Leto. Significantly, the ‘I’ in her speech is overshadowed by the ‘we’. ‘We need the future’, she continues as the ‘I’ totally disappears (*LB*, 177). This symbolic indication of Leto’s loss of identity is emphasized through the novel. On

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

one occasion Skipwith manages to separate Leto from her children for a short time for the first time since they were born; '[y]ou're not plants, you know, grafted together at the trunk', Skipwith stresses (*LB*, 200). When she is finally on her own, her strong attachment to her children being temporarily broken, Leto comes face to face with her dilemma. We are told that, entering Skipwith's cabin, Leto notices the presence of someone else: '[s]he took in this third figure out of the corner of her eye. He was standing back in a corner by a washbasin on a stand, a grim, gaunt silhouette compared to Skipwith himself' (*LB*, 200). Significantly, his ugly shadow with no trace of womanhood is Leto's own reflection in Skipwith's cheval glass. 'That's you. Take in your image, look at yourself', Skipwith stresses trying to force her to accept her new image (*LB*, 202). 'That's not me', Leto shakes her head rejecting what she sees, '[t]hat's not anyone I know' (*LB*, 202). This clearly indicates that Leto faces an identity crisis that has left her in shock: 'She stayed mute, her face unresponsive, a dull shock in her eyes, as turned her back to the glass. There was a silence between them' (*LB*, 202). The reasons behind Leto's reaction deserve a close exploration.

Leto's response to her reflection in the mirror surprises Skipwith who links her story to the myth of Valentine and Orson. Valentine manages to capture his brother who has been brought up by bears in the wilderness by showing him his horrid reflection in a mirror. He then brings him to his palace and teaches him 'ways of civilization' (*LB*, 204). Skipwith wants to put this myth to the test by taking Leto to his mother to 'see if a human creature who had no grasp of herself as a face and a body and a being in space could learn to be a lady according to the customs and expectations of modern society' (*LB*, 210-1). Skipwith sees in Leto a case study. His speculations, however, do not reflect her real situation. He thinks that '[s]he's just

experienced Narcissus' primal discovery – except that [he] didn't think she fell in love with what she saw' (*LB*, 208). He comes to this conclusion because he thinks that Leto has 'never seen [her]self in a glass before' (*LB*, 202). This is obviously not the case as Leto herself tells us that '[s]he had used a small silver hand mirror, chased with cupids and dolphins, with a naked Venus for a handle' (*LB*, 202). The presence of Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, and Cupid, the love messenger, suggests that Leto previously saw herself in the mirror of love and liked what she saw.

Warner, however, as we have seen in *Indigo*, often entwines images of love with those of death. Leto 'remembered that she could see her face in Cunmar's bright armour, when the breeze lifted his surcoat' (*LB*, 202). This is reminiscent of the death of the Medusa when she sees her own face in Perseus's armour, which foreshadows Leto's own symbolic death. Leto used to see herself in relation to powerful goddesses of beauty and horror, not meek submissive mothers. This is why she takes in 'the dark dwarfish figure' in the mirror 'in such perplexity and dismay' (*LB*, 202-3). She now can see 'in the glass that the girl whose father had staked her in a trade deal, whom Doris had chivvied and Abbess Cecily had moulded and Cunmar had held so tight, was now dead' (*LB*, 204). The suffering inflicted on Leto by her father and her lover, together with the constraints enforced on her by her maternal function, has tamed her previous wild self that she is no longer able to recognize her own reflection. The new features Leto sees in the mirror reflect the changes in her character. In direct opposition to the image of the Medusa with her snaky hair and mesmerizing look to which Leto used to relate, Leto now finds that '[a]nother had replaced her: a burned, weather-beaten scarecrow, a beggar with a thin, *set* mouth and hair in *stiff* clumps and a *panicky* look in eyes and forehead' (*LB*,

204; emphasis added). The set mouth is another prominent characteristic of Leto's new facial structure that symbolizes a significant change in her character.

We are told that Leto is troubled by the third person in the corner of the cabin because of his silent presence; '[t]he figure in the corner remained very silent', she thinks to herself (*LB*, 201). Therefore, she takes 'the silent third', which is only her own shadow, 'as audience, as assistant ... or, even, participant' in whatever evil plans Skipwith is hiding for her (*LB*, 201). Thus the silence Leto now can recognize in herself, through her reflection in the mirror, turns her into an accomplice in her own victimization. Leto's muteness turns into a token of her self-destructive submissiveness. Later in her journey, Leto admits this irrecoverable loss in her character. In the following scene, Leto is thinking of a way to prevent the merchant from selling her children:

She had once possessed great gifts of transformation, but she had mislaid the trick of them on her way down the years. As her reflection stretched down over time it had thinned and faded, as she had seen in Skipwith's cheval glass; the light that carried her form no longer gathered enough power to change things; she was lit wanly now. (*LB*, 232-3)

This statement reflects Leto's loss of touch with any trace of her previous rebellious self. The more she is involved in her maternal role the further she is driven from her former powerful self. This idea is introduced through replacing images of forceful female figures like Medea and Medusa, to which Leto is previously associated, with images of passive fairy tale figures.

Leto is a woman who stops perceiving herself as a powerful female figure, often present in myth, and slips into a state of dependency and helplessness, often associated with passive fairy tale heroines: 'So instead, she entertained ideas from other kinds of stories, *not of metamorphosis and escape*, but of romantic, rescue and

recognition' (*LB*, 233; emphasis added). Leto imagines herself in different fairy-tale narratives where the passive female heroine gets rescued by a male savior. She wishes to be a heroine in a Cinderella narrative, and imagines that 'a young nobleman who, passing by, might peep into the kitchen yard and see through the grease and the grime and loosen her filthy hair from its headrag and see that it could be soft and scented and silky and bright' (*LB*, 233). Alternatively, she dreams of being saved by some magic item:

Might she find, in the refuse from the kitchen, in the piles of uneaten scraps in the dishes and pans she was scrubbing, a magic token, a ring she could rub and then vanish? Would a single feather plucked from one of the fowl being prepared for the tale have the power of lifting its owner above the rooftops? (*LB*, 233)

Significantly, Leto's escapist imaginings are interwoven with descriptions of her work in the kitchen. This highlights the conflict between traditional romantic representation of women in fairytales and the pressure of their real domestic duties and their role in subduing their abilities.

Rich's assertion that 'under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood', seems to apply to Leto's situation at this stage of the novel.¹¹⁹ Any glimpse of Leto's aspiration to regain control over her life and show her abilities is eclipsed by her exhaustion under the weight of consuming maternal duties:

She plotted as she did the dishes: she could show herself to her enemies as she had been when Cunmar loved her. She could amaze them with what she knew and what she had seen. But soon after, she would realise she was all used up, though she wasn't yet seventeen years old. [...] [S]he knew she wasn't playing a part in a fairy story. (*LB*, 233)

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

Leto is drained by her duties as a mother, and she gives up her resistance under the heavy burden of motherhood. ‘*Yet sometimes, I have to admit to you, [...] I liked being on my own*’, whispers Leto under the pressure of her responsibilities as a mother (LB, 233; emphasis in original). The theme of self-estrangement created by Leto’s silent suffering as a mother, and her gradual descent into a state of helplessness, is powerfully emphasized as we get to the end of the novel. Significantly, in the last two parts of the novel Leto is called Ella which means ‘simply “her” or “that woman”’ (LB, 255). And we are told that she ‘did not fight against this new name’ (LB, 255). This partly reflects Leto’s deepening sense of alienation: ““Leto” was outlandish to the locals, and her life in Tirzah felt so cut off from the former sense she had of herself before, that she no longer owned the woman she had been’ (LB, 255). This is apparent in the fact that Leto, who previously was capable of facing her rapist, of changing form and producing ink to tell her story, is now no longer able to name the acts of violence for what they are: ‘Ella left her there to perform her *unnamed, extra duties* in the hotel. [...] There were some men who liked – well- Ella wasn’t going to put it into words’ (LB, 257). Later in the novel, Leto gives a detailed description of the acts of violence she was subjected to, ‘we were used to being forced, and there was nothing I could do, I couldn’t find a *protector* – hah, what a word – a man who’d beat up anyone who tried it on because I had to be free to work when I wanted to – and Phoebe being so, well, fragile’ (LB, 320). Freddie, a committee member, can now recognize the real nature of Leto’s duties when she says, ‘[y]ou were raped. Systematically’ (LB, 320). Only then does Leto name the acts for what they really were: ‘But I kept at it, and I never let the bad days and the bad men stop me- *the rapes or the violence*. When I was well again I went back to the river and waited for another client. I even hoped

that things would improve' (*LB*, 321). Leto's awareness of the necessity of her submission in order to survive does not extinguish the spark of hope inside her.

There is a direct relation between Leto's proceeding through time and her gradual loss of powers: '[t]he struggles of the present day were wiping Leto's mind, moulding Ella to their necessities' (*LB*, 256). This is significant because Leto now lives in a city torn by war, and her situation reflects the condition of all women at wartime. As her new name Ella indicates, she is now a representative example of all women. Talking in the tongue of the female victims during the war, Leto/Ella explains: 'A soldier will tremble all over just like any ordinary man in the grip of his passion but he'll belt you across the face and kick you in the belly if you try to stop him doing what he wants, with even a single word or a simple gesture of recoil ...' (*LB*, 320). By telling the story of war from Ella's point of view, the novel seems to revise male history of war and glory. She describes how soldiers 'jeered at their captives [...] as they stripped and raped their women in front of their eyes: this was men's way of talking to one another, trading insults. The bodies of wives, daughters, sweethearts, mothers, served as communal notice boards' (*LB*, 254). Men's real history of violence is being written on women's bodies while their history books totally ignore their existence.

The novel gives a detailed description of the different aspects of women's suffering during wartime and places it in direct opposition with the history of glory and victory men usually record in history books:

[T]here were some old men in this shuffling column, some boy children under six, but for the most part women made up the ragged numbers, women with infants and toddlers in their arms, on their backs, sometimes wheeling their own broken frail mothers in pushchairs before them where they clutched bursting bags of their remaining possessions on their laps. When an old woman collapsed on the march, they tried to tie her corpse to their

meagre heap of belongings, and another one took her place in the last of the wheeled vehicles, be it a child's pram or a shopping cart. (*LB*, 258)

Women are left to face their maternal responsibilities with their prams and shopping carts in the face of male vehicles of destruction. The novel emphasizes the absence of this story of female suffering from history books: 'When the column of fugitives passed out of sight, it seemed they had all fallen over the edge of the world into a bog of primal slime, which swallowed them' (*LB*, 260). The women victims march into oblivion as men take over and start inscribing a new page in their own annals of history in which women, their work and their suffering have no place. 'When the victorious soldiers reached the hub of the city', we are told that

they rushed in fours, in threes, in pairs, shouting, embracing, bayoneting this obstacle and clubbing that, kicking and cuffing, to force the event to feel like a triumph to them, to make their mark, to tell on history and sever the old times from the new ones. They were the liberators from the oppression, the bringers of light and plenty; they were the coming men. (*LB*, 259)

This juxtaposition of the scene of the leaving refugees and the coming soldiers brings to light one version of the story of war that usually goes unmentioned in the accounts of history created by the victors. To reveal the destructive effects of the cultural myth of the angelic all-giving mother, the novel traces Leto's gradual loss of power under the heavy burden of her maternal responsibilities. The novel, moreover, discloses the suffering of women, particularly mothers, often concealed within historical narratives of wars and victories.

Conclusion

In both of these novels, Warner brings to light the untold stories of women, sorties of love, abandonment, rape, suffering, and motherhood that fail to make their

way to male history books: ‘More women, again. The remnant [...] we are always the remnant. We are cuttings from the pattern, and we fall from the tailor’s shears on to the floor, fit for stuffing cushions or padding shoulders; we are the disappeared, made invisible’, Ella reflects on women’s condition (*LB*, 264). This is not to indicate that Warner writes these stories from a pessimistic perspective. Talking about the influence of fairy tales in her works, Warner says, ‘the reason I was attracted to them, not only as an avid reader of them since childhood, but as a critical writer, lies with their utopian defiance – their “heroic optimism”, in Carter’s phrase’.¹²⁰ Warner, I suggest, writes her two novels in this spirit of heroic optimism. Women, *The Leto Bundle* asserts through Ella’s words, will be able to break their silence and will have their way to recorded history:

Yet those discarded twists of cloth *can utter*, she insists, ‘they fall into patterns and figures dropped at random like numbers cast from a lottery run, but this will yield shape, arrangement, with ingenuity, with *stories* they may then bear. Figure: ground. Interchangeable, inconstant, it just depends which your mind fixes on: the bespoke suit spread in deliberate plan and sections on the tailor’s table or the kelp-like twists of living cloth fallen from the shears. (*LB*, 264; emphasis added)

The novel stresses how empowering it is for women to have the ability to express their own experience, and insists on the possibility of achieving this aim. By telling their own stories, women will be able to write new roles for themselves where they are neither inferior nor passive. The idea of the possibility of change, of women regaining their lost powers is most effectively presented by the end of the novel through the character of Phoebe.

¹²⁰ Marina Warner, ‘Why I Write’, in *Into the Nineties*, p. 505.

As Leto gradually loses her former mythic powers till she finally, literally, disappears, Phoebe's newly gained powerful characteristics are repeatedly emphasized. Although Leto's 'former, scared, small girl self swarms up again through the blaze of her prideful new being', looking at her 'tough, newborn goblin daughter', she recognizes 'something of her own sense of purpose, of her capacity to adapt to new occasions' (*LB*, 312-4). Phoebe here is related to the original race of the Titans to which her mother used to belong. She is more related to the image of the powerful female figure with which Leto is associated at the beginning of the novel. She, at the same time, is fitting nicely into the new environment of twentieth-century England. In the Harvest Fair, by the end of the novel, we watch Phoebe, accompanied by the she-wolf Lucy, looking perfect in her 'new skin' which is a symbol of her newly won identity (*LB*, 391). Timmo, her boyfriend and his friend act in a play in which the novel rewrites the fairytale plot of the rescuing prince who awakes the sleeping, passive princess with a kiss. Timmo lies on the ground calling for his savior: 'Where's a maiden pure of heart / To kiss the gallant knight who's slain / By the foul fiend's wicked art / And raise him to his feet again?' (*LB*, 392). We have seen this strategy of subverting traditional gender power structure by associating the male protagonist with fairy tale princesses in both Carter's and Byatt's novels. Walser, in *Nights at the Circus*, takes the role of Beauty from 'Beauty and the Beast', and Roland, in *Possession*, plays the role of the Princess from 'The Princess and the Pea'.

Phoebe's newly gained powerful position is highlighted in a highly ironic scene, Phoebe reluctantly takes the role of the saving princess who removes the wicked spell 'to resurrect the dying hero with a kiss':

Phoebe wriggled away from the arms pushing her back towards the dead champion of civilization and Albion where he lay prostrated, with a beer mug in one hand and the saucepan on his head, but they insisted. Phoebe said, firmly, 'No tongue, Timmo,' as she knelt down and placed her mouth on his; his limbs jerked and he leapt up like Frankenstein's creature galvanised. A full measure was pulled into his tankard. He raised it to her: 'The Fair Princess of Sabra!' he called out, and downed the drink; for all his swaggering, he was looking at her shyly, wonderingly, as she turned with a laugh and a shake of head. (*LB*, 393)

This change of roles indicates a significant change in power structure with the female taking the upper hand and rewriting traditional plots of female helplessness. While the female is represented as an active agent in the plot, the male hero, in this scene, is endued with characteristics that are usually attached to the traditional passive female heroine of fairy tales. It is significant that Phoebe does not read the 'story of the lost twin' as a story about love, 'about looking for your lost half all your life until you're at last reconciled – twin souls, soul mates', as she is trying to read his inner psyche reads it? 'Love isn't everything', she believes, '[y]ou find your twin inside – the real you that's gone missing', she asserts (*LB*, 394). Phoebe is able to look for the powerful female inside her, and she does not believe in romantic stories of love that lead to women's subordination.

Zabus' reading of Warner's novels is less optimistic than mine. She thinks that *Indigo* reads like 'a botched fairy tale, in that "the golden girl before whom everything lies is not Xanthe but Miranda". Romance is a *denouement* that customarily crowns Warner's novels'.¹²¹ For her, *The Leto Bundle* 'is, however, not a romance. It is imbued with a dark pessimism, characteristic of end-of-millennium turmoil'.¹²² Other critics have read *Indigo* in a more positive light, especially when it comes to its rewriting of colonial narratives. The fact that *Indigo* often invites such

¹²¹ Zabus, 'Mingling and Metamorphing', p. 125. Emphasis in original.

¹²² Ibid.

optimistic readings of healing and reconciliation might lie in Warner's tendency to write it in the mode of fairy tale's 'heroic optimism'. In a fairy tale, Warner explains, 'the whole space of the narrative is taken up with ordeals. It is only the end – usually perfunctorily handled – which *promises change*. Most of the foreground is crammed with cruelty and horror, with suffering and problems'.¹²³ This emphasis on the possibility of change, without ignoring the difficulties, is what Warner aims to achieve when she 'constructed *Indigo* as a classic fairy tale': 'I wanted it to speak in the way fairy tales do, for hope, against despair. But at the same time [...] I wanted not to scant the difficulties'.¹²⁴ With this same spirit, Warner also rewrites the story of love and motherhood from the female point of view.

By placing the theme of motherhood at the center of her novels, Warner seems to share common ground with Rich when she says: 'Motherhood – unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism – has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism'.¹²⁵ In both novels, Warner seems to rewrite the herstory of love and motherhood mainly through giving voice to silenced figures of the hysteric, rape victims and other outcasts, as Rich argues:

Patriarchal man created-out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, physical force, ignorance, and intelligence split from its emotional grounding, a system which, turned against woman her own organic nature, the source of her awe and her original powers. In a sense, female evolution was mutilated, and we have no way now of imagining what its development hitherto might have been; we can only try, at last, to take it into female hands.¹²⁶

¹²³ Warner, 'The Silence of Sycorax', pp. 265-6. Emphasis added.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 265.

¹²⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 34.

¹²⁶ Ibid, pp. 127-8.

Warner explores ways of imagining female development to unravel the myth that has brought women loss of power, and has promoted their exploitation in the name of love. Like Carter and Byatt, Warner revives strong mythic female figures to celebrate female power and assert the liberating potential of active female sexuality, trying, at the same time, to reveal female entrapment within traditional mythic images of female passivity and monstrosity. 'Both in the historical studies I've written and in the fiction', Warner declares, 'I go on the attack – sometimes of what I cherish – to redraw its limits and its promises'.¹²⁷ This statement seems to inform her attack on different narratives of romantic love and motherhood.

¹²⁷ Marina Warner, 'Why I Write', p. 505.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented Angela Carter as an influential novelist whose belief in the liberating potential of revising the genres of myth and fairy tale has led her to take on the project of rewriting well-known myths and fairy tales to demythologize confining social myths perpetuated by these tales, particularly those concerning women. Robert Eaglestone declares that ‘Carter’s aim of telling stories usually left untold is one shared by many writers, so it would be hard - if not foolish - to suggest that she had been a specifically powerful influence on particular writers who do this’.¹ I have shown that Carter’s influence is not only restricted to “‘low” cultural forms’, like that of science fiction and comics, as Eaglestone claims, but also reaches acclaimed contemporary women writers.² I demonstrate that both A. S. Byatt and Marina Warner, who openly admit their indebtedness to Carter, follow in her footsteps in their retellings of old tales. By bringing these novelists together for the first time, this thesis demonstrates that they share a demythologizing project that aims to provoke a social change that they all believe literature is capable of achieving, if only by presenting visions that stress the possibility of change.

Although a daunting amount of material has been written on Carter’s rewritings of myths and fairy tales, a Cixousian in-depth reading of the use of myth and fairy tale in her novels has never been given before. Reading Carter’s adaptation of myths and fairy tales in her novels alongside Cixous’s revisions of the genre sheds light on her project of demythologizing cultural myths that confine both men and women within a power structure based on the phallogentric logic of mastery and

¹ Robert Eaglestone, ‘The Fiction of Angela Carter: The Woman Who Loved to Retell Stories’ in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard J. Lane *et al.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 195-209 (p. 205).

² *Ibid.*

slavery. This reading not only reveals affinities in Carter's and Cixous's approaches to revising the genre, and a shared belief in the liberating potential of rewriting these tales, but also uncovers a similar vision of change. Carter seems to present the same utopian vision of change introduced by Cixous, a vision that asserts the possibility of building a new male-female relationship based on equality and understanding. This same vision is also introduced in Byatt's rewritings of myths and fairy tales in her novels. In fact, relatively little work has been done on the feminist demythologizing aspect of Byatt's work in the genre, partly because of her own declared suspicious attitude towards feminist literary criticism. This aspect has been brought to light in this thesis by applying Cixous's idea of 'bisexuality', and her subversive reading of the Medusa. In *Possession*, Byatt's retelling of the myth of Melusine seems to present Cixous's idea of new bisexuality as a way out of cultural myths of self-sufficient female sexuality, and the female artist's inevitable need for isolation to protect her identity. This analysis shows that Byatt shares Carter's belief in the possibility of achieving a new form of male-female relationship - that of love between two autonomous equal beings.

Carter and Byatt seem dramatically different from Warner in their handling of the theme of romantic love. As Magali Cornier Michael puts it, discussing *Nights at the Circus*, Carter 'makes more explicit the claim that men as well as women must be transformed if a new world free of oppression is to be created'.³ Warner, however, in both *Indigo* and in *The Leto Bundle*, highlights the potentially destructive effects of the social myth of romantic love. Unlike Warner, Carter's male protagonists, Finn and Walser, undergo a process of transformation that renders them new men capable of building a new type of relationship with the female

³ Magali Cornier Michael, 'Fantasy and Carnivalization in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*' in *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 171-208, p. 208.

protagonists, Melanie and Fevvers, a love relationship that can have the power to change and liberate, especially since she places them at the threshold of new promising eras. This is also true of Byatt's *Possession* and *Morpho Eugenia* in which Roland and William go through transforming journeys of self-discovery after which they join their equally transformed partners, Maud and Matilda. Carter's and Byatt's heroes end up willing to give up traditional images of male heroism, and to replace their passive Sleeping Beauties with powerful Medusas. This scenario does not apply to Warner's protagonists, for even when Miranda marries George, at the end of Warner's *Indigo*, it is a union between the oppressed: a woman and a black man. Interviewed by Miranda, Jean-Claude Meursault, the director of pornographic films, argues that women and blacks share the position of the victim within the 'capitalist code of production'. 'The difference', he asserts, 'is that women collude in their subjection. They think it's power. The blacks don't – they don't have even an illusion of power' (*I*, 260). Thus, Miranda and George's marriage perpetuates the power structure of their society, and lacks the revolutionary potentials of love between a new man and a new woman at the end of Carter's novels.

Warner is known as a mythographer, and her works of non-fiction on the subject of myth and fairy tale are very highly regarded. However, her novels in general, and the use of myth and fairy tale in particular have received much less critical consideration. In both of the novels discussed here, Warner depicts negative narratives of exploitative romantic love alongside those of consuming maternal love, in order to demythologize myths of the all-giving beloved and the self-sacrificing mother. The novels reveal that these traditional cultural narratives of the all-loving woman are as destructive as narratives of female monstrosity. As Warner herself insists, this does not imply a rejection of motherhood or female sexuality. On the

contrary, it is an attempt to expose false cultural myths of love that suppress female active sexual desire, and obscure women's real experiences, and sufferings, as mothers. Despite her emphasis on negative narratives of love and motherhood, Warner's novels, written in the spirit of the heroic optimism of fairy tales, accentuate the possibility of change, of subverting oppressive power structures and writing new narratives through which women can tell their own stories. This need for women to talk about their own experiences, and to make themselves heard is present in the work discussed in this thesis.

In their use of retellings of traditional myths and fairy tales, Carter, Byatt and Warner stress the fact that it is essential for women to have the power of self-expression. After all what have been said, perhaps it is safe to say that Carter advocates the use of a new form of language for women. She seems to use voice as a liberating form of expression in the absence of an efficient language for women. As we have seen, through Melanie's character, she seems to use voice in a Cixousian way as a form of expression that can disrupt male rhetorical discourse represented in traditional narratives of myth. Moreover, Carter's mute characters symbolically regain voice when they gain power, as in the case of Aunt Margaret, in *The Magic Toyshop*, and Mignon and the Princess in *Nights at the Circus*. In *Morpho Eugenia*, Byatt seems to use Cixous's language of the body in ambivalent ways. Living in a world where the power of naming is the hands of men, Eugenia resorts to the language of the body to express herself and assert her desire. Although it reveals a hidden rebellious side to her character, the language of the body proves to be insufficient for Eugenia to free herself from oppressive power structures. The novel seems to stress the need for oral or written expression, as possessed by Matty, for women to take the act of naming into their hands and to achieve their liberation.

Warner's novels also highlight the importance of naming and self-expression as devices of liberation confiscated from women whose voices are absent from male history books. In her novels, Warner tries to give women back the ability to speak by allowing them to tell their own stories. Serafine's stories frame and comment on most of the main narrative in *Indigo*, and Leto tells stories of love, rape and motherhood from her own point of view as victim and woman in *The Leto Bundle*.

In Byatt's *Possession*, Sabine, another of Byatt's female artist figures, gives a reading of the myth of the City of Is by a male critic who believes that it is female uncontrollable desire, represented in the character of Dahud, that has brought the city's destruction.⁴ Sabine objects to this sort of reading of wild women like Dahud, readings that make women 'witches, outcasts, *sorcieres*, monsters' (*P*, 349). She poses the question that Carter, Byatt and Warner address in their novels: 'Why should desire and the senses be so terrifying in women?' (*P*, 349). It is made obvious in all the novels discussed in this thesis that images of female monstrosity are only a making of men's imagination; a projection of men's fear of women's potential abilities. In these novels, female characters pursuing their intellectual ambition, or asserting their sexual desire are related to images of female monstrosity: Aunt Margaret and Fevvers in Carter's novels, Maud, Christabel, Matty and Eugenia in Byatt's novel and novella, Astrid, and Leto in Warner's novels. Instead of wholly rejecting this image of the female monster, Carter, Byatt and

⁴ In *Possession*, Sabine writes in her journal: 'Dahud is the sorceress whom the Ocean loves and whose excesses cause the City of Is to be engulfed (by that same Ocean) and drowned. In one of my father's mythological recensions the editor says, "In the legend of the City of Is may be felt, like the passing of a whirlwind, the terror of ancient pagan cults and the *terror of the passion of the senses, let loose in women*. And to these two terrors is added the third, that of the Ocean, which, in this drama, has the role of Nemesis and fate. Paganism, woman and the Ocean, these three desires and these three great fears of man, are mingled in this strange legend and come to a tempestuous and terrible end"' (*P*, 349; Emphasis added). See also 'The City of Ys' in *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, ed. by James MacKillop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 431-2.

Warner appropriate it and use it against itself in their novels, by relating it to the emancipating image of Cixous's laughing Medusa.

Commenting on her attempt to rewrite the story of a vigorous mythical female figure, Sabine says: 'What I had meant was to make of the wild Dahud an *embodiment* as it were of our desire for freedom, for autonomy, for our own proper passion, which women have, and which it seems, men fear' (*P*, 349; emphasis in original). As I have shown, Carter, Byatt and Warner have transformed the image of the monstrous Medusa in these same ways. One strategy they all use in their novels to liberate women from distorting images of monstrosity, is the coupling of hair imagery, that relate their female characters to the mythic figure of the monstrous Medusa, with an emphasis on wild laughter. This brings to mind Cixous's beautiful laughing Medusa, the emblem of celebration of a liberating active female sexuality, encouraging women to embrace their desire and not to internalize men's fears. The thesis suggests that Carter, Byatt and Warner are engaged in two strategies with regards to traditional myths and fairy tales: the first is a celebratory one, manifested in their revival of powerful mythic female figures, like the Medusa, which stress female ability and glorify assertive female desire; and the second is a revisionist one, aimed at exposing women's entanglement within the cultural narratives that equate femininity with passivity.

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