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IT WAS SO, IT WAS NOT SO: THE USE OF FAIRY TALE IN THE FICTION OF ANGELA CARTER AND  
SALMAN RUSHDIE



## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the use made of fairy tales by two contemporary writers, Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie. Its aim is to investigate the ways in which fairy tale has enabled them to formulate and further their political positions. In Carter's case I suggest that the fairy tale has enabled her to explore and revise the roles played by women in society. In Rushdie's case I suggest that the fairy tale has provided a means by which he can investigate issues of cultural identity, and also functions as a tool with which ethnocentric assumptions can be challenged. By focusing upon their work I attempt to identify a specific and dominant strain in the contemporary appropriation of fairy tale that can be summarised briefly here as the use of fairy tale in fiction that aims to make statements in the field of identity politics. I concentrate, in Carter's case, upon *The Bloody Chamber*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. In Rushdie's case I look at the work in which he explores the concept of fairy tale most explicitly, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and then I look in more detail at his use of *The Arabian Nights* in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. By way of conclusion I suggest that they both use fairy tale as a tentative but nonetheless productive means of outlining utopian solutions to social problems.

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INTRODUCTION:  
CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO FAIRY TALE



*Replying to one story with another which unravels the former has become  
central to contemporary thought and art.*

Marina Warner, *The Reith Lectures*, 1994



From Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979, to Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* in 1997; from Tanith Lee's *Red as Blood* in 1983, to A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* in 1994, we are experiencing a boom in the literary reworking of fairy tale unmatched since, and possibly in excess of, that of the Romantic period. This thesis will look closely at the work of two contemporary writers, Angela Carter, who used fairy tale in her fiction throughout her career, and Salman Rushdie, who is still writing novels that draw eclectically upon tales taken from Indian and English folk culture. Its aim is to ask what it is about the fairy tale that makes it such an appealing resource for late twentieth century writers of literary fiction in English.

There is an initial and obvious answer to this question. Writers have always borrowed from popular oral narratives and fairy tales in order to exploit their rich stock of familiar motifs, plot structures, character types, and resonant cultural references, and there is no good reason why they should stop doing so now. As Angela Carter reminds us "a flourishing illiterate culture has always wonderfully nourished the productions of the literati ... James Joyce named *Finnegans Wake* after a Dublin street song, [and] even borrowed the plot."<sup>1</sup> What I want to explore in particular, however, is how, if at all, the appropriations of fairy tale carried out by Carter and Rushdie can be distinguished from appropriations carried out by earlier writers. This will involve an investigation of the ways

in which fairy tale has been used explicitly by them to formulate and further their political positions. In Carter's case, I will suggest, the fairy tale has enabled her to explore and revise the roles played by women in society. In Rushdie's case, I will suggest, the fairy tale has provided a means with which to investigate cultural and national identity, and also functions as a tool with which ethnocentric assumptions can be challenged and revised. By focusing upon their work I hope to identify a specific and dominant strain in the contemporary appropriation of fairy tale that can be summarised briefly here as the use of fairy tale in fiction that aims to make statements in the field of identity politics.

A key text in this regard is Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, first published in 1957. Barthes does not mention fairy tale directly in this work, but in exemplifying the critical practice of reading popular culture semiotically, treating its various manifestations as a system of signs that will reveal the economic, social and political interests of the society, he was setting the precedent for critics and writers to understand fairy tale not as 'innocent speech' that evolves "from the 'nature' of things", but as "a type of speech chosen by history"; a context-related product of specific social forces.<sup>2</sup> Prior to Barthes the fairy tale tended to be regarded, in the light of Romanticism, as a narrative that was, in some way, a naïve expression of fundamental philosophical truths. "A true fairy tale" as Novalis wrote "must also be a prophetic account of things - an ideal account - an absolutely necessary account. A true writer of fairy tales sees into the future."<sup>3</sup> Barthes, in undermining the idea that any text can have such a 'natural justification', undoes the myth that fairy tales are universal, "flowing from some great and mysterious fountainhead" and allows us to see them as contingent narratives that can be read not just as stories but as symbolic encodings of cultural norms and values.<sup>4</sup>

Since the fairy tale deals predominantly with the experiences of an individual - the protagonist who seeks to improve his or her position in the family by going on a quest, finding a mate or acquiring a kingdom - it is understandable, given the critical tendency Barthes represents, that contemporary critics first scrutinised fairy tales in order to see what kind of role models they were offering their young readership. More specifically, critics and writers began to scrutinise fairy tales to see what kind of norms they established

for gender roles. This investigation was carried out predominantly by theorists with feminist agendas, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Andrea Dworkin, and Ruth Bottigheimer; all of whom suggest that the norms established for young girls are significantly different from the norms established for young boys. The fairy tales canonised in western culture, that is the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, The Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, they suggest, assign asymmetric gender roles, masculinity being represented as the active principle, femininity as the passive.<sup>5</sup> In Patricia Duncker's pithy formula: "Princes act, Princesses react."<sup>6</sup>

There has been some resistance to this view from feminist quarters. Margaret Atwood - acting both as critic and rewriter - reacts to the view that *Grimms' Tales* are sexist with surprise, and suggests:

that various traits were quite evenly spread. There were wicked wizards as well as wicked witches, stupid women as well as stupid men, slovenly husbands as well as slovenly wives.... When people say 'sexist fairy tales,' they probably mean the anthologies that concentrate on 'The Sleeping Beauty,' 'Cinderella,' and 'Little Red Riding Hood' and leave out everything else.<sup>7</sup>

Maria Tatar similarly qualifies the feminist critique by pointing out that the hero, as well as being, as Jack Zipes puts it, "competitive, authoritarian, and power-hungry" (a description strongly seconded by Duncker and Jennifer Waelti-Walters), is also "[i]nnocent,' 'silly,' 'useless,' 'foolish,' 'simple' and 'guileless'".<sup>8</sup> "If the female protagonists of fairy tales are often as good as they are beautiful," she adds, "their male counterparts generally appear to be as young and naive as they are stupid".<sup>9</sup> Despite these points of resistance, however, the weight of evidence does tend to suggest that sexual inequality is the rule in canonical tales. Ruth Bottigheimer has conducted a thorough study of all 210 tales in the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (7th edition, 1857) and has argued convincingly, contrary to Atwood's speculation, that it is not just the anthologised fairy tales that can be seen as 'sexist' but that sexism operates consistently throughout the collection.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the passivity and lack of autonomy of the female characters is represented as 'inevitable' and 'natural', furthermore, the 'silliness' and naivety of the male character is invariably represented as a

'lack' that it is the function of the fairy tale to correct. The female's lack of autonomy is part of what she *is*, the male's lack of autonomy is temporary and will be remedied in the course of the tale.

Such double standards are operative on every level of Grimms' tales. The girl is represented as a possession of the male character, passed on from father to prince and defined almost exclusively in terms of her appearance. The boy, however idiotic, is the one who sets out to forge his own destiny. He is encouraged in his curiosity and often forgiven if not positively rewarded when he transgresses an injunction. She, like Eve, is rigorously punished if she disobeys the rules. All turns out well in the long run for the young King when he insists upon looking in a forbidden room in Grimms' 'Faithful Johannes' (Tale 6), for instance, but when the heroine of 'The Virgin Mary's Child' (Tale 3) does the same she is abandoned in a wilderness, rendered dumb, has three of her children taken from her, and nearly suffers burning at the stake. In the end it is only her meekness and obedience that save her; beauty, silence and goodness, rather than active exertion, being the means by which the woman is taught to achieve her quest aim.

Curiosity, in these fairy tales, is an agent of knowledge. It is through transgression of the injunctions that autonomy can be achieved. The only transgression that goes unpunished in the canonical fairy tale, however, is Oedipal; transgression of the male child against the father. For a woman to do the same, transgress actively against the patriarch, is for her to become an outcast, to become evil. There are only two definitions of woman in fairy tales, Andrea Dworkin has argued: the meek and quiet woman who accepts her role, and who survives and prospers, and the active and curious woman who attempts to take command of her own destiny and, in consequence, is vilified and made monstrous.<sup>11</sup> Very few heroines in Grimm who behave in an active and inquisitive manner manage to survive unpunished. One of the few is Gretel - who pushes the witch into the oven - but Gretel, in every other sense, plays the role of the silent and silenced heroine. "Hansel speaks not only more often than Gretel" as Bottigheimer points out "but also at greater length, and his first words to Gretel are 'Quiet, Gretel'".<sup>12</sup> Another active benevolent female is the fairy godmother in Perrault's version of 'Cinderella' who, in Grimm, appears as the spirit of her

dead mother; but these 'good fairies', critics have argued, represent the female domain of natural magic and thus a kind of harmless female force, kept in its proper place, supportive of the traditional outcome, and ultimately supportive of the patriarchal order. Whatever the exceptions, then, as a general rule there is a polarity between evil woman and good woman, angel and monster, and these two versions of women are set in opposition and competition, reinforcing the message, as formulated by Patricia Duncker: "women beware women".<sup>13</sup>

These critical ideas have generated, and in turn are generated by, a considerable body of re-written fairy tales in literature. In the 1970s and 1980s, a large number of anthologies, short story collections, poems and novels were published which attempted to change the gender representations on offer in traditional fairy tales and suggest new symbolic paradigms for identity construction. Prominent examples from these decades include Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), a collection of poems that is vigorously critical of the destructive limitations that result from the gender roles on offer for women in Grimms' tales; Tanith Lee's *Princess Hynchatti and Some Other Surprises* (1972), in which various princesses and young women find the traditional prince unpalatable, and rebel by making their own unconventional choice of a mate; Jay Williams' *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales* (1973), which includes the tale of 'Petronella' who insists on going on her own quest in search of a prince, and ends up marrying the enchanter whom she has to do battle against instead; Jane Yolen's numerous publications, that emphasise the importance of matriarchal culture and female community; Olga Broumas's collection of poetry *Beginning With O* (1977), that offers relationships between women as an antidote to fairy tale hetero-sexism; and Letty Pogrebin's *Stories for Free Children* (1982) which includes Jeanne Desy's tale 'The Princess who Stood on her Own Two Feet' in which a Princess, who doesn't stand up or speak so as not to offend a prince who likes to think himself taller and wiser than her, eventually comes to her senses and elopes with an enchanted dog instead.<sup>14</sup> The fairy tale had rarely been so popular, but since many of these writings were predominantly critical of the traditional values expressed in the genre it was a kind of popularity through notoriety. This notoriety



has led to a widespread belief that fairy tales are, in some way, inherently repressive. Andrea Dworkin, for instance, has argued that the fairy tale form is indigestible; that, given the role models it offers and the ideologies it encodes, women “never did have much of a chance” to escape from the gender stereotypes that confine them.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Patricia Duncker has argued, in response to Angela Carter’s uses of fairy tale, that their ‘original structures’ are strait-jackets that it is impossible to escape from. “[T]he tale, especially the fairy tale”, she writes:

is the vessel of false knowledge, or more bluntly, interested propaganda ... fairy tales are, in fact, about power, and about the struggle for possession, by fair or magical means, of kingdoms, goods, children, money, land, and-naturally, specifically, - the possession of women.<sup>16</sup>

The fact, however, that there were feminist writers such as Angela Carter attempting to reutilise fairy tales as early as the 1970s without necessarily having a hostile attitude towards them, has led, more recently, to several attempts at critical reconsideration of the genre. Jack Zipes and Marina Warner, both directly influenced by Carter’s work, have consistently argued that the fairy tale is not inherently antithetical to feminist concerns, but can, on the contrary, be used in a way that is positively empowering for women.<sup>17</sup> This recuperation rests upon the realisation that it is not fairy tales in themselves that are pernicious, but the uses to which they have been put at specific historical moments, for specific socio-political reasons. Both Perrault and Grimm, in their respective periods, adapted traditional fairy tales considerably so that they would prove acceptable to the middle class, patriarchal households for which they wrote. They converted what was, effectively, a diverse and non-homogenous body of narratives into what Zipes has called “a type of literary discourse about mores, values and manners so that children would be civilised according to the social code of that time.”<sup>18</sup> This meant, of course, that these fairy tales found fruitful soil and flourished - becoming so ubiquitous that one commentator has even defined the fairy tale as “a story like the ones collected in the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* of the brothers Grimm”.<sup>19</sup> But Perrault and Grimm, although they in practice comprise the western canon of fairy tale, do not represent the only examples of the genre available. Even as they were writing, in fact, a considerable

body of narratives was being produced that were written by women, for women, and represented values that were antagonistic towards patriarchy. Just at the time when Grimms' tales were becoming firmly established in German culture, for instance - as Shawn Jarvis's research has shown - members of the *Kaffeterkreis*, a 'female association' that was formed as a response to exclusive male literary cliques, were writing and collecting tales that were breaking open "the traditional parameters of the *Märchen* as found in Grimms' collection." Jarvis writes:

Grimm model females were passive, silent, industrious, and rewarded with riches and a man to support them, while male models were destined to seek out adventure and take as their reward passive, silent, industrious females. *Kaffeter* fairy tales reversed these roles and presented heroines who found happiness in being educated and single rather than married and brain dead.<sup>20</sup>

This type of women's storytelling, claims Jarvis, was prolific in France and Germany at this time but, because of its failure to agree with dominant ideologies, has been entirely excluded from the canon of the classical fairy tale. The same is true of Perrault's contemporaries. Before and after Perrault published his *Contes de ma Mère L'Oye* in 1697, his compatriot and fellow salon-writer Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy was publishing tales that offer far more sprightly, active and intelligent role models for women. Again, however, because of "the canonical principles governing [the genre] ... which [magnify] the male role while diminishing the female contribution" the tales "have hardly been received in critical literature." The fact that these tales did not make the dominant canon, does not mean that they are not fairy tales. On the contrary, as Jarvis points out, the literary product of writers like Madame d'Aulnoy and Madame de Murat "actually constituted the genre of the *contes de fées*".<sup>21</sup> What it does mean is that re-writers of the fairy tale can use the genre without necessarily becoming implicated in the ideologies expressed in canonical fairy tales, because the ideologies expressed in the canonical fairy tales are not inherent to the genre. It is tales such as these, alternative, non-canonical tales, I shall be arguing, that Carter and Rushdie are employing in order to undermine the oppressive qualities of the more familiar tales that constitute the canon.

This recent rethinking of fairy tale can be neatly represented by Marina Warner's Reith Lectures, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of our Time*, broadcast on BBC Radio in 1994. Her primary models for these lectures were - as she notes - "Roland Barthes famous essays of 1957, *Mythologies*", but her intention was to update Barthes' project for the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Warner thus begins by noting the validity of the fundamental principle of *Mythologies*: "that myths are 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".<sup>23</sup> But she develops Barthes' idea by going on to argue that:

myths are not always delusions, that deconstructing them does not necessarily mean wiping them, but that they can represent ways of making sense of universal matters, like sexual identity and family relations, and that they enjoy a more vigorous life than we perhaps acknowledge, and exert more of an inspiration and influence than we think.<sup>24</sup>

This reworking of Barthes seems to reflect the transformation in the way that creative writers are using fairy tale in the manner initiated by Angela Carter. The primary aim is no longer to attack the fairy tale, demystifying it and forcibly revising it against the grain of the source, but to recuperate it, appropriating it as a genre that is broad enough and rich enough to be used as a powerful expression of identity in its own right. Whereas the previous model of the re-written fairy tale presents the source as an enchantment that has to be broken, a pernicious magic spell, the new approach recognises the fairy tale's capacity for enchantment and attempts to appropriate the mechanism for its own ends. If, in this pursuit, the agenda expressed in any given fairy tale seems unacceptable to the writer who is reutilising it, the fictional procedure followed is not to blatantly contradict and demystify the enchantment, but to mobilise equally potent enchantments, that express different agendas, against it. "Replying to one story with another which unravels the former" as Marina Warner goes on to argue "has become central to contemporary thought and art."<sup>25</sup> The assumption that underpins this procedure is that there can be no ur-tale according to which all other tales are 'right' or 'wrong', there are only tales and further

tales, each of which embody different approaches to experience. “[N]othing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary”, as Richard Rorty expresses the concept:

there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original.<sup>26</sup>

This process is exemplified by A. S. Byatt’s Princess in ‘The Story of the Eldest Princess’ who, when she realises she is trapped in a conventional story pattern, is able to free herself by changing it into another story of her own making, that operates on her own terms. She sets out on a quest, at the behest of her parents and the council of the state, to recover a ‘silver bird’ that will enable them to turn the sky from green back to blue; a difference which has no detrimental effect on the kingdom whatsoever, but proves objectionable simply because it is at variance with the ‘norm’. Being a princess who is familiar with the conventions of fairy tale, however, the heroine knows that only younger sisters succeed in quests, and assumes from the start that she is destined to fail. Consequently she does not treat the quest with complete seriousness and allows herself to be distracted by some injured creatures along the way: a scorpion with a crushed tail, a toad with a gashed head and a cockroach snared in a fowler’s threads. These creatures are under threat from one kind of story that has marginalised them. The scorpion, for instance, would not usually have been rescued because of the story of the scorpion that stings its helper, and the toad has been wounded as a result of the story of the toad with a jewel in its head. All of them, with the princess, manage to escape these original oppressive stories, by realising that “stories change themselves” and that they can tell their own tales differently.<sup>27</sup> As an old woman tells the princess later, she is able to escape from the pernicious enchantments of the fairy tale she initially found herself in because she is “a born storyteller”. “You had the sense to see you were caught in a story” says the old woman, “and the sense to see that you could change it to another one.”<sup>28</sup> Carter and Rushdie in their fiction, I would suggest see the fairy tale as seductive in similar ways, and recognise that whilst such seductive potency can be used, as Grimm and Perrault use it, to

oppress, it can also be used, as Carter and Rushdie use it, to liberate. It can set free, as well as entrap.

To be able to approach fairy tales in this way, as Cristina Bacchilega reminds us, is a privilege earned for us by deconstructive writers such as Dworkin and Duncker. “We fortunately do not need to reject fairy tales as inherently sexist narratives which offer ‘narrow and damaging role-models for young readers’”, she says, because the work has already been done for us; and we are now free to “view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse” that can be used to define and shape new kinds of gender identity.<sup>29</sup> It was necessary to understand the limitations of fairy tale before it was possible to understand its potential; the princess had to be a ‘knowing’ princess, before she could appropriate the fairy tale for herself. But now that those limitations *have* been understood it has become possible to recuperate the genre, and revivify the muted tradition. Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie, I believe, exemplify this new approach to fairy tale. They show, on the one hand, how fairy tales have been used to express models of identity formation that exclude or marginalise other possibilities, and on the other, how fairy tales can be used to formulate powerful new conceptions of identity that are inclusive of difference and variation. There is still a deconstructive element to their appropriations of fairy tale, of course, but the deconstruction is carried out, not in the spirit of a critique of fairy tale *per se*, but in the spirit of a recuperation. This lends their treatment of fairy tale a curiously ambiguous, dual character - as if it is something that is to be distrusted, and yet affirmed; rejected, and yet adopted.

Part of the seduction of fairy tales, for Carter and Rushdie, part of their pleasure, derives from the fact that they offer a space of play, a space of making, within which identity constructs can be toyed with, and even remodelled. If certain fairy tales have the power to shape gender roles so that girls become prissy and passive, and boys become boisterous and aggressive - then surely other fairy tales also have the potential to reshape gender roles so that boys and girls are given more equal roles to play. This idea is partly derived from the psychoanalytic theory developed most famously by Bruno Bettelheim in

*The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). Because fairy tales employ symbolism that reflects the workings of the unconscious mind, argues Bettelheim, they can enable the child to confront and resolve inner problems and conflicts in order to reach an acceptable level of maturation and psychic integration. *The Uses of Enchantment*, he says “attempts to show how fairy stories represent in imaginative form what the process of healthy human development consists of, and how the tales make such development attractive for the child to engage in.”<sup>30</sup> In this thesis I accept Bettelheim’s arguments to some degree, arguing that Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie are drawn to fairy tales partly because they can offer a model of successful personal integration, vital for the writer dealing in identity politics. But at the same time I argue that there are limits to Bettelheim’s position, deriving from his Jungian framework, that represents the fairy tale as an archetype of the collective unconscious. In a flaw common to Jungian thinking, this means that he presents the model of maturation symbolically represented in fairy tales as universal, failing to recognise the degree to which it is also a model of socialisation - fitting developing minds into social and cultural moulds rather than unproblematically ‘natural’ ones.

Other Jungian interpretations of fairy tale such as Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) suffer from similar weaknesses. Campbell’s argument that the quest structure of fairy tale is common to myth and heroic legend because such narratives reflect a universal archetype, leads him to suggest that “the symbols of mythology are not manufactured ... They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source.”<sup>31</sup> This kind of semi-mystical argument fails to take account of the fact that fairy tales, myths and legends are also products of specific societies and specific times, and need to be understood in the context of their societies and times. It strikes me that the Freudian interpretation, that compares fairy tale with dreams, and insists that they have to be read in the context in which they are produced and received is far more realistic. “There can be no doubt that the connections between our typical dreams and fairy tales and the material of other kinds of creative writing are neither few nor accidental”, Freud argued in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).<sup>32</sup> But he rejects the method of dream interpretation that assumes there to be a “fixed key” for

decoding the symbolism, and instead aligns himself with Artemidorus of Daldis, who makes an “interesting modification” to the standard decoding method by insisting that the analyst:

takes into account not only the content of the dream but also the character and circumstances of the dreamer; so that the same dream-element will have a different meaning for a rich man, a married man or, let us say, an orator, from what it has for a poor man, a bachelor or a merchant.<sup>33</sup>

Whilst there can be no general procedure for the interpretations of dreams, then, and presumably by extension the interpretation of fairy tales, as Jungian analysis might suggest, a procedure of interpretation can be developed that interprets the material of dreams in the context of the dreamer’s mental and social life, or the material of fairy tales in the context of their social production. Carter and Rushdie, I would suggest, recognise the potency of fairy tale in Bruno Bettelheim’s terms, but they also recognise the need to contextualise in this way, perceiving that the majority of fairy tales which white patriarchal culture has canonised as fairy tale will use this potency to suppress difference rather than encourage it.

#### ✿ Definitions of the Fairy Tale

In folklore studies the fairy tale belongs to the broad and diverse category of *folk narrative*; that is, narrative which was at some stage transmitted orally within a community. Steven Swann Jones identifies three forms of folk narrative; *myths* which use “*gods* (divine, immortal figures) to explain the operation and purpose of the cosmos”, *legends*, which are “quasi-historical narratives that use *exceptional and extraordinary* protagonists and depict remarkable phenomena to illustrate cultural ideas, values and norms”, and *folktales*, which are “entertaining narratives that use *common, ordinary people* as protagonists to reveal the desires and foibles of human nature”. The fairy tale is a subsection of the category folktale which can be distinguished from other subsections of folktale, such as *fables, jokes, and romantic tales*, by virtue of the fact that they depict magical or marvellous events as normal parts of human experience.<sup>34</sup> “We can differentiate folktales from other forms of folk narrative”, Jones sums up usefully “by their use of

ordinary protagonists, we can differentiate the genre of the fairy tale from other forms of the folktale by its incorporation of and attitude toward magic".<sup>35</sup>

Jones identifies these basic distinctions in his study in an attempt to establish exactly what it is that defines the fairy tale as a genre. This is no easy task, as he notes early on, because the genre is derived from a pre-literate, oral heritage in which the tales "circulate over hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years in multiple versions, adapted by different narrators in a style or manner specific to each narrator".<sup>36</sup> As a result it is encyclopaedic in its scope. He does, however, come to identify four features of fairy tale which he considers to be 'significant formal continuities'. These are: the use of marvellous events which, in a Todorovian fashion, are accepted without explanation; the resolving of a problem by means of a quest, which recalls formalist descriptions of fairy tale as a narrative which begins by establishing some form of 'lack'; the happy ending, which signifies the liquidation of the 'lack'; and finally, the use of an unambiguous central protagonist with whom the audience can identify.<sup>37</sup>

The uses that Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie make of the fairy tale will evidently be for their own purposes, and will not reflect the rigour of a strict folkloric definition. Nevertheless, their definitions of fairy tale do relate to the folkloric definition in significant ways. In the following section, with the above description in mind, I would like to explore some of the comments Carter has made concerning fairy tale, in order to establish, in more concrete terms, what it is she means when she refers to the genre. Having considered Carter's approach I will then examine some of Rushdie's pronouncements upon the genre and consider the influence that Carter's approach to fairy tale has had upon him.

It will be helpful to observe at the outset that Carter's thoughts on the fairy tale cannot be homogenised, because they undergo a change mid-way through her writing career. In her earlier writings, up to and including *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter adopts an idiosyncratic psychoanalytical approach to fairy tales, stressing their dreamlike qualities, their symbolism, and their latent content of erotic desire. In her later writings she adopts a more academic folkloristic stance towards the tales, treating them as popular



entertainments that have been passed from generation to generation and community to community. This first approach is illustrated by a statement made in her 'Afterword' to the first edition of *Fireworks* (1974):

The tale does not log everyday experience, as the short story does; it interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience ... Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural - and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the world as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function - that of provoking unease.<sup>38</sup>

Here she treats the fairy tale as a space for discourses other than the conscious in which subversive desires can be expressed and played out. Unlike Bettelheim's this definition does not represent the fairy tale as a 'safe space of play' but as a space in which potentially dangerous and potentially corrupting ideas can be given expression in a symbolic form. This effectively makes the fairy tale into a subgenre of the literature of the uncanny, described by Rosemary Jackson as a literature which, "by permitting an articulation of taboo subjects which are otherwise silenced, threatens to transgress social norms."<sup>39</sup> Jackson derives this definition from Freud's essay on the subject 'Das Unheimliche'(1919), in which the uncanny is presented as an experience caused by an apprehension of "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."<sup>40</sup> It is an experience in which, in other words, things repressed for the sake of social continuity recur to unsettle our habitual conceptions of normality and reality, causing us to question the basis of our belief systems. One of the things that can have this effect, as Freud argues, is magic; where the magical explanation of experience represents a mode of thinking that we believe we have surmounted and outgrown, but which can be forced upon us once more by a particular experience or event:

animistic beliefs of civilised people [writes Freud] are in a state of having been ... *surmounted* ... an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.<sup>41</sup>

Angela Carter, I would argue, is using the magical and marvellous content of fairy tale, in her earlier works, to precisely this end: to encourage the apprehension that there are more ways of seeing than those which are reinforced by the dominant order. As Jorge Luis Borges puts it, with characteristic brilliance, “[m]agic is a unique causality. It is the belief that besides the causal relations we know, there is another causal relation.”<sup>42</sup>

In his essay Freud actually denies that the magical content of fairy tale can produce this feeling of the uncanny. “Fairy tales” he notes “... adopt the animistic standpoint of the omnipotence of thoughts and wishes, and yet I cannot think of any genuine fairy story which has anything uncanny about it.”<sup>43</sup> This is because, as Freud argues later in the essay, foreshadowing Todorov’s definition of the fairy tale, “the world of reality [in fairy tale] is left behind from the very start, and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted”.<sup>44</sup> As a result of this the conflict between the fantastical interpretation of events and the realistic interpretation, that would have occurred were the events of the fairy tale to have happened in ‘real life’, does not arise. What if, however, the fairy tales themselves were introduced into a naturalistic representation of the events of ‘real life’? They would then serve the function of unsettling our conceptions of reality, for they would represent the presence of magic and the fantastic in the everyday; forcing us to ask “whether things which have been ‘surmounted’ and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible”.<sup>45</sup> This is, of course, precisely what Angela Carter is doing in her fiction; introducing fairy tales into realistic scenarios in order to confuse the distinction made between reality and fantasy and suggest that there are other ways of doing things than those which have been adopted and naturalised by ‘civilised’ societies. It is this confusion, this challenging of the boundaries between fantasy and reality, that makes fairy tales into potent political tools in Carter’s writing - since their magical events and extravaganzas cease to be disruptions that are limited purely to the world of the faery, and begin to encroach upon the world of social issues and identity politics.

Salman Rushdie, arguing with a socio-historical rather than a psychoanalytic agenda, presents Terry Gilliam’s film *Brazil* as a potent political fantasy for similar reasons. It has a marvellous content, he notes, but that marvellous content is clearly meant

to relate to, and have an impact upon reality. It does not set up an impassable border between the real and the fantastic, but integrates them so that the world of the imagination can be set “*at war* with the real world”, challenging our preconceptions, and breaking down “our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be.” It is a world in which the dreamer can become empowered, and in which s/he finds a weapon “with which reality can be shattered, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed.”<sup>46</sup> Both writers, because of their use of the marvellous in this way, have been referred to as ‘magic realists’ - a term which recognises the influence that contemporary South American fiction, such as that of Borges, has had upon their work. Some commentators have found this term problematic, because it is frequently used too casually, and has come to represent an amorphous and sometimes widely divergent body of texts. Rushdie himself, in a discussion with Angela Carter, objects to the term because the “faddishly, fashionable” appropriation of it has distorted its true meanings.<sup>47</sup> If we try to understand the term in its South American context, however, as a description of “a body of narratives that were formulated, explicitly, to “elucidate social problems of race, class and gender” it can prove useful.<sup>48</sup> This specific formulation, I would argue, is applicable to Carter and Rushdie’s work because it alerts us to the political motivation behind their use of fairy tale as a means of disrupting normative expectations.

Clearly the fairy tale is not always regarded by Rushdie and Carter as a politically subversive medium. On occasion, in fact, it is presented as the definitive example of a narrative that allows escape from and evasion of political engagement. In *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, Hind’s tower represents the ‘once upon a time’ to which she flees in order to become “a woman who [does] not change”. In *Shame*, likewise, the fairy tale house of Nishapur enables the three Shakil sisters to shut themselves away from the world, and in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* the Spanish town where Vasco da Gama has built his ‘folly’ with its “high, high tower, which looked like something out of a fairy story” is also a place “to which people come to forget themselves - or, more accurately, to lose themselves, to live in a kind of dream”.<sup>49</sup> Just as escapism isn’t necessarily the only result of fantasy in general, however, fairy tale worlds do not always prove debilitating in a political sense,

but can also be challenging. Rushdie's fairy tales are not always discrete, they are not always partitioned off from reality, but can become entwined with his fictional-real worlds undermining the strict binarism set up between fantasy and reality, subverting the binarism between text and frame, and challenging the construction of the 'observable world'. This is demonstrated effectively in *Shame* when Rushdie's unreliable narrator argues that he is not writing a realist novel, but "a sort of modern fairy-tale" about which "nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either".<sup>50</sup> This argument is clearly, and intentionally, disingenuous because it is glaringly apparent that Rushdie's 'fairy tale' is being written for precisely the opposite reasons, as a mask that allows him to say something of a potentially explosive nature in an apparently innocuous and harmless way. It has the function of enabling the political activist to speak out, to issue provocative sallies of invective with impunity, and thus it licenses Rushdie to conduct a penetrating analysis of the lives of Pakistan's notables whilst hiding behind his laughing (laughable) saturnine persona. The fairy tale's very appearance of innocence, in other words, makes it into a narrative that can disrupt whilst appearing not to disrupt, and unsettle whilst appearing to confirm.

The use of fairy tale as a political tool in this way is not a particularly new or isolated development. As Jack Zipes argues, the literary fairy tale began to be written in Europe because certain French writers, dissatisfied with the policies of Louis XIV, but unable to criticise him directly because of rigorous censorship, saw it "as a means to vent criticism and at the same time project hope for a better world."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, as a student recently told me in Romania, fairy tales were used under the regime of Ceausescu as a covert means of expressing and circulating dissatisfaction without drawing unwanted attention from the authorities. Evidently, then, whilst it is possible that the fairy tale can operate simply as a means of escapism and evasion of political reality, it can also operate as a means of engaging in political debate: criticising the authorities, suggesting alternative realities, and, at the same time, providing a means of disguise and protection. Like pornography, as it is described by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), it can operate with no more rigour than a 'wet-dream' if it is simply meant to be the fantasy of a

reactionary who doesn't wish to disrupt the status quo. If, however, it is used as a socially relevant text that can "affect the reader's perceptions of the world" it can also function as a potent critique. Used politically, "[t]he text that had heretofore opened up creamily to [the reader], in a dream" will have the potency to "gather itself together and harshly expel him into the anguish of actuality."<sup>52</sup>

This element of the fairy tale, the disruptive potential of magic, does not disappear from Carter's fiction as her conception of the fairy tale changes, it simply changes its nature. From being dark magic that disrupts the consciousness of the individual, it becomes light, carnival magic that, more like Rushdie's, aims to disrupt the hierarchies of culture. This later approach is illustrated in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990), in which talk of psychoanalysis, eroticism and desire is dropped, in favour of a strictly social and historical study of the dissemination of the tales. Here the fairy tale is defined as 'a figure of speech' which we use loosely:

to describe the great mass of 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 perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor.

This definition highlights two features of the fairy tale that will be vital to an understanding of both Carter and Rushdie's use of the genre. Firstly, it suggests that fairy tales, as the entertainment of the poor, are in some way set in opposition to the entertainment of the rich. They are a carnivalised counter-discourse that can be used to unsettle the values established in more 'official' discourses. Rushdie's *Arabian Nights*, in this regard, becomes a scurrilous, subversive and frivolous body of fairy tales, that can be used to undermine the more serious and weighty narratives held as sacred in the Islamic tradition, and Carter's robust and bawdy peasant tales become the 'irritating itch of the vernacular' within the body of 'high literature'. Both writers, in this way, suggest that fairy tales can be the opposite of Barthes' concept of mythic speech. They are not necessarily narratives that reinforce the values of the status quo, they can also represent a

voice from below, the voice excluded from the privileges of power, willing to disrupt the status quo.

The idea that fairy tale can, because of its very frivolity, operate as a counter-discourse that can be set in opposition to the mythic, conforms with the definition of fairy tale established by Steven Swann Jones. Fairy tales, he argues, are entertaining narratives in which the protagonist wants nothing better than the physical comforts of life (food, a fire, money, a wife or husband) and seems completely unaware of divine forces. Myths conversely are narratives which embody the values of the tribe, by using a protagonist that is at all times aware of his gods and strives towards some form of transcendental apotheosis. The immortal protagonists of myth, writes Jones:

are linked with the immutable laws of the cosmos; their situations and actions illustrate cosmogonic and paradigmatic principles.... Consequently, audiences relate to myths as sacred and esoteric texts.... the ordinary protagonists of folktales remind us of ourselves, and their quests and questions are on a very personal level the same as ours ... as a result, we regard folktales as personal entertainment, as engaging fictions reflecting our ability to laugh at ourselves as well as to express our deepest dreams and fears.<sup>53</sup>

Because of this distinction it is possible to suggest that whilst the re-writing of myth for the contemporary writer will tend to be a deconstructive process that aims at altering the conservative communal values it enshrines, the re-writing of fairy tale, on the contrary, will be a more relaxed affair - more of an appropriation - since the fairy tale is already set in opposition to the monumental structures of the mythic. "The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal" writes Walter Benjamin "does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man." Thus "[t]he fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed on its chest."<sup>54</sup> This is precisely the distinction Angela Carter draws in her essay, 'Notes From the Front Line'. Myths, she says, "are extra-ordinary lies designed to make people unfree" whilst fairy tale on the other hand, offers "a much more straightforward set of devices for making real life more exciting and is much easier to infiltrate with different kinds of consciousness."<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that folk tales are in

any way universal or beyond social critique. With folklore as with myth Carter is a materialist and would reject any claim they are not one of the “social fictions that regulate our lives”.<sup>56</sup> Fairy tales remain, however, somewhat different from myth in that their social fictions are less concerned with ‘dominant’ ideals. Whilst the myth tends to reflect the sacred aspects of society, upholding its hierarchies and supporting its power structures, the fairy tale remains conspicuously secular. It represents, not the authority that descends from on high vouchsafed by transcendental experience and deistic fiat, but the small ‘descendental’ voice of the everyday.<sup>57</sup> It is for this reason that Carter sees the transition she undergoes between her successive works *The Passions of New Eve* (1977) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) as a process of relaxation. *New Eve*, she notes, is an “anti-mythic novel” conceived “as a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity”. *The Bloody Chamber*, however, is more playful in its intentions:

[After *The Passion of New Eve* I] relaxed into folklore with a book of stories about fairy stories, *The Bloody Chamber*, in 1979. It turned out to be easier to deal with the shifting structures of reality and sexuality by using sets of *shifting structures* derived from orally transmitted traditional tales.<sup>58</sup>

This brings us to the second feature of the fairy tale highlighted by Carter’s definition in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*; the idea that the oral dissemination of the tales will mean that they can be made again and again, in infinitely various permutations. It is significant, in the above quotation, that when Carter refers to the tales as ‘shifting structures’ she mentions specifically that they are orally transmitted. Their oral origins, in other words, mean that they will still be associated, both imaginatively and historically, with the many different voices of the many different people that have told and retold each tale, despite the fact that they have long been written down and assimilated into ‘literature’. The tales, in this way, retain the sense that, whatever tale is being told, there is always an alternative telling available. If one matriarch is telling a tale that encourages its audience of girls to spin spin spin until their legs fall off, on the next spinning stool sits a mother goose who is showing them her clubbed foot and telling them, warning them, that spinning is a crippling task. In more literary terms: if Charles Perrault is writing, in one

elite Parisian salon, that Beauty should marry the Beast because girls should reconcile themselves to arranged marriages, in another salon just down the road, Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy was perhaps writing the same tale, but showing how it is a tyranny for Beauty to be married to any Beast against her own wishes. Both tellings exist side by side and are encompassed by the same narrative type; neither telling, therefore, can be entirely stable or entirely determinate, because both automatically exist in relation to each other - as contradictory alternatives.<sup>59</sup> This, of course, is true of all narratives; any piece of writing will prove to be relative, in the values it expresses, if it is compared and contrasted with other narratives of similar kinds taken from different periods and different communities. Because the fairy tale is linked explicitly to the concept of a teller, however, its dependence on context becomes foregrounded, and its potential to be something else becomes apparent. "[T]he memory or the fancy of the story's origin" as Marina Warner has argued "inspires the simulation of a storyteller's voice in the literary text"; and this simulation suggests that whatever is being said in any particular tale is changeable and open to revision in another tale.<sup>60</sup> It is this aspect of the fairy tale - the storytelling aspect - that Carter and Rushdie are emphasising in their re-workings, in order to stress the idea that the tales are not fixed or stable, or expressive of any one ideology.

Both these elements of Carter's definition of fairy tale in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* - that they are the voice of the oppressed and marginalised, and that they are unstable and variable narratives - enable her to appropriate them for her own creative and ideological ends. Both set the scene for her to employ the fairy tale as a weapon in the fight against monological discourse, which excludes the various and multiple unofficial voices that she sees in fairy tale. This, of course, involves some purposeful misuses and re-interpretations of the genre. The fairy tale, in ordinary circumstances, is a product of its society, and does reflect social norms, if it is understood in the context of that society. If it is taken out of its specific social context, however, and placed alongside a number of other diverse tales, taken from different cultures at different periods, it will cease to be a potentially conservative testimony to social continuity and become something more radical, a testimony to the relativity of cultural values. Within its social context, the fairy



tale will reflect a social norm, taken out of that social context and contrasted with fairy tales from different contexts which reflect different norms, it will demonstrate that no single cultural code is better, or more natural than any other. This is precisely the effect that Carter is striving to achieve in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*: she sets about undermining any cultural certainties by placing a wide spectrum of tales, that range from more or less familiar old English tales to tales that lie outside our generic expectations altogether, between the covers of a single book. This makes the collection into a fine example of Bakhtinian polyphonic dialogue - presenting many competing voices, all of which modify one another, and none of which establish a dominant norm. The factor that superficially unites the tales of *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter notes, is that they are all, loosely, about women; but she is keen to point out that she hasn't put the collection together in order to show that women are "all sisters under the skin", but, on the contrary, to show that women can be many different things, at many different times, and no one thing all the time. "Sisters under the skin we might be" she says:

but that doesn't mean we've got much in common ... Rather I wanted to demonstrate the extraordinary richness and diversity of responses to the same common predicament - being alive - and the richness and diversity with which femininity, in practice, is represented in 'unofficial' culture: its strategies, its plots, its hard work.<sup>61</sup>

A recognition of diversity, then, rather than a call to unity is the function of the collection - Carter's aim being not to assert a homogenised feminist voice, but to undermine the restrictive and unrealistic idea that there can be any such thing as a naturally homogenised group. Her objective is proliferation, rather than identification; and the vehicle of this proliferation is the fairy tale.

This device, of drawing eclectically from various sources, and placing contradictory or widely diverse narratives side by side, is a familiar one in contemporary fiction. A. S. Byatt, in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', for instance, uses the character of a narratologist, and the forum of an academic conference on narratology, to create the equivalent of an oral culture in which narratives are exchanged in a dynamic and inter-active environment. This, to some extent, reproduces the conditions of traditional

oral exchange, but it does so on a global level. Narratives are relayed in this forum, in a highly self-conscious fashion, that cover a far broader geographical and temporal span than would ever be possible in a localised community. A British academic tells Chaucer's tale of 'Patient Griselda', a Turkish professor tells tales from *The Arabian Nights*, a museum guide recounts the epic of Gilgamesh, and Petrarch, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Grimm and Somadeva, amongst others, are all referred to in the process. The effect of this is to suggest, firstly, that there is no single, dominant cultural way of viewing things and that each culture will understand the world in different, but equally valid, ways. Secondly, however, it also shows how there are many similarities between the products of different cultures, suggesting that cultures are not different in essential terms because they have been formed out of a process of interaction and mutual borrowing over the centuries. Together these two ideas suggest that no one culture should have primacy over any other because, in the first place, no single approach is inherently better or more preferable to any other, and in the second, no rigorous 'natural' boundaries can be established between cultures that enable us to separate them definitively.

It is for just these reasons, I would suggest, that Rushdie uses an equivalent technique, in his fiction, appropriating fairy tales eclectically from a number of different cultures and a number of different periods. Perhaps the best representation of such eclecticism in his fiction is the 'cartoon' room that Vasco Miranda paints for Moraes Zogoiby in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* in which contemporary heroes of various media merge into traditional heroes of east and west:

On the nursery walls he first painted a series of trompe-l'oeil windows, Mughal palatial, Andalusian Moorish, Manueline Portugese, roseate Gothic, windows great and small; and then, through these magic casements, which were windows both of and on the world of make-believe, he gave us glimpses of his fabulous throngs .... There were talking roosters, booted pussies and flying, red-caped Wonder Dogs; also great galleries of more local heroes, for he gave us more than we bargained for, adding djinns on carpets and thieves in giant pitchers and a man in the claws of a giant bird. He gave us story-oceans and abracadabras, Panchatantra fables and new lamps for old. Most important of all, however, was the notion ... of the secret identity ... Clark Kent who was the space-immigrant Kal-El from the planet Krypton who was Superman ...<sup>62</sup>

One of the reasons Rushdie is using such eclecticism, is to challenge restrictive cultural barriers. If, as Stella suggests in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), "understanding [is] impossible between people who [have] not read the same children's books or heard the same nursery rhymes", then one route to greater inter-cultural understanding, is for different cultures to assimilate each other's fairy tales.<sup>63</sup> More radically than this, however, Rushdie is also combining the fairy tales of diverse cultures in order to unsettle the myth that there is any ontological difference between cultures. Many of the nineteenth century collections of fairy tales were conducted for nationalistic purposes, in order to demonstrate the supposedly authentic spirit of the nation's folk. The Grimms, influenced by Herder's concept of *Urpoesie* (primeval poetry), collected their tales in order to reinforce German national self-awareness by stressing a Nordic-Germanic heritage; and the Nazis, on the same basis, used the fairy tale as "a most valuable means ... in the racial and political education of the young".<sup>64</sup> By pointing to the parallels between folk cultures over the ages, and by indicating the ways in which folk cultures have interacted and influenced one another, Rushdie is resisting this idea that fairy tales belong to or define a single culture and attempting to replace it with a vision of fruitful hybridity, in which 'east' is influenced by 'west' and 'west' is influenced by 'east'. Like Carter, his aim is to destabilise the view that there can be an essential and 'natural' difference between cultural groups, outside of history, for it is on the basis of such essentialism that exclusive, racist dichotomies are established.

There can be little doubt that the fiction of Angela Carter has had a direct influence upon the fiction of Salman Rushdie. She herself recognises the impact she has had upon the kind of novels that he is writing, and numerous critical parallels have been drawn between them.<sup>65</sup> "It is not immodest of Carter to imply" - as Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton argue in the introduction to their collection of essays - "that her own writing from the 1970s set a precedent for a younger generation of writers such as Rushdie."<sup>66</sup> Rushdie himself is not slow to admit this impact, and refers frequently to Carter's inspirational qualities, both as a person and as a novelist. In his obituary notice for

her he argues that she was unjustly neglected by the critics and the establishment during her life time. Fellow writers such as himself, however, and her “bewitched, inspired readers” knew all along “that she was that rare thing, a real one-off, nothing like her on the planet”. Part of her appeal, as Rushdie goes on to explain, is her talent for profanity, her willingness to defile sacred cows and to thumb her nose at anything that might suggest conventionality:

She loved nothing so much as cussed - but also blithe - nonconformity [he writes]. Her books unshackle us, toppling the statues of the pompous, demolishing the temples and commissariats of righteousness. They draw their strength, their vitality, from all that is unrighteous, illegitimate, low. They are without equal, and without rival.<sup>67</sup>

The most successful example of such nose-thumbing and table-turning, Rushdie notes in his introduction to her collected short stories, comes in her treatment of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*. This, he claims, is her ‘masterwork’ and likeliest of all to endure.<sup>68</sup> It is also, I would suggest, one of the key influences upon Rushdie’s own use of fairy tales.

This influence is most apparent in Rushdie’s use of the Beauty/Beast motif in *Shame* (1984), as we will see in the first chapter. But throughout Rushdie’s writings there is evidence of a Carterian willingness to violate ‘sacred’ fairy tales in order to discover new stories, or to recover old ones that have been forgotten. As in Carter’s fiction Rushdie’s willingness to interrogate fairy tales has a political function, allowing him to investigate and remodel the social fictions that are embodied in them. Both writers represent historically marginalised voices; both - therefore - have reasons for resisting the dominant social code as it is inscribed in the specific fairy tales that have been canonised in Europe and America. In order to resist this inscription they are attempting to recuperate the fairy tale, by rejecting the exclusive canonical definition and replacing it with a more representative body of narratives that reflect a diversity of possible subject positions. In Carter’s case, this involves the reintroduction and production of tales that suit the concerns of women, whereas in Rushdie’s case this involves an assault upon the ethnocentric canon of European fairy tales.

There are, of course, as many differences between Carter and Rushdie as there are similarities, and these will also be instructive in attempting to identify trends in the contemporary appropriation of fairy tale. The difference of primary importance, as will already be apparent, is the difference in their political agenda. Carter's emphasis upon the role of women and men in society leads her to focus predominantly upon the construction of gender roles in fairy tales. Rushdie's emphasis upon the experiences of the migrant lead him to use the fairy tale as a means of investigating issues of cultural 'belonging' and national affiliation. Whilst the following chapters on Carter, in general, concentrate upon the process of identity formation in fairy tale in relation to issues of gender, then, the chapters on Rushdie tend to focus upon the process of identity formation in fairy tale in relation to issues of race and culture.

A second major difference between Carter and Rushdie, is the difference in style and technique. Rushdie's writing is historical and epic in style and scope, Carter's is more fabular and 'other-worldly'. This difference, I would argue, also derives from the difference in political affiliation: Rushdie is more concerned with specific historical events, so he tends to employ less overtly fantastical means of representation. Carter is more likely to exploit fantasy for its symbolic, metaphoric and psychoanalytic, rather than cultural, implications, so the fantastical elements in her writing tend to be more pronounced. Despite these differences, however, there remains a basic similarity in Carter and Rushdie's treatment of fairy tale. Both of them use fairy tale to investigate issues of identity formation and the ways in which a culture or cultures view identity; and both of them employ the fairy tale positively as well as negatively as a means of developing new possibilities for identity.

## ✿ Conclusion

This introduction began with an observation, and a question. The observation was of the number of times fairy tale appeared both as a casual reference and as a major narrative structuring device in late twentieth century Euro-American fiction. The question

was why; what is it about the fairy tale that makes it such a popular source for contemporary writers? The difference, I will now suggest, between previous borrowings and contemporary borrowings is that many contemporary borrowings, in the spirit of both Barthes and Warner, are executed with a greater degree of self-consciousness, because they are designed to investigate, as well as expropriate, the mechanics of the fairy tale. Contemporary literary rewritings of fairy tale, we might say, are often meta-fairy tales; fairy tales on the subject of fairy tale, or, as Carter describes *The Bloody Chamber*, collections of stories about fairy stories. What needs to be stressed, however, is that the fairy tale, in these appropriations, is not only a thing that is viewed with suspicion, as a narrative that reinforces dominant social codes. It is also regarded by many writers, including Carter and Rushdie, as a potent means of undermining dominant social codes in its own right. This is based upon the apprehension that, firstly, the fairy tale isn't as strong as the mythology in its inscription of social codes because it represents the voice of the common man and common woman, and secondly, the fairy tale cannot be homogenised because its productions are so diverse. As a polyphony of diverse voices and diverse expressions of identity that are relayed in frequently bawdy and irreverent ways, fairy tales become a Menippean form that resists the imposition of any single voice, and exceeds the limits, measures and restraints of an established status quo.

Having argued this, however, I do not wish to suggest that the varied works of Carter and Rushdie can be reduced to those that feature fairy tale, neither do I wish to suggest that fairy tale alone provides the key to their fiction. My aim is to illuminate their writing by isolating one of its many elements, and in so doing to say something about the contemporary attitude toward fairy tale more generally. The objective of this study, as a result, is not a comprehensive analysis of the fiction of Carter and Rushdie, but a more specific analysis of fairy tale elements in their writing. To this end, I will concentrate, in Carter's case, upon the fiction that she produced after deciding to 'relax into fairy tale': *The Bloody Chamber*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. In Rushdie's case I will look firstly at the work in which he explores the concept of fairy tale most explicitly, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Then I will look in more detail at his use of *The Arabian*

*Nights in Midnight's Children* and, by way of conclusion, *The Satanic Verses*. Other relevant works such as *The Magic Toyshop* by Carter or *Shame* by Rushdie will also be referred to in this thesis, although there is not an entire chapter devoted to them.

- <sup>1</sup>Angela Carter, Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings (1992; London: Vintage, 1993) 21.
- <sup>2</sup>Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973) 118.
- <sup>3</sup>'Notes on the Fairy Tale,' trans. by David Constantine for Marina Warner, quoted in Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers (London: Vintage, 1995) 188.
- <sup>4</sup>The quotation is from Edgar Taylor, preface, German Popular Stories and Fairy Tales, Bohn's Illustrated Library (1823; London: Bell, 1888) iv.
- <sup>5</sup>These are the writers that Zipes has suggested form the canon. See Jack Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation (London: Heinemann, 1983).
- <sup>6</sup>Patricia Duncker, Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 152 & 153.
- <sup>7</sup>Margaret Atwood, 'Grimms' Remembered,' in Donald Haase, ed., The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993) 291-2.
- <sup>8</sup>See Zipes, Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England (Aldershot: Gower, 1986) 3. For Jennifer Waelti-Walters' feminist critique of fairy tale see, Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination (Montreal: Eden, 1982).
- <sup>9</sup>Maria Tatar, The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987) 86 & 87.
- <sup>10</sup>Ruth B. Bottigheimer, Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 168-171.
- <sup>11</sup>Andrea Dworkin, Woman Hating, (New York: Dutton, 1974) 48.
- <sup>12</sup>Bottigheimer, 52.
- <sup>13</sup>Duncker, Sisters and Strangers, 152.
- <sup>14</sup>For a more thorough consideration of these tales and some examples see Zipes, ed., Don't Bet on the Prince. For a selective chronological list of publications that rework fairy tales, see Appendix II.
- <sup>15</sup>Dworkin, 33.
- <sup>16</sup>Patricia Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers,' Literature and History 10.1 (1984): 3-4.
- <sup>17</sup>For Warner on Carter see From the Beast to the Blonde, 193-197; for Zipes, see The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993) xiii.
- <sup>18</sup>Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, 3. For a very lively and entertaining attack upon the so called 'authenticity' of the Grimm tales, in which they are denounced as a fraud on the scale of Macpherson's Ossian, see John. M. Ellis, One Fairy Story too Many: The Brothers Grimm and Their Tales (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983).
- <sup>19</sup>A. Jolles; quoted and translated by Mia I. Gerhardt, The Art of Storytelling: A Literary Study of The Thousand and One Nights (Leiden: Brill, 1963) 277.
- <sup>20</sup>Shawn Jarvis, 'Trivial Pursuit?: Women Deconstructing the Grimmian Model in the 'Kaffeterkreis', in Haase, 106.
- <sup>21</sup>Jarvis, 119.



- <sup>22</sup>Marina Warner, Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time, The Reith Lectures (London: Vintage, 1994) xiii.
- <sup>23</sup>Warner, Managing Monsters, xiii.
- <sup>24</sup>Warner, Managing Monsters, xiii.
- <sup>25</sup>Warner, Managing Monsters, 4.
- <sup>26</sup>Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: CUP, 1989) 80.
- <sup>27</sup>A. S. Byatt, 'The Story of the Eldest Princess,' The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories, (London: Chatto, 1994) 68.
- <sup>28</sup>Byatt, Djinn, 66.
- <sup>29</sup>Cristina Bacchilega, Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997) 9-10. The inset quotation is from Kay Stone.
- <sup>30</sup>Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1976; London: Penguin, 1991) 12.
- <sup>31</sup>Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949; London: Paladin, 1988) 3-4.
- <sup>32</sup>Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 4, general ed. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1976) 345.
- <sup>33</sup>Freud, Interpretation of Dreams, 171-2.
- <sup>34</sup>Steven Swann Jones, Fairy Tales: The Magic Mirror of Imagination, Studies in Literary Themes and Genres (New York: Twayne, 1995) 8. David Buchan argues that the fairy tale can also be distinguished from the folktale on the basis that folktales are oral and fairy tales have been written down. See 'Folk Literature,' Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism, ed. Martin Coyle et al. (London: Routledge, 1990) 976-990.
- <sup>35</sup>Jones, 10.
- <sup>36</sup>Jones, 3.
- <sup>37</sup>Jones, 9-17. For Todorov's definition of the marvellous, see The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve UP, 1975) 54. For a formalist characterisation of the fairy tale in terms of lack and liquidation of lack see Vladimir Propp, The Morphology of the Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis A. Wagner, 2nd ed. (American Folklore Society: U of Texas P, 1968).
- <sup>38</sup>Angela Carter, Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces (London: Quartet, 1974) 121-2.
- <sup>39</sup>Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (London: Methuen, 1981) 72.
- <sup>40</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'The 'Uncanny',' Art and Literature, ed. Albert Dixon, trans. James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 14, general ed. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1985) 363-4.
- <sup>41</sup>Freud, 'The 'Uncanny',' 372.
- <sup>42</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Thousand and One Nights,' Seven Nights, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1984) 51.
- <sup>43</sup>Freud, 'The 'Uncanny',' 369.
- <sup>44</sup>Freud, 'The 'Uncanny',' 373.
- <sup>45</sup>Freud, 'The 'Uncanny',' 373.

- <sup>46</sup>'The Location of Brazil,' Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991 (London: Granta, 1991) 122.
- <sup>47</sup>See Helen Simpson, 'Hackle Raisers,' Vogue Aug. 1985: 133.
- <sup>48</sup>María-Elena Angulo, Magic Realism: Social Context and Discourse, Latin American Studies 5 (New York: Garland, 1995) xi.
- <sup>49</sup>For the quotations see Rushdie, Satanic Verses, (1988; Delaware: Consortium, 1992) 392; and The Moor's Last Sigh (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 388 and 402.
- <sup>50</sup>Salman Rushdie, Shame (1983; London: Picador, 1984) 70.
- <sup>51</sup>Jack Zipes, introduction, Beauties, Beasts and Enchantments: Classic French Fairy Tales, ed. Jack Zipes (London: Meridian, 1991) 6.
- <sup>52</sup>Carter, The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History (London: Virago, 1979) 19.
- <sup>53</sup>Jones, 8-9.
- <sup>54</sup>Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,' Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 102. This essay was first published in Orient und Okzident, 1936.
- <sup>55</sup>Angela Carter, 'Notes From the Front Line,' On Gender and Writing, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983) 71.
- <sup>56</sup>Carter, 'Notes,' 70.
- <sup>57</sup>For this distinction, see also Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1976) 7-10.
- <sup>58</sup>Carter, 'Notes,' 71. My emphasis.
- <sup>59</sup>As Mikhail Bakhtin claims "a genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past," Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature 8 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 106.
- <sup>60</sup>Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, 25.
- <sup>61</sup>Angela Carter, introduction, The Virago Book of Fairy Tales, ed. Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1990) xiv.
- <sup>62</sup>Rushdie, The Moor's Last Sigh, 151-2.
- <sup>63</sup>V. S. Naipaul, The Mimic Men (1967; London: Penguin, 1969) 227.
- <sup>64</sup>For a thorough account of this subject see Christa Kamenetsky, Children's Literature in Hitler's Germany: The Cultural Policy of National Socialism (Ohio: Ohio UP, 1984). The quotation is of a party official, cited by Kamenetsky on p. 70.
- <sup>65</sup>In an interview with John Haffenden, shortly after the publication of Nights at the Circus, Carter recognises the influence she has had on Rushdie and simultaneously laments the fact that critics and reviewers are accusing her, rather than him, of being the one to jump on the bandwagon of 'magic realism': "I haven't had a novel out for a long time" she says "... everybody is doing it now. I am older than Salman Rushdie and I've been around longer, but memories are short." John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen, 1985) 81.
- <sup>66</sup>Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, introduction, The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism, ed. Bristow and Broughton, Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature (London: Longman, 1997) 5.

<sup>67</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Angela Carter, 1940-92: A Very Good Wizard, A Very Dear Friend,' New York Times 8 Mar. 1992, 7.5.

<sup>68</sup>Rushdie, introduction, Burning Your Boats: Stories, The Collected Angela Carter (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995) xi.

TALES OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE:  
ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*



*And what, I wondered, might be the exact nature  
of his 'beastliness'?*

'The Tiger's Bride'



In a 1984 interview with Angela Carter, Kerry Goldsworthy made the following observation:

The image of colonisation struck me as a kind of sidelight on what you were doing in *The Bloody Chamber* - taking a patriarchal, if you like, form like fairy tale and rewriting it so that it ... [Which Carter interrupts to say] Not really. I was taking the *latent image* - the latent content of those traditional stories and using that; and the latent content is violently sexual. And because I am a woman, I read it that way.<sup>1</sup>

Again, a few months later, in an interview with John Haffenden, Carter says: "My intention was not to do 'versions' ... but to extract the *latent content* from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginning of new stories."<sup>2</sup>

Both of these comments suggest to me that Carter is using fairy tales in a more constructive way than is often assumed. Her aim, it appears, is not primarily to re-utilise the genre with the intention of revealing problematical ideological shortcomings, though this will undoubtedly occur; rather, she re-utilises it with the more positive aim of showing how it can be, in some way, already subversive to patriarchy. She is not, therefore, as Sylvia Bryant suggests, re-writing fairy tales with an eye to "myth-breaking" rather than "myth-making", neither does she re-write them in order to attack their reinforcement of "essential sexual differences,"<sup>3</sup> on the contrary, she suggests that they already undermine "essential sexual differences" using a "latent content" of violence and sex.

One of the techniques she uses to highlight this latent content in *The Bloody Chamber* is to stress the links fairy tale has with less restrained, more riotous genres - bringing to the fore, in a nasty, savage precipitation of erotica and Gothicism, the Sadeian brutality of 'Snow White' and the Carnavalesque excess of 'Puss in Boots'. A second technique she uses, however - a more subtle technique - involves the introduction of 'alternative' tales, versions of fairy tales from outside the canon, that do not conform to their fabled innocence or naivety and do not carry the message that boys should be the paradigm of bravery and activity whilst girls "never think, act, initiate, confront, resist, challenge, feel, care or question" but are "[s]ometimes ... forced to do housework."<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I will begin by looking at two of these non canonical tales, showing how Carter uses them as alternative perspectives upon the genre that reveal the latent potential that can still be detected in the more canonical variants. Having done this I will go on to show how she isolates the more utopian aspects of fairy tale, and distances herself from other elements using irony. Finally I will show how she attempts to harness the idea of a multi-vocal oral medium in order to escape the limitations offered by any one single tale. In all cases I shall argue that fairy tales, as Carter perceives them, are not inherently sexist, because they are not inherently anything: they are "a great mass of infinitely various narrative" that "can be remade again and again by every person that tells them".<sup>5</sup> This means that they cannot be fixed or defined in any exclusive way, but are, in themselves, a heterogeneous, hybrid form that has been narrated, 'revised' and transformed by so many different voices that it would be impossible to settle upon "a theory which would explain the fairy-tale entirely as a literary species sui-generis".<sup>6</sup> In Carter's later work this multi-vocal quality of fairy tale becomes something to be celebrated - something to be tapped in order to suggest the abundance and variety of the lives they represent. In *The Bloody Chamber* which I will be looking at in this chapter, however, it is apparent that Carter is using the sheer variety of folk and fairy narrative to capture something far darker, far more sinister: qualities of violence and sexuality in fairy tales that have been disguised in the accepted canon, but that can still be discovered through the diligent exploration of alternatives and variations.

A useful parallel that can be drawn here is between Carter's attitude to fairy tale and Carter's attitude to pornography, as expressed in her polemical work, *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), published in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*. Pornography, she suggests, can, and in most cases does, "reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas in a given society";<sup>7</sup> and it is for this reason that the "straitjacket psychology" of de Sade's pornography "relates his fiction directly to the black and white ethical world of fairy tale"<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, however, "the pornographer has it in his (*sic*) power to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerrilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of ... relations".<sup>9</sup> This purposeful contradiction evolves because Carter believes that the ethical status of the pornography is entirely dependent upon the pornographer that is using it. If the pornographer is a "moral pornographer" and uses the medium in order to deconstruct gender stereotypes, then pornography becomes a subversive weapon. If the pornographer, however, is a reactionary pornographer who seeks only to maintain and exploit gender hierarchies, then pornography as a medium becomes confining. Similarly with fairy tales, if the writer or teller strives to use the subversive potential of the genre then the fairy tales will become a liberating, not a repressive medium. If the writer uses the fairy tale to compound and perpetuate the dominant order then they will indeed become strait-jackets.

#### ✱ 'The White Cat' and 'Mr Fox'

Although most of the tales in *The Bloody Chamber* deal with beauty\beast relationships, only two derive immediately from the source tale 'La Belle et la Bête'. These are, of course, 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride', modelled upon Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's literary version of 1757. There is an earlier, and much longer, literary version of the tale by Gabrielle Suzanne de Villeneuve (1740) which Carter was also familiar with. As Carter herself points out, however, it is de Beaumont's abbreviation of Villeneuve's novella that has set the parameters of the European variant of 'Beauty and the Beast', arriving, as it did, "in the springtime not only of mass media but

also of that of a burgeoning literary market specifically for children.” It is this version then, it is safe to assume, that Carter uses in *The Bloody Chamber*.<sup>10</sup>

‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ follows this source plot with considerable fidelity, so much so, in fact, that it can be read as ‘Beauty and the Beast’ re-written in Carter’s own words. ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ on the other hand, takes greater liberties with the material and offers a more radical reinterpretation of the original text. Taken together the two tales interact with the source on several different levels, offering no single interpretation of it, but suggesting many; presenting no final position, but forcing the reader to consider a multiple of possibilities. It is my intention, in the following chapter, to analyse both tales, showing, not only how they open a dialogue with the source, but also how they interact with each other, existing, in context, as inseparable and mutual comments upon the fairy tale ‘Beauty and the Beast’ (AT 425C).<sup>11</sup> Firstly, however, I shall note that though Carter’s overt narrative source is ‘Beauty and the Beast’ by de Beaumont the one direct reference within the tales is to another writer of fairy stories altogether: Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy. This reference comes when Beauty, in ‘Mr Lyon’, finds and begins to read “a collection of courtly and elegant French fairy tales about white cats who were transformed princesses and fairies who were birds.”<sup>12</sup> This book is not, as might be expected, a collection of de Beaumont’s tales, but must be one of the several collections of tales published by d’Aulnoy between 1696 and 1698, considerably earlier than either Villeneuve or de Beaumont, and contemporary with Charles Perrault. D’Aulnoy pre-dates, therefore, the time when the narratives were, as David Buchan puts it, “prettified and rewritten into children’s fairy tales.”<sup>13</sup> There are no attempts at facile moralising in the tales, courtly, elegant and mannered though they may be, the humour is fiercer and more bizarre, and the female characters are far more spirited and independent-minded than most of their generic kinsfolk.<sup>14</sup>

Jack Zipes, uncharacteristically insensitive to the universalising gesture, attempts to homogenise the canon of fairy tale by suggesting that d’Aulnoy was engaged in the same pursuit as Perrault, rewriting fairy tales so that they would conform to bourgeois patriarchal codes. All d’Aulnoy’s fairy tales” he writes “provide moral lessons, and the

ones that involve Beauty and the Beast reiterate the message of Perrault's tales. The woman must be constantly chastened for her curiosity, unreliability and whimsy." He argues that d'Aulnoy's tale 'The Ram', in particular, carries the message that "women must be placed under constant surveillance even when they are endowed with reason to temper their appetites."<sup>15</sup> A close reading of the tale, however, shows this criticism to be ill considered and unjust. 'The Ram', on the contrary, is openly critical of attempts by a king to impose his patriarchal whim on an intelligent and active young woman, and shows how she escapes his tyranny, using her own wit and the loyalty of her companions, in order to discover a more just and equal society where she will not be coerced by violent and cruel male figures. At the beginning of the tale, in the same motif used in *King Lear*, a proud and jealous King demands compliments from his daughters. The two elder sisters comply with his wishes, but the youngest, Princess Merveilleuse, refuses and instead recounts a dream in which the king behaves like her servant. The king, unable to react to this display of insolence with equanimity, becomes suspicious of the Princess, and finally resorts to violence, ordering his woodsman to take her into the forest, kill her, and bring him her heart and her tongue. These are in symbolic terms the two agents of her autonomy that he wishes to crush, the tongue allowing her the speech and wit that she has used to frustrate him, the heart (her own heart) signifying her self-possession. In a scenario reminiscent of Grimms' 'Snow White' (Tale 53), however, the killing is not carried out, and the required organs are substituted by an animal's.

The 'Snow White' recorded by the brothers Grimm, of course, could not have been a direct influence upon d'Aulnoy's 'The Ram', since Grimm settled upon their final version over a hundred years after d'Aulnoy had penned hers. A comparison between the two literary uses of the same motif, however, is instructive, since it illustrates the differences in concern between d'Aulnoy and Grimm, and shows us how d'Aulnoy's account is nuanced in order to offer the female character a more active and intelligent role. In 'Snow White' the princess, upon learning of the huntsman's intentions, begins to weep and begs the huntsman not to kill her. The huntsman then decides, "[s]ince she was so beautiful", that he will take pity on her, and kills a boar instead.<sup>16</sup> In 'The Ram',



conversely, the Princess does not lose her demeanour but “turns her beautiful eyes to the captain of the guards”, looks at him “without anger”, and then convinces him, in measured and eloquent terms, that the king’s order is unreasonable. The huntsman then decides not to kill her, not because he takes pity and not because she is beautiful, but because the king’s command is ‘barbarous’.<sup>17</sup> He does not then take the heroic initiative, condescending to rescue the princess, but remains at a loss, until the Princess’s pet dog, Tintin, sacrifices himself to secure her release. Then proceeds a series of adventures in which the princess meets an enchanted Prince, who has been transformed into a Ram, and journeys to his society underground where she is told that she (not he) is “to consider herself the sovereign” (393). The ram clearly appreciates the princess for her strength and ability, having watched her driving a chariot “that [she] drove ... with more skill than Apollo does his own” and hunting “... on a steed that seemed would obey no other rider” (395), so he falls in love with her; and the Princess, noticing the respect that the Ram has for her, begins to fall in love with him too. The story is not destined to have a happy end, however, for the ram (unlike the beast in ‘Beauty and the Beast’) dies when she is away from him for too long, and the princess is left forlorn. In one respect, however, there is room for hope, for when the princess returns to her father’s court he is so remorseful that he renounces the tyranny of his patriarchal rule by placing “his crown on the Princess’s head” and making her queen in his stead (398).

One of the particular tales that Beauty reads in ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, ‘The White Cat’, has a similar moral. The principal female character, in this tale, is a figure of noble self sufficiency: a ‘smart politician’ who “since she never said anything but what she chose ...never gave answers that did not wholly suit her.” (529). When the prince arrives, it is *she* that actively assists him in fulfilling various tasks, whilst he himself does next to nothing, and in the denouement it is *she* that condescends to the king, rather than, as is more traditionally the case, the king condescending to her:

The king ... was so overcome by this wondrous appearance that he could not resist exclaiming, ‘Behold the incomparable beauty who deserves the crown!’

‘My liege,’ she announced, ‘I come not to deprive you of a throne you fill so worthily, for I was born heiress to six kingdoms. Permit me to offer one to you and one to each of your elder sons...’ (544).

This is a just ending for the autonomous and courageous princess. Her own life story, related to the prince after her transformation, is a tale of suffering and hardship. Like Rapunzel in the Grimm variant she was imprisoned in a tower at birth as a direct result of her mother’s pre-natal cravings for peculiar foodstuffs. Unlike Rapunzel, however, this intemperance, the craving for forbidden fruit, is not regarded as a sin to be punished. When the king, in patriarchal horror at the consequences of the queen’s ravenousness (she ‘devours’ rather than ‘eats’ the fruit (532)), has her locked up it is *he* that is shown to be in error. He, unlike Perrault’s Bluebeard, is not justified in punishing his wife for her transgression and is ordered to set her free by a friendly fairy who calls her a “charming woman” and asks him what right he has “to treat her so severely?” (534)<sup>18</sup>

De Beaumont’s story, Carter’s apparent source, expounds a far more conservative moral than either of these d’Aulnoy tales. As Carter indicates elsewhere the French, eighteenth-century Beauty is designed more to “house train the id” than to liberate it.<sup>19</sup> She is a perfect example of how to be morally beautiful, modest, self-effacing, considerate, and of how to sacrifice oneself for the good of others. When the good fairy arrives at the end to put all to rights, for instance, she tells Beauty:

Vous allez devenir une grande reine; j’espère que le trône ne détruira pas vos vertus .... On se corrige de l’orgueil, de la colère, de la gourmandise et de la paresse, mais c’est une espèce de miracle que la conversion d’un coeur méchant et envieux.

[You’re going to become a great queen; I hope that the throne will not ruin your virtues ... One can correct pride, anger, gluttony and sloth, but the conversion of a bad and envious heart takes a special miracle.]<sup>20</sup>

In the translation that Carter herself made of de Beaumont’s tale, collected in her *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*, the moralising is diminished as much as possible. Carter leaves out the list of deadly sins above, and the foundation of the marriage that is guaranteed to make it long lasting is “goodness” instead of “virtue”, a less morally loaded term. When her sisters are cruel to Beauty, furthermore, Carter simply mentions that, “she

wished her sisters well although they hated her”,<sup>21</sup> whilst the original text suggests a more self-martyring, self-deprecating character: “*elle était si bonne qu’elle les aimait et leur pardonnait de tout son coeur le mal qu’elles lui avaient fait,*” (“she was so good that she loved and pardoned them with all her heart the wrongs they had done her”).<sup>22</sup> There is only so much alteration a translation can make, however, without becoming an adaptation in itself, and de Beaumont’s central message, that a young woman must be prepared to reconcile herself to the beastliness of a husband if it improves her father’s financial standing, is still evident.

This message is frequently cited as the principal message of all beauty and the beast myths - from Cupid and Psyche, through to the Disney musical on London’s west-end. As the ‘Greatest Living Poet’ explains to Salman Rushdie’s narrator in *Shame*: “the classic fable *Beauty and the Beast* is simply the story of an arranged marriage”.<sup>23</sup> The idea that this marriage is somehow essential to the tale is illusory, however, for the message of d’Aulnoy’s beauty-beast tales is diametrically, and categorically, opposite. In ‘The White Cat’, for example, when the trope appears as a sub-plot in which the fairies attempt to force the princess to marry King Migonnet, “a frightful monkey” (538) who has “talons like an eagle”(539), d’Aulnoy gives the princess the right to thwart and confound the proposed union with the monster using all the means and ingenuity at her disposal. She tricks the fairies into letting her make a rope ladder, attempts to elope with a charming prince, and finally, when the prince is devoured by a dragon, elects to be transformed into an animal, rather than lose her liberty.

Rather than being one that upholds the patriarchal institution of arranged marriage, therefore, the tale operates more as a parable of feminine independence.<sup>24</sup> It is this sleight of hand on Carter’s part - the introduction of a tale that is radically opposed to enforced unions into the rewrite of one that is meant to recommend them - that is her principal stroke of genius, and constitutes the principal subversion of de Beaumont’s narrative. This subversion, furthermore, does not come from a source external to the fairy tale - Carter is not revising the fairy tale from outside. She is pitting fairy tale against fairy tale, using one variant to modify a later bowdlerised variant, and thus insisting that the fairy tale is wider,

more diverse, less reactionary, than is suggested by a reading of de Beaumont, Perrault, or Grimm alone. In doing this she is exemplifying the pattern I outlined in the introduction to this thesis: setting one story against another in order to allow one narrative to modify or question the other narrative.

This backward glance at d'Aulnoy's 'White Cat', is not the only example of Carter using non-canonical sources to undermine the authority of more traditional variants. She also, I believe, indicates a subversive approach to Perrault's 'Bluebeard' in her adaptation by selecting, as the title for the story, a phrase taken, not, as one might expect, from 'Bluebeard' (AT 312) but from a more obscure English tale called 'Mr Fox' (AT 955C); a tale Carter was certainly familiar with by the time she wrote *The Bloody Chamber*, for she refers to it in *The Magic Toyshop*, written over a decade previously.<sup>25</sup>

The phrase appears when the heroine of the tale, Lady Mary, has followed Mr Fox, her affianced, to his Manor, and witnesses him cutting off the hand of an unconscious victim in order to get her ring:

Mr Fox cursed and swore and drew his sword, raised it, and brought it down upon the hand of the poor lady. The sword cut off the hand, which jumped up into the air, and fell of all places in the world into Lady Mary's lap. Mr Fox looked about a bit, but did not think of looking behind the cask, so at last he went on dragging the young lady up the stairs into the Bloody Chamber.<sup>26</sup>

'The Bloody Chamber', it is hardly necessary to add, not only appears in the first and last tales of Carter's collection, but also provides the title of the collection's longest tale and, consequently, the title of the work as a whole. It is possible to argue, therefore, that, even though the tales are re-writings of canonical works such as Perrault, Grimm and de Beaumont, the actual inspiration for the whole, the actual model for the sort of fairy tale that Carter was trying to reproduce is, in fact, this alternative non-canonical source 'Mr Fox', in which the heroine, Lady Mary, is shown to be, as the title of the section in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* under which Carter later includes the tale suggests, 'brave, bold and wilful'. When she is due to marry Mr Fox she persists in discovering his secret

ignoring all the blood-curdling injunctions warning her not to, and when all are assembled for the wedding she outwits Mr Fox, despite his cunningly ambiguous replies, by producing the severed hand as evidence.

Even if Lady Mary doesn't deal the actual death blow herself, and male companions must do the deed, she still reveals considerably more spirit than her French counterpart, Bluebeard's nameless wife. She does not tremble, become flustered or quaver, neither does she throw "herself to her husband's feet, weeping and begging his forgiveness" being "truly sorry she had been disobedient";<sup>27</sup> instead she is forthright, cunning and unruffled. Unlike Perrault's heroine, furthermore, she is not blamed in the 'Moral' for the curiosity that led her to discover the tyrant's crime. Neither is Mr Fox, the violent man, the ogre, shown to have the moral upper-hand: on the contrary, he is shown to be guilty of crimes against women, and Mary's bravery in putting a stop to these crimes is represented as something to be commended.

Although 'The Bloody Chamber' is modelled, in narrative terms, upon Perrault's 'Bluebeard', then, I would suggest that it also recalls, in its title, this more 'feminist' source 'Mr Fox'. The heroine of Carter's tale, is undoubtedly Perrault's heroine - for she never takes matters into her own hands, and she retains, at the end of the story, the mark of her guilt and shame. But in the background of the tale, as an ironic comment, as a utopian suggestion, or even as a reminder of what fairy tale women can be, lurks the spirit of Lady Mary.

Curiously, Jacqueline Simpson, in an essay from a volume of *Folklore* to which Carter later contributed, approaches 'Mr Fox' in a very similar fashion. There are tales such as 'Mr Fox', she argues, that have "spirited and inquisitive" heroines, that should be used to encourage a revision of the "gloomy picture" created by the feminist critique of fairy tales. Fairy tales, she goes on to say, can only be assessed fully, in ideological terms, if examples "from outside the Perrault-Grimm canon, or even versions of the classic ones drawn from oral tradition" are also taken into account.<sup>28</sup> Twelve years prior to the publication of this essay, in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter is illustrating just this: there are tales which do not quite fit into the canon, tales which do not quite conform to Dworkin's

stereotype of the 'indigestible' tale, which can be used to regenerate the fairy tale tradition from within. In this way Carter is returning a vitality to the tales, reminding us that whatever tale is being told there is always an alternative telling available.

### ✦ **Modes of Irony in *The Bloody Chamber***

References to tales such as 'Mr Fox' and 'The White Cat' in *The Bloody Chamber* work in ironic counterpoint to Carter's apparent sources, reminding us that there is more to the fairy tale than is initially apparent. Violence and sexuality, specifically female violence and sexuality, are not alien to the genre and can be highlighted by allusions to tales that do not necessarily conform to canonical strictures. The problems involved in using this very discreet mode of irony, however, are obvious. How effective can any mode of irony be that relies upon the reader's knowledge of specific and somewhat recondite texts? My answer to this is twofold; firstly, as Elaine Jordan puts it, "it is not essential for a feminist writer to assume naive readers, or for every reader to see all possible readings."<sup>29</sup> Angela Carter was, in many ways, an academic folklorist and there is no reason why the specific knowledge that she had available to her should not play an important role in her fiction. Secondly, it is important to point out that there are also different forms of irony available in the text: irony that relies upon a knowledge of other texts critical of fairy tale, and irony that relies upon a reading of the remainder of the tales in *The Bloody Chamber*. In the following section I will be examining these two further modes of irony.

Returning to 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' then, we have seen how Carter achieves 'allusive' irony by crediting a tale that stringently opposes arranged marriage, in the re-utilisation of a tale that supports it. Now I shall discuss a second mode of irony, showing how Carter uses idiosyncratic symbolism in order to make the roles that her characters are playing explicit.

The first thing that Carter establishes is that Beauty is a snow child. The tale starts with her looking outwards, from a kitchen window, at the winter landscape. The narrator

comments upon the unearthly pallor of the snow and then observes that Beauty too possesses this same inner light. "You would have thought ... she, too, was made of snow" (41). There are two frames of reference being employed here; firstly Carter is looking back to the Grimm tale 'Snow White' which also begins with the vision of a child made of snow outside a window. Secondly, she is looking forward to her own tale, 'The Snow Child', which appears later in *The Bloody Chamber*. A brief analysis of these two interrelated references will help to locate Beauty in Carter's symbolic scheme.

'Snow White' is, I believe, invoked because the tale is often used to represent all that feminists find unacceptable in the genre of fairy tale. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar use the narrative famously to exemplify the dichotomy between angel woman and monster woman that forms the basis of their study of Victorian literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Women are portrayed, they say, as either unrelentingly evil, like the stepmother, or perfectly innocent, like Snow White. The former is active and creative, and so cast, in patriarchal mythology, as a witch, the latter is passive and submissive and therefore becomes the fairy tale equivalent of the angel in the house. Both women, Gilbert and Gubar point out, are enslaved to the patriarchal order, the wicked step mother being defined by the patriarchal voice in the mirror and Snow White by her submission to male rule. Both women, by accepting their roles, are perpetuating the order that oppresses them.<sup>30</sup> A parallel can be made here with Carter's division of women under patriarchy into de Sade's victim Justine and his victimiser Juliette in *The Sadeian Woman*. Justine, like Snow White, is "a good woman in a man's world. She is a good woman according to the rules for women laid down by men".<sup>31</sup> Juliette, like the stepmother, is "a woman who acts according to the precepts and also the practice of a man's world" but "does not suffer. Instead, she causes suffering".<sup>32</sup> Of the two, as Carter argues, the victimiser is a better model for women than the victim since "[b]y the use of her reason, an intellectual apparatus women themselves are still inclined to undervalue, she rids herself of some of the more crippling aspects of femininity."<sup>33</sup> Neither kind of woman is ideal, however, since both are operating within the parameters established by patriarchy. It is clearly this pattern of experience that Carter is illustrating and exploring in her tale, 'The Snow Child'. Here

again, the tale begins in midwinter “invincible, immaculate” (91), and a young girl is summoned up out of a potent concoction of snow, blood and raven’s feathers.<sup>34</sup> The girl in this instance is explicitly the victim, product of a patriarchal fantasy, since she is made from the Count’s ‘description’ and is “the child of his desire” (92). Accordingly, she is first subjected to adoration and devotion by the Count who has her clothed with expensive boots and furs; but subsequently she is subjected to mutilation, death and rape (in that order). The Countess, meanwhile, the wicked stepmother figure, is at first denuded of her garments, to clothe the snow child, and then re-clothed with them when she has ensured the snow child’s death by asking her to pick a vampiric rose. This countess is clearly meant to be de Sade’s figure of feminine power, with her “high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs” (91), and the child, de Sade’s passive object. The Countess is the victimising woman, the snow child is the victimised girl. The narrative illustrates how these two kinds of women exist in patriarchal representation, the good woman and the monster woman, Justine and Juliette, and shows how patriarchy enforces competition between women - making one vie against the other for the support and attention of the male figure. “Any shift in the Count’s affections”, as Cristina Bacchilega writes, “is immediately reflected in the relationship of the two women, whose socio-economic fortunes mirror each other in reverse ... and depend entirely on the Count’s words.”<sup>35</sup> The only suggestion in the story that there may be a different and preferable power structure comes when the Countess touches the rose that has killed the snow child at the end of the tale, and drops it, saying “it bites”. Perhaps here the countess is recognising her affinity with the victim, in seeing how patriarchy is deadly for women in general, not just victims. It is surely better for the countess to have been in control, to be the victimiser rather than the victim, but in recognising the vampiric nature of male dominion, perhaps she is looking forward to a time when women do not have to beware women: “a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling.”<sup>36</sup>

Applying this sequence of associations and parallels to ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, we are given a very different reading of the tale than that which would have resulted if we



knew only of de Beaumont's narrative. By making Beauty into a snow child at the beginning of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' Carter is identifying her as a potential victim of Sadeian abuse. The virginal and pure character of Beauty, that might at first seem admirable, given the expectations of the genre, is now shown to carry all the negative associations that Carter gives Justine, or Gilbert and Gubar give Snow White: she "is not in control of her life ... She is always the dupe of an experience that she never experiences *as* experience; her innocence invalidates experience and turns it into events, things that happen to her but do not change her."<sup>37</sup> At the same time that Carter is presenting her as a pure and virginal daughter in the tradition of Grimm tales, in other words, she is also offering a subtle critique.

There are further symbols that locate Beauty as a victim, all small, white and precious. She asks for a white rose, representing her delicate virginal innocence, she is "a single pearl" (46), to be owned by the rich and powerful, and she is like the moon that she discusses with the Beast, nothing but "borrowed light" (47). She is a reflective surface, starting the tale as her father's 'pet' and ending it reflected in the Beast's eyes. She is a picture to be looked at and a malleable form that will accept any footprint. She is, in short, "Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial" coming to the slaughter in the den of the lion (45). Mr Lyon, similarly, is located through symbolism as the Sadeian master. He is a beast, wealthy and decadent, and his minion servant, the King Charles Spaniel, has, like Bluebeard's wife in *The Bloody Chamber* or Uncle Philip's in *The Magic Toyshop*, the precious choker that is the mark of his power over it.

Within the parameters of canonical tales these symbols would be unremarkable. Beauty would be fulfilling the conventional gender role: passive, reflective, small, delicate, ineffectual. Within Carter's symbolic scheme, however, which relates her to the Sadeian victim and Gilbert and Gubar's angel woman, they become fiercely ironic. The wealthy benevolent Mr Lyon is, potentially, a brutal sadist, and the sweet inoffensive Beauty his prey. As it turns out, in fact, all goes well in the end - happily ever after according to the traditional fairy tale formula - but the irony remains that were it not traditional fairy tale

formula, were it rather the “black, inverted fairy tale” of de Sade, we know Beauty’s reward would be “rape, humiliation and incessant beatings.”<sup>38</sup>

This second mode of irony, a ‘knowing’ irony, is perhaps more accessible in the context of Carter’s writing than the first. She can be fairly sure that her readership will see the irony in the narrative features she selects. It remains the case, however, that this mode, like the first, requires some knowledge external to the work itself; it assumes to some degree that they have read Gilbert and Gubar, or similar works, and *The Sadeian Woman*. Neither mode of irony, therefore, is entirely effective since neither can depend on the reader’s awareness of the encoded criticism. A similar effect can be observed when reading Blake’s *Poems of Innocence*. The poem ‘Holy Thursday’, for instance, is read as a naive and sentimental yarn if one is unaware that the “wands as white as snow” carried by the “grey headed beadles” symbolise, in Blake’s system of imagery, the repressive and order giving nature of Urizen.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, it is possible to miss the satirical tone if one is not told what the social and historical conditions lying behind the event of Holy Thursday were really like. Blake, therefore, must use a third mode of irony that is intrinsic to the text and available to any casual reader; contextual irony that juxtaposes with the naive ‘Holy Thursday’ of the *Songs of Innocence*, another ‘Holy Thursday’ sung by the bard of experience in which we see the “Babes reduc’d to misery, \ Fed with cold and usurous hand”.<sup>40</sup>

Carter, I would contend, employs a similar technique in *The Bloody Chamber*, using ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ as a tale of experience that offers an entirely different perspective on the source, and questions the settled certainties of the ‘innocent’ ‘Mr Lyon’. In the very first line of ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, for instance, Carter is already unsettling the founding assumptions of ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, having Beauty announce: “My father lost me to the beast at cards.” We have just been lulled into accepting the union between Beauty and Beast as a wholesome one in which Beauty shows considerable strength of character in learning to love the Beast to whom she is bound. Now, an entirely new perspective upon the arrangement is established. The nature of the union, as a contract between men

in which the woman, Beauty, becomes the helpless object of exchange, is made suddenly explicit. The sentimentality taken for granted and accepted without examination in 'Mr Lyon' is now submitted to a subtle and cynical analysis.

Both Beauties are, at some point in their narratives, referred to as pearls; the first looking "as if she had been carved out of a single pearl" (46), the second being a "pearl beyond price" (55). In the latter case, however, the endearment is no longer innocuous because Beauty has been bought and sold *as if* she were a small precious object. In both narratives the description is patronising and belittling, but only in the second is this made apparent. It is only within the context of 'The Tiger's Bride', therefore, that the images and symbols, accepted blindly in 'Mr Lyon' as standard generic motifs, receive a full and demystifying analysis. Beauty, Carter now makes clear, is not a pearl, she is not a rose, she is not an automaton, in fact, she lets out raucous guffaws like "no young lady" should (58) and cold-bloodedly shreds the white rose that her predecessor, in both source and Carter's rewrite, requested and treasured.

The presentation of these two contrasting perspectives reveals, quite effectively, an aspect of Carter's method in *The Bloody Chamber* as a whole. She never presents an experience as archetypal or universal, but always posits conditions that allow for variability - for different people to be contented in different ways. In the opening paragraph of 'Mr Lyon', as observed, Beauty is identified as a victim, as the snow child - she is contented, therefore, with the sedate and domesticated match signalled at the end of the tale. Walking peacefully in the garden, for her, *is* a happy ending. The fiery child who is to be the tiger's bride, however, would never settle for such a finale. First presented experiencing the "deathly, sensual lethargy of the sweet South" (51) with the hot wax from the candles dropping masochistically on her "bare shoulders" (51), *her* happy ending is not going to be that of a subdued humanisation but, far more exciting, to be herself transformed into the essence of desire - the wild beast.

Whilst Beauty and Mr Lyon both become lamb-like, the heroine civilising the beast, Beauty and Mr Tiger prefer to become tiger-like, the heroine appropriating beastliness for herself. Neither category is fixed - paradoxically the lion may become the lamb, as does

Mr Lyon, or the lamb may aspire towards the tiger, as does the tiger's bride. Mr Lyon can shed his carnivorous tendencies in order to settle with Beauty, or Beauty can shed her lamb-ness in order to run with the tiger. In both instances the happy ending is achieved by the lovers finding a level upon which they can meet in mutuality to, as Carter puts it in *The Sadeian Woman*, "assuage desire in a reciprocal pact of tenderness".<sup>41</sup>

### ✱ The 'Strange Harmonies' of Angela Carter

To sum up the previous section: three modes of irony can be identified in *The Bloody Chamber*. *Allusive irony*, which involves allusions to texts which contradict or modify an overt source; *knowing irony*, which depends upon the reader's knowledge of potential critiques of characters and situations, and *contextual irony*, which is achieved by setting texts that express different values in counterpoint. All three forms of irony are employed by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* in order to subvert and challenge the gender hierarchies established in canonical fairy tales.

Having shown Carter's awareness of the ideological problems involved in the use of canonical fairy tale, however, I believe it is now possible to go on to discuss her more utopian uses of the genre, beyond the purely cynical and purely ironic. I have argued that 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' follows de Beaumont's narrative closely, offering a critique of it by ironic means. I want to make the further suggestion, however, that Carter also follows de Beaumont closely, because she believes that even this patriarchal and bourgeois narrative has something potentially valuable to offer feminists. This suggestion can be made by reference to the description that is offered of Beauty, when she is on her own, back at her father's house, enjoying being pampered. Here, as she looks in the mirror, the narrator observes that "a certain inwardness was beginning to transform the lines around her mouth, those signatures of the personality" (49). She is becoming spoiled and petulant; "[smiling] at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days" (49) and indulging in, as Elaine Jordan puts it, "self preoccupied fantasies which interfere with the possibilities of relation between people who are other in themselves, not just projections of

each other's desires."<sup>42</sup> She is playing Narcissus whilst the Beast (already described as having a "voice that seemed to issue from a cave full of echoes" (46) powerful enough to make "the hills on which the snow still settled" echo with its "rumbling roar" (47)) begins to play the mythic counterpart, Echo. These alternative roles act against the victim/victimiser binary, lamb and lion, and allow Beauty to become the active agent. She is identified as self-love, the restrictive principle, and the tale becomes her rite of passage, her active quest to overcome her own solipsism and learn to understand 'difference' - represented by the Beast. The Beast is no longer the dominant, defining character, but an outsider, an 'other', and it is *she*, the heroine, that must transform herself by coming to an understanding of mutuality. He becomes the dying echo, the reflection dwindling to nothing, and she the heroic rescuer.

The moment of rescue comes when Beauty realises that "she had only looked at her own face" reflected in the beast's eyes. She has only existed within the circle of herself. Now for the first time she sees the beast as another being and he becomes human for her. The reflection becomes one of mutual awareness, harmonious receptivity, and the bounds of separation, the limits of the role, are finally broken. In short, they fall in love. But this is not the asymmetrical love of conqueror and conquered, it is not the love that exists within a patriarchal hierarchy, but the love that Carter uses Emma Goldman to define in *The Sadeian Woman*, that does away with "the ridiculous notion that to be loved ... is synonymous with being a slave or subordinate" and replaces it with "[a] true conception of the relation of the sexes" that will allow the lover to "give of one's self boundlessly, in order to find one's self richer, deeper, better."<sup>43</sup>

In emphasising the importance of mutual love in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' Carter is, I believe, returning something to the tale that persistent revision has gradually disguised. She is neutralising the emphasis placed upon marriage, submission and manners by de Beaumont and highlighting the more optimistic message that true love conquers all. The tale is transformed back from one in which a young girl learns to subordinate herself to a dominant order to one in which she unites herself, through desire, to something

outside the dominant order. The beast made homely and acceptable by de Beaumont becomes, once more, something to be desired.

These hints are only small, however, in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and it requires 'The Tiger's Bride', a more thorough revision, to state them with greater force and clarity. Here the relations that are inscribed in de Beaumont's tale are made more explicit and are, as a result, more explicitly discredited. The otherness of the Beast in this later narrative becomes more apparent, and it is clearly signalled that Beauty's affinity with him derives from her recognition of her own status as 'other':

I knew they [the beasts] lived according to a different logic than I had done until my father abandoned me to the wild beasts by his human carelessness. This knowledge gave me a certain fearfulness still; but, I would say, not much ... I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves ... all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with [souls] (63).

Both Beauty and the Beast are limited and restricted by the human form that is *imposed* upon them - the form of humanity as it is defined by men. Their accession to beasthood, therefore, symbolises a stepping *out* of that restrictive order, and an opening up of further alternative possibilities. Like Christ in Blake's *Milton* they throw off the woven clothes of this body, they throw off the nets that restrain them, and open themselves up to a more apocalyptic consciousness - consciousness of pure desire - pure energy. They "put off self" and so put off "a false body, an Incrustation over [the] immortal \ spirit, a selfhood which must be put off and annihilated alway", and so "cleanse the face of [their] spirit by self-examination."<sup>44</sup>

In presenting the savagery of the beast - even lauding the savagery of the beast - Carter is not, however, suggesting that there is 'goodness' behind the mask. The beast disclosed does not constitute kindness or even generosity. This Beast harks back to a more primitive Eros, untamed desire that has the dangerous yet utopian potential to subvert dominant social constructs. Carter is reverting to an earlier form of the Beast before it is domesticated, as Marina Warner shows, and reconnecting it to a more terrifying potency.<sup>45</sup> The tiger is not a safe anthropomorphic, slightly odd but essentially

human, beast, like Mr Lyon. It is, quite literally, a tiger that paces, glints, smells and goes on all fours. This Beast is closer to the devil, with its “devil’s knack at cards”; and is diametrically opposite to the vaguely spiritual Aslan-like beast of “Mr Lyon”, “the winged lion with his paw upon the Gospel” (46). It is a mysterious, frightening beast that carries with it all the superstitious dreads of childhood. It has aspects of the tiger-boy with its “black fur lined cloak”, and, like the bear’s son, it seems to have an eerie control of the wind. He is the embodiment of erotic threat, coming to “GOBBLE YOU UP” (56) - his very dreadfulness being the essence of his appeal. Like Blake’s tiger, his savage geometry and fiery eyes are awesome and it is his power and strength, his capacity as pure energy, that will truly burn away the accepted cultural limits, and allow for the establishment of a more radical harmony.

Unlike Blake, of course, Carter does not propose that the putting off of self leads to transcendence. She shares the utopian vision, however, to the extent that the putting off of a dominant perception of self leads to an awareness, an accessibility to other marginalised states. But these are not the accepted, limited states that operate within the confines of convention, these beastly unions represent difference: “strange companions” (47) coming together to form “strange harmonies”.

The term ‘strange harmony’ is used by Carter in one of her early rewritings of fairy tale, ‘The Donkey Prince’, published in 1970.<sup>46</sup> In this tale a group of outsiders come together to attempt a quest that a more conventional gathering of heroes and heroines could not complete. A donkey called ‘Bruno’, who is in fact a ‘Brown Man of the Hills’ under a spell, a young ‘working girl’ called Daisy and a ‘Wild Man’ from the Savage Mountain all co-operate with one another in order to regain a magic apple that has been lost by the queen of the realm. They succeed in this venture, after going through fire and water for one another, but they are only able to complete the quest because of their eccentricity and peculiarities. They can only cross the ‘river no man can cross’, for instance, because, as Daisy points out, she and the Donkey are not men and can thus assist the Wild Man to the other side. Like the singing of the Wild Men, therefore, they are

outlandish and discordant as a crew of people but nevertheless manage to sing songs in 'strange harmonies' because of a potent mutual association and friendship.

The phrase can perhaps be further illustrated by reference to Donna Haraway's concept of 'fission impossible' - a union formed from the unnatural association of dissimilars, based upon affinity rather than identity. This union, as Haraway argues, does not require a stable basis of identity, it doesn't need a naturalised and essentialised conception of gender to forge a common basis of mutuality, it is a relation "not by blood but by choice".<sup>47</sup> This does not mean, however, that it is a politically ineffective union, as some theorists might argue. Just because it "cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification" it does not follow that it cannot affirm the capacity to act "on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship."<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, it crafts a new kind of "poetic/political unity without relying on a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification" that allows it to become even more politically effective, because it transgresses the boundaries and limits that are inherent in 'permitted' 'naturalised' relationships.<sup>49</sup> This, I would argue, is the function of the strange harmonies that Angela Carter forges; through her use of fairy tale in *The Bloody Chamber* she creates couplings that are beyond the pale, in order to undo conceptions of relations that set a limit upon what it is possible to conjoin, and what it is possible to associate. In her beauties, beasts, vampires, werewolves and wolf-girls she creates bizarre hybrid unions that undo the myth of pure and 'natural' relations, and replace it with a myth of unnatural 'strange' relations. Her unions are beastly and monstrous, but it is only through such anti-social couplings that a true relation, outside convention, outside hierarchy, can be discovered.

#### ✱ Multi-Vocality and the Problem of 'Strait-Jackets'

I have not attempted to reconcile my readings of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', one suggesting that it reproduces 'Beauty and the Beast', another suggesting that it is a satire on 'Beauty and the Beast', and a third suggesting that it is an optimistic and utopian



parable. This is because I believe that all three readings are available and intended to co-exist in Carter's text. Neither have I settled the relationship between 'The Tiger's Bride' and 'Mr Lyon'; proposing on the one hand that 'The Tiger's Bride' exists as a satirical comment on 'Mr Lyon', and on the other, that it stands, simply, as a comparable alternative. Once again, I think that both readings are possible, even encouraged, and indicate fidelity to the notion that experience is multiple and varied. Neither way of being, that of the lamb or that of the tiger, is given automatic precedence over the other; and neither solution to the problem of how men and women can meet without the desire of one determining the desire of the other is offered as a universal truth. Like Blake's poems of Innocence and Experience, both tales act as perspectives that offer part of the truth but not the whole truth. As such, they operate as ironies in a broad sense, if irony is, as Haraway suggests, "about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true."<sup>50</sup>

In the last section I implied that there is a form of closure available in Carter's tales, but that these closures were subversive to the dominant order, being 'strange harmonies'. In this section, however, I would like to show how all the tales in *The Bloody Chamber* taken together transcend individual closures and create a vision that is more multiple and varied. Unlike Blake's perspectives which, in the figure of Christ, converge (innocence and experience forming a dialectic that results in synthesis), I shall argue, Carter's voices only proliferate more and more variant possibilities of conjunction. There is no overall story to tell, which all the individual stories are fragments of; the stories remain multiple and diverse. After the tales of innocence and experience have been told, there is no ancient Bard, who can look forward to an apocalyptic "opening morn, \ Image of truth new born,"<sup>51</sup> - there is no final goal or telos - but each solution, each tale, remains, in its own context, separate and un-integrated. This is because the aim of the conflict set up between the tales is not, as is the conflict between Blake's innocence and experience, closure, but precisely the opposite: openness.

Margaret Atwood observes that “what Carter seems to be doing in *The Bloody Chamber* - among other things - is looking for ways in which the tiger and the lamb, or the tiger and lamb parts of the psyche, can reach some sort of accommodation.”<sup>52</sup> Carter uses a number of variations upon the tiger/lamb motif and attempts to find out how, in each instance, if at all, a new order or a new harmony can be concocted out of the ingredients given. None of these accommodations, however, none of these new harmonies, are offered as the definitive solution to the problem of how men and women can relate to one another without the desire of one party determining the desire of the other. Each tale allows for a separate harmony to be formed, given separate characters and separate conditions, but these harmonies always remain in conflict between themselves. Although closure may be achieved for any given set of conditions, there is no definitive recipe for closure in all conditions. In the first tale of Carter’s collection, for instance, the Beast is a man - beastly within - and is united with a lamb, who, for the duration of the tale, remains lamb-like. In this case the conditions of the dominant order prevail - the Sadeian or pornographic binary of master and victim remains resolutely in place. The only way that the repressive situation can end, in this case, is through the murder of the master, and the marriage of the heroine to a lamb-like, or as Duncker points out, symbolically castrated, man. The next two tales, however, are more optimistic, and suggest that the lovers are capable of transcending the dominant order sufficiently to meet upon a basis of equality: for in one instance, the beast, who is a beast in body but a man in kind, sheds his beastly propensities to become a lamb and unite with his lamb lover, and in another the heroine, who initially appears a lamb, eventually reveals that she is a tiger and unites with the male who has also shed his human mask and become a beast.

The first tale, taken by itself, seems to be an admission that males and females *cannot* meet on a basis of equality unless the male has been, in some way, symbolically maimed. Having shown that she is aware of the difficulties, however, Carter is then free to project alternative orders in which more utopian conditions can be realised. Duncker may be correct, therefore, when she claims that “only with a blinded boy who humbly serves her music can Carter envisage a marriage of equality for Bluebeard’s bride”;<sup>53</sup> but putting

the tale in context, we realise that Carter is not offering this solution as the definitive answer to all such problems, but only as one that seems to work given the conditions outlined. In another situation, as Carter is about to show in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride', a marriage of equality may become possible, in which both characters transcend the limited roles of master and victim and unite upon a level that does not require the male to be crippled.

The same level of variation is maintained in the later tales of *The Bloody Chamber*. If we look at the tales that concern werewolf figures, we can see a similar degree of shifting signification. In one instance the wolf, in the form of the grandmother, symbolises tradition and must be killed off if the heroine is to proceed with her own life. In another instance, however, the werewolf is the figure that represents desires that are subversive to the tradition represented by the grandmother. This latter tale is, of course, 'Company of Wolves'; and it is against this tale that Duncker levels one of her most serious accusations. She claims that Little Red Riding Hood's complicity with the wolf's desire represents her submission to rape. Seeing the rape as inevitable, Duncker says, she "decides to strip off, lie back and enjoy it. She wants it really. They all do."<sup>54</sup> Whilst Carter, treading what Elaine Jordan would call "The Dangerous Edge",<sup>55</sup> certainly does risk this interpretation, however, I do not believe that it is entirely just. For Carter does not represent Little Red Riding Hood as a passive character who is being used by the wolf, but as an active agent who is seeking knowledge of otherness and difference. Her embrace with the wolf is not an embrace with a conventional masculine figure; rather it represents her willingness to embrace difference, and to experience a union that exists outside the conventional parameters. She is in fact undoing the notion, represented by the grandmother (and reinforced unwittingly by Duncker), that women are always going to be victims at the mercy of savage wolf-like men, and shows that Red Riding Hood, if she so chooses, can embrace the wolf, symbol of her desires, without being complicitous with her own abuse.

"Don't try this technique on a street mugger", says Atwood, talking of lying down with the wolf.<sup>56</sup> But we should note that the wolf is not a street mugger at all but, as Merja Makinen points out, "a sensuality that the women have been taught might devour

them, but which, when embraced, gives them power, strength and a new awareness of both self and other.”<sup>57</sup> In case the reader interprets him differently Carter is careful to show, firstly that Red Riding Hood is “nobody’s meat” (118), and secondly that in alternative conditions, given different allegorical figures, one should behave with more caution. Once again, the solution to the problem as it is given in ‘Company of Wolves’ is not universalised throughout *The Bloody Chamber* but is qualified by other texts. In a situation where submission to the beast *would* constitute female masochism and complicity with subjection, the heroine most certainly does not lie down with the tigers. In ‘The Erl-King’, for instance, or in ‘The Bloody Chamber’, where the union with the male represents entrapment rather than liberation, it is better that the heroine (or her mother) kills the beast-male rather than submit to his dubious seductions. It is this complexity in *The Bloody Chamber*, this refusal to offer universal solutions, that Salman Rushdie focuses upon in his introduction to Carter’s collected short stories, *Burning Your Boats*: “It is Carter’s genius” he writes:

... to make the fable of Beauty and the Beast a metaphor for all the myriad yearnings and dangers of sexual relations. Now it is Beauty who is the stronger, now the Beast. In ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ it is for Beauty to save the Beast’s life, while in ‘The Tiger’s Eye’ (*sic*), Beauty will be transformed into an exquisite animal herself ... In ‘The Erl King’, however, Beauty and the Beast will not be reconciled. Here there is neither healing, nor submission, but revenge.<sup>58</sup>

This treatment of the ‘Beauty and the Beast’ story clearly influences Rushdie’s own use of it in *Shame* (1983), in which, in a similar fashion, no definitive interpretation of the tale is offered, but a fresh interpretation is generated according to which relationship it is applied to. In terms of physical appearance alone Sufiya Zinobia Hyder is Beauty and Omar Khayyam Shakil is the Beast. In terms of morality, on one level, Sufiya is the innocent beauty and Omar, who wants to marry a retarded child, the beast. On another level, however, Sufiya is the beast, because, like Hyde (Hyder), she literally changes into a monster, whilst Omar, as Jekyll (Shakil), remains the human (and humane) doctor. If one set of conditions hold one character is a beast the other is beauty; if another set of conditions hold the same character is beauty and not beast. The point Rushdie wants to

make is that the binary 'Beauty and the Beast' cannot be used in a universal fashion; it does not describe essential characteristics, but only passing, context related characteristics. Each character seems to be fulfilling several roles simultaneously depending upon how you think about him or her and the certitude that you can derive from any one characteristic (here he's a beast, and she's a beauty) gives way to a general uncertainty that is best described as a realisation of hybridity. This realisation, I would argue, is one that both writers in their uses of fairy tale are attempting to encourage: the realisation that no relationship, no binary, exists as an ontological certainty and that no two unions will be of exactly the same kind.

In the final tale of Carter's collection this kind of complexity is taken to extremes. She stretches the 'strange harmony' formula almost to absurdity in having two hybrid half-human, half-wolf figures unite in a grotesque wedding parody. Any possibility of stable allegorical interpretations for Carter's symbolism must be abandoned here, once and for all, and if before one was hard pressed to answer the question posed by Beauty in the 'Tiger's Bride' as to what might be the exact nature of the beast (55), now it becomes impossible. *The Bloody Chamber* proves, if taken in its entirety, that there are many natures of the beast; sometimes the beast is a man in form though animal on the inside, sometimes the beast is an animal in form, but human within. Sometimes the beast that is a man is gentle, sometimes he is cruel, and sometimes the man that is a beast is tame, though on other occasions, he may do you harm. There is, evidently, no telling which he will be through some pre-planned pre-conceived formula, only context will tell, and only in the specific situation, the specific relationship, will you be able to tell whether or not you should have a "savage marriage ceremony" (118) with the beast, sleep with it, or strangle it with its own hair. Indeed, only in the specific situation and with the specific beast will you be able to tell, truly, what you yourself will be - a beast or a lamb.

It is not only in these human-beast formulas that Carter offers a vision of diversity and ambiguity. She also offers a number of contradictory possibilities for the interpretation of less central motifs such as the motif of stripping. In 'The Tiger's Bride', as we have

seen, the stripping off of clothes becomes a metaphor for the stripping off of civilised identity. When the beast, with its “tongue, abrasive as sandpaper” (67), actually licks the skin off Beauty to reveal her animal fur beneath, it is apparent that the Beast is liberating Beauty from human cultural constraints. In the final tale of the collection, however, when Wolf Alice begins to lick the blood off the duke the licking doesn’t strip off the skin but gradually reveals it in the mirror. The same activity in each instance produces different results: in one case, the licking frees the animal desires of the character restrained by her human form, and in another case the licking produces a human identity for the character made monstrous by his lack of human form.

Given this variation, Duncker’s observation on ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ that “we are watching, beautifully packaged and unveiled ... the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography” also seems unjust.<sup>59</sup> In ‘The Erl-King’ and ‘The Bloody Chamber’, there is a ritual disrobing of the victim, admittedly, but the disrobing in ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ is shown, by contrast, to be a different process altogether. The Erl-king’s lover cannot escape the oppressive Romantic context that will always require her nakedness to be an index of her vulnerability;<sup>60</sup> in ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, however, the story is precisely *about* the ability of the protagonists to escape the conditions that require her stripping to be an index of her vulnerability. Beauty at first refuses to strip “like a ballet girl” (61) because she believes that Mr Tiger is exerting the powers of mastery and dominance over her. It is only when she has realised that they are *both* outside the dominant order that they *can* strip; not in order to reassert the Sadeian binary, but in order to challenge it; in order to find “the key to a peaceable kingdom where his appetite need not be [her] extinction” (67). “Authorial comment surrounding this encounter” as Duncker correctly observes “is contradictory”; on the one hand Carter talks about keys to peaceable kingdoms whilst, on the other, she is casting Beauty as “the cold white meat of contract” (66).<sup>61</sup> Duncker fails, however, to appreciate the significance of this contradictory commentary. From one perspective, of course, Beauty *is* this cold white meat of contract and Carter, in recognising that perspective, is showing an awareness of how the scene *could* be interpreted. But the text indicates that she is only the cold white meat of contract if the

eyes that see her are like the eyes in the market place that “take no account of her existence”. Appropriately, the eyes that are watching her when Carter makes this comment are the eyes of the mechanical lady’s maid. The tiger’s eyes, by contrast, are the very opposite of those assessing eyes (the “reducing chamber[s]” of the Erl-King (90)) for he sees through her cold white flesh to the “nascent patina of shining hairs” beneath. He does not see her as an automaton or as a simulacra, he sees her as a hairy, bestial animal. This rather neatly brings us full circle back to the issue of pornography, broached at the start of this chapter, for the contrast between the stripping in ‘The Bloody Chamber’ or ‘The Erl-King’ and ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ is an excellent demonstration of the categories of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ pornography suggested by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*. The pornography of ‘The Bloody Chamber’, we might say, is ‘immoral’ pornography, because it reasserts binary oppositions between male and female whilst the pornography of ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ is ‘moral’ pornography because it breaks them down.

<sup>1</sup>Kerryn Goldsworthy, interview, Meanjin 44.1 (1985): 10. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>2</sup>Haffenden, 84. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>3</sup>Sylvia Bryant, 'Re-Constructing Oedipus Through 'Beauty and the Beast', Criticism 31.4 (1989): 441 and 439. Bryant notes that she has borrowed the terms "myth-breaking" and "myth-making" from Lorna Sage, 'The Savage Sideshow - A Profile of Angela Carter,' New Review 4.39/40 (1977) 56. The terms are, in fact, used on page 52 and refer specifically to The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman not The Bloody Chamber. This is, I think, significant in the light of Carter's statement, quoted earlier, that whilst novels prior to The Passion of New Eve can be seen as 'anti-mythic' The Bloody Chamber is more 'relaxed'.

<sup>4</sup>Dworkin, 42.

<sup>5</sup>Carter, introduction, Virago Book of Fairy Tales, ix.

<sup>6</sup>Karel Capek, 'Towards a Theory of Fairy-Tales,' In Praise of Newspapers and Other Essays on the Margin of Literature, trans. M. and R. Weatherall (London: Unwin, 1951) 54.

<sup>7</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 18.

<sup>8</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 82.

<sup>9</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 21.

<sup>10</sup>For Carter's comments see her review of Betsy Hearne's 'Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale,' Folklore 102.i (1991): 123-4.

<sup>11</sup>Where I discuss a tale type at length I will include in parenthesis the Aarne-Thompson index number for the tale type. Fairy tales, or 'tales of magic', are those classified by Aarne and Thompson between AT 300 and AT 749. See Antti Aarne, The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography, trans. and enlarged by Stith Thompson, 2nd rev., Folklore Fellows FF Communications 75 (Helsinki: np, 1961).

<sup>12</sup>Angela Carter, The Bloody Chamber (1979; London: Penguin, 1981) 46. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be included in the text.

<sup>13</sup>Buchan, 977.

<sup>14</sup>See Warner, From The Beast to the Blonde, 284-291.

<sup>15</sup>Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, 37 and 36.

<sup>16</sup>Zipes, ed. and trans., The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm (Bantam: New York, 1987) 197.

<sup>17</sup>Zipes, Beauties, Beasts and Enchantments, 389. All subsequent references will be included in the text.

<sup>18</sup>In the verses that close the tale d'Aulnoy recaps upon the mother's role in the story. Her insistence upon eating the fruit at such a terrible cost is given a different interpretation here than it is in the main text, and she is not forgiven so readily: "Mothers beware and learn from this greedy queen! / Don't tamper with a daughter's lot / Or gratify the appetite and act so mean. / Condemn her conduct and remember what she got." (544). Here the mother's sin is to interfere with her daughter's liberties, and seen in this context she becomes culpable. Whereas the narrative forgives her for acting upon her own cravings, the verse condemns her for limiting the cravings of her daughter.

<sup>19</sup>Carter, 'Beauty and the Beast,' 124. Carter here is contrasting de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' with an ancient literary ancestor: Apuleius's 'Cupid and Psyche.' Psyche, she observes is "admirably brave and determined" unlike Beauty who retains at all times "a high moral tone". D'Aulnoy's heroine, I would suggest, in terms of spirit, has more in common with Psyche than Beauty.



- <sup>20</sup>Mme. Leprince de Beaumont, Les Contes de Fées (Paris: Librairie Centrale, 1865) 35. My translation.
- <sup>21</sup>Carter, trans., Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales (1982; London: Gollancz, 1991) 62 & 50.
- <sup>22</sup>De Beaumont, 23. My translation.
- <sup>23</sup>Rushdie, Shame, 158.
- <sup>24</sup>A parable that can, perhaps, only be bettered by the tale of d'Aulnoy's own life: one of intrigue and ingenuity, during which, amongst other things, she conspired with her mother, her lover, and her mother's lover, to have her own husband, by an arranged marriage, implicated in high treason and executed. The plan backfired unfortunately, and the two lovers were executed - but d'Aulnoy managed to escape, and spent the next few years travelling and acting as a secret agent for France. In 1685 she was finally allowed to return to Paris, where she set up a literary salon in the rue Saint-Benoit, and continued her intrigues, taking numerous lovers and narrowly avoiding beheading for assisting her friend, Mme. Tiquet, to assassinate her husband. Mme. Tiquet was less fortunate. For d'Aulnoy's life story see, 'The Memoirs of Madam, the Countess of D'Anois, Before her Retirement,' in The Diverting Works of the Countess D'Anois (London: John Nicholson, 1707).
- <sup>25</sup>Melanie, exploring her uncle's house, wonders whether it is "Bluebeard's castle" or "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". Carter, The Magic Toyshop (1967; London: Virago, 1981) 83. Having read 'Mr Fox' it also becomes apparent where the hand that Melanie finds in the knife drawer comes from. It is the hand, with ring, that Mr Fox severs off in the quotation below. The hand, soft, plump and tidy, clearly symbolises Melanie's old adolescent self, now mutilated by Uncle Philip, a twentieth century version of the fairy tale tyrant.
- <sup>26</sup>Carter, Virago Book of Fairy Tales, 9.
- <sup>27</sup>Angela Carter, trans., The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault (London: Gollancz, 1977) 36.
- <sup>28</sup>Jacqueline Simpson, 'Be Bold, But not too Bold': Female Courage in some British and Scandinavian Legends,' Folklore 102.i (1991): 16 and 19.
- <sup>29</sup>Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangers of Angela Carter,' New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992) 122.
- <sup>30</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 36-44.
- <sup>31</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 38.
- <sup>32</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 79.
- <sup>33</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 79.
- <sup>34</sup>Carter is using a German version of 'Snow White' collected by Bolte and Polivka. See Bacchilega, 33.
- <sup>35</sup>Bacchilega, 37.
- <sup>36</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 79.
- <sup>37</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 51.
- <sup>38</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 39 and 38.
- <sup>39</sup>William Blake, Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: OUP, 1966) 121.

- <sup>40</sup>Blake, 211. For the critical discussion see Robert F. Gleckner, 'Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs,' Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 8-14.
- <sup>41</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 8.
- <sup>42</sup>Jordan, 'The Dangers of Angela Carter,' 121.
- <sup>43</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 151. Carter borrows from Goldman's, The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation.
- <sup>44</sup>See 'Milton,' 38:49 and 40:35-7 in Blake, 530 and 533.
- <sup>45</sup>Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, 305-313.
- <sup>46</sup>First published as a separate volume (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). Reprinted in Zipes, ed. Don't Bet on the Prince, 62-72; 'strange harmonies' appears on page 66.
- <sup>47</sup>Donna J. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (London: Free Association, 1991) 155.
- <sup>48</sup>Haraway, 156.
- <sup>49</sup>Haraway, 157.
- <sup>50</sup>Haraway, 149.
- <sup>51</sup>Blake, 126.
- <sup>52</sup>Margaret Atwood, 'Running with the Tigers,' in Lorna Sage, ed., Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1994) 120.
- <sup>53</sup>Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales,' 11.
- <sup>54</sup>Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales,' 7.
- <sup>55</sup>See Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangerous Edge,' in Sage, Flesh and the Mirror 189-215.
- <sup>56</sup>Atwood, 'Running with the Tigers,' 130.
- <sup>57</sup>Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality,' Feminist Review 42 (1992): 10.
- <sup>58</sup>Rushdie, introduction, Burning Your Boats, xii.
- <sup>59</sup>Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales,' 7.
- <sup>60</sup>See Harriet Kramer Linkin, 'Isn't it Romantic?: Angela Carter's Bloody Revision of the Romantic Aesthetic in 'The Erl King',' Contemporary Literature 35.2 (1994): 305-323.
- <sup>61</sup>Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales,' 7.

FAIRY TALE RITES OF PASSAGE IN ANGELA CARTER'S 'PUSS IN BOOTS', 'ASHPUTTLE' AND  
*NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*



*The song was utterly transformed and yet its essence  
did not change.*

Nights at the Circus



The normative type of the fairy tale, as David Buchan has argued, involves a quest: a young individual, either male or female, leaves his or her native environment, engages in various tests and tasks in an imaginative story-landscape peopled with marvellous creatures and strange beings, successfully overcomes all vicissitudes, and at the end achieves property and marriage (half the kingdom and the princess / prince) ...

Read symbolically, such a narrative can be seen as a dramatic encoding of the rite of passage that the young reader needs to undergo in order to achieve maturity, self-sufficiency and adult status. He or she must separate from home and family, confront the problems of the outside world, and establish him or herself as a worthy and useful individual, fully integrated into the community. This 'ideal' rite of passage will, as Buchan argues, invariably conform with the norms and expectations of the society within which the tale is being told:

Especially through the depicted conduct of the hero and heroine in the tests and trials, but also through that of other characters, the traditional tale performer exemplifies admirable and unadmirable social behaviour, and communicates both a sense of life's grained texture and, more concretely, the values of the group to which he or she and the audience belong.<sup>1</sup>

Angela Carter, in her revisions of fairy tale, employs this rite of passage narrative structure in order to investigate such issues of social conditioning and identity formation. Her primary aim, however, is not to suggest that rite of passage narratives in fairy tale are limiting in the roles they offer to men and women but, on the contrary, to appropriate the rite of passage as a potent means of showing how it is possible for men and women to

overcome the difficulties and vicissitudes of experience and to forge productive and mutually empowering unions. In the above quotation, Buchan seems to be suggesting that fairy tales will inevitably support the values and concerns of the dominant order; reinforcing its gender hierarchies and social norms. This is often the case, but no form of fiction will be unproblematic in its support of the dominant codes, and there can be heard, within the huge variety of fairy tales produced at any one time, voices of protest as well as voices of reaction. Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy, as we have seen, wrote fairy tales for her salon circle that revised the dominant gender hierarchy, in order to offer men and women new kinds of mutually rewarding relations. Charles Perrault, similarly, although on the one hand supporting the upcoming bourgeois class by showing how it is possible for the individual to make his or her way in the world by the exercise of resourcefulness and cunning, was also arguing for a new social ordering in opposition to the aristocratic and elitist system of favour and advancement according to birth. Fairy tales, therefore, cannot be homogenised as simplistically as Buchan suggests and the rite of passage may be, and has been, used to allow the individual to find his or her own place in society, without necessarily being circumscribed by the hierarchies legitimised by the dominant culture. The socialisation enacted in fairy tale, in other words, is not necessarily socialisation according to dominant norms. The fairy tale may in practice allow the individual to understand and envision how it is possible to develop and mature in a way that does not necessarily conform to the established hierarchies. Angela Carter, as I argued in the previous chapter, uses the fairy tale for just this purpose: to show how the fairy tale drive towards integration and harmonisation can be used to construct 'strange harmonies' and alliances that exist outside the conventional boundaries. In the current chapter I want to extend this argument by showing how Carter uses the rite of passage narrative structure derived from fairy tale to allow individuals the freedom and potentiality to work out who they are and what they want to be independently of social conditioning. To this end, I will be looking at the use Carter makes of Perrault's 'Puss in Boots' and the Grimms' 'The Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was', as narratives that concern the identity formation of boys, and 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty' as narratives that concern the identity formation of

girls. My aim will be to show how Carter combines the narratives for boys and the narratives for girls so that they come to represent processes of mutual discovery in which the liberty, awareness and self-sufficiency of one party is not sacrificed to the liberty, awareness and self-sufficiency of the other.

### ✦ New Puss in Old Boots

'Puss in Boots' (AT 545B) deals with the rite of passage of a young man from innocence to maturity. Several written variants of 'Puss in Boots' exist. Two prominent early versions are Straparola's 'Night the Eleventh, First Fable' in *Le Piacevoli notti* (1550), and Basile's 'Gagliuso' in *Il Pentamerone* (1634), both of which may have been an influence upon the Menippean style that Carter adopts in her version of 'Puss in Boots'. Angela Carter's primary source for her short story, however, is Charles Perrault's genteel homage to civilité; 'Chat botté' (1697); a tale that she herself had translated two years prior to the publication of *The Bloody Chamber*.<sup>2</sup> Perrault's and Carter's stories, upon first reading, are very different from one another. Whereas Perrault's is an urbane representation of the benefits to be gained from what Carter herself calls "enlightened self-interest", hers is a complex over-wrought carnival romp told in the Rabelaisian manner.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Perrault tells the tale that most young children will be familiar with, furthermore, Carter's story is more likely to strike a chord with readers/watchers of *commedia dell'arte*, popular comedy and Medieval Romance. Both tales, however, share the same title because they show how the wrangling of a booted cat brings about the good fortune of a young man. It is this element of the story, the masculine quest for legitimisation that culminates with the establishment of the male character in a position of power, that I will begin by examining.

Perrault's tale, as is probably fairly well known, tells the story of a young man, the third son of a poor miller, who - upon the death of his father - receives nothing but a cat as his "patrimony". The son, despairing of his fate, resolves to eat the cat and make a muff out of its hide; but the cunning cat saves its own skin (quite literally) by offering to help its

new master make a living. The son, somewhat doubtfully, gives the cat a pair of boots and a purse, as it requests, and the cat thus adorned proceeds to work, as paternal influence might, to gain its master advantage at court. This involves a series of ingenious tricks, culminating in the cat persuading an ogre to turn into a mouse, so that it can devour the ogre and allow the young man to pretend that its castle is his own. The king, seeing the beauty of the castle and supposing the young man to be fabulously wealthy, immediately grants the young man permission to marry his daughter, and thus he becomes heir to the entire kingdom.

In Angela Carter's tale, like Perrault's, a sly feline helps his destitute master to establish himself in the world, with riches and a wife. At first the rascally duo, the cat and its master, have little aim in life other than pleasure and riotous behaviour. But when the master falls in love with the wife of Signor Panteleone, the cat, for the sake of their continuing peace, begins to apply its ingenuity to the achievement of their mutual union. This involves a series of intricate operations and escapades, culminating in the murder of Signor Panteleone, the sensational coupling of the two lovers, and their appropriation of Signor Panteleone's fortune. Despite the significant stylistic differences between the two narratives, therefore, there are also clear thematic similarities. Perrault's tale tells of the young upcoming male generation's appropriation of paternal power, first by learning to use it, in the form of a father's bequest, and finally by overcoming it, in the form of the monstrous ogre. Carter's tale, similarly, tells of the defeat of the old order, in the person of Signor Panteleone, and the accession of the younger generation to a position of power and mastery. In both cases an Oedipal rite of passage is enacted in which the cat has enabled a male hero to kill the king, steal his woman and step into his shoes.

The celebration of this violent patrilineal contest is not stinted by Carter in her tale; she tells it with all the glee of de Sade narrating his bed tricks and love stratagems, or Rabelais depicting the toppling of old orders by lusty, bodily young men and women. Evidently, however, appealing though such excess may be, the tale of a masculine rite of passage, in the explicitly feminist *Bloody Chamber*, will not be one that remains unexamined or unexplored. This exploration comes not as a qualification, though, nor as a

rejection of the fairy tale, but as an addition and an extension of it. For Carter's re-writing of the patrilineal 'Puss in Boots' is not meant to offer a critique of the male rite of passage it depicts, but to match that rite of passage with an equally potent matriarchal rite-of-passage narrative, 'Cinderella' (AT 510A): the tale of a young woman who, like Puss's master, is not at first recognised as a valid member of society, but who, through a variety of stratagems assisted by a mother figure, comes to be seen as an able and adult human being. This tale is clearly referred to at two points in Carter's story; firstly, when the Missus's pet cat is identified as a "witty soubrette who lives among the cinders" (76) and secondly when the cat and the Missus are referred to in tandem as "two Cinderellas at an all girls ball" (73). Its function - I would suggest - is to operate as a counterbalance to Carter's titular source: 'Puss in Boots'.<sup>4</sup>

In placing these two narratives side by side, 'Cinderella' and 'Puss in Boots', Carter is drawing upon a well established comparison. Andrew Lang, for instance, in his 1893 introduction to Marian Roalfe Cox's catalogue of 'Cinderella' variants draws a similar analogy:

The fundamental idea of *Cinderella*, I suppose, is this: a person in a mean or obscure position, by means of supernatural assistance, makes a good marriage. This, of course, is the fundamental idea of *Puss in Boots*. In the former tale the person is usually a girl, in the latter a man. In both tales the supernatural aid, always in *Puss in Boots*, often in *Cinderella*, is given by a beast.<sup>5</sup>

Lang here imposes his own limitations upon the tale by identifying 'Cinderella's' primary goal as marriage. In fact, this goal is a relatively recent phenomenon, and in many texts the marriage, as Jack Zipes has argued, is only part of a more general drive towards the young girl's recognition and recovery of status in society.<sup>6</sup> Lang nevertheless identifies the key equivalence between the two texts, pointing out the fact that whilst 'Puss in Boots' is the tale of a boy's accession to power and maturity, 'Cinderella' is the tale of a girl's quest for the same. Carter, exploiting this similarity, works the two narratives into the same tale, playing one off against the other in order to represent the competing claims of two different rites of passage, a male one and a female one, in a single narrative. The purpose

of this juxtaposition is to show that these two developmental processes *can* operate harmoniously towards a mutually beneficial end; the male and female characters coming together as accomplices to overthrow the divisive and patriarchal order represented by Signor Panteleone.

This co-operative element is, admittedly, not always apparent in Carter's story. For the first half of the tale, mediated entirely through the perceptions of the male cat and his master, 'woman' is represented as a vague and mysterious thing, unknown, veiled, a "princess in a tower" (70). Not having seen her, the master constructs her in the Platonic mode as a "divinity he's come to worship" and a "pearl" in an "oyster" (72).<sup>7</sup> Carter at this point, however, is only setting the reader up for an educative fall. For when we finally encounter the woman in question it is evident that she is neither princess, goddess nor jewel. Rather, as Puss suddenly realises, "she's a sensible girl" (74) or, in more familiar Carteresque terminology, a 'wise child'. She is not an object or a possession of the old order, ripe to be plucked by the new order, but a character able to exercise choice and discernment in the selection of her new mate. When she receives the master's letter of love, for instance, the well performed Romantic response is carefully qualified with a measure of sly practical cynicism:

Such tears she wept at his address! ...[a]nd put his paper next to her heart and swore, it was a good soul that sent her his vows and she was too much in love with virtue to withstand him. If, she adds, for she's a sensible girl, he's neither as old as the hills nor ugly as sin, that is. (74)

Increasingly, from here on in, the lady displays her own self-sufficiency and reveals the shallowness of Master's idealistic expectations. She is, Carter tells us, "a young woman of no small grasp" (77), whilst her confidante Tabs, the "witty soubrette", is equally "sharp as a tack" (76). Furthermore, whereas many of the 'bed tricks' in popular comedy, from Boccaccio through *Cymbeline* to de Sade, could take place in spite of the woman involved this tale numbers amongst those that depend upon the consent, agency, and inspired cunning of its feminine cast.<sup>8</sup> It is Tabs who thinks up the idea of the rats and arranges the infestation scenario, all but killing the beasts for Figaro; and it is Tabs who finally knocks



Signor Panteleone down the stairs, killing him outright, “[d]ead as a doornail” (82). When all the manoeuvrings are completed, furthermore, it is the Missus who keeps her cool and ensures that the plot runs smoothly. She displays “the glimmerings of a sturdy backbone” in the affair of the rats, and when Signor Panteleone finally expires she is quick to obtain the keys, like a comic Bluebeard’s wife taking revenge, that ensure “*she*’s in charge of all” (83, my emphasis).

There is a strong emphasis upon the agency of women, then, contradicting the masculinist bias of the overt source. I think it is significant, however, that this feminist element is indicated, not by a direct statement or a complete rejection of the fairy tale ‘Puss in Boots’, but by the introduction of an alternative fairy tale, that describes an alternative experience. As a description of a rogue’s rite of passage Perrault’s ‘Puss in Boots’ isn’t objectionable in itself, it simply fails to accommodate different kinds of rite of passage. It deals only with the development of male characters, features neither hide nor hair of a female cat, and only fleetingly mentions a ‘king’s daughter’.<sup>9</sup> By introducing the claims for a female rite of passage via ‘Cinderella’ Carter is balancing the books. She is not rejecting the fairy tale as a mode of conveying experience. She is rejecting the limited scope of an individual tale, combining it with another to achieve a more inclusive, multi-vocal form.

The popular European ‘Cinderella’ story, however, is not automatically unproblematic in regard to its depiction of women. On the contrary, it is frequently used to illustrate two of fairy tale’s most reprehensible contributions to misogynist representation in literature: feminine malignancy, in the characters of the step-sisters and step-mother, and the passive heroine, in the character of Cinderella. Colette Dowling, for instance, in her best selling self-help book *The Cinderella Complex*, uses the image of Cinderella, waiting patiently for her prince to come, as the paradigm of women under patriarchy who are “waiting for something external to transform their lives.”<sup>10</sup> When women do not wait passively for their prince to come, in this way, they cross the thin divide between good and evil and become the wicked step-sisters: shrewish, demanding, self-interested and morally ugly. These negative views of ‘Cinderella’ are largely a result

of the Disney film version of 1950 that has dominated perceptions of the story for the last fifty years. When the post Second World War generations think of the stepmother, they think of the unrepentantly evil black-white haired witch, and when they think of Cinderella they think of that monster of passivity who “never complained” because she “felt sure someday happiness would find her.”<sup>11</sup> Disney’s monopoly on the ‘Cinderella’ story, however, is a very late phenomenon in the development of a narrative that is at least as old as the ninth century AD and probably much older.<sup>12</sup> Many of her forerunners are far stronger, more intelligent heroines who, with the assistance and co-operation of a maternal spirit, usually in the form of an animal or tree, manage to achieve their own maturity and take their place in the community. The earliest known ‘Cinderella’, for instance, ‘Yeh-hsien’, taken down by a Chinese official Tuan Ch’êng-shih from the narration of a servant in AD 850-860, shows a far more active and engaged heroine. She is “intelligent and good at making pottery” and, after she has received help and advice from her mother’s ghost in the persona of a golden fish, is able to *provide herself* with gold, food, dresses and pearls whenever she wants them.<sup>13</sup> The story, moreover, shows sympathy for the women who oppress and demean her, recognising that their actions are not a result of inherent and archetypal malignancy, but a result of the social and economic pressures upon the new wife to promote the interests of her own children. “The cave people were sorry for them” says the narrator, after telling of their mysterious death by flying stones “and buried them in a stone-pit, which was called the Tomb of the Distressed Women. The men of the cave made mating offerings there; any girl they prayed for there, they got.”<sup>14</sup>

Huang Mei, a student from a Chinese background brought up on tales from the Chinese tradition, registers her astonishment when, on joining a Western university, she comes into contact with tales such as Disney’s and Perrault’s. “I have been particularly fascinated” she writes “by the ever-present passive and innocent heroine in the English novels patterned on ‘Cinderella’, and by the noticeable difference between the archetypal woman image in these works and in Chinese folklore.”<sup>15</sup> “[I]n many Chinese folk tales and literary works” she notes “the positive women figures display unusual strength, courage, and initiative.”<sup>16</sup> In many English works, by contrast, the Cinderella figure becomes an

embodiment of the Christian virtues of “unrivalled humbleness, patience and kindness”.<sup>17</sup> This passive Cinderella flourished in England, Mei argues, after Robert Samber introduced Perrault’s tale in 1729, “just before the first bloom of the English novel”. Here she found fictional expression in many of the prominent works of the period, from Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740-1) to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Even at the period of this Cinderella’s greatest ascendancy, however, it is worth pointing out that there were still alternative models of Cinderella available to women, albeit women of a very different social class. Although Perrault’s version was probably the dominant version in the drawing rooms of the period, other tales, such as “the gypsy Cinderella” ‘Mossycoat’ (AT 510B) - which Carter was later to include in her *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* - would have been circulating orally.<sup>18</sup> Briefly, here is the story of ‘Mossycoat’: being courted by a troublesome hawker, she goes to her mother to ask what she should do. Her mother, who’s busy spinning her a magic coat made out of green moss and gold thread, advises her pragmatically to “git what you can out’n him, while I finish dis coat, after when you won’t have no need’n him, nor his presents neether.”<sup>19</sup> Wisely following her mother’s instruction the girl proceeds to swindle the courter for a dress of white satin, a dress “de color o’ all de birds o’ de air” and a pair of silver slippers, and armed with these she elopes in her moss-coat to make her fortune. She arrives at a grand hall, where she is given a job in the kitchen, and there - whilst simultaneously being maltreated by the other servants - woos the prince using the ‘powers’ of her magic coat and her beautiful new-found clothes.

Many of the features of Perrault’s or Disney’s ‘Cinderella’ are apparent here: the mistreatment of the heroine, the ball and the attainment of the prince. What is absent, however, is the persistent, pervasive aggression towards women. There are no wicked step-mothers or step-sisters, Mossycoat is maltreated (by being hit “a-top o’ de head wid de skimmer”) by ‘sarvants’ and, when it comes to her chance to go to the ball, she is not feebly waiting for somebody else to do all the work for her but does it herself using her mother’s blessings and her own special talents:

Dat night, Mossycoat decided as she’d go to de dance, in right proper style, all on her own, and wi’out nobody knowing it. De first thing she does is to put all de t’other sarvants into a trance; she just touches each on ‘em,

unnoticed, as she moves about, and dey all falls asleep under a spell as soon as she does, and can't wake up agen on deir own; de spell has to be broke by somebody wid de power, same as she has through her magic coat, or has got it some other way.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence from a broader cross-section of variants and versions of 'Cinderella', then, reveals that the story has been used to empower women rather than demean them. It is these variants that Angela Carter is attempting to re-animate when she cites 'Cinderella' in 'Puss in Boots', introducing a narrative from a matriarchal tradition to counter one that expresses an exclusively patrilineal inheritance. What she is trying to convey in her re-use of 'Cinderella' is not the fact that the tale has been used to render women passive or malignant, but the fact that it has also been used to more positive ends: to show how it is possible for women to change, transform and develop.

That Carter saw 'Cinderella' as potentially empowering for women in this regard is demonstrated by her reference to it in *The Sadeian Woman*. Here she describes de Sade's victim Justine as:

the living image of a fairy-tale princess in disguise but a Cinderella for whom the ashes with which she is covered have become part of the skin. She rejects the approaches of a fairy godmother because the woman is a criminal; she falls in love, not with a handsome prince, but with a murderous homosexual who sets his dogs upon her and frames her for a murder he has himself committed. So she is the heroine of a black, inverted fairy-tale and its subject is the misfortunes of unfreedom ...<sup>21</sup>

Cinderella, in other words, only becomes a perverse role model for women if she is not allowed to attain her ultimate apotheosis: transformation from a degraded cinder-girl into a woman with status. She is only a model for the victim Justine, according to Carter, if the ashes that signify her debasement are not scrubbed off. So in the fairy tale that most young children would read, the tale in which she is metamorphosed from something worthless into something worthy, rather than de Sade's inverted version of the story in which she is not, there remains something that is valuable and positive. This can, in part, serve as a response to Gilbert and Gubar who, as we have seen, divide woman in fairy tale into the categories of angel woman and monster woman, a categorisation that can be paralleled by

the division of women in de Sade's fiction into Justine and Juliette. According to Gilbert and Gubar, figures such as Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, like Justine, are always and only victims and cannot act as empowering role models for young girls. They fail to take account of the fact, however, that these fairy tale heroines are, to some extent, empowered by their fictional transformation and that it is possible, in certain instances, to interpret the passivity of the heroine not as evidence of patriarchal oppression, but of self-doubt which the fairy tale will go on to resolve and cure. The heroine of the tale will only be unproblematically a victim if she does not achieve her final metamorphosis. She will only be a bad model for women if she does not change.

One of the clearest illustrations of Carter's approach to 'Cinderella' as an empowering narrative for woman in this way is her re-telling of the Grimm variant 'Aschenputtel': 'Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost: Three Versions of One Story', included in the posthumous collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993) and first printed in *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories* (1987). The three-fold title of this story alone is indicative. 'Ashputtle', first of all, identifies it as the Grimm variant and sets it at odds with the more familiar 'Cinderella' that has descended to us from Perrault and Disney; 'The Mother's Ghost' serves to emphasise the role played by maternal powers in the tale, reintroducing a vital element that has been gradually omitted in retellings from the oldest known European variant, Basile's 'La Gatta Cenerentola', onwards,<sup>22</sup> and finally, 'Three Versions of One Story' suggests that Carter is attempting to recapture the variety and fluidity of the tale in her retelling by offering three different, competing versions of the same narrative. In doing so she is, emphasising Cinderella's status as one of the most frequently recreated narratives in our culture, and attempting to recapture the richness of the seven hundred odd variants of it that have been collected by folklorists.<sup>23</sup>

It is as a direct tribute to this diversity, I would suggest, that Carter uses a number of motifs culled from several versions of the tale. The cow is borrowed from the Scottish 'Rashin Coatie' and the Russian 'Burenushka', the bird is a distinctive feature of the Grimm tale, the cat that sleeps by the fire may be a recondite allusion to the cat-Cinderella of Basile's *Il Pentamerone*, and the coach and horses derive from Perrault. The dress of

blood that is poured over Carter's heroine, furthermore, may be a reference to a more recent reutilisation of the 'Cinderella' plot in the film that popularised Stephen King's novel *Carrie*, in which a girl, when she finally gets to go to the ball, also ends up doused in blood.<sup>24</sup> Such an awareness of different possibilities for the tale, different potentialities, enables Carter to subvert the expectation, created by Disney, that there is only one way to tell the tale and only one essentialised role that the characters in the tale can play and insist instead that there are in fact hundreds of ways to tell it and hundreds of different meanings that can be generated by it.

This variation is further signalled, in Carter's tale, by a modulation in the style and tone in which each part of her narrative is relayed. The first tale is narrated in an erudite, academic style, and takes up a critical-analytical stance in regard to its subject matter; the second is told with a folksy simplicity that foregrounds the symbolism of the tale, and the third is rendered obscurely and briefly in a kind of mock-primitive language. This increasing primitivisation of tone is matched by the successive diminution of the male's role in the story, as if Carter is illustrating a three-stage regression of the tale back to its ancient matriarchal roots. In the first narrative, 'The Mutilated Girls', the father plays a similar role to the father of the Grimm tale; he is in the background, but he is the character who influences and controls the actions of the foregrounded women. In the second tale, 'The Burned Child', a male character is still present, but here he has become the object of the women's actions and the women's desires and is no longer "the unmoved mover, the unseen organising principle, like God".<sup>25</sup> In the third tale, 'Travelling Clothes', the man has disappeared altogether, and the tale is unambiguously about the relationships between women. The stepmother burns the child, not because they are competing for a place in the father's affections, but "because she had not raked the ashes"; and the mother rescues the girl, not by giving her to a prince, but simply by giving her independence:

'step into my coffin.' [says the mother]

'No' said the girl. She shuddered.

'I stepped into *my* mother's coffin when I was your age.'

The girl stepped into the coffin although she thought it would be the death of her. It turned into a coach and horses. The horses stamped, eager to be gone.

'Go and seek your fortune, darling.'<sup>26</sup>

These tales are all clearly designed to emphasise the matriarchal origins of 'Cinderella' and to show that within this tradition the rite of passage endured by the young girl is one of liberation rather than entrapment. She is not being groomed to fit the role of the good woman, as she is in later patriarchal variants of the tale; she is, like the young man in 'Puss in Boots', learning to use the attributes and talents of her foremothers, in order to make her way in the world. Both these tales, 'Puss in Boots' and 'Cinderella' are offering developing individuals the promise that change and transformation are possible; both, together, suggest that men and women can enact rites of passage that are not mutually exclusive, but mutually supportive. It is these factors that Carter is trying to emphasise in her re-writings of the tales. Her heroes and heroines undergo fairy tale rites of passage in order to free themselves from convention, not align themselves with it, and their goal is not mastery over others, but mastery over themselves. To investigate this issue further I will now look at *Nights at the Circus*, a novel in which, like Carter's 'Puss in Boots', a young man and a young woman, Jack Walser and Fevvers, endure fairy tale rites of passage that result in their mutual union and contentment. In my exploration of this novel I will show how Carter uses a similar technique to that employed in 'Puss in Boots', playing different fairy tales off against one another in order to isolate those aspects of the fairy tale she finds empowering and reject those elements that she finds restrictive.

#### ✿ **Traditional Plots and Radical Innovations in *Nights at the Circus***

Metamorphosis or transformation is a dominant feature of *Nights at the Circus* - almost every character in the course of the novel undergoing some form of change as a direct result of their experiences. The Strong Man changes from brute-ignorant into shy-sensitive, Mignon from archetypal victim into wise-child and the Professor from subordinated ape into self-sufficient intellectual. Most interesting of all, however, is the transformation undergone by the American journalist Jack Walser, firstly since it is

arguably the most consistent theme of the novel, and secondly since it is conveyed explicitly in fairy tale terms.<sup>27</sup>

At the beginning of the novel, when Walser is first described by the narrator, he has already quested to some degree. He has already endured a “picaresque career” sufficient to rub off some of his “rough edges” and leave him with the “smoothest of manners” (9). Yet in all his travels, in all the “cataclysmic shocks” to which he has subjected himself in order to prove, like the Byronic hero, that he is still alive, he has not “experienced his experience *as* experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched” (10). Walser, that is to say, is yet to experience a quest and adventure that will really alter the nature of his identity. He has already endured the *expected* rite of passage for a young man of his age; he has already gone as far as a more run-of-the-mill hero ever would, yet this, Carter is saying, is not enough. Having had his safe and socialising adventures, he must now suffer something truly revolutionary, something truly alarming, that will demolish his immunity to transformative experience altogether. “Like the boy in the fairy tale who does not know how to shiver” (10), Jack Walser must learn the true nature of hair-raising, person-changing fear.

The reference to the Grimm fairy tale of ‘The Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was’ is appropriate since both heroes follow a very similar trajectory. Both begin to learn how to use their experience creatively so that, by the end of the narrative, they are capable of being *affected*. When his father tells him to go forth and learn a trade the boy in the tale takes it upon himself to “learn how to get the creeps.”<sup>28</sup> He spends a night in a church bell-tower, a night under the gallows with some corpses, and three nights in a haunted house with demon dogs, demon cats and zombies. Still, however, due to his improbable degree of stupidity, he has not managed to be afraid, and it is not until his wife, the Princess, whom he has married in the course of his adventures, pours a bucket full of cold water and minnows on him whilst he is asleep that he finally achieves his longed-for desire and wakes up screaming “Oh, I’ve got the creeps! I’ve got the creeps!”<sup>29</sup>



The sexual innuendo is fairly evident and, I suspect, was made abundantly clear by many of the storytellers that had the fortune to relate it. Carter, certainly, in her retelling, literalises it with a bawdy wink and a suggestive leer; for it is sex, she says, in no uncertain terms, with a rustling of feathers and the woman on top, that finally enables Walser to accede to the state of fearfulness. Afterwards: “[h]e was as much himself again as he would ever be, and yet that ‘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...” (292). It is the ‘spasm’ of orgasm, Carter notes a page later, that is partly responsible for Walser’s re-hatching, and this spasm is a direct descendant of the Grimm shudder that enables their *dummling* to come out of his shell. The tales that began in the same way, with characters that couldn’t experience experience as experience, have thus ended in the same way, with both characters being taught fear and trembling by two cunning girls: Fevvers and the princess. Walser has travelled exactly the same route as his folk tale predecessor and Carter, in this instance, has not altered the message of the fairy tale at all; she has simply literalised it and made it explicit.

Fevvers meanwhile, when she is not playing the role of the fairy tale princess, is also experiencing a transformational rite of passage. After a mock-biblical fall from the rooftops of Ma Nelson’s, she is ejected from a state of Eden-like bliss, in an all female Beulah, and must journey through the fallen world, where she learns the nature of good and evil by experiencing a series of Gothic set pieces, including incarceration in the Sadeian dungeon of Madame Schreck, entrapment by a corrupt Duke, and near sacrifice by a demented Rosicrucian. Only after experiencing total abandonment and self-doubt can she achieve a kind of resolution by being reunited with Walser in the happy conclusion of the tale.

Both these transformations, Walser’s accession to fearfulness, and Fevver’s reconstitution of self, take place in the section of the novel entitled ‘Siberia’, the third location of the narrative. The first and second, London and St Petersburg, are both set in old and established cities. Not only are they old and established, in fact, but they are two of the cities that will define the upcoming century. Siberia, by contrast, is a blank, a fresh

page, a gap in which the revisionary impulse is apparently given free reign.<sup>30</sup> It is here, significantly, that Walser “like the landscape” becomes “a perfect blank” (222), and it is here that the women of the panopticon escape to find a white world that “looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished” (218). This space is a familiar narrative feature in fairy tale: it is that liminal place that exists in any rite of passage narrative in which the hero and heroine are given leeway to reinvent themselves through the experience of radically ‘other’ states of being. It is within this gap that convicts and outlaws live, where magicians or shamans roam and where the animal encroaches, to some extent, upon the human. It is here, then, that the boundaries of accepted civilised community can be questioned, challenged, revised and finally, rebuilt. As Rory Turner argues, it allows the novel’s characters to move from a fixed symbolism, through a ‘liminal phase’ in which identity becomes malleable, towards a reintegration, where the character is reborn and re-symbolised.<sup>31</sup>

In the fairy tale this liminal space often appears in the form of a forest. Appropriately, then, it is now that Walser becomes lost in the forest, and the remainder of the team are kidnapped by bandits, led into “the margins of the forest”, and so “translated into another world ... to which [they] had no map” (225). They are entering that enchanted wood Carter describes in *Wise Children* “where you lose yourself and find yourself, again; the wood that changes you; the wood where you go mad; the wood where the shadows live longer than you do.”<sup>32</sup>

As with *Wise Children*, however, the forest in *Nights at the Circus* seems not quite real. For if the wood in the later novel, is quite literally a movie set, then the wild wild wood of Siberia, mediated as it is by the circus ring, also carries a hint of the papier mâché. This is because we sense that Carter is reproducing the narrative motif in full awareness and with a distinct purpose in mind. The wood near Athens as it appears in *Wise Children* is both a wood in which transformation becomes possible and, simultaneously, only a movie set in which that transformation is recognised as a device and a deception. Likewise in *Nights at the Circus* the Siberian wood is both a place in which transformations can occur and a place in which these transformations can be revealed as

part of a conventional narrative structure that Carter is wary and critical of. Carter, in other words, wants to use and exploit that element of traditional narrative that allows for transformation - the fairy tale sense of a dialectic progression - but at the same time, by making a set out of the transformational arena, she signals her awareness that human lives are not generally characterised by dialectic progress. Fevvers and Walser are transformed, having had their certainties shattered they are then put back together again, but at the same time this transformation is narrated with an irony and self consciousness that forces the reader to regard the process with a degree of detached scepticism.

It is not only the fairy tale convention of transformation and development that Carter reflects ironically upon in *Nights at the Circus*. The happy ending, that quintessential, consolatory element of fairy tale romance, is also treated with considerable scepticism by Lizzie when Fevvers first begins to talk about the possibility of Love:

And when you *do* find the young American, what the 'ell will you do, then? Don't you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes? True lovers' reunions always end in a marriage .... Orlando takes his Rosalind... The Prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon's lair is always forced to marry her, whether they've taken a liking to each other or not. That's the custom... (280-1).

Such a marriage, she makes clear, would be an abomination and a betrayal of all Fevver's principles of independence and self-sufficiency. The fact that this tale does end happily, however, like the fact that there *is* a transformation in the fairy tale forest, suggests that there is something in the happy ending convention that Carter finds useful. Despite Lizzie's cynicism and despite Carter's caution the hero and heroine are, in a traditional enough manner, finally united, because such a union is a celebration of the possibility of constructive change, and the possibility that two individuals can transcend restrictive gender roles sufficiently to join together on a basis of equality. Carter must ensure, however, if she is to harness the constructive element of this ending that, though structurally conventional, it is not traditional in the hierarchy of relations it entails. One character must not come to dominate the other; Walser must not define Fevvers purely in

relation to himself. This is why the happy ending only becomes possible because it is the wondering and impressed eyes of the tribals finally “that told [Fevvers] who she was” (290). In the final instant, she does not become “Mrs Sophie Walser, who formerly had a successful career on the music-hall stage” (293-4) but remains the self-determined performer and exhibitionist. Only now, after they have both been defined separately, can the lovers meet to “assuage desire in a reciprocal pact of tenderness”, as Carter puts it in *The Sadeian Woman*.<sup>33</sup>

Although the narrative in one way *does* achieve closure with Fevvers’ and Walser’s union, then, in another way, it doesn’t. They are united in a traditional enough manner, but the conventional aspects that the union entails - male determination - are eliminated. The novel, furthermore, does not close as a conventional romance might, because the union of the lovers does not mark the end of the mystery. The novel ends, if it can be said to end at all, with the enigmatic laughter of Fevvers, that serves to unsettle any sense of conclusion and closure. She laughs a bold, unsettling, mocking laugh, that proves by its very positioning in the text that the carnival romp is *not* to be closed down, it is not to be confined between licensed parameters, tidied up and forgotten, but goes on, even after the novel has ended:

She laughed, she laughed, she laughed... The spiralling 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 (295).

In her essay ‘Weaving Our Own Web: Demythologising / Remythologising and Magic in the Work of Contemporary Women Writers,’ Gina Wisker uses a metaphor borrowed from Hélène Cixous to define a process called ‘stealing and flying’. She quotes Morag Shiach’s description of the process, saying that women must “steal what they need from the dominant culture, but then fly away with their cultural beauty to the ‘in between’ where new images, new narratives and new subjectivities can be created.”<sup>34</sup> This describes perfectly what Carter is doing in *Nights at the Circus*. She both *uses* a standard fairy tale formula, and *abuses* it towards her own ends; she takes what she requires from the model,

and then she abandons that which she considers obsolete. Such a process enables her to borrow from texts that have a certain appeal and a certain dynamic, whilst simultaneously disengaging herself from the more limiting elements of those texts; “spring[ing] forward *from* recoil”, as Elaine Jordan puts it, “[r]epeating and departing from the inheritance described”.<sup>35</sup> In the case of fairy tale, this process enables Carter to disengage herself from those misogynist variants that have achieved a mass popularity through companies such as Disney, whilst reclaiming elements of the tales that are empowering and liberating: their matriarchal dimension and their rite of passage structure that allows her to envision alternative models for socialisation.

Sarah Bannock, in her work on *Nights at the Circus*, also describes this process of exegesis. Rather than using the metaphor of the flying woman, however, she compares the novelist who assimilates elements of past texts to the performer who (like Stanislavski’s actor) draws on elements of past experience in order to reproduce them in the present with a fresh interpretation and a fresh application. “Fiction”, she writes: “... may be conceived of as a performative art, in which the author uses, as an actor does, his or her own life experiences and impressions in the creation of characters, transforming these experiences and impressions into something new in the process.”<sup>36</sup> This angle on the process of exegesis neatly elucidates the character of Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* who, as performer and actress is continually appropriating images, symbols and ideas from the past, and reinterpreting them, in the present, to suit herself and her own sense of spectacle. In a world where representations of women are largely controlled by men, this process of performative exegesis enables Fevvers to steal the initiative and empower herself by making up fictions about herself. She is the Cockney Venus, she is the Winged Victory, she is the Angel of Death, and she is Sophia-Wisdom; all of which are icons taken from a masculine tradition and appropriated, outgrown, abandoned by Fevvers, who partakes of elements of all these things but can never be reduced to a single one.<sup>37</sup> In this Fevvers is a model for the woman writer generally, Carter included, who takes over the means of representation from a masculine tradition, and uses it for her own ends, killing the king and re-styling his throne. Male narratives are no longer sufficient to explain the characters

and experiences of women and must be adapted, appropriated and discomposed. Thus Walser who, as a rational male journalist, begins by trying to tell Fevver's story for her, becomes increasingly confused and befuddled by events and ends up in a state of total dissolution, unsure not only of his own sexuality but also, after witnessing the apes learning to write, of his own humanity.

Walser's confusion must mirror the readers confusion when confronted with *Nights at the Circus*. As he has his ideas discomposed and put back together again so the reader has his/her ideas discomposed and put back together again. This is largely why it is such an unsettling, and therefore powerful, novel. Nothing is really what it seems: gender, identity, sexuality even species become flexible categories and almost every image, every idea, every symbol, in the context of Carter's (or more properly, Fevver's performance) becomes new and transformed.

#### ✿ Flying Away with Sleeping Beauty

To localise this argument and give it more specificity I want to focus, now, upon the use that Carter makes of one particular tale in *Nights at the Circus*: 'Sleeping Beauty' (AT 410). Following a similar procedure to that used in my previous analysis, I shall first look at the aspects of "Sleeping Beauty" that Carter elects to leave behind, then I shall indicate the areas of "Sleeping Beauty" that Carter chooses to fly away with.

The most overt Sleeping Beauty figure in the novel is the one encountered by Fevvers whilst she is working in Madame Schreck's Gothic freak show: the country curate's daughter who, "the very day her menses started" (63), fell into a deep sleep from which she never awoke. Her speciality at Madame Schreck's is to do precisely nothing except sleep. "Proneness" says Fevvers "was her speciality" (61). She becomes, therefore, the perfect metaphor for the male pornographic fantasy of the woman as object. She exists purely as a thing to be observed and takes on the sickly vulnerable appearance of de Sade's victim, Justine: "Sleeping Beauty's face had grown so thin, her eyes were

especially prominent, and her closed eyelids were dark as the under-skins of mushrooms” (63-4).

Appearing thus, she is laid on a marble slab, whilst Fevvers stands over her, wings spread, and plays the Angel of Death, the resulting Tableaux Vivant depicting the two models available to women in the canonical fairy tale narrative: the witch and the passive maiden, the whore and the virgin. The irony in Carter’s depiction is, of course, that these women are figures in a freak show. The passivity of the Sleeping Beauty and the demonism of Fevvers is not normal or natural, Carter is saying, on the contrary, the reduction of women to symbols creates monsters and abominations.

This point is made more forcefully in a comparable scene in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*. Here Desiderio finds himself in a brothel where, likewise, all the women have been reduced to images:

Each was as circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric and you could not imagine they had names, for they had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of Woman.... All, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute.<sup>38</sup>

Such a reduction, Carter shows, is not natural or charming but freakish. These women, like Beauty, have had their humanity, their identity replaced with monstrous distortions. The implied critique, here, is in tune with overt critiques made of the fairy tale by certain feminist writers in the seventies. Prominent versions of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ such as the Disney version, critics such as Kay Stone have argued, offer unacceptable models for children because their narcoleptic heroines are more like freaks than real women.<sup>39</sup> Carter fictionalises this critique by making Sleeping Beauty perpetually dormant and then parodies it by placing her in a freak show.

Simultaneously, however, having indicated the validity of criticisms like Stone’s, Carter also qualifies them; for the freakishness of her Sleeping Beauty derives from the fact that, *unlike* the source heroine, this Sleeping Beauty *never* wakes up. Her

unnaturalness, that is to say, derives from the fact that, in this instance, a quality inherent in the traditional fairy tale - awakening and transformation - is missing.

In *The Uses of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim claims that the sleep of Beauty symbolises the period of inactivity and lethargy that assails the child at the beginning of puberty. “The happy ending” he says “assures the child that he (*sic*) will not remain permanently stuck in seemingly doing nothing, even if at the moment it seems as if this period of quietude will last for a hundred years.”<sup>40</sup> In *Nights at the Circus* Carter makes this interpretation explicit by stating that the malaise of the curate’s daughter started “one morning in her fourteenth year, the very day her menses started” (63). Here too, the period of sleep is linked directly to the adolescent phase of quietude. In this instance, however, Carter does not allow for the fairy tale reassurance that Bettelheim identifies in the source(s). This Sleeping Beauty lacks the positive and constructive features that inhere in Perrault’s tale and it is, arguably, this *divergence* from the source tale, as much as her grotesque passivity, that makes her freakish. Like the Cinderella figure that Carter discusses in *The Sadeian Woman*, it is the fact that the ashes don’t wash off that makes her a monster, not the fact that she is covered with ashes in the first place.

Carter, then, is presenting two possible readings of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ in this novel, neither of which is fully satisfactory on its own, but both of which have elements of value. The feminist critique is correct to emphasise and reject the passivity of the female in the canonical source, but wrong to reject the fairy tale altogether. The Bettelheimian celebration is correct to recognise the positive transformative powers of the tale, but needs to take account of the ways in which this transformation is determined by social and cultural factors. Both interpretations together, however, can yield a satisfactory composite: an awareness that fairy tales have been used to limit men and women to the playing of socially unequal roles, but a simultaneous awareness that they can also enable men and women to transform the roles that they are already playing. This composite fairy tale interpretation is effectively represented by Carter in the characters of Walser and Fevvers, both of whom are transformed by their respective rites of passage, neither of whom come, as a result of their rite of passage, to dominate the other.



There are two more explicit references to the tale in *Nights at the Circus*, firstly, when the narrator describes St Petersburg as a “Sleeping Beauty of a city” (97) and secondly when Walser is discovered unconscious by the women of the panopticon and must be kissed awake by Olga Alexandrovna (222). Both references, if ironic, emphasise the transformative and curative aspects of the tale. In the first instance St Petersburg is a Sleeping Beauty because it awaits “the rough and bloody kiss” (97) of the Russian revolution; in the second Walser is a Sleeping Beauty because he is awaiting the time, like Bettelheim’s adolescent, when he will be woken up metamorphosed. In this case, Carter is explicitly rejecting the sexist implications of the traditional tale, by challenging the expectation created by the source that the sleeping figure will always be feminine. She may agree that a period of quietude is a necessary phase to be endured prior to radical change, but she would not agree that this quietude is an exclusively female experience. This notion is effectively parodied via a simple inversion and complication of gender roles; making the Sleeping Beauty into the Sleeping Walser, masculinising the model, and then having him woken up by a lesbian woman. Similarly, Carter also rejects that element of the source that makes the kiss of a *prince* the key to the awakening of female potential for Fevvers. Whilst Fevvers is “sealed in [the] artificial egg” of her pose as Winged Victory, Carter has her say:

‘I waited, 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! ... I was possessed by the idea that I had been feathered out for some special fate, though what it was I could not imagine. So I waited, with lithic patience, for that destiny to manifest itself. (39).

Fevvers at this point is an adolescent; these are her “blossoming years” and like Bettelheim’s Beauty she is waiting to develop. Simultaneously, however, Carter makes it clear that the prince does not hold the key to such development and that his kiss represents a sealing in, rather than an opening up, that recalls the freakish and fearful fate of the curate’s daughter. In all these examples Carter retains the element of transformation

crucial to the plot of the fairy tale, but alters the emphasis in order to challenge the gender hierarchies that are implicit in many versions of the story.

The promise of change afforded by the fairy tale is, arguably, the central feature of the genre. There is hardly a single tale that does not tell of some development or alteration in a character. Men and women change from humans into beasts and back again, the poor become rich and the rich become poor, the boy who does not know how to shudder will eventually learn, and those who sleep will eventually wake up. As Marina Warner says in her introduction to *From the Beast to the Blonde*: “[m]ore so than the presence of fairies, the moral function, the imagined antiquity and oral anonymity of the ultimate source and the happy ending (although all these factors help towards defining the genre) metamorphosis defines the fairy tale.”<sup>41</sup> If this is correct, and I believe it is, then the transformative element that Carter retains of the fairy tale is not just one of its many and various aspects, it is *the* defining feature of the genre. It is not just the odd motif or parallel that Carter is drawing upon here. Rather, the central thematic motivating feature of her novel is precisely the central thematic motivating feature of fairy tale.

### ✿ **Singing a New Song**

In the story ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ Carter asks the question: “Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?”<sup>42</sup> This question, arguably, is not only addressed to the female vampire of the text - but also to the text itself. The story, like the village in which it is set, has ‘too many shadows’, too many intertexts, and Carter is asking whether or not it is possible to escape these intertexts and sing something different.

The answer to this question as it is posed in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ is not as optimistic as it might be. If the vampirella is to escape the cycles of her ancestry, if the lark is to escape its cage and rise up (like Blake’s lark at the end of *Milton*), then the lady must die. The only way that things can really change for her, the only way that she can find release from entrapment in tradition, is through her death. In *Nights at the Circus*, on the other hand, it seems to me that Carter offers a more hopeful answer, for here the

character that tries to sing her own song, Mignon, *succeeds*. A fairy godmother touches “the little street-waif with her wand” (162) and Mignon, like Cinderella, down on her luck, is finally allowed to go to the ball. The ‘Cinderella’ transformation, in this case, represents her empowerment.

Mignon does not, however, sing a particularly new song; in fact, she sings an old and traditional song but seizes hold of that song “in the supple lasso of her voice” and mates it “with her new-found soul” so that “the song was utterly transformed and yet its essence did not change” (247). Her ability to sing a new song derives, that is, from her ability to transform an old song and yet, at the same time, retain its essence. So too with the fairy tale shadows and intertexts of Carter’s novels: she seizes hold of them in the supple lasso of her voice and transforms them utterly; yet despite this transformation, one of the defining features of the fairy tale, its representation of a metamorphic rite of passage, remains.

<sup>1</sup>Buchan, 979.

<sup>2</sup>See Carter, Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault, 43-53.

<sup>3</sup>For Carter's comment see 'About the Stories,' Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales, 126.

<sup>4</sup>The idea of a cat who resembles Cinderella may have been inspired by Basile's title 'La Gatta Cenerentola' in Il Pentamerone (translated by Richard Burton as 'The Cat Cinderella') although curiously the Cinderella in that story is not, in fact, a cat.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Lang, introduction, Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty Five Variants, by Marian Roalfe Cox (London: Folklore Society, 1893) vii.

<sup>6</sup>See Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, 30.

<sup>7</sup>This representation is intensified, and so parodied more thoroughly, in Carter's Radio Play 'Puss in Boots'. Here the hero's adulation reaches heights of absurdity with "let me see the lady's hands, her hands ... white hands, like lilac on a coffin ..." Come Unto These Yellow Sands: Four Radio Plays (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1985) 132.

<sup>8</sup>I take The Marriage of Figaro to be a positive source in this regard. Susanne, like Carter's Tabs, is a "witty soubrette" who controls the plot as much as she is a victim of it. Carter's appreciation of this opera is confirmed by Lizzie in Nights at the Circus - who announces that it is one of her favourites due to its "class analysis"; Nights at the Circus (London: Picador, 1985) 53. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be included in the text.

<sup>9</sup>It is worth noting, however, that there have been 'Puss in Boots' tales with a female protagonist - particularly in Scandinavian renderings of the tale. See Maria Leach and Jerome Fried, eds., Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, vol. 2 (New York: Crowell, 1950) 912.

<sup>10</sup>Colette Dowling, The Cinderella Complex: Womens' Hidden Fear of Independence (1981; Glasgow: Fontana, 1982) 28.

<sup>11</sup>Disney Productions, Cinderella (Los Angeles: Disney, 1981) 1.

<sup>12</sup>See Arthur Waley, 'The Chinese Cinderella Story,' Folk-Lore 58:1 (1947): 226-38. Jack Zipes suggests, via August Nitschke, that the story is as old as the Ice Age (Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales (London: Heinemann, 1979) 172) although, as Neil Philip points out "[t]his is pure claptrap: no such demonstration is possible." The Cinderella Story: The Origins and Variations of the Story Known as 'Cinderella' (London: Penguin, 1989) 7.

<sup>13</sup>Waley, 227 and 228, my emphasis.

<sup>14</sup>Waley, 229.

<sup>15</sup>Huang Mei, Transforming the Cinderella Dream: From Frances Burney to Charlotte Brontë (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990) vii-viii.

<sup>16</sup>Mei, viii

<sup>17</sup>Mei, 3. Mei does, however, go on to argue that the English Cinderella "is much more active and complex than [her] cursory first impression indicates" (7).

<sup>18</sup>See Katharine M. Briggs and Ruth L. Tongue, eds., Folk-tales of England, Folktales of the World (London: Routledge, 1965) 16, and Angela Carter, notes, Virago Book of Fairy Tales, 234. This tale was collected by T. W. Thompson from a gypsy Taimie Boswell in 1915, but was almost certainly circulating much earlier. James Orchard Halliwell collected a rhymed variant 'Catskin' in 1843.

<sup>19</sup>Carter, Virago Book of Fairy Tales, 48.

- <sup>20</sup>Carter, Virago Book of Fairy Tales, 52.
- <sup>21</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 39.
- <sup>22</sup>See Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, 206.
- <sup>23</sup>See Iona and Peter Opie, eds., The Classic Fairy Tales (London: OUP, 1974) 117. For further information on 'Cinderella' see also Alan Dundes, Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook (New York: Garland, 1982).
- <sup>24</sup>Stephen King, story, Carrie, dir. Brian de Palma, perf. Sissy Spacek and Piper Laurie, UA/Red Bank, 1976.
- <sup>25</sup>Carter, American Ghosts and Old World Wonders (1993; London: Vintage, 1994) 112.
- <sup>26</sup>Carter, American Ghosts, 119-120.
- <sup>27</sup>In this chapter I focus upon the fairy tale transformations of Fevvers and Walser, the 'principals' of the novel. For an excellent analysis of the structure of transformations on a more minute scale, including a discussion of how the transformations are interrelated (the transformational 'dance'), see Rory P. B. Turner, 'Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus,' Folklore Forum 20. 1-2 (1987): 39-60.
- <sup>28</sup>Zipes, Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, 12. Tale 4, AT 326.
- <sup>29</sup>Zipes, Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, 20.
- <sup>30</sup>Carter is not, of course, so naive as to believe that there is no continuity at all. In order to effect transformation there must be something to transform. The new century must come from the old, and Carter and her Marxist character, Lizzie, as materialists, are well aware that if there is to be a revolution then it must arise out of historical conditions. Thus the blankness of Siberia is not so blank as it first appears, and Carter reminds us that it only "seemed a bundle of blank paper to the ignorant" - to the tribesmen that inhabit the land it is an "instruction manual of universal knowledge" (252).
- <sup>31</sup>Turner, 39 and 41.
- <sup>32</sup>Carter, Wise Children (1991; London: Vintage, 1992) 158.
- <sup>33</sup>Carter, Sadeian Woman, 8.
- <sup>34</sup>Gina Wisker, ed., It's My Party: Reading Twentieth Century Women's Writing (London: Pluto, 1994) 110. Wisker is quoting from Morag Shiach, Hélène Cixous, (London: Routledge, 1991) 23. For the original reference see Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Harvester, 1981) 258.
- <sup>35</sup>Jordan, 'The Dangers of Angela Carter,' 124 and 125.
- <sup>36</sup>Sarah Bannock, 'Auto/biographical souvenirs in Nights at the Circus,' in Bristow, 199.
- <sup>37</sup>For more on this point see Lorna Sage, Angela Carter, Writers and Their Work (Plymouth: Northcote, 1994) 46-9.
- <sup>38</sup>Carter, The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman (1972; London: Penguin, 1982) 132.
- <sup>39</sup>Kay Stone, 'Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,' Women and Folklore, ed. Claire R. Farrer (Austin: U of Texas P, 1975) 44.
- <sup>40</sup>Bettelheim, 225.
- <sup>41</sup>Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, xv-xvi.
- <sup>42</sup>Carter, Bloody Chamber, 93.

THE FAIRY TALE AND THE CARNIVALESQUE:  
FROM *THE BLOODY CHAMBER* TO *WISE CHILDREN*



*We live in Gothic times. Now, to understand and to interpret is the  
main thing; but my method of investigation is changing...*

Angela Carter, 'Afterword' *Fireworks*

✻ **Fairy Tale and the Carnavalesque**

In her 'Afterword' to *Fireworks*, written in 1974, Carter suggests cryptically that her "method of investigation is changing." From being a method suited to "Gothic times" that involves investigation and interpretation, she suggests, it is becoming something else that remains unspecified.<sup>1</sup> It was to take another ten years for this transformation in method to become apparent, and the new style that Carter adopted was only fully realised in *Wise Children*. But when it did appear it proved her prediction in *Fireworks* to be strangely accurate. She was moving away from the terrifying, alienating 'gothic' modes that dominated her earlier fiction and abandoning the analytic and interpretative stance. Instead, from 'Puss in Boots' in *The Bloody Chamber* through to the exuberant fairy tales she collected for Virago, we begin to see a comic, even light-hearted, voice emerging. In the following chapter I will investigate these changes by exploring her use of, and changing attitude to, carnivalesque literature and theory. This analysis will be crucial to the current study, since it will reveal the extent to which Carter treats fairy tale as a carnivalesque genre.

In broad terms the fairy tale is carnivalesque, in Carter's fiction, because it represents a literary form that is frequently produced outside the institutions of power which can – to some extent – disrupt those institutions. In Carter's earlier fiction this carnivalesque disruption comes about, as we have seen, through an emphasis upon the

transgressive violence and sexuality latent in canonical fairy tales and sometimes explicit in non-canonical fairy tales. In Carter's later fiction, however, the nature of the carnivalesque disruption enacted through fairy tale changes as Carter increasingly begins to associate fairy tale with the 'people' who originally circulated them as oral narratives. Now the carnivalesque disruption comes about because the exuberant, pleasure-orientated elements of the tales can be used to resist and undermine the 'seriousness' and 'moderation' implicit in authoritarian narratives.

This change in Carter's approach reflects three important new influences: Walter Benjamin, Robert Darnton and Mikhail Bakhtin. Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller' is one that evidently held a fascination for Carter. In the fragments of notes she left behind for the introduction to the *Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* Marina Warner records the words: "fairy tales - cunning and high spirits".<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to Benjamin's essay, and is taken from a passage that reads, in full:

The wisest thing - so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day - is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarises *Mut*, courage, dividing it dialectically into *Untermut*, that is, cunning, and *Übermut*, high spirits.)<sup>3</sup>

In using this passage Carter is setting the fairy tale explicitly in opposition to the mythic, which is represented as a form of narrative that embodies the weighty, serious, sacred prerogatives of official culture. It is a kind of telling that enables its producers and consumers, underhandedly and overhandedly (*Untermut* and *Übermut*), to "show us that the questions posed by the mythic are simple-minded".<sup>4</sup> The element of fairy tale that licenses this disruption, for Carter, is its derivation from, in Benjamin's words, the 'experience' of "the resident tiller of the soil, and ... the trading seaman";<sup>5</sup> the common man, rather than the social authority. This experience, as Benjamin goes on to argue, has now been dulled by the advent of modern warfare and modern industrialisation, but the voice of the working peasant can still be heard in some of those tales that have survived in writing, and it is still possible for a sufficiently talented writer such as Benjamin's subject Nikolai Leskov to recapture the "[e]xperience which is passed on from mouth to mouth ...

from which all storytellers have drawn.” “[A]mong those who have written down the tales,” as Benjamin goes on to argue “it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers”.<sup>6</sup>

Another major influence on Carter’s thinking about fairy tale after its publication in 1984 was an essay by the cultural historian Robert Darnton, ‘Peasants Tell Tales: the Meaning of Mother Goose’. Darnton uses fairy tale to show how the peasantry of eighteenth century France negotiated and constructed their world.<sup>7</sup> The thoughts of the peasantry, “the unenlightened during the Enlightenment”, he argues, would seem to be “irretrievably lost”, since they themselves were largely illiterate, and very little was written down about them in official histories.<sup>8</sup> The various collections of fairy tales made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, “provide a rare opportunity to make contact with the illiterate masses who have disappeared into the past without leaving a trace”.<sup>9</sup> They record the “world of raw and naked brutality” experienced by eighteenth century French peasants in surprising detail; testifying to the injustices of inheritance systems, the proliferation of stepmothers because of the high mortality rate of women in childbirth, and the abandonment of children as a result of extreme poverty and demographic crisis. More positively, the tales of Mother Goose also testify to the stratagems used by the peasant for enduring this hostile world, because they depict the victory of the cunning ‘little man’ over a hostile higher order.<sup>10</sup> The wishes of the poor, the wishes of the oppressed are always fulfilled; demanding giants are toppled, princesses are won, and - more importantly - the table is always filled with wonderful foodstuffs. The fairy tale, therefore, as well as revealing despair at lives filled with poverty and death, also provides the oppressed peasant with a means of speaking out against his or her oppression, and of compensating for the wrongs that have been done. It:

always pits the little against the big, the poor against the rich, the underprivileged against the powerful. By structuring stories in this way, and without making explicit social comment, the oral tradition provided peasants with a strategy for coping with their enemies under the Old Regime.<sup>11</sup>



Both of these writers, then, Benjamin and Darnton, share one key belief about fairy tale that had a vital impact upon Carter's thinking: they are the products of specific historical groups, usually the working classes, and can, as such, operate as 'unofficial' histories that provide an antidote or an alternative to the monologue of 'official' history. This, of course, is a major premise of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory, and it is Bakhtin's influence on Carter's notions of the carnivalesque and of fairy tale that I wish to focus on in the following section. It is important to note at the outset, however, that Carter did not actually read Bakhtin's work until critics began to draw parallels between it and *Nights at the Circus*, and that Bakhtin's theory, as a result, can only have had a direct influence on texts written after 1984.<sup>12</sup> I have assumed, to some degree, that Carter may have been indirectly exposed to Bakhtin's thinking prior to this date because both of them were interested in very similar fields. It is also probable that Carter would have come across theories concerning carnival in her studies of Medieval literature.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is only *Wise Children* that could have been directly influenced by Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque, so it is this novel that I shall be concentrating on for the majority of this chapter.

### ✱ The Romantic and Renaissance Grotesque

Carter's work prior to *Wise Children*, with its parodic Sadeian figures, its gothic fairy tale motifs and its scattered Blakeian imagery, often reads like a contemporary catalogue of the Romantic grotesque - defined by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* as a grotesque of terror and alienation in which:

[a]ll that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognised by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure.<sup>14</sup>

This form of the grotesque, Bakhtin makes clear, is a degraded version of its predecessor, the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, in which terror was "turned into something gay and comic" and monsters were defeated by laughter.<sup>15</sup> It no longer celebrates the unity of

'the people', amidst scenes of riotous laughter and merriment, instead it comes to reflect the "subjective idealistic spirit" of the gloomy Romantic individual; "laughter [is] cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm" and "loses its gay and joyful tone" and rather than something that can be mocked and abused the world becomes something isolating and unknowable.<sup>16</sup> It is a world, Bakhtin notes, that achieves its definitive expression in the fiction of E. T. A. Hoffmann, one of the authors whom Carter cites as a major early influence, and whose literature of cruelty, wonder and terror, can be seen as a continuous intertext in her early writing.<sup>17</sup>

Carter's preference for the Romantic grotesque over the Renaissance grotesque, in *The Bloody Chamber*, is revealed distinctly in her use of two motifs central to the Hoffmannesque gothic, the mask and the marionette. In the Renaissance grotesque, as Bakhtin writes, "[t]he mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity".<sup>18</sup> In its Romantic form, conversely:

the mask is torn away from the oneness of the folk carnival concept. It is stripped of its original richness and acquires other meanings alien to its primitive nature; now the mask hides something, keeps a secret, deceives.... The Romantic mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a sombre hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it.<sup>19</sup>

In most of the tales of *The Bloody Chamber* the mask evidently belongs to this latter category, being a fearful thing of concealment and deception. Bluebeard's face in 'The Bloody Chamber', for instance, seems terrifying to the narrator because it is "like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me ... lay underneath [it]" (9), and the tiger of 'The Tiger's Bride', similarly, wears an unsettling false face to cover his true visage, "a beautiful face; but one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human" (53). Likewise, the marionette is used by Carter not as the marionette of Bakhtin's 'folk culture', but as the figure of fear, the 'tragic doll' or automaton, derived from Hoffmann, in which "the accent is placed on the puppet as the victim of alien inhuman force, which rules over men by turning them into

marionettes.”<sup>20</sup> Bluebeard, again, is described as a malignant “puppet master” who sees “his dolls break free of their strings” and “abandon the rituals he had ordained for them” (39); and *The Lady of the House of Love*, trapped by the evil force of her ancestral curse, is likened to a doll:

a ventriloquist’s doll, or, more, like a great, ingenious piece of clockwork. For she seemed inadequately powered by some slow energy of which she was not in control; as if she had been wound up years ago, when she was born, and now the mechanism was inexorably running down and would leave her lifeless (102).

In all these examples it is apparent that Carter’s imagery in this phase of her work shares the fearful dimension that Bakhtin identifies in the Romantic grotesque and lacks the simplicity he attributes to the Renaissance grotesque. In the spirit of de Sade, who represents an extreme of such dark Romanticism, or in the spirit of Hoffmann with his bizarre automatons and eerie states of schizophrenic madness, she uses elements of the carnivalesque to destabilise and disturb, not to consolidate and conserve, creating undercurrents of potentially eruptive violence and brutality in her fiction.

There is one tale in *The Bloody Chamber*, however, that seems anomalous in this respect. In ‘Puss in Boots’, for the first time, we hear an entirely different tone; a tone that corresponds more to the Renaissance Gothic the disappearance of which Bakhtin laments than the new Hoffmannesque Gothic which he bemoans. It is this tone that is to become the dominant voice in *Wise Children*, and if we read Carter’s work to 1979 as an expression of the Romantic grotesque, then it is possible to read Carter’s work after this date as, in part, a reflection of the Renaissance grotesque.

Within the space of the seventeen pages of ‘Puss in Boots’ Carter manages to embrace a vast heteroglossic catalogue of carnival genres and forms, both literary and performative. There are elements of the *commedia dell’arte* (Signor Panteleone, the Buffoon), the French satire (Figaro of Beaumarchais and the miser of Molière) and the fairy tale (‘Puss in Boots’ and ‘Cinderella’). Looking down into the marketplace, from over a ledge of Rococo architecture, we see acrobats (Puss turning his tricks) and Pierrots (the master in disguise), not to mention “players in the square” (68), ballad singers and

harlequins. Along the way we are also invited to join a “feast” (80) on a pig’s trotter, and in the end we can watch and applaud, along with the undertaker and his mutes, a bawdy “spectacle” (83). All this is contained in one picaresque romp with the trusty rogue, rake and gambler Signor Furioso alternatively known as ‘Il Famed Dottore’ alternatively known as the ubiquitous Puss’s master.

The carnivalesque element in all these genres and forms creates an atmosphere far removed from the gothic gloom and pallor that hangs over most of *The Bloody Chamber*. The successive disguises of Puss’s master are not designed to obscure his identity - as the mask of Bluebeard was his - rather, they are expressions of ‘gay relativity’ designed to reveal the eternally shifting nature of identity. The disguise he adopts of the doctor, for instance, recalls Rabelais’ doctor in disguise from the prologue to the fourth book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and fulfils the same function as the ‘Gay Physician’ described by Bakhtin, who espouses the healing virtues of laughter. This physician, as Bakhtin argues, is not the narrow-minded doctor of later literature, nor, I would add, is he the satanically empowered Gothic doctor, who provides the model for Carter’s earlier Dr. Hoffman; on the contrary, he:

is essentially connected with the struggle of life and death in the human body and has a special relation to childbirth and the throes of death. He participates in death and procreation. He is not concerned with a completed and closed body but with the one that is born, which is in the stage of becoming.<sup>21</sup>

This is signalled in Carter’s tale by the fact that the Master, when dressed as the Doctor, participates in an outrageous scene in which he copulates with the Missus, next to the corpse of the just dead Signor Panteleone. Even in the presence of death, this scene implies, there is fertility and renewal.

Such daring juxtaposition of the dead and alive, the old and new, the high and low, the serious and the profane, is a common feature of Carter’s texts. Her aim here, as Bakhtin claimed Rabelais’ was, is to subvert all “narrow-minded seriousness”. “These images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook”.<sup>22</sup> Hence in ‘Puss in Boots’ we

see the “pious” who “trot to church” set opposite the “ungodly” who go “rolling home”, we find the girl reading her prayer book receiving scandalous letters of love, and we see the convent mentioned in the same sentence as the brothel. In all cases the latter subvert the former and the unholy mesalliance is productive of liberating laughter; laughter that undermines the ‘monolithic’ views of orthodoxy and opens the door to more flexible ‘alternative’ views. When the lady laughs to see the absurd figure of a booted cat, she “draws her veil aside” and it is as if “an alabaster lamp has been lit”. When the veil comes down “so cold it is, and dark again” (71). Laughter has the power to unlock shutters and to lift veils. It has the power to free the entrapped and open the enclosed, and ultimately it has the power to liberate the young lady from the sere cold grip of the old man.

The liberating power of laughter and the celebration of pleasure become more consistent themes in Carter’s later work. It is a philosophy that she expounds directly in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, and an attitude that is apparent throughout *Wise Children. Nights at the Circus* can be regarded, in this context, as a transitional work, for it seems to contain an equal balance or admixture of what I have been calling Hoffmann’s Grotesque and the Rabelaisian. The episode at Madame Schreck’s, for instance, with its dungeons, its freaks and its mouthless coach driver (Toussaint), reflects an earlier period of Carter’s writing when Hoffmannesque gloom and Sadeian ghastliness were the dominant fictional mode. The clowning of the clowns, the monkeying of the monkeys, and the sheer ebullience of Fevvers, conversely, all point forwards to her more celebratory writings of the future that subvert the sage and sensible with a greater lightness of touch, pitting, as Salman Rushdie expresses it at the beginning of *The Satanic Verses*, “levity against gravity”.<sup>23</sup> This mixing of styles is nicely illustrated by the contrasting uses of the Sleeping Beauty figure, discussed in the previous chapter. The female freak who never wakes up, I would argue, would not be out of place in any of the tales of *The Bloody Chamber* bar ‘Puss in Boots’, whilst the sleeping Walser, conversely, would be more at home in the comic, cross-dressed world of *Wise Children*.

By the time of *Wise Children*, then, the elements of the Schreck-Hoffmann-Gothic have faded back into the dark night from whence they came. Carter no longer uses

imagery to express the fearful alienation characteristic of the Gothic as a genre, but the 'joyful relativity' characteristic of the comic. That is not to say that the images used in *Wise Children* are necessarily different from those employed in previous texts, however; on the contrary, they are strikingly similar. Rather, it is the way the imagery is used that has changed. We still have the image of the mask, only now it is no longer a symbol of the unknowable and unknown, but becomes, explicitly, the mask of 'the commedia' "the comic mask, the tragic mask, one mouth turned up at the ends, the other down" (58). Similarly, we still have the figure of the puppeteer, only now the puppeteer is no longer the demonic monster in the same cast as Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop*, but the jovial Peregrine who acts out of a sense of abundant joy rather than twisted megalomania. "He liked to pull the strings and see the puppets move" says Dora. "You might think, if you heard him say that, he was a cold-hearted bugger but cold-hearted, never! He was the heart and soul of mirth."<sup>24</sup> Even the image of the fearful automaton, the mechanical double that shadowed Beauty in 'The Tiger's Bride' is no longer a nightmare derived from Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' but, in Genghis Khan's ex-wife, becomes a comic figure in a marriage-swap plot. "I saw my double" says Dora "I saw it was a replica. A hand made custom built replica" (155), but she does not, as have many Gothic heroines before her, recoil in terror at the doppelgänger; instead she thinks, pitying, "[f]ancy taking so much trouble over a man" (156).

Part of the change in approach here derives from the fact that Carter's characters have seen through the devices that kept them in thrall. When Nora and Dora see themselves depicted as Puppets, for instance, in a portrait by Cecil Beaton, they are not intimidated or alienated as a Melanie or a Beauty might have been, but mocking and ironic: "[h]e'd done us up as painted dolls, rouged spots on our cheeks and terrible artificial grins, sitting on the floor in frills with our legs at angles, as if they were made of wood. Rich men's playthings. Very subtle. His nanny used to hold the flash, you know" (187). They are sufficiently wise children to see straight through the inscription, and turn it into an example of the transparency of the patriarch. Laughter, in this context, becomes a

far more powerful weapon than terror, and though the image is the same - though, indeed, the meaning of the image is the same because it still signals the power that men may have over women - it is no longer a threat, but somehow pathetic. The masculine desire for control is not seen as something demonic and terrifying, but as a product of inadequacy and immaturity, equivalent to a puerile reliance upon nanny to hold the flash.

There are several more examples of such transposed images in *Wise Children*. Saskia enacts a dislocation of the swan that so terrorised Melanie and Leda by cooking it and devouring it, so that it becomes "violated" rather than the violator (99); and the eerie fairy tale characters, so central to *The Bloody Chamber*, become larger than life figures in a pantomime. In all cases the images recur with none of the gothic weight that they held in previous works, and become entirely explicable, de-mystified, and even laughable. Fevver's ability to fly was, in *Nights at the Circus*, a matter of debate and ambiguity, creating the uneasy sensation that Todorov would describe as *fantastic* since it causes the reader (and Walser) to hesitate between rational explanation and an acceptance of the marvellous.<sup>25</sup> In *Wise Children*, however, there is no such hesitation, since Dora Chance makes a point of saying that the only time she ever flew "was in a harness at the end of a steel cable, on the set of *The Dream*, in Hollywood, USA" (112). In *Wise Children*, we might say, the machinery and artifice are laid bare for all to see, and the characters depicted are more or less in control of the scenery. They know how the set-scenarios work, they've read the right books, and they know how to manipulate them to their own advantage. Even in cases where it seems as if the character is not in control; when Nora is summoned to the office of Genghis Khan, for instance, and is told that she has been selected to fulfil a special fate, all turns out well in the end. Nora refuses, Genghis tries to have his way regardless, Nora tries to get her gun out of her bag, and just as things are about to turn nasty, the gun goes off inside the bag, and Genghis breaks down, grovelling, and asks - with tremendous comic bathos - "[w]ell, if you won't, how about your sister?" (146). In a very similar scene in *Nights at the Circus* Christian Rosenkreuz, also a balding patriarch, also obsessed and revolted by the 'orrible 'ole,<sup>26</sup> summons Fevvers to his office to tell her that she has been "feathered out for a special fate" (39). In this case,

however, there is no final bathetic anti-climax, and Fevvers only just manages to escape by leaping from a nearby window. In structure, at least, and in the negotiation of power relations the two scenes are nearly identical. The difference between them, however, is that whilst Rosenkreuz is a dark and mystical hero who wishes to sacrifice Fevvers to his arcane philosophy, Genghis Khan is a comedy figure, who wishes Nora to bear his child because his mother's name was Leonora. Whereas there is a moment of real terror, real uncertainty, when we see the glint of Rosenkreuz's blade, there is never any doubt that all will turn out well for Nora, because she, as a wise child, has understood and seen through the mechanics of power. As Dora says a few pages later: "I recognised for what it was the game that Nora and I had played out once before as Romance" (149), and it is this recognition, this 'knowingness', that is their antidote to oppression.

In *Wise Children*, in other words, the carnivalesque, laughter, hilarity, are used to demystify power rather than, rather than to emphasise the helplessness of 'the people' in the face of it. It is this feature more than any other that serves to identify the distinctive influence of Bakhtin upon Carter. The ordinary folk (and their low, vernacular literatures) are no longer intimidated by what Bakhtin would call the 'monolithically serious', they are gloriously and riotously scornful of it. Chances mock Hazards, folktales mock Shakespeare, South London mocks North London and Brighton Pier mocks the Theatre with a big 'T'.

There is, however, a considerable body of criticism developing in response to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque that Carter is evidently aware of. More specifically, criticism has developed in response to the symbolic opposition Bakhtin constructs between high and low. Firstly it is observed that the carnival celebrations are permitted, even encouraged, by the authorities, in order to contain the subversive energies of the people within ritual parentheses. As Terry Eagleton notes, using an appropriately Shakespearean allusion, "there is no slander in an allowed fool".<sup>27</sup> Secondly, it is pointed out that included in the definition of carnival is the notion that it must stop. It cannot, therefore, be truly revolutionary, since - when day breaks, or the feast ends - the status quo will reassert itself more secure than before. If Angela Carter celebrates the low and illegitimate forms in



*Wise Children*, then, she could be accused of celebrating that 'low' life at the expense of condoning the 'high' life. If, furthermore, she does it within the 'licensed' period of the carnivalesque it could be argued that she is accepting the fact that the ascendancy of the illegitimate can only be temporary and that, when the carnival is over, the dominant will once more re-establish its supremacy.

In defence of Carter, I will advance two arguments. Firstly, I will attempt to show that Carter does not construct any simplistic binary between high and low; and secondly I will suggest that there are many ways in which the carnivalesque can be employed, and that Carter, having recognised its dangers and pitfalls, offers us a different form of carnival than that described by Eagleton. To start with, Carter does not represent the subversion of the 'high' by the 'low' in a manner that will allow the 'high' or the 'low' to settle back into binaristic opposition after the carnival is over, but problematises and inter-weaves that which is supposedly high with that which is supposedly low, until the polarity of the relation disappears into a more general recognition of hybridity. Drawing parallels between the folk tale and Shakespearean drama, for instance, as Carter does by equating *Othello* with 'Bluebeard' or *King Lear* with 'Love Like Salt', is not meant to set a bawdy folk culture in opposition to Shakespeare, but to show that a bawdy folk culture is integral to Shakespeare.<sup>28</sup> It is not meant to highlight the opposition between Shakespeare's plays and the folk tale but to show that Shakespeare is not the inviolable, seamless cultural monolith that Melchior wants him to be. Similarly, the presence of Nora and Dora within the Hazard dynasty, "that element of *chance* with Ranulph" (14, my emphasis), does not construct any crude binary between legitimate and illegitimate, nor is it simply a plea by the illegitimate to be recognised. It is meant to show that ultimately nothing is fully 'legitimate': Melchior Hazard is as illegitimate as his bastard children, and Shakespeare is as illegitimate as the folk tale. Even as "the 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status," as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White observe, it discovers that it is, at once "dependant on that low other" because "the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticised constituent of its own fantasy life."<sup>29</sup> In other words, there is no such thing as a pure high-culture that can set itself apart from a low.

Carter's carnival does not tip the status quo on its head for a set period of time only to right it again, but tips it on its head in order to derange it permanently; suggesting that the status-quo is as illegitimate as anything that it attempts to exclude, thus introducing a random, chaotic element that undoes all possibility of binarism.

Secondly, Carter can be defended against the critiques of the carnivalesque on the basis that she herself is aware of its potential shortfalls, and strives to distance herself from them in her fiction. Whilst, as I have argued, she uses carnival for the subversion of 'monological' discourses it is also important to stress that she is not unaware of its capacity to be exploited for other ends, and takes steps to parody the reactionary forms that carnival may take. Once again, as in *Nights at the Circus*, she is stealing that which she finds useful in the genre whilst being careful to maintain a critical distance from other aspects of it. She uses the fiction of Rabelais and the theory of Bakhtin for the subversive, excessive voice it allows her to adopt, but at the same time, like Stallybrass and White, she is "building upon the work of Bakhtin" in order to "avoid the limitations".<sup>30</sup>

As Kate Webb has observed in her analysis of *Wise Children*, the single character that represents carnival most consistently is Peregrine - and Peregrine Hazard, importantly, is not only part of the legitimate side of the family, but is male.<sup>31</sup> In creating Perry, then, Carter is not only recognising that carnival can be, and often is, beneficial to the legitimated culture, but also that it tends to prove inhospitable, even hostile, to women. As Jane Miller argues, in her analysis of the carnivalesque, seductive though Bakhtin's thought may be for feminism, the feminist who wishes to use Bakhtin must always be aware that "within [his] theoretical work itself women's voices remain subsumed within male ones, spoken for, unmarked, inaudible."<sup>32</sup> Whilst it is true, as Miller suggests, that "women's recent discovery, or recovery, of their marginality [through Bakhtin's theory] has increased feminism's critical scope and its leverage", it is also important to recognise that "men can seem to have appropriated the management of misrule as well as the imposition of order, so that women's voicing of their objections may get as niggardly a look-in as their assertions of what is worth knowing."<sup>33</sup> Mary S.

Pollock, in her 'exegesis' of Bakhtin, offers a similar argument. Several of Bakhtin's ideas, she notes, have been readily enlisted in support of the feminist cause. Three in particular are mentioned; first, his "concept of the interindividuality of discourse"; second, "his emphasis on change within language as within the whole of life"; and third, "his valuation of otherness in the creative life".<sup>34</sup> All three of these ideas provide convenient theoretical tools with which to unsettle the patriarchal imposition of a single voice and imply that marginalised voices, such as women's voices, can have an equal claim to validity. The difficulty here, however, is that Bakhtin, in actual practice, neglects to mention women. He fails to follow through the obvious implications of his own theories and ignores the possibility that there may be *gendered* differences in the polyphony of languages that constitute discourse. "As a woman," says Pollock, "I must continually calculate the parallax, and continually insert myself into a text where I am absent, if his work is to be of real use for me."<sup>35</sup>

This is not to say that women do not play a significant role in Rabelais' work and Bakhtin's theory. In a key passage of *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin even offers a defence of Rabelais' representation of women. He notes that, at the time *Gargantua and Pantagruel* was being written, a *querelle des femmes* was raging in which two opposing lines of thought concerning the nature of women were being debated - the 'Platonic line' that idealised women and the 'Gallic line' that debased them. Even the most cursory reading of Rabelais will suffice to show that he does not follow the former line of thought. His women are undoubtedly fleshly monsters of the Gallic tradition. But Bakhtin's defence of Rabelais rests on the claim that Rabelais belongs to the popular strain of the Gallic tradition that treats women with ambivalence rather than the ascetic strain that treats them with hostility. Rabelaisian women "cannot be taken out of the general pattern of images," says Bakhtin "for in this pattern woman-hood performs the functions of debasement and at the same time of renewal of life."<sup>36</sup> Such ambivalence, claims Bakhtin, results in the development of the theme of cuckoldry. For the woman, in making a cuckold of her husband, and enjoying the pleasures offered by a younger man, is both destroying and renewing. She is abandoning the old and heralding in the new. In so doing, as Bakhtin

observes, she is appropriating what, in 'high' drama, remains the archetypal image of male succession, and giving it a female personification. In killing the king and stealing his throne, she is, of course, the comic Gallic answer to Oedipus.

Such a model for women is inevitably attractive for writers like Carter, and indeed, many of her characters do exploit the image of the Gallic woman. They lust, desire, romp and rut, and do all that Panurge is told a woman will do; namely - cuckold, beat and rob.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, however, Carter must qualify the Rabelaisian representation of women, for it is clear, as Webb, Miller and Pollock all argue, that in Rabelais' text the female, however subversive, is only subversive in and for a masculine order. She is still only an object that is represented and not an active subject, for though she may, as a function of the narrative, take the place of the male Oedipus, the subversion that this Oedipus enacts is of a male patriarch, and is designed to allow the new male patriarch, the new lover and master, to step into his shoes. In Bakhtin's critical terms, furthermore, even though the female earthy-debased principle may be the grounds on which the previous monological literary tradition is subverted it is (if we are to judge by Bakhtin's total neglect of the feminine voice) in the long run only to allow a masculine literary model to take its place. Women, therefore, may seem to be active agents in the narrative - they may speak in the text - but their function, in the end, is to support the orders, both social and literary, of men. As Wayne C. Booth points out, "just as the original *querelle des femmes* was conducted largely by men, accusers and champions [Bakhtin's] exoneration of carnival laughter is conducted by and for men, ignoring or playing down the evidence that the book itself largely excludes women."<sup>38</sup> Even in Rabelais' supposedly equal utopian order of the Abbey of Thélème, Booth observes, the women are constructed as objects for male satisfaction and whilst, when a man leaves, he may take with him a woman of his choosing, the woman is not free to do the same.<sup>39</sup> When the monk and Gargantua first discuss the implementation of the order, furthermore, it is a question of what they should 'do' with the women ("if a woman is neither fair nor good, what can you do with her?"),<sup>40</sup> whilst there is never any question as to what should be done to the men. Clearly men are the 'doers' in this scenario whilst women are the 'done to'. So, Booth concludes:

[t]he truth is that nowhere in Rabelais does one find any hint of an effort to imagine any woman's point of view or to incorporate women into a dialogue. And nowhere in Bakhtin does one discover any suggestion that he sees the importance of this kind of monologue, not even when he discusses Rabelais' attitude to women.<sup>41</sup>

It is for this reason, perhaps - the need for critical distance from Bakhtin's theory - that Carter makes Perry the focus of the carnivalesque in *Wise Children*, and then proceeds to criticise it in his person. When Dora voices her reservations about carnival at the end of the novel, "you listen to the news, that'll take the smile off your face", it is significant that Perry is not listening: "News? What news?" (222) he says, revealing, in his carnivalesque outlook, a certain blindness to, a certain ignorance of, the force of social and historical events. Attractive though carnival may be, nice though a brief dalliance with Uncle Perry might appear, there comes a time when his larger than life character and all it represents must be left behind. There are limits to carnival, Carter is saying, and if Nora and Dora, on the first orgiastic night, inadvertently cause the Hazard residence, seat of the dynasty, to burn to the ground, Dora and Perry, in the final revel refrain from 'fucking' the house down (220). "There are limits to the power of laughter" says Dora "and though I may hint at them from time to time, I do not propose to step over them ... The carnival's got to stop sometime" (220-222). In saying this she echoes a statement made by her creator in interview: "[t]he carnival has to stop" Carter told Lorna Sage. "The whole point about the Feast of Fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped."<sup>42</sup>

Given these limits it is significant that the carnivalesque always appears, in *Wise Children*, as a set or a stage. "Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon", "a carnival, a bedroom, a feast" (58) are all present, but Carter maintains a careful critical distance from them by putting them in a toy theatre given to Nora and Dora by Perry. Perhaps this is in preparation for the grand toy theatre that is to be the Hollywood set of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, replete with real conkers and real newts, but still nothing more than an overgrown stage. It is on this later set (or more accurately this 'set up') that Carter reveals her further reservations about the carnivalesque; for this wood, this entire dream, is

“custom made”, or quite literally, made for custom. “I felt we were marooned in Wonderland and victims of a plot” says Dora:

I know full well who plotted it. Not Melchior. Not Peregrine. Not even Genghis Khan. My German teacher was keen to ascribe everything to a cash nexus but I didn't need him to tell me what was going on.

The love of Mammon lay behind it all. (142)

The aim of this carnival, in other words, is not to achieve community or to overcome boundaries, as a reader of Bakhtin might have expected, but to make capital. The fairy tale wood isn't necessarily a place where one is set free to find oneself - it can be a place where one is kidnapped and put to work for hard cash. “We ourselves weren't so much part of the process as pieces of the product” observes Dora. “They laid us back in chrome recliners and sprayed us with paint, as if we were a motor chassis... We felt we had been dislocated. Or, as if we, too, had surrendered to the dream but did not know for sure who dreamed us” (140).

In recognising this commercial function of carnival Carter is avoiding a wholesale endorsement of it. Carnival, she says in no uncertain terms, can be used to support the concerns, fiscal and political, of the dominant order, and should be regarded, on this basis, with a degree of suspicion and proper wise-child cynicism. It is this cynicism that Bakhtin's own work noticeably lacks, and which makes it appear, at certain points, somewhat naive and idealistic.

Having established the shortfalls and political motivations of carnival, however, Carter can then proceed to recuperate and reappropriate some of the devices of the carnivalesque for her own ends. She becomes acquainted with the counterfeit carnival (to misquote Auden) but does so only in order to appropriate its more anarchic potential.<sup>43</sup> *This* wood, *this* entire dream may be custom-made; but there are other dreams to be had. The wind in this forest may be generated by a wind machine, but the winds of change that blow throughout *Wise Children* are, it seems, quite real. “There goes the wind, again” notes Dora at the beginning of the novel. “Crash.... What a wind! Whooping and banging all along the street, the kind of wind that blows everything topsy-turvy”. This is a wind that brings disorder and transformation in its wake. Like the near-identical laughter-wind

that began to blow everything awry at the end of *Nights at the Circus* (295), this wind heralds the cataclysmic ending of *Wise Children*:

They let the wind in when they opened the door. The same amazing wind that whipped up the leaves and Dora Chance's weary corpuscles this morning.... Laughter like sweet thunder blew on the wind in front of him and every head turned to see whom it might be, arriving late, in such a genial tempest.

Who else could it have been? (206)

It is Perry, of course - covered in butterflies. And if the carnivalesque, in the form of Perry, isn't welcome *all* the time, then this is not always the case. For when Perry arrives for the grand finale the wind he brings with him is a refreshing wind that promises to stir up the old Hazard bones - not fix them in their ways. As Stallybrass and White point out, carnival has no one meaning independent of context. It can be used either for subversive effect or for reactionary ends, but in itself is neither:

It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves a false essentialising of carnivalesque transgression. The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*.<sup>44</sup>

Stallybrass and White are, of course, talking about carnival as an event, whereas Carter is using the idea of carnival as a literary tool. Both carnival as event, and carnival as literary genre, however, represent, in their respective mediums, sites of struggle that can become either reactionary or revolutionary. Carter imposes no definitive character upon carnival - in the hands of Genghis Khan it becomes an agent of capitalism, in the hands of Dora Chance it becomes a subversive weapon. It is the usage it is put to, in both cases, that will determine its impact. "Context", as Carter puts it more succinctly in the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, "changes everything".<sup>45</sup> Here Carter is referring specifically to the usage of fairy tale, but fairy tale, as I have already suggested, is one of the literary genres that Carter uses to investigate ideas of the carnivalesque. Like the

carnival the fairy tale takes place in a space set apart for play, and both can have a reactive form or a subversive form depending upon its application. In its reactive form fairy tale, like carnival, offers a limited playful space in which the marginalised and oppressed can achieve temporary ascendancy before the dominant hierarchy reasserts itself. In its subversive form the playful space is offered as a vision of how society could be if it was restructured along different lines. In the former instance both the fairy tale and the carnival achieve a closure in which the balance of power is as it was when the tale began, and in the latter instance they can both escape the ritual parentheses and either refuse closure, or achieve a closure that represents an alternative social order or 'strange harmony'.

The statement, repeated often enough to stand as a motif for *Wise Children*: "hope for the best, expect the worst", can, I think, be used to reflect these feelings about the fairy tale carnivalesque. Carter knows that it is often a tool used to support the dominant order, but she will go on using it, because she hopes that the more radical aspects of carnival will have some impact. She knows that the carnival must stop. She knows that the utopian hopes that exist within the parameters of carnival may never be actualised but, simultaneously, she is aware that the very act of hoping can be the beginning of an effective critique. To project a better society, within the license of carnival, does not necessarily mean that you expect that ideal society to come about; but it may be a means of showing, by contrast, how inadequate the existent society is. As Paul Ricoeur observes:

the development of new, alternative perspectives defines utopia's most basic function. May we not say ... that imagination itself - through its utopian function - has a constitutive role in helping us to rethink the nature of our social life?... Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization 'nowhere' work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?<sup>46</sup>

Michael Gardiner uses this idea of Ricoeur's to defend Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. His defence rests on the presumption that Bakhtin uses carnival as a form of 'critical utopia', rather than a 'totalising blueprint' for social change.<sup>47</sup> This same defence, I believe, can be extended to Carter's use of the carnivalesque. There are many forms that carnival can take, and whilst she rejects carnival as a way to live one's life (this



would be an escapist carnival indeed, guaranteed to keep its subjects in a state of permanent delusion and inaction) she embraces the idea of carnival as a critical tool. It's not life, and it must end, but this does not mean that, in itself, the carnival is ineffective, and nor does it mean, as Warner suggests, that Carter is staging a "kind of retreat" from the carnivalesque.<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, in perceiving the limits of laughter, and in realising that we must at some point, cross the boundary from laughter to real life, Carter is showing an awareness of the connection between laughter and life, and recognising that if the former is to have real value, then it must have some bearing on the latter.

### ✱ Conclusion

To sum up: I have shown how Carter's general outlook, between *The Bloody Chamber* and *Wise Children*, changes from one that dwells upon the gothic and mysterious, to one that is celebratory and comic - I have further argued that two of the principal genres that make up her writing, carnival and fairy tale, illustrate this change. Her use of the carnivalesque changes from one that employs the Romantic grotesque to one that employs the Renaissance grotesque, and the fairy tale changes from one that owes its primary allegiance to literary fantasists such as Hoffmann, to one that returns to the roots of oral narrative and attempts to employ the voices of the original tale tellers. Hoffmann, de Sade, Poe and Blake, even Perrault and Grimm, bastions of the literary fairy tale, now yield pride of place to the wandering journeyman and the itinerant fiddler, whose intentions are not to plumb the depths of the human psyche, but to entertain and hopefully, to divert.

This schematisation, however, is not neat and definitive, but, like the grotesque body itself, has holes, flaws, and (like Estella) pins loose in its hair. Parts of *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* hark back to the Hoffmannesque Gothic of *The Bloody Chamber* and some scenes in *The Bloody Chamber* set a precedent for the more celebratory elements of *Wise Children*. Just as 'Puss in Boots' helped us to mark the transition undergone in Carter's work, therefore, so too can it help to identify the points of

continuity. In her essay 'Running With the Tigers' Margaret Atwood suggests that 'Puss in Boots' is only a "brief entr'acte" in *The Bloody Chamber*, a "comic coda" that serves as a relief from the "generally more Baroque" nature of the other tales.<sup>49</sup> Whilst this is in part true, I think it would be a mistake to suggest, as Atwood is in danger of doing, that 'Puss in Boots' is not also integral to the project of *The Bloody Chamber*. Not only does 'Puss' share several key features with the other tales, such as its use of anthropomorphism and the Beauty/Beast motif, it also complements the rest of the collection thematically, showing how an unholy alliance of opposites, based on affinity rather than 'nature', can result in the toppling of a repressive and inflexible order. Though, as I have been arguing, 'Puss in Boots' represents the Rabelaisian as opposed to the Hoffmannesque grotesque, then, it is important to recall that, different though they may be in terms of style, both are still modes of the carnivalesque. Just as, in Bakhtin's words, the Renaissance Grotesque is "opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook",<sup>50</sup> the Romantic Grotesque is:

[t]o a certain degree ... a reaction against the elements of classicism which characterised the self-importance of the Enlightenment. It was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed...<sup>51</sup>

Both modes, then, are formed in opposition to some form of dominant, totalising ideology, both are characterised by their subversive relation to the norm. What has remained constant in Angela Carter's work, therefore, is the hunt for a subversive medium in fairy tale and a willingness to exploit its vernacular, anti-authoritarian, potential.

*Wise Children* is a 'left-handed' novel. It deals with outsiders, 'the left-hand line', and ambiguous states. Most stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, conversely, are sinister - dealing, once more, with the not-quite-known, the shady, the outside, the *unheimliche*. These two terms, left-handed and sinister, express the distinction and conflation I have been trying to draw well; for whilst left-handed and sinister imply rather different approaches, one suggesting a quirky comic irregularity, the other a slightly frightening

insecurity, they both mean, etymologically the same thing. They approach reality from the left hand side, offering an alternative path.

<sup>1</sup>Carter, afterword, Fireworks, 122.

<sup>2</sup>Marina Warner, introduction, in Angela Carter, ed., The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales (London: Virago, 1992) xi.

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin, 102.

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin, 102.

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin, 84-5.

<sup>6</sup>Benjamin, 84.

<sup>7</sup>For Carter's review of Darnton's book see Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings, ed. Jenny Uglow, The Collected Angela Carter (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997) 473-5. The review was first published in New Society in 1984. She also discusses Darnton's work in 'Irish Folk Tales, Arab Folktales,' Shaking a Leg, 476-8.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Darnton, 'Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose,' The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History (London: Penguin, 1984) 9.

<sup>9</sup>Darnton, 17-18.

<sup>10</sup>Darnton, 53.

<sup>11</sup>Darnton, 56.

<sup>12</sup>This was relayed by Lorna Sage at her keynote lecture for the 'Fireworks' conference on Angela Carter, University of York, 1994.

<sup>13</sup>It is unlikely that Carter would have come into contact with theories of the carnivalesque that were influenced directly by Bakhtin during her studies of the Medieval period at Bristol University. She completed her degree in 1965, the same year that Rabelais and His World was first published in English.

<sup>14</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 39.

<sup>15</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 39.

<sup>16</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 38.

<sup>17</sup>Bakhtin argues that Hoffmann "strongly influenced the development of the new grotesque in the next period of world literature", Rabelais, 37; and Carter notes that she'd "always been fond of Poe and Hoffmann - Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious." Afterword, Fireworks, 121.

<sup>18</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 39.

<sup>19</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 40.

<sup>20</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 40.

<sup>21</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 179. For the doctor as mock prescriber see also 161. Rabelais' doctor in disguise is, of course, a real doctor whose uniform, in a Sartrean fashion, serves to obscure his nonofficial identity. See Gargantua and Pantagruel, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1955) 436.

<sup>22</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 3.

<sup>23</sup>Rushdie, Satanic Verses, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Carter, Wise Children, 92. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be included in the text.

- <sup>25</sup>Todorov, 41-4.
- <sup>26</sup>Genghis Khan reveals this obsession by continuously feeding a carnivorous plant that looks like a 'rotting pudenda'.
- <sup>27</sup>Eagleton, Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism (London: NLB, 1981) 148.
- <sup>28</sup>Ranulph may be re-enacting the crime of Othello by killing his wife and her lover, but Carter's use of a phrase borrowed from 'The Bloody Chamber' 'lamb to the slaughter' (15) reminds us that Othello, the Shakespearean hero, is not that far removed from Bluebeard, the fairy tale monster. Similarly, the novel's central theme, illegitimacy, owes as much to the folk tale as it does to Edmund's cry in Lear: "Now, gods, stand up for bastards" because it is summed up in Gorgeous George's joke, 'E's not your father', which, in turn, is a reworking of a Hillbilly folk tale 'Father and Mother Both 'Fast'' later included in Carter's Second Virago book of Fairy Tales (1992).
- <sup>29</sup>Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986) 5.
- <sup>30</sup>Stallybrass and White, 19.
- <sup>31</sup>Kate Webb, 'Seriously Funny: Wise Children,' in Sage, Flesh and the Mirror, 301-2.
- <sup>32</sup>Miller, Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture (London: Virago, 1990) 149.
- <sup>33</sup>Miller, 138.
- <sup>34</sup>Mary S. Pollock, 'What is Left Out: Bakhtin, Feminism and the Culture of Boundaries,' in David Shepherd, ed., Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference, Critical Studies 3.2 and 4.1\2 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993) 232-3.
- <sup>35</sup>Pollock, 232.
- <sup>36</sup>For this discussion of women see Bakhtin, Rabelais, 239-244. The quotation is on p. 240.
- <sup>37</sup>Rabelais, 325.
- <sup>38</sup>Booth, 'Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,' Critical Inquiry 9 (1982) 63.
- <sup>39</sup>Booth, 65.
- <sup>40</sup>Rabelais, 150.
- <sup>41</sup>Booth, 65-6.
- <sup>42</sup>Quoted by Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag,' in Sage, Flesh and the Mirror, 254.
- <sup>43</sup>W. H. Auden, 'Atlantis,' Selected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1979) 117.
- <sup>44</sup>Stallybrass and White, 14. The emphasis is not mine.
- <sup>45</sup>Carter, introduction, The Virago Book of Fairy Tales, xv.
- <sup>46</sup>Ricoeur, Lectures in Ideology and Utopia, ed. G. Taylor (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986) 16.
- <sup>47</sup>Gardiner, 'Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique,' in Shepherd, 22.
- <sup>48</sup>Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde and Double Drag,' 254.
- <sup>49</sup>Atwood, 'Running with the Tigers,' 127 & 122.
- <sup>50</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 3.

<sup>51</sup>Bakhtin, Rabelais, 37.

BREAKING THE BOUNDS OF FAIRY TALE:  
*HAROON AND THE SEA OF STORIES*



*Jacobites must speak in children's rhymes,  
As preachers do in Parables, sometimes.*

Thomas Pynchon.<sup>1</sup>

*[T]he thing that I've taken most from [India], I think, apart from the fairy tale tradition  
... is oral narration.*

Salman Rushdie.



Salman Rushdie's overt statements concerning fairy tale, made in the context of interviews or non-fictional pieces of writing, suggest a fairly strict definition of the genre. In the above quotation, for instance, taken from a conversation with Günter Grass broadcast on *Channel 4* television, it seems as if Rushdie draws a sharp distinction between Indian 'oral narration' and 'the fairy tale tradition'.<sup>2</sup> One form exists only in the moment of telling, the other, whilst it has its roots in the spoken narrative, has attained a certain degree of written fixity and become a literary medium. One exists only as memory, the other exists as manuscript. In Rushdie's fictional work, however, distinctions such as this are not made with the same degree of classificatory rigour. In *Midnight's Children*, for instance, as will be apparent in the next chapter, Rushdie uses the *Arabian Nights* ambiguously as both a written collection of fairy tales and as a repository of oral devices and techniques. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, similarly, the Story Sea represents both the collective existence of all the fairy tales of the world and the collective existence of all the oral narratives of the world. This lack of precision in his fictional approach to fairy tale

allows us to draw a contrast between Rushdie's use of the genre and Angela Carter's. Carter, as we have seen, has a detailed knowledge of folklore and folklore studies, and uses the genre of fairy tale to fulfil a very specific function in her writing. Rushdie, on the other hand, although he may have an equivalent degree of knowledge concerning folklore, often chooses to use the term with less precision to signify 'storytelling' in general. As I will argue, this is by no means a criticism of Rushdie. In fact, it testifies to one of his great strengths as a writer - his refusal to make strict, impermeable categorical distinctions, and his willingness to undermine rigid classificatory boundaries. It does however offer difficulties to the analyst of Rushdie's work because it makes it very hard to establish general patterns in his writing. The best way to surmount these difficulties, I have found, is to resist the inclination to *impose* order and system upon Rushdie's use of the genre and be true to his original intentions. This chapter therefore will focus upon Salman Rushdie's unwillingness to treat fairy tale as a distinct and definable genre, and will look at some of the reasons behind his choice to blur the boundaries between tales of different cultures and tales of different kinds. The text I have chosen to use in this exploration is the work in which Rushdie uses fairy tale most explicitly, his short fantasy, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990).

This discussion will connect with the examination of Carter's use of fairy tale at several points, and will enable a more thorough analysis of the issues investigated in the previous chapters. As I have suggested, the fact that Carter uses the term specifically, and Rushdie uses it vaguely, marks a difference between them. Paradoxically, however, Rushdie's imprecision in his approach to fairy tale also signals a similarity between his approach and Carter's. Like her, he is attempting to challenge strict and restrictive conceptions of the genre by forcing the reader to revise and question narrow preconceptions of it.



## ✿ Fairy Tale Politics

Since *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is Rushdie's first publication after the imposition of the *fatwa* it is unsurprising that the emphasis on storytelling has a marked biographical character. Like Farid ud-Din Attar, the writer of one of the sources Rushdie uses in *Haroun*, he has "aroused the anger and stirred up the persecuting spirit of a certain orthodox theologian", had his work burned, been denounced "as a heretic deserving of death", and finally "driven into banishment".<sup>3</sup> Like Attar, then, he is replying to his detractors fictionally, using *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as Attar used *The Conference of the Birds*, to stage a vindication of storytelling, reconfirming its role and value in the face of an extreme and potentially brutal form of censorship.<sup>4</sup>

The nature of the persecution experienced by Attar in the twelfth century and the persecution experienced by Rushdie are, of course, of a different order. Attar was persecuted because, as a Sufi, he was expounding a doctrine thought to be heretical by the Persian authorities, Rushdie is being persecuted because of his secular beliefs, and because of his overt attack upon Islamic fundamentalism. The persecution of Attar, moreover, was a local affair, involving a small sect within Islam; the trials of Rushdie, in contrast, have attained global significance and have brought relations between the Islamic nations and the west into sharp relief. Despite these differences, however, there are surprising parallels between the two cases that illuminate the issues at stake in both. Both writers are being persecuted for expressing, through literature, ideas considered heretical by orthodox Islam, and both are using literature as a medium through which to reply to (and resist) that persecution. Both, furthermore, are insisting, in the face of deep suspicion of literary representation, that literature has an important role to play in society because it offers a non-didactic means of exploring and communicating ideas. Attar's text makes this last point very forcefully. In presenting the Hoopoe, the bird that leads all the other birds to the mountain of Kaf, as an eloquent and persuasive storyteller, Attar is implicitly suggesting that storytelling can, contrary to orthodox belief, play a valid role in a religious system. In the first place, it has persuasive power, since it is storytelling that enables the

hoopoe to motivate and encourage his reluctant followers on their quest; in the second, unlike doctrinal teaching, storytelling provides a means of maintaining the 'mystery' of the faith, allowing for a degree of obscurity and ambiguity in the message. "This obscurity is certainly, in part at least, intentional", as Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis argue: "the reader is being asked to look at some problem in an unfamiliar way, and logic is often deliberately flouted so that we are, as it were, teased or goaded - rather than logically led - into understanding."<sup>5</sup>

Rushdie, I would suggest, borrows from Attar's tale, having a hoopoe lead Haroun and his father on their quest, in order to exploit these very ideas about storytelling. Like Attar, he is attempting to show that storytelling still has an important role to play in society, not only because it is a persuasive and eloquent way of communicating ideas, but also because storytelling leaves the reader free to make up his or her own mind. Rushdie's aim in this is, of course, quite different to Attar's. Attar incorporates obscurity into his poetry in order to force the reader to undergo a process equivalent to the Sufi mystic's, and endure a struggle towards revelation and religious understanding. Rushdie has no such conception of religious truth, and incorporates obscurity into his storytelling in order to suggest that no single definitive truth is possible. In Rushdie's novels, unlike Attar's poetry, to use the words of Carlos Fuentes, "truth is the search for truth, nothing is pre-established and knowledge is only what both of us - reader and writer - can imagine."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless it remains the case that Rushdie makes allusions to Attar's poem in order to make similar claims about the prophetic power of the written or spoken word, asserting that storytelling offers a means of establishing a complex and non-reductive attitude to reality.

The question that serves as the starting point for Haroun's quest in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* focuses precisely upon the issue of the validity of fiction: 'what is the use of stories that aren't even true?' This and other objections posed against storytelling by 'enemy forces' in Haroun recall the Socratic objection relayed by Plato in *The Republic* that, for reasons both metaphysical and social, art has no claim to truth and therefore no

value. On the one hand, the artist is not offering a truthful representation of reality but an imperfect copy, and on the other the artist is acting upon an irrational indulgent impulse and thus cannot proceed by rational means towards a true and philosophic understanding of actuality. These arguments are reflected throughout the tale, but primarily in Mr Sengupta's condemnation of Rashid, and the Sengupta-inspired note that Soraya leaves, reading: "[y]ou are only interested in pleasure, but a proper man would know that life is a serious business. Your brain is full of make-believe, so there is no room for the facts."<sup>7</sup>

Rushdie's response to this takes several forms. Firstly he argues, as does Sidney in his defence of poetry against its Socratic and Puritan detractors, that "the Poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lyeth."<sup>8</sup> Rashid's intention is not to relay facts, or tell the 'truth', so he can hardly be accused of an intention to mislead. On the contrary, his refusal to offer 'facts' and 'truths', and his preference for yarns and fictions, makes him inherently more trustworthy because he is not attempting to reduce an irreducible reality into political sound-bites and captions. "Nobody ever believed anything a politico said" observes Haroun, "... everyone had complete faith in Rashid because he always admitted that everything he told them was completely untrue and made up out of his own head" (20). He does not even pretend that he can tell the truth or offer a solution, instead his stories offer a way of telling that remains faithful to the ambiguities, the doubts and the uncertainties that are more representative of experience than any unambiguous statement of fact could be. "[I]t is half the art of storytelling" as Walter Benjamin puts it "to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it":

... The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.<sup>9</sup>

This is why the story-world created by Rushdie - *Kahani* - is populated by creatures named Iff [if] and Butt [but]. It is a world that does not offer finalised polished solutions. Like Touchstone's pastoral-fantasy world in *As You Like It*, *Kahani* includes an 'if' whose ambiguity operates as an antidote to the "firm and irrevocable doom" pronounced by the

tyrants at court.<sup>10</sup> It is a world of provisos and qualifications, a politically inconvenient world that represents the antithesis of the closure implicit in any monolithic system, such as Plato's or Khattam-Shud's. This is precisely why the villain of *Haroun*, Khattam-Shud, like Plato, is afraid of storytelling. "The world is for Controlling" he argues "... [a]nd inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all ...' (161).

The argument that Khattam-Shud or Plato might advance in defence of the control of stories is that it is necessary to create order. Unless we choose a single point of view, a single definition, then we will never have the strength of purpose, the consistency of vision, to achieve anything. This is the argument tentatively suggested by Haroun and Rashid when they witness the disorder of the Guppee army, in which all the troops are permitted to hold and argue for whatever view they wish. "What an army!" Haroun muses. "If any soldiers behaved like this on Earth, they'd be court-martialled quick as thinking". "But but but" replies the hoopoe, "what is the point in giving persons Freedom of Speech ... if you then say they must not utilise same? Is not the Power of Speech the greatest Power of all? Then surely it must be exercised to the full?" (119). And sure enough, this policy proves to be the most effective in the long run, for when the two armies do finally meet, the Chupwalas are unable to resist the Guppees:

The Pages of Gup, now that they had talked through everything so fully, fought hard, remained united, supported each other when required to do so, and in general looked like a force with a common purpose. All those arguments and debates, all that openness, had created powerful bonds of fellowship between them. The Chupwalas, on the other hand, turned out to be a disunited rabble ... their vows of silence and their habits of secrecy had made them suspicious and distrustful of one another. (185).

A free society in which there are no limits to what can be said and what can be told, Rushdie is arguing, will always prove stronger than a society that is superficially bound by imposed government policy and ideology.

Of course, not all stories will serve an oppositional function, and stories clearly can be used to corrupt ends. In response to David Tushingham's question as to whether or not

there are any stories which are not good Rushdie replies: “[b]ad-for-you stories? I’m sure there are.”<sup>11</sup> As evidence of this in *Haroun Rashid* is initially employed by dishonest politicians in order to dupe the people of ‘K’ into voting for them. The point is, however, that in any society in which there is no censorship, and no restriction placed upon storytelling, people will always have access to alternative stories that offer alternative visions. Whilst an individual story may not necessarily avoid closure, or oppose tyranny, no closure or tyranny can exist unchallenged in a social context in which stories can be told unchecked.

In many respects this argument for freedom of speech is excessively simplistic. In theory, absolute freedom of expression may lead towards a more tolerant society in which a multitude of different, competing ideas can co-exist side by side. In practice, however, it is usually the case that ideas which are backed up by the most powerful institutions, and ideas which suit those who have greatest access to the media and other forms of mass-communication, have the most forceful impact. Even in societies in which there is no direct censorship, in other words, indirect censorship based upon various social and economic factors will still operate. For this very reason *Haroun* has been criticised for excessive simplification of what is in fact a very complex political issue. “*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*”, as Srinivas Aravamudan has argued, “becomes a banal didactic fiction that demonstrates ... everything that is wrong with liberal assumptions about literature.” It assumes that “pluralist individualism (as large a variety of opinions as possible will be best for all concerned)” is preferable in all circumstances regardless of context, and regardless of the fact that “very different kinds of multicultural considerations have to be weighed and balanced in a socially responsible manner.”<sup>12</sup> Other critics have attempted to defend Rushdie’s tale against criticisms such as these. “Haroun is not a tract”, as James Fenton correctly observes, “ideas are played with, but not forced into too tidy an order.”<sup>13</sup> “This is a fable without a moral” as Rushdie himself notes. “It uses all the techniques in a fable without trying to operate a homily at the end.”<sup>14</sup> Even Rushdie himself admits, however, that he has not managed to avoid pedagogy entirely. “There is obviously a kind of view” he acknowledges “that the values of language are superior to those of silence. So in so far

as there is an author's message, it's there."<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, this is precisely the message that critics such as Aravamudan are objecting to. Rushdie has failed, according to her, to consider whether or not there are circumstances in which unlimited freedom of speech becomes undesirable, if not actively destructive, and this failure represents a serious flaw in his argument.

Accusations of excessive simplification levelled at *Haroun* are not easy to dismiss. In striving to express his opinions through the two dimensional medium of the fantastic allegory Rushdie does fall prey to a degree of reductionism. This is an almost inevitable failing for any text that attempts to simplify ideas sufficiently in order to make them accessible to children. If there *is* a defence to be made of *Haroun* against such charges, though, I believe it lies in the fact that the reader is never allowed to forget that what s/he is reading is 'only a story'. It is only a fantasy, and is not meant to be taken seriously. Rushdie draws upon this defence in his final, passing comment to Tushingham after he has considered the 'moral' of *Haroun* at some length. *Haroun* is about the idea that speech is preferable to silence, argues Rushdie, and it is because of their loquaciousness that the disordered Guppees eventually win out over the more powerful, regimented Chupwalas. "But" he adds "I think it would be a dangerous moral to follow because in real life the Guppees would lose the war. They're a shambles."<sup>16</sup> Storytelling, in other words, provides Rushdie with a means of presenting an argument or an ideal, and simultaneously distancing himself from it. It enables him to depict a utopian scenario in which total free speech does work, but to simultaneously imply that such a scenario is politically impractical and even (in recognition of Aravamudan's argument) politically undesirable. This approach to political argument may seem ineffective and futile; it is a poet's argument rather than a politician's. Nevertheless, it does have its advantages. The use of fantasy and fairy tale as a means of evading the need to justify political arguments on a practical basis allows Rushdie to represent the *absolute ideal* that would be desirable if no external conditions applied. Moreover, it allows the reader to understand that what Rushdie is representing *is* a fantasy of an absolute ideal and to realise that Rushdie does not necessarily believe that such a scenario could be implemented practically. The society that Rushdie depicts upon

Gup may be of the order of idle wish-fulfilment, but because Rushdie represents Gup explicitly as an unreal world and never attempts to lure the reader into believing that the solutions he offers are practical, the fantasy, perversely, becomes politically viable. It is an extreme and it is accepted, because of the medium in which it is relayed, as an extreme; but at the same time the reader is encouraged to consider how these extreme examples can be translated into practical solutions. The benefit of using this extreme form of allegory, for Rushdie, is that he doesn't have to spell the solutions out. He can indicate extravagantly and frivolously that there are problems with the world, but he can leave it up to the reader to decide how these problems can be resolved in 'real' terms.

Rushdie's use of storytelling and fantasy, in this way, can be compared with Angela Carter's use of fairy tale. She uses fairy tale in *The Bloody Chamber*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, as we have seen, as a means of imagining the ideal union between different individuals. Salman Rushdie, I will argue in the remainder of this chapter and the next, also uses fairy tale in order to conceptualise the fantastic and wishful ideal of a multi-cultural community.

### ✿ A Sea of Fairy Tale

The idea that fiction can offer the writer a new and non-reductive way of telling truths is evidently one that can be attached to any form of storytelling, not just fairy tale. Any kind of narrative, from novel to poem, can provide a means of formulating 'positional' truths rather than 'final' truths if the author wishes it to do so. This is why Rushdie fills Haroun's story sea not just with fairy tales but with a vast range of fictional forms, spanning from old epics to contemporary 'talking helicopter anecdotes' (83). Despite the broadness of Rushdie's conception of storytelling, however, it is to the fairy tale that he returns most consistently as a common denominator of storytelling. The fairy tales gathered in the ancient Sanskrit collection the *Katha Sarit Sagara* or *Ocean of Streams of Story* provide the most explicit model for Rushdie's story sea, and it is the fairy tale that Rushdie uses most consistently to illustrate and reflect his ideas about

storytelling. When he discusses the issue of storytelling with Grass, for instance, it is to the fairy tale specifically that he attributes the power of non didactic truth telling. “[I]t seems to me” says Rushdie:

that the reason, the thing that made me become a writer was that desire: a desire simply to tell stories. I grew up in a literary tradition. That’s to say that the kind of stories I was told as a child, by and large, were Arabian Nights kind of stories. It was those sort of fairy tales ... And the belief was that by telling stories in that way, in that marvellous way, you could actually tell a kind of truth which you couldn’t tell in other ways.<sup>17</sup>

In order to investigate Rushdie’s approach to storytelling in more detail, then, I will in the following section be looking more closely at the particular narrative and storytelling conventions that he employs in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. I will show how Rushdie uses fairy tale in particular to, as he puts it, tell kinds of truth ‘which you couldn’t tell in other ways’, and I will argue that the specific ‘kinds of truth’ that Rushdie is aiming to investigate through fairy tale are connected to his post-colonial agenda.

*Haroun* can be described as a short literary fantasy that combines traditional elements of fairy tale with the authors own creative and surreal imaginings. It operates both as a simple quest narrative that features a young boy travelling to distant lands in search of a happy ending and as a potent political allegory that confronts pertinent contemporary issues, ranging from the restrictions upon freedom of speech imposed by fundamentalist regimes to the pollution of the environment by irresponsible multinational corporations. As such it can be placed fairly securely in the sub-genre that Jean-Pierre Durix defines as “the children’s story which only adults can really understand”; a tradition which incorporates Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865).<sup>18</sup>

The influence of both these predecessors is evident in both the style and the structure of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Stylistically, much of the nonsense, word-play and surrealism derive from Lewis Carroll, whilst the biting satire that the ‘nonsense’ conceals is Swiftian in its savagery and intent. The figure of the Walrus, for instance, the



scientific genius on the moon Kahani and Grand Comptroller of the P2C2E (Processes too Complicated to Explain) owes something to both forebears. He is an icon associated with the work of Lewis Carroll (or at least Carroll via The Beatles)<sup>19</sup> and a parody of scientific analysts not unlike the parody of the academics of Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels*. Structurally, all three texts are organised around the adventures of a central hero, who begins the tale in a comfortable domestic environment, travels out of that environment to visit a fantasy world full of the most eccentric peculiarities and marvels, and then returns home again to find that his/her attitudes towards the 'home' world have been subtly altered. In all three texts the function of the hero or heroine's adventure is the same: by experiencing a world that is different from their own, and yet in some strange way parallel, they are able to come to a clearer understanding of the everyday world in which they live.

Despite the similarities between *Haroun* and texts such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Alice in Wonderland*, however, there are also important differences. Carroll and Swift's tales both derive from a predominantly English storytelling tradition. *Alice in Wonderland* was heavily influenced by previous Victorian 'juvenile' literature such as Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* and Frederick Marryat's *Masterman Ready*, and also reveals a considerable debt to the fantastical and nonsensical situations portrayed in popular British fairy tales and nursery rhymes.<sup>20</sup> Swift's tale, similarly, is influenced by oral or chapbook fairy tales popular in Britain at the time of writing such as *The History of Tom Thumbe* and *The History of Jack and the Giants*.<sup>21</sup> Rushdie's fantasy, by contrast, demonstrates a resistance to the tradition's exclusive reliance upon European narrative forms and European modes of perception by taking this tradition, saturated in British folklore and fairy tale, and merging with an equivalent tradition in Indian storytelling, that derives from Indic, Persian or Arabic oral and literary sources. As well as a host of character types and scenarios reminiscent of western fairy tale Rushdie gives us plot motifs and expressions from *The Arabian Nights*, Bhatta Somadeva's eleventh century *Katha Sarit Sagara* and Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*.

There are, of course, elements in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Gulliver's Travels* that also derive from texts such as these. *The Arabian Nights* first became popular in Britain in

the early eighteenth century and since Swift, as Peter Caracciolo notes, was among its first English readers it is probable that oddities recalling 'the wonderful east' in *Gulliver's Travels*, such as the floating island populated by transcendentalist astronomers, owe something to *Nights*.<sup>22</sup> The figure of the caterpillar in *Alice*, similarly, draws upon stereotypes of the oriental (or the westerner influenced by oriental cultures) with his hookah and his 'languid, sleepy' drug dulled voice.<sup>23</sup> [See illustrations over].

These images, however, whilst they derive from the same texts that Rushdie employs, are arguably different from Rushdie's because they reflect the western tendency to represent 'the east' as exotic, alien and bizarre. Motifs such as the hookah, hashish and the turban regularly appear in European Orientalist fantasy settings because their unfamiliarity, their strangeness, made them seem appropriate subjects for extravagant and incredible stories. When Rushdie uses motifs and tropes taken from the *Nights* or *The Ocean of Story*, by contrast, he is not doing so in order to represent something that is alien, threatening or 'outside' the compass of that which the 'norm' - he is placing them on a level footing with the traditions of western fantasy in order to create a text that does not privilege one mode over the other. Whereas Carroll and Swift have founded the genre using only English sources, or 'eastern' sources in an Orientalist manner, Rushdie aims to adapt the tradition by merging the English sources with 'eastern' tale collections in a way that makes them mutually supportive of one another.

His attempt to show the compatibility of tales from different cultures is most apparent in the episode in which Haroun takes a drink from the story sea. Haroun is miserable having failed to wish hard enough for the return of his father's storytelling abilities so Iff the Water Genie extracts a story from the water to cheer him up. Haroun drinks the story-water and finds himself transported to a virtual landscape in which the story is being played out before him. First he has to dispatch several monsters, which he does with considerable ease, then, having dispatched the monsters, he finds himself at a white stone tower:

At the top of the tower was (what else but) a single window, out of which there gazed (who else but) a captive princess. What Haroun was experiencing, though he didn't know it, was Princess Rescue Story Number



Harry Rowntree  
'Keep you' temper' (undated)



Sir John Tenniel  
'Alice and the Caterpillar' (1865)

**Illustrations accompanying Carroll's text frequently make this connection explicit. In this undated illustration by Harry Rowntree, the Caterpillar wears a fez, and in the more famous Tenniel illustration the Caterpillar is shown wearing a loose sleeved Arabic garment.**

S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r)xi; and because the princess in this particular story had recently had a haircut and therefore had no long tresses to let down (unlike the heroine of Princess Rescue Story G/1001/RIM/777/M(w)i, better known as 'Rapunzel'), Haroun as the hero was required to climb up the outside of the tower by clinging to the cracks between the stones with his bare hands and feet (73).

Rushdie is clearly being playful, here. His primary aim in this passage is to create a comic effect by drawing attention to the formulaic conventions of fairy tale and then confounding those conventions by introducing the extravagant device of a princess with a haircut. Despite this frivolous approach, though, Rushdie does conceal a half serious point in his parody fairy tale notation. The first notation, 'S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r)xi', calls *The Arabian Nights* to mind. The number '1001' signifies the thousand and one nights and the letters 'SZHr' signify Scheherazade. Conversely, the second notation, 'G/1001/RIM/777/M(w)i', recalls the Brothers Grimm, the capital letters spelling 'GRIMM' unambiguously, the lower case letter 'w' standing for Wilhelm. Both are variants, as Rushdie notes, of the 'princess rescue story' that has become popularised as 'Rapunzel' (AT 310).

The effect of this playfully allusive notation is twofold. Firstly, it alerts the reader to the fact that the tale 'Rapunzel' does not exist in Grimm alone. Different variants of the tale, such as the mysterious S/1001, are also floating around in the veins of the story sea. The variant of 'Rapunzel' that is now most popular is undoubtedly that which was collected by Grimm in 1812, but - as Rushdie reminds the reader cryptically - this is not the only version, nor indeed is it the first. Grimm took the tale from a story by Friedrich Schultz who had in turn borrowed it from a French tale 'Persinette' by Mlle. Charlotte-Rose de la Force (published anonymously in *Contes des Contes* in 1692).<sup>24</sup> It is unclear where de la Force took it from, although there is an Italian variant in Basile's *Pentamerone*, and it is probable that Basile's version, through various complex paths, is related to early Indian versions of the tale.<sup>25</sup> Just as Rushdie implies in his parody, therefore, there are Middle Eastern precedents for a tale that is now predominantly thought of in European terms.

The second effect of Rushdie's allusive notation is to remind readers that tales from diverse cultures can actually be quite similar. The 'princess rescue stories' in Grimm have their peculiarities, just as the 'princess rescue stories' in *The Arabian Nights* or *Katha Sarit Sagara* have their peculiarities. But in addition to these peculiarities there are also significant continuities between tales. In the 'Scheherazade' tale the hero may have to climb up the cracks in the wall, whilst the hero of the 'Grimm' tale is assisted by a ladder of hair, but both tales tell of the attempted rescue of an imprisoned princess from a high tower.

These two implications taken together enable Rushdie to challenge the primacy of the brothers Grimm and other European fairy tales, and replace it with a more representative view of the genre that recognises the influence of one tale collection upon the other. In the first place he has suggested that there are more tales available than those which are gathered in the popular European collections. In the second he has suggested that the popular European tales may actually derive from ancient Sanskrit sources.

The idea that many popular European tales have an originary point in non-western tale collections is reinforced, in the above passage, by the inclusion of the number '1001' in the parody notation for the Grimm tale, as well as in the parody notation of the Scheherazade tale. It would be possible to argue, given that '1001' is synonymous with the *Arabian Nights*, that Rushdie is implying that the true source for tales which have ended up in Europe is in fact the Middle East. If this is really Rushdie's intention then he is not alone in his thinking. Emmanuel Cosquin (1841-1921) in his influential work *Études folkloriques: Recherches sur les migrations des contes populaires et leur point de départ* (1922) offers a similar argument, and N. M. Penzer, in the introduction to the first and only English translation of *The Ocean of Story*, suggests that:

India is ... the home of story-telling. It was from here that the Persians learned the art, and passed it on to the Arabians. From the Middle East the tales found their way to Constantinople and Venice, and finally appeared in the pages of Boccaccio, Chaucer and La Fontaine."<sup>26</sup>

This theory is a largely unfounded and romantic misconception - the passage of narratives across borders is almost impossible to trace, and no one story can be said to have any definite source or nation of origin - rather, they have developed and changed over time in a gradual and fluid process of accretion. Rushdie may be toying with this idea, however, because the concept of an Indian source of stories is useful as a *myth* of origin. Whilst there is little evidence that all stories derive from India, the idea that they might takes the emphasis off western traditions of storytelling, re-asserting the role that Indian oral and literary traditions have played in the development of western narrative. Ultimately, however, I think that Rushdie's model of the story sea, as it appears in *Haroun*, offers a clear refutation of this possibility. The source or wellspring of stories is not located in any particular geographical position, and the stories that pour out of it are not of one kind but of "many different colours" (167). The number '1001', moreover, whilst it clearly has some associations with *The Arabian Nights*, is not used by Rushdie to refer exclusively to the stories in that collection. It is rather a general code that stands, in Rushdie's symbolic scheme, for all the stories of the world irrespective of what they are or where they come from. Unlike Penzer and Cosquin, therefore, I would suggest that Rushdie is not implying that all stories come from the mysterious east. Neither is he implying, as the prevalence of Grimm and Perrault in many twentieth century accounts suggest, that all fairy tales have achieved their definitive form in their European variants. In fact, he undermines both of these exclusive possibilities - and replaces them with the vision of a story sea which is continually in flux and gives absolute primacy to no single cultural influence.

Perhaps this is giving too much weight to what is, realistically speaking, little more than a passing joke on Rushdie's part. 'S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r)xi' and 'G/1001/RIM/777/M(w)i' are, after all, only jests at the expense of folklore indexers such as Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson that were not meant to be subjected to rigorous analysis. The notion of story sea, however, as it is developed thematically in *Haroun*, does lend concrete support to this interpretation by showing the reader, in a kind of visual allegory, precisely how fairy tales interact and combine. Only a page before Haroun drinks his 'princess rescue stories' he has looked into the story waters to find "that it was made

up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity.” These are the streams of story, as Iff explains:

Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held there in fluid form they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive.  
(72)

It is this livingness, for Rushdie, that characterises the genre of fairy tale, and anything that interferes with the dynamic interchange of narratives, whether it be the fictional censorship imposed by Khattam-Shud or the actual censorship imposed by the accepted cannon of fairy tale, is regarded as a dangerous and undesirable pollutant. If fairy tales are to be accurately represented they must be shown not as static narratives which convey a fixed and inflexible message, they must be represented as ambiguous narratives, which are both multiple in terms of the potential meanings they can generate, and multiple in terms of the different cultures they can belong to. When Rushdie uses fairy tale, consequently, he is not trying to establish a concrete or final idea of the genre, he is juggling ideas. He is throwing up different possibilities, different stories, and seeing how they land. “I always thought storytelling was like juggling,” as Haroun tells Blabbermouth, “... you keep a lot of different tales in the air, and juggle them up and down, and if you’re good you don’t drop any.” (109).

Having said this, however, *Haroun* is not just about how we should view and understand fairy tales. The representation of fairy tales as ambiguous, slippery narratives is not Rushdie’s sole aim in *Haroun*; his aim, more specifically, is to use this conception of fairy tale to provide support for the dominant themes of the text. One of these themes - and perhaps the most important single theme in the novella - concerns the undesirability of establishing strict and inflexible boundaries between cultures. The troubles that Haroun

encounters upon the moon of Kahani (meaning 'story' in Hindustani) are largely the result of the separation of the moon into two halves. There is a light side populated by the talkative Guppees (gossips) upon which the sun always shines, and a dark side populated by the silent Chupwalas (quiet fellows) which is in perpetual darkness.<sup>27</sup> The division between the two sides is maintained by a wall of force erected by the Guppees to keep the Chupwalas out, and it is this wall that is responsible for the tensions between the two communities. It represents any number of walls that have been constructed to segregate two groups of people. Its name 'Chattergy's Wall', after the king of the Guppees, recalls the Roman emperor Hadrian's barrier against the Picts and the Scots, but it also invokes the Berlin wall separating communist East Germany and democratic West Germany which had come down the year before Rushdie published *Haroun*. Its symbolic function is the same as that of the wall constructed by the king in Edward Bond's play *Lear*; it is meant to ensure the safety of the populace, but it ends up being a cage, a trap, which causes hatred, suffering and brutality.

The Guppees, in Rushdie's tale, seem to have justice on their side. They are fighting a war against the malignant Khattam-Shud, leader of the Chupwalas. A fanatic whose sole wish is to destroy all stories and impose a state of perpetual silence. As the tale progresses however it becomes increasingly apparent that the Guppees are as much responsible for Khattam-Shud's reign as the Chupwalas because it is their machinery that has created the division between the two cultures. They developed techniques with which to bring the moon's rotation under control, separating day from the night and Chupwala from Guppee, and it is this divisiveness that has allowed Khattam-Shud's fanatical opposition to the Guppees to flourish. The success of Haroun's quest, therefore, depends upon him being able to undo this binary opposition, which he does in the end by causing the moon Kahani to turn "so that it is no longer half in light half in darkness" (170). Light shines down upon Chup for the first time causing all Khattam-Shud's shadow battalions to melt away to nothing.

Once the barriers have been broken down the people of Gup and Chup realise the errors of their ways and devise a peace settlement that permits "a dialogue" (193) between



the two groups. "Night and Day, Speech and Silence," according to this peace, "would no longer be separated into Zones by Twilight strips and Walls of Force" and would be able to interact with one another (191). This radical transformation in the way that the two cultures interact is prelude to a total reassessment of their understanding of one another. Both parties realise that the other is not as bad, or as different, as they first thought - and both realise that the distinctive differences between the two cultures can provide opportunities for productive exchange rather than destructive enmity. This is something that the perceptive young Haroun has realised several chapters previously whilst watching Mudra, the shadow warrior from the 'enemy' city of Chup, do his martial dance:

'How many opposites are at war in this battle between Gup and Chup!' he marvelled. 'Gup is bright and Chup is dark. Gup is warm and Chup is freezing cold. Gup is all chattering and noise, whereas Chup is silent as a shadow. Guppees love the Ocean, Chupwalas try to poison it. Guppees love Stories, and Speech; Chupwalas, it seems, hate these things just as strongly ...'

And yet, as Haroun recognises:

... it's not as simple as that ... because the dance of the Shadow Warrior showed him that silence had its own grace and beauty (just as speech could be graceless and ugly); and that Action could be as noble as Words; and that creatures of darkness could be as lovely as the children of light. 'If Guppees and Chupwalas didn't hate each other so,' he thought, 'they might actually find each other pretty interesting. Opposites attract, as they say.' (125).

In a tale that is largely about oppositions - the opposition between fantasy and reality, the opposition between child and adult, the opposition between good and bad - Rushdie is being careful to show that there can be 'dialogue' and 'crossover' between categories. Guppees and Chupwalas may be very different, he suggests, but there are still grounds for communication and interaction. The only character who insists upon rigorous separation of the two societies is the villain of the piece, Khattam-Shud, whose name ('completely finished' in Hindustani (218)) stands for closure and the fanatical prevention of communication and dialogue. He is, to borrow the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "obsessed with arriving at any singular self image; or legislating who may or may not

speak ... or policing boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.<sup>28</sup> This is why Khattam-Shud is an inveterate enemy of the story sea, the symbol of infinite potential inclusiveness. The Guppees celebrate and defend the story sea because it reflects the plurality of their own society which, as Haroun notes when he first arrives in the capital, is incredibly "diverse" (87). Mechanical hoopoes consort with many mouthed fish and Archimboldo-esque vegetable men fraternise with blue-bearded water genies. Khattam-Shud, on the other hand, dislikes stories because the cultural diversity that any eclectic mass of stories will reflect is a threat to his politics of exclusion. To maintain his power he has to pretend that there is only one supreme way of seeing and understanding the world; the Ocean of Story is a blunt contradiction of this notion, because it shows that there are many simultaneous and conflicting ways of understanding the world. It reflects, to borrow Gates's words again, a "polyphony of voices", a "heteroglossia", that can be used to undermine tyrannical forms of marginalisation.<sup>29</sup>

Both in the way Rushdie treats his own sources and in the way he depicts stories in the trope of the Story Sea, therefore, a clear resistance to ethnocentrism is demonstrated. He has taken diverse tales, from diverse cultures and diverse periods to provide inter-textual support for one of his novella's central post-colonial agendas - to confound the belief that there can be one dominant means of mediating experience and replace it with the idea that experience is more accurately mediated by a plethora, a multiplicity, of complex cultural references. The fairy tale, as we have seen, plays a central role in this process. It is, for Rushdie, a narrative that resists singular and unambiguous interpretation, and a narrative that cannot be traced definitively to any single nation. It is thus a narrative that can operate as an irrefutable contradiction of Khattam-Shud's belief that two cultures, such as the Chupwalas and the Guppees, can be separated definitively, without any basis for communication or understanding.

"We have many realities", as Grass tells Rushdie towards the end of their conversation. "Our problem is that we don't accept that there are many realities. This side only wants this reality, and the other only their own reality." One of the ways to surmount

this will to ignorance, Grass implies, is through storytelling. “[U]sing these fairytales” he says “is bringing us to another kind of truth: to a much much richer truth than you can get by collecting facts of this flat realism.”<sup>30</sup> Fairy tales, in other words, can enable us to maintain several different positions simultaneously without reducing or negating the complexity of these positions. They enable us to behave like the ironist, defined by Linda Hutcheon as someone who can only ‘complexify’ and never ‘disambiguate’.<sup>31</sup> This is precisely how Salman Rushdie uses *The Arabian Nights* and other collections of fairy tales in his fiction: to maintain a position that permits the multi-perspectivism of a diverse body of narratives, without implying a single, final position that all the perspectives must add up to. There is no final story, there are only stories and further stories. In this use of fairy tale Rushdie follows Carter who, as we have seen, also uses fairy tale to express multi-vocality and multiplicity. Like Carter, Rushdie reveals a certain degree of distrust of what he calls the ‘folkloristic straitjacket’;<sup>32</sup> he sees that the fairy tale is not necessarily a subversive medium, and has frequently been used to support the status quo. But he also sees that fairy tale needn’t be constrained by the ‘folkloristic straitjacket’. It can also be used, in Carter’s words, “to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways”, leaving “the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of [the writer’s] fictions.”<sup>33</sup>

In the following chapter I would like to extend some of the ideas broached in this chapter and show how Rushdie uses *The Arabian Nights* in *Midnight’s Children* to provide him with an ideal model of national identity. This collection of fairy tales, I will argue, offers him with a narrative precedent for the paradoxical idea that it is possible to both contain something and simultaneously to suggest that containment is an impossibility. It serves as the prototype of a narrative that consists of a finite and perceivable body of tales, and yet implies that the tales that could be told are both never-ending and infinitely complex. Thus it provides him with a model for nationhood according to which it is possible to conceive of a singular nation, which exists as a distinct entity, but which does not establish its identity by excluding any other potential form of identity. *The Arabian Nights*, in this, fulfils a similar function to the Story Sea in *Haroun*: it operates as a means

of conceiving of a society which does not require a principle of exclusion, of *Khattam-Shud*, to make itself viable.

<sup>1</sup>Pynchon, Mason and Dixon (1997; London: Vintage, 1998) 350.

<sup>2</sup>This conversation was later published. See 'Fictions are Lies that Tell the Truth,' The Listener June 1985, 15.

<sup>3</sup>Edward G. Browne, A Literary History of Persia From Firdawsi to Sa'di (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1928) 509.

<sup>4</sup>Rushdie has already used The Conference of the Birds as a key source in his first novel Grimus (1975).

<sup>5</sup>Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, introduction, in Farid ud-Din Attar, The Conference of the Birds, ed. Darbandi and Davis (London: Penguin, 1984) 17. Catherine Cundy makes a similar point in her book on Rushdie: "the path of the Sufi mystic towards truth" she writes "... mirrors Haroun's own journey". See, Salman Rushdie, Contemporary World Writers (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 88.

<sup>6</sup>Carlos Fuentes, 'Worlds Apart,' Modernism / Postmodernism, ed. Peter Brooker (London: Longman, 1992) 245. First printed in The Guardian 24 Feb. 1989.

<sup>7</sup>Rushdie, Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990; London: Granta, 1991) 22. All subsequent references will be to this edition and included in the text.

<sup>8</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and Other Writings, ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson (London: Dent, 1997) 111.

<sup>9</sup>Benjamin, 89.

<sup>10</sup>William Shakespeare, As You Like It, ed. H. J. Oliver, New Penguin Shakespeare (London: Penguin, 1968) V. iv. 99. The firm and irrevocable doom is pronounced at I. iii. 81.

<sup>11</sup>David Tushingham, 'Salman Rushdie in Conversation,' programme, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, dir., Tim Supple, Cottesloe Theatre (1998) 3.

<sup>12</sup>Srinivas Aravamudan, 'Fables of Censorship: Salman Rushdie, Satire, and Symbolic Violence,' Western Humanities Review 49.4 (1995): 327, 328 and 325.

<sup>13</sup>James Fenton, 'Keeping Up with Salman Rushdie,' New York Review of Books March 28 (1991): 32.

<sup>14</sup>Tushingham, 5.

<sup>15</sup>Tushingham, 5.

<sup>16</sup>Tushingham, 5.

<sup>17</sup>Rushdie, 'Fictions are Lies,' 15.

<sup>18</sup>"The Gardener of Stories": Salman Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories, Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, ed. D. M. Fletcher, Cross/Cultures 16 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994) 343. There are other works in this tradition that have influenced Haroun such as the film version of The Wizard of Oz. Rushdie discusses the impact of this film upon him at length in his British Film Institute pamphlet (1992).

<sup>19</sup>The Walrus's name in full, 'I. M. D. Walrus', and the title of his workers, 'Eggheads', refer quite obviously to the song 'I am the Walrus', and its lyric "I am the Eggman, we are the Eggmen, he is the Walrus". The figure of the walrus first appears in association with nonsense poetry in Carroll's 'The Walrus and the Carpenter'. In referring to the same figure in his song lyrics, I would suggest, John Lennon was consciously aligning himself with this nonsense tradition.

<sup>20</sup>See P. Gila Reinstein, Alice in Context (New York: Garland, 1988).

<sup>21</sup>See M. Sarah Smedman, 'Like Me, Like Me Not: Gulliver's Travels as Children's Book,' The Genres of Gulliver's Travels, ed. Frederik N. Smith (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1990) 75-100.

<sup>22</sup>Caracciolo, 2.

<sup>23</sup>Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, Library of Classics (London: Collins, no date) 51. Alice in Wonderland has also been compared, in its chinese-box structure, explicitly to The Arabian Nights. See William A. Madden, 'Framing the Alices,' PMLA 101 (1986) 362-373.

<sup>24</sup>See Zipes, Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, 729.

<sup>25</sup>Stith Thompson identifies an early Indian variation on the motif of the princess held captive in a tower (R41.2) in his Motif Index of Folk Literature, 2nd ed., vol. 5 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957) 273. One such Indian version can be found early on in the Katha Sarit Sagara, a story collection which influenced The Arabian Nights. See Bhatta Somadeva, Katha Sarit Sagara or The Ocean of Streams of Story, trans. C. H. Tawney, vol. 1 (Calcutta: J. W. Thomas, 1880) 15.

<sup>26</sup>N. M. Penzer, introduction, in Bhatta Somadeva, The Ocean of Story, trans. C. H. Tawney, ed. Penzer, vol. 1 (London: Sawyer, 1924) xxiv-v.

<sup>27</sup>The translations of the names are provided by Rushdie in a glossary, 217-8.

<sup>28</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (New York: NAL, 1990) 8.

<sup>29</sup>Gates, 8.

<sup>30</sup>Rushdie, 'Fictions are Lies,' 15.

<sup>31</sup>Linda Hutcheon, Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony (London: Routledge, 1994) 13.

<sup>32</sup>Rushdie, Satanic Verses, 52.

<sup>33</sup>Carter, 'Notes,' 69.

'AT THE INSURMOUNTABLE EXTREMES OF STORYTELLING': THE USE OF *THE ARABIAN NIGHTS* IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*



*[A]t the insurmountable extremes of storytelling, we encounter the question of cultural difference as the perplexity of living and writing the nation.*

Homi Bhabha, 'Dissemination'



When a prodigious story is told in *The Arabian Nights* the fictional auditor of the tale - especially if he is a wise and powerful king - frequently orders the tale to be written out and placed amongst the records. In the tale of 'Ghanim Ibn Ayyub and his Sister Fitnah,' for instance, it is with great pleasure that the Khalifah has "the palace scribes write out the whole history of Ghanim from beginning to end in their most elaborate calligraphy, and [causes] the story to be added to his library, that it might serve as a lesson to future generations". When Scheherazade finishes the entire collection and King Shahriyar has renounced his dreadful oath, furthermore, he calls together "the most renowned annalists and proficient scribes from all the quarters of Islam," and has them "write out the tales of Shahrazad from beginning to end, without the omission of a single detail."<sup>1</sup>

It is often assumed that, in a less hyperbolic fashion, this is precisely how *The Arabian Nights* did come into being. The stories were narrated orally and at some point were set down to paper and thus preserved for posterity. Of course this is too simplistic an account and the true tale of the transition undergone by the *Nights* from an oral collection of narratives told by professional story-tellers in coffee-houses and market-places to a written text circulated first in manuscript form and later in elaborately polished redactions and translations is far more convoluted; worthy of a thousand and one nights in the telling

itself. Far from neglecting to omit a single detail as Shahriyar recommended, there is ample evidence that the various redactors, collectors and translators of the *Nights* omit many, and add a few of their own, altering cultural settings and details to suit their own predilections or the predilections of their readership. They also modified the stories to suit the conventions of the written word, transforming them into literary products, intended to appeal to a literary audience in literary ways.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the transformations the *Nights* has undergone, however, it remains the case that the tales derive, in part, from an oral tradition and that certain traces of oral narrative conventions remain in their construction. The texts, for instance, are heavily digressive, allowing for interpolations and interruptions, and they frequently read as if improvised on the spot by some innovative raconteur. For the auditor who may have an imperfect memory of the complex interweavings of the plot, they are studded with lively recapitulations; and for the auditor who might have a short attention span, they are decorated with enticing hints of what might yet come to pass. Since the tale-teller's activity is essentially performative, furthermore, the story tends to be more like an event than a piece of writing: clearly visualised, expressive, and kinetic.

Rushdie himself was granted the opportunity of seeing a traditional Indian tale-teller at work, and from his description of the occasion, it is clear that the experience had a considerable effect upon him. "An oral narrative" he writes:

does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end of the story. It goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that has happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again, sometimes summarises itself, it frequently digresses off into something that the story-teller appears just to have thought of, then it comes back to the main thrust of the narrative. Sometimes it steps sideways and tells you about another, related story... Sometimes there are Chinese boxes where there is a story inside a story inside a story inside a story, then they all come back, you see. So it's a very bizarre and pyrotechnical shape. And it has the appearance of being random and chaotic, it has the appearance that what is happening is anything the storyteller happens to be thinking, he just proceeds in that contingent way. It seemed to me in fact that it was very far from being random or chaotic, and that the oral narrative had developed this shape over a very long period, not because story-tellers were lacking in organisation, but because this shape



conformed very exactly to the shape in which people liked to listen ... it was the looping and digressing and swirling shape that kept people listening; it was as much the shape that kept the people listening as the content of the stories that were being told.<sup>3</sup>

Inspired by this display Rushdie goes on to ask whether it is possible to find the written equivalent of such a 'pyrotechnical shape': "I thought it must be possible", he adds, "to attempt the creation of a literary form which corresponds to the form of the oral narrative."<sup>4</sup> He made this attempt, he goes on to say, in *Midnight's Children*, in which the oral-epic techniques of foreshadowing, hasty summation and lengthy digression, become the means by which his all-incorporating, loquacious narrator Saleem is able to fit the "excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours" into the compass of a single plot.<sup>5</sup> The main problem that Rushdie faces in this attempt - as he himself puts it - is that "one cannot simply write down sentences that were designed to be spoken". Though *Midnight's Children* toys with the devices of oral tale-telling, the narrative remains literary, and though digression and recursion may be the way in which 'people like to listen', it may not be the way in which people like to read. What Rushdie requires is some formal pre-cursor for the embodiment of oral techniques in the literary work that would enable him to create a hybrid text, somewhere on the boundary between the heard and the read. *The Arabian Nights* is just such a 'cultural amphibian'<sup>6</sup> - and it is for this reason that Saleem, at the very start of the novel, locates himself as a sort of speeded up, twentieth-century version of Scheherazade. He has no hope of saving his life, as she did, nor can he "count on having even a thousand nights and a night"; nevertheless, the exigencies of Scheherazade are invoked because she exhibits the same skill at imposing structure or form, and thus meaning, upon a mass of disparate stories. "I must work faster than Scheherazade," he says "if I am to end up meaning something" (11).

"Who what am I?" Asks Rushdie's narrator:

My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of those

now-six-hundred-million plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (370).

The very structure and syntax of this passage testifies to the difficulties - impossibilities - of containing 'everyone-everything' that has to be said and explained. Not only in thematic terms, but in formal terms too, this passage exemplifies a crisis that is apparent in much contemporary narration: that it is unable to find its own bounds. Evidently, in order for the story to remain coherent to some degree, a rigid, albeit not traditional, architecture will be required to contain it, and the precedent that Rushdie uses for the construction of this architecture is none other than that of *The Arabian Nights*, which is in turn derived from the pyrotechnical shape of oral narrative.

To delineate the pyrotechnical shape of oral narrative more precisely I will investigate three features of *The Arabian Nights* that derive from the oral tradition, which Rushdie has employed in his novel. I will look at the use he makes of repetition devices; the use he makes of a frame narrative; and his exploitation of the capacity of the *Nights* to resist closure. These are the three devices at the tale-teller's disposal that contribute most to the 'looping and digressing and swirling' form that reflects "the shape in which people liked to listen". It will be these, therefore, that the crowd-pulling novelist most wants to recreate in his or her writing. Having looked at how Rushdie incorporates devices derived from oral narrative into *Midnight's Children*, I will then, in the remainder of the chapter, be asking why he does this. This will involve a consideration of the ways in which the narrative techniques that Rushdie borrows from *The Arabian Nights* are compatible with, or even take precedence over, the postmodern narrative theories which also inform Rushdie's fiction. Most importantly, however, the aim of this chapter is to extend the argument formulated in the previous chapter and show how Rushdie employs the alternative structuring devices appropriated from the *Nights* to formulate a conception of nationhood based upon inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.

## ✱ Structuring Devices in *The Arabian Nights*

Rushdie is particularly impressed, listening to the tale-teller, with the way in which the form, that at first seems random and chaotic, gradually achieves a peculiar kind of organisation. This is because various elements of the story, which initially appeared marginal or irrelevant, begin to re-emerge and repeat themselves until they attain a specific relevance and function within the context of the tale. Out of the anti-linear confusion, objects, words, motifs, plots and even entire stories re-appear; so that a cyclical structure, not initially evident, will gradually take shape. This would explain the peculiar feeling of 'déjà vu', noted by Mia Gerhardt, that is experienced by the reader of the *Nights*. "At first sight, the collection seems a monument of untidiness ... [and] most of the pieces do not immediately fix a firm outline in the mind", she writes. But through a combination of "repetition effects" - sequels, recurrent motifs and duplicate stories, a distinct shape becomes delineated.<sup>7</sup>

David Pinault identifies two specific narrative contrivances that are used to create this recursive structure: 'Leitwortstil' and 'Repetitive Designation'. The term 'Leitwort' (leading word) is borrowed from the study of Biblical storytelling and is used to indicate a word, word root, or even an entire clause, expressing some specific theme or motif that is purposefully repeated in a literary piece. This gives the piece a 'dynamic effect', writes Pinault (quoting Martin Buber) in which "one can sense waves moving back and forth between the words."<sup>8</sup> 'Repetitive Designation' fulfils a similar function, only with objects and characters instead of words. "Under this heading", notes Pinault, "I group repeated references to some character or object which appears insignificant when first mentioned but which re-appears later to intrude upon the narrative." This creates "an effect of apparently casual foreshadowing and allows the audience the pleasure of recognition at that later moment when the object re-appears and proves significant."<sup>9</sup> Both these devices are clearly employed by Rushdie in his fiction. Examples of repetitively designated objects might include the silver spittoon that Saleem carries throughout most of his picaresque adventures, or Millais' painting of the pointing fisherman that serves as a recurrent icon.

Examples of 'leitworts' and 'leitsatze' (leading sentences) include the Reverend Mother's 'whatsitsname', which Saleem identifies as her 'leitmotif' (42), and key phrases such as "to understand me you'll have to swallow a world" or "most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence". Perhaps the best example of a 'leitsatze', however, is the clause 'it was and it was not so' which is repeated sporadically through *The Satanic Verses*. This phrase is itself a phrase used repetitively by Arab storytellers so I take its use as a 'leitsatze' in *The Satanic Verses* as a specific example of the traditional use of 'leitsatze' in oral narrative and folk literature. The idea of such devices, as Rushdie explains, is:

that you use as recurring things in the plot incidents or objects or phrases which in themselves have no meaning or no particular meaning but which form a kind of non-rational network of connections in the book ... these things have very little meaning in themselves. The meaning of the leitmotif is the sum total of the incidents in which it occurs. So it accumulates meaning the more it is used. And what one is able to do by using the leitmotif is to orchestrate what is otherwise a huge mass of material, which doesn't always have rational connections, but the leitmotif can provide this other network of connections and so provide a shape.<sup>10</sup>

To take the example of the silver spittoon; it appears first in a minor sub-plot as a joke because the poet Nadir Khan (who is perhaps an echo of the resident rogue-poet of *The Arabian Nights*, Abu-Nowas) has claimed that "poetry and - oh - the game of hit-the-spittoon are equals" (45). The continuous presence of the spittoon that the Rani of Cooch Naheen then provides to complete the jest is thus, in part, an ongoing and subtle reminder by Rushdie of Nadir's aesthetic philosophy: that there is no such thing as high art, and that art should be beyond such categories. Since the spittoon is introduced in the sequence that involves the Rani and 'The Hummingbird', furthermore, it also comes to be associated with the political optimism of the 'Free Islam Convocation', which attempted to unite the various Muslim splinter groups into "a loosely federated alternative to the dogmatism and vested interest of the [Muslim] Leaguers" (46). In both cases, the spittoon stands as an ironic comment upon the ideals expressed. It operates as a critique of Nadir's artistic ideal, since this particular spittoon, made of silver with a lapis lazuli inlay, is well beyond the

means of the common man. It also serves as a reply to the Hummingbird's political optimism, its subsequent fate reflecting his own fate and that of India: it is exploded, dented, squashed, and finally destroyed.

Throughout the novel, the spittoon is also used as a device to provide continuity between all the diverse, divergent narratives that follow. Nadir takes it to his underground hide-out, where he lives with Saleem's (supposed) mother to be, Mumtaz, and the spittoon becomes a key prop in the dissolution of their marriage when he leaves it with a note, divorcing her: "Talaaq! Talaaq! Talaaq" (62). Mumtaz, now Amina, then takes it with her to Delhi, when she marries her new husband, Saleem's (supposed) father; and in the fullness of time the spittoon is bequeathed to Saleem himself, as his birthright. This birthright, far from fulfilling its fairy tale promise, later causes Saleem's amnesia by 'braining' him, and its final chronological appearance comes in Saleem's pitiful reminiscences to Padma, when he compares his impotence to an inability to "hit her spittoon"; a comparison which, once more, links it back to Nadir and Mumtaz. In this way the spittoon becomes, not only a device that coheres the plot, but also a recurrent symbol that is associated with the principal themes of the plot: sexuality and impotence, questions about art and its function, and political questions concerning freedom and unification. Whereas in a more conventionally realist novel, such events and themes would be united through linear and chronological narrative, Rushdie has engineered it so that events, themes and time periods are coiled up together in a single multi-faceted symbol; a priceless silver spittoon. No wonder Saleem eulogises it so insistently:

you should never underestimate a spittoon. Elegant in the salon of the Rani of Cooch Naheen, it permitted the intellectuals to practise the art-forms of the masses; gleaming in a cellar, it transformed Nadir Khan's underworld into a second Taj Mahal; gathering dust in an old tin trunk, it was nevertheless present throughout my history, covertly assimilating incidents in washing-chests, ghost-visions, freeze-unfreeze, drainage, exiles; falling from the sky like a piece of the moon, it perpetrated a transformation. O talismanic spittoon! O beauteous lost receptacle of memories as well as spittle-juice! (432).

This exemplifies Rushdie's procedure throughout *Midnight's Children* - or, at least, the procedure he gives his unreliable narrator, Saleem. Events are not conjoined by the establishment of necessary connections, they are linked through the accumulation of meaning and the establishment of tangential relations. Saleem, as it becomes clear, is an ego-maniac who believes that all events are, by direct or indirect means, caused through his agency. He provides the language riots with the chant to which they are fought, his interference causes the Sabarmati scandal that serves to crystallise the contradictions inherent in Indian public affairs, and even the Emergency - Indira Gandhi's suspension of political liberties - is said to have been instituted in order to ensure the dissolution of the Midnight's Children Conference. One symptom of this ego-mania is his neurotic tendency to associate the disassociated, and to explain all events in relation to an idiosyncratic web of themes, ideas and objects, all of which are connected in some way to himself. Objects such as the silver spittoon, therefore, become part of a network of associations that enables Saleem to create a private mythology that can be set against, and can even contradict, the 'official' versions of events. We are never meant to believe Saleem, of course, when he explains the entirety of history in regard to himself. We are never meant to entertain the idea seriously that slums were cleared just so that the government could capture him. Nevertheless, the fact that an alternative explanation of the events *can* be told, however outrageous, serves to challenge the inviolability of the official version. If the same evidence can be used to tell a story differently, then no account of events can have an absolute and unchallenged claim to truth. It is in this way that the recursive narrative structure borrowed from *The Arabian Nights* becomes, in Rushdie's hands, a means of making an ideological statement. It shows that there is more than one way to organise information and, as a result, more than one claim to 'truth'.



A second oral structuring device, evident in the text of the *Nights* and exploited by Rushdie in his fiction, is the use of chinese-box narrative. Scheherazade tells all the tales to

Shahriyar; within Scheherazade's tales her fictional narrators tell tales to fictional auditors; and within the tales of those fictional narrators, yet further fictional narrators tell tales to yet further fictional auditors, and so on for as long as the tale-teller can keep it up (or as long as the audience is prepared to listen). Then, when each of the tales has run its course, they are rounded up, one by one, starting from the middle, and moving outwards, so that the reader experiences a curious kind of relief, as if s/he is surfacing after a long immersion or returning home after a long quest. It is this aspect of *The Arabian Nights*, its formal, framed construction, which has had the most impact upon twentieth century borrowings. When the tales of *The Arabian Nights* first appeared in Europe in the eighteenth century they were celebrated as 'a storehouse of ingenious fiction and splendid imagery' that offered access to new plot-lines, exotic locations and images of 'easterness'.<sup>11</sup> In this century, by contrast, the celebration of the *Nights* has had a more specific focus; it is not so much the contents of the storehouse that the contemporary writer is interested in, as the storehouse itself. It is not so much Nur-al-Din, Ala-al-Din or the Ladies of Baghdad that inspire, as the boxes within boxes, and frames within frames that enclose them. As Robert Irwin observes: "[t]he engagement of twentieth-century writers has been more cerebral" because their interest in self-conscious formal experimentation has led them to use the *Nights* more for its structural implications than its actual narratives.<sup>12</sup> Salman Rushdie, exemplifying this trend, borrows the idea of 'framing' from the *Nights* by having Saleem recite all of his 'writing-shiting' to an illiterate worker Padma each night. "[J]ust as Scheherazade, depending for her very survival on leaving Prince Shahriyar eaten up by curiosity, used to do night after night" (25) Saleem too must spin his gripping, entrancing narratives in order to keep Padma interested and by his side.

Apart from the most obvious advantage the framing device holds for the writer of metafiction - highlighting the process of storytelling, and thus permitting an analysis of the narrative act - it also has a subsidiary benefit. It alerts the reader to the fact that Saleem is not an objective, all-knowing historian by showing how distorting elements could have crept into his account. Saleem, as teller, it becomes clear, does not always remember (or want to remember) past events clearly. Padma, as listener, concurrently, exerts a powerful

distorting influence upon the narrative. He forgets, invents and elaborates; she leaks into his writing with her “down-to-earthery” and bullies him into “the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next” (39). “When she’s bored” observes Saleem:

I can detect in her fibres the ripples of uninterest; when she’s unconvinced, there is a tic which gets going in her cheek. The dance of her musculature helps to keep me on the rails; because in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe ... (263)

In identifying and locating Padma and Saleem, in other words, Rushdie is making it clear that Saleem is not a reliable narrator, but a man with a bad memory, talking at a specific point in time, and tailoring his narrative to the demands of a specific auditor, with specific “idiosyncrasies of belief” (56).

As Peter Caracciolo points out, the traditional function of this kind of disjunction, in which a tale of the present frames a tale of the past, is to use the past to clarify the present. “In the past (once it has been identified)”, he writes, “lies the solution to the current problem”.<sup>13</sup> Rushdie’s narrator Saleem fulfils this traditional function to some extent, hunting through his past in an attempt to clarify events and explain his failures. Rushdie gives the model a characteristic twist, however, for it becomes increasingly apparent that an analysis of the past will not make the present more explicable, it will only intensify and exacerbate the feeling of dislocation. Whilst the disjunctive model of storytelling is being used, therefore, its traditional function is being confounded. No matter how much the narrator attempts to control his past, to understand it by telling it, it only becomes more opaque, more fractured and more inaccessible.



A third feature of *The Arabian Nights*, deriving from its chinese-box structure, is its resistance to closure and finality. No sooner is one tale finished than another tale starts up, or an earlier tale remains to be completed - so that the reader is given a sense that there can be no definitive end to the tale-telling. Such fluidity is founded upon the idea that



every character has a story to tell, since, every time a new character is introduced he or she (or occasionally it) is impelled to render themselves in narrative. The result of this is a fruitful, if seemingly chaotic, multivocality in which coherent stories can hardly be finished for the quantity of alternative voices or alternative tales pushing at the margins. In a novel such as *Midnight's Children*, this produces a narrative which can veer from the experiences of a cowardly poet hiding under the carpets, to the terror of a peepshow owner under attack for his faith, to the revelations of a fraudulent seer. There is no real end to these thousand stories, and one more story, and yet one more story, because there is no real end to the characters that can be introduced into the narrative. Even as the novel is drawing to a close there are still new characters and new stories jostling to get in that have to be forcibly excluded. Saleem notices a man carrying an umbrella 'having a shit' and observes: "[o]nce, when I was more energetic, I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour, and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the connections I needed to begin the process of weaving him into my life ... but now I'm disconnected, unplugged ..." (440). The waning of the story, it seems, can only result from the weariness of the narrator. There is no 'whole' or "impossible heap" to be achieved - the teller can only proceed by adding "grain upon grain" until death intervenes and cuts the narrative act short.<sup>14</sup> This is why Rushdie's hero-narrators, like Beckett's, are so often in a state of immanent decay - because their stories can only end with them. There is no closure or conclusion; the end of tale-telling in *Midnight's Children* or *The Moor's Last Sigh* will be death, as it is for Scheherazade. "[T]he end of all stories", as Angela Carter puts it, "... is death, which is where our time stops short. Sheherezade knew this, which is why she kept on spinning another story out of the bowels of the last one".<sup>15</sup>



As a formal entity, then, the text of *The Arabian Nights* offers the contemporary writer an alternative to the more traditional linear narrative. It does not progress according to the classical unities of place and time, but is cyclical, recursive, self-reflexive,

fragmentary, open, and episodic. As such, it operates as a useful precedent for the kind of novel Rushdie is writing which aims to question the capacity of narrative to represent the world in any final and stable way, and so question our capacity to establish final and stable truths. In showing how it is possible for a narrative structure to exist that simultaneously achieves closure and resists closure, the *Nights* provides Rushdie with the solution to one of his key narrative difficulties: how to represent history and autobiography without suggesting that history and autobiography can have a definitive, contained form. It permits a paradoxical means of representation that does not supply reality but intimates that reality is far more complex than is possible to represent.

It is not only on the formal level, however, that the *Nights* can be used to challenge the conventions used in traditional realist narratives, and all that they imply about the knowability and/or the objectivity of the world. It can also challenge the very notion of the text as traditionally understood. The tales of the *Nights* have no definable place of origin, they limit themselves to no one identifiable genre, and they seem to exist on the boundaries between several different types of medium. The stories are not the product of any one author and neither is any individual given implied authority over the text. The very concept of the author, sacred to the western tradition, is dislodged in favour of a network of competing voices in a state of continuous and productive multi-vocality.<sup>16</sup> As such, the collection proves an excellent precedent for the authorless text celebrated, most famously, by Roland Barthes, in which the role of the author, made central in bourgeois humanist literary-critical discourse, is 'desacrilized', so that the text can be seen as "not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."<sup>17</sup> It is a prime example of the 'ethnographic' text cited by Barthes in which "responsibility for narrative is never assumed by a person" as it is in the humanist tradition, "but by a mediator", an anonymous storyteller.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, then, it is Rushdie's knowledge of these tales, as much as the influence of theorists such as Barthes, that give his writing its distinctive form - it is as much traditional oral narrative as the discourses of structuralism and post-structuralism that have made the techniques used in *Midnight's*

*Children* appear experimental and innovative. As Rushdie himself puts it in interview: *Midnight's Children* uses a "form which is thousands of years old" and yet it "has all the methods of the post-modernist novel ... you become a post-modernist writer by being a very traditional one."<sup>19</sup>

### ✱ *The Arabian Nights and the Nation*

*Midnight's Children*, amongst other things, is a novel about fragmentation and strategies of containment. Not only does the structure of the novel reflect a continuous tension between dissolution and the drive towards coherence, many of the novel's themes and plot elements dramatise this struggle. Dr Aziz sees his wife piece by piece through a perforated sheet before he can possess her whole, Amina Sinai learns to love her husband bit by bit (apart from one bit that she can never love), and Saleem, who is "falling apart ... buffeted by too much history", must write to keep himself together. All these strategies of containment are treated as paradigms for one of the dominant political aims of Rushdie's novel: that of imagining a form which could contain the hybrid 'hotchpotch' nation of India. As Michael Gorra argues:

Rushdie attempts, with ... *Midnight's Children* ... to provide a vision of the country he wants India to be: an attempt to imagine a unifying form for the subcontinent as a whole ... [he] embodies both India's extraordinary diversity and the concomitant centrifugal force of its national form in the very structure of Saleem's narrative itself...<sup>20</sup>

This is no easy task, as Edward Said has argued, for the "classic rules about form or structure" will no longer be appropriate to nations such as India or Palestine because their experiences are 'discontinuous'. Instead of a classical structure, he argues, it will be necessary to "work through a kind of chaos or unstable form that will accurately express [the] essential instability" of the nations which are being represented.<sup>21</sup>

There are many different kinds of Palestinian experience, [Said tells Rushdie] which cannot all be assembled into one. One would therefore have to write parallel histories of the communities in Lebanon, the

occupied territories, and so on. That is the central problem. It is almost impossible to imagine a single narrative.

What is required for a conception of nationhood, he argues, is a model according to which the various discontinuities can be reconciled, or, if not reconciled, at least harmonised, and this, according to Said, can be indicated by the sort of narrative model Rushdie uses in *Midnight's Children*, a "kind of crazy history ... with all those little strands coming and going in and out."<sup>22</sup> Putting it less colloquially, Rushdie tells John Haffenden:

I was very interested in the idea of implying a multitude of stories in one's structure ... What I was trying to do ... was to make a plural form, since it seemed to me that I was writing about a world that was about as manifold as it's possible for a world to be. If you were to reflect that plurality, you would have to use as many different kinds of form as were available to you - fable, political novel, surrealism, kitchen sink, everything - and try to find an architecture which would allow all those different kinds of writing to co-exist.<sup>23</sup>

*The Arabian Nights*, as I have argued, provides just such an architecture, serving the somewhat paradoxical function of providing a strategy of containment that exemplifies the possibility of containing limitlessness and boundlessness within the parameters of a single fictional frame. It represents the possibility of containing the uncontainable, offering Rushdie a model for expressing heterogeneity in unity, and thus a means of giving structure to his national allegory.<sup>24</sup>

On one level, this idea that the nation can be structured along narrative lines is compelling. It seems to be an accurate description of post-war nationalism, in which, as Julia Kristeva argues, the chimeras of economic homogeneity, linguistic unity and historical tradition have broken down and been replaced by a "broader and deeper determinant" - or 'symbolic denominator' which can be defined as "the cultural and religious memory".<sup>25</sup> "The nation" as Homi Bhabha expresses it "fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor".<sup>26</sup> On another level, however, the notion that nation-making operates in the same way as fiction-making sounds a little absurd, because it suggests that the act of nation making is a

simple affair, as if it is possible to create the 'symbolic denominator' or 'metaphor' of nationhood as easily as it is to create fictions. Rushdie, acute to such problems, is quick to recognise the limitations of such a conception of nationhood and, even as he recognises the potentiality that 'imaginary homelands' hold for the writer, parodies it, by dwelling ironically upon the attempt to create the 'new' nations of India and Pakistan:

there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with the Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will - except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth - a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. (111)

Clearly Rushdie is representing this new imagined nation as a false myth; a grand narrative equivalent to the grand narratives of religion and capitalism. This model of nationhood becomes an escapist fantasy, he implies, because the will to nationhood is accompanied, like the Nietzschean will to knowledge, by a corresponding will to ignorance; a will to forget all the differences, the perplexities and valid historical ambiguities, that pose serious problems for unification. A true model of nationhood, Rushdie suggests, will be one that does not attempt to forget or ignore differences in order to create solidarity, but one that incorporates all the ambiguity, all the perplexity, and manages to exist as a nation in spite of, or even because of these. The *Nights*, as I have argued, provides Rushdie with a means of implying limitlessness even as it exemplifies containment; applied to this problem of national memory it also offers Rushdie a means of overcoming the 'will to forget', by demonstrating that the telling of the history of a nation is potentially infinite even as it is being relayed in finite literary forms.

“The idea of infinity” as Jorge Luis Borges writes “is consubstantial with *The Thousand and One Nights*” because the ‘one’ suggests that there will always be further tales to add on to those that have already been before:

the word thousand is almost synonymous with infinite. To say a thousand and one nights is to add one to infinity. Let us recall a curious English expression: instead of forever, they sometimes say forever and a day. A day has been added to forever. It is reminiscent of a line of Heine, written to a woman: ‘I will love you eternally and even after.’<sup>27</sup>

For Borges this infinitude operates as a form of the romantic sublime. The *Nights* induce in the reader a kind of ‘vertigo’ or awe in the face of the potentially never-ending that makes him or her alert to the metaphysical grandeur of the universe. For Rushdie, the *Nights* is also sublime, but its sublimity has more to do with national imaginings than transcendental imaginings. It implies that there can be a form for the novel, and metaphorically the nation, that does not require novels or nations to be monumental and ‘whole’. It suggests that there are infinite additions that can be made to the narrative or to the nation, without suggesting that there is any point at which the additions will add up to a totality. In Bhabha’s words, it is a means of, keeping open “ a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological or dialectical.”<sup>28</sup>

Bhabha explains this idea further by considering the number of people that ought to belong to a nation. Many nations and political groups, he argues, define themselves by limiting the potential number of people that are able to become citizens. To explain this he cites the nineteenth century opponents of the suffragette movement who, according to Claude Lefort, argued that the number of voters that would result from the addition of women to the electorate would threaten the “the substance of society”. Number, for them would break down unity and destroy identity.<sup>29</sup> Bhabha, by contrast, believes that the nation should never be closed off as to number, it should never be a thing based upon exclusion and marginalisation, it should be, potentially, infinitely inclusive. For Rushdie (like Borges) it is the number a thousand and one that represents this inclusive ideal. It is a magic, paradoxical number because it implies an infinitude, and yet remains a coherent,

imaginable amount. It imagines a whole, because it is a complete number, and thus corresponds to an idea of nationhood; and yet it leaves the whole incomplete because it imagines a whole without closure. Perhaps this is why Rushdie calls it a number “beloved of poets and detested by politicians” - because poetically, it represents an ideal, offering a utopian vision of infinite alternative realities; whilst politically it is a nightmare, since the politician, or at least, the tyrannical politician whom Rushdie is attempting to undermine, has to establish a view of the world based upon the exclusion, even the forced repression of “all alternative visions of the world” (212).

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that these ‘I’s who speak in Saleem’s head initially number 1001 - “the originally-one-thousand-and-one marvellous promises of a numinous midnight” (423). For just as *The Arabian Nights* contains a multiplicity of competing stories within the boundary of a single, if protean, text; so Saleem is able to contain all the voices of the *Midnight’s Children* (and thus all the voices of post-independence India) within the forum of his conference. At first, when Saleem hears these voices he is overwhelmed by the differences between them - primarily because of the problem of language differences: “[t]he voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil. I understood” says Saleem “only a fraction of the things being said within the walls of my skull.” Gradually, however, he begins to realise that “below the surface transmissions - the front-of-mind stuff which is what I’d originally been picking up - language fade[s] away, and [is] replaced by universally intelligible thought forms which far transcended words” (166). It is at this point that he begins to hear the separate voices coming from all points of the compass, North, South, East and West, uniting in his mind, and decides “to act as a sort of national network, so that by opening up [his] transformed mind to all the children [he can] turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another” (221). At a time when language riots were proving one of the principal divisive factors in the attempt to achieve nationhood, in other words, Saleem has discovered a forum within which all the differences can be contained and maintained, and the project of uniting the nation can begin.

This ideal of holding all the world together is also symbolised by Lifafa Das's peepshow, in which, he claims, all the world can be seen. "Come see everything" he yells, "Come see Delhi, come see India, come see!" (73). Such an attempt to unify all things, however, this "Indian ... urge to encapsulate the whole of reality" (75), is being parodied before it is even underway, for no sooner has Lifafa begun to display his marvels than he finds himself hounded to near death by a mob of Muslims because he is a Hindu. "Hindu! Hindu! Hindu!" chants a little girl who has been unable to see his show:

[a]nd chick-blinds are flying up; and from his window the girl's father leans out and joins in, hurling abuse at a new target, and the Bengali joins in in Bengali ... 'Mother raper! Violator of our daughters!' ... and remember the papers have been talking about assaults on Muslim children, so suddenly a voice screams out ... 'Rapist! Arré my God they found the badmaash! There he is!' And now the insanity of the cloud like a pointing finger and the whole disjointed unreality of the times seizes the muhalla, and the screams are echoing from every window, and the schoolboys have begun to chant, 'Ra-pist! Ra-pist! Ray-ray-ray-pist!' (76).

Evidently the differences between peoples, the valid historical and cultural divisions, cannot be reconciled in any simple way. Despite Lifafa's utopian hope of encapsulating a vast and ranging reality, class hatreds and race hatreds remain very potent actualities. It may be possible to offer a representation of India-contained, in picture postcards, or even in the novel, but containing it in a practical, political sense proves a far more complex and fraught process, that defeats even the boldest attempts at unification. In like fashion, then, Saleem's bold attempt to hold together all the diverse peoples of India in the forum of his conference, is doomed before it ever really starts. Before anything productive has begun, "the prejudices and world-views of adults" have begun to "take over" the children's minds, and the Conference - reflecting the nation - has become divided within itself:

I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian 'blackies'; there were religious rivalries; and class entered our councils. The rich children turned up their noses at being in such lowly company; Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables... (248)



Even as Rushdie expresses his ideal, therefore, he is recognising the difficulties, or even near impossibilities, that will be involved in acting upon it practically. This is perhaps why he only expresses the ideal as a fantasy, as a forum of children who meet together using telepathic powers - or as a unification that can only ever be imagined using the model of *The Arabian Nights*. At the same moment that Rushdie expresses his political ideal, in other words, he distances himself from it, even mocks it, by expressing it in magical fairy-tale terms. In this the *Nights* serves a curious dual function: it is both the principal means by which Rushdie expresses his national ideal of multiplicity-in-unity, and the principal means by which he offers a critique of that ideal. It is both the model of a utopian hope, and a recognition that that utopian hope is fantastically naive. That the hope was at least expressed, however, even though Rushdie maintains a critical distance from it - does give the novel a qualifiedly optimistic edge that allows for the possibility, centred in Saleem/Siva's son, that the next generation of midnight's children will come closer to the utopia; there is, as Rushdie tells Haffenden, "another, tougher generation on the way."<sup>30</sup> It may be a fantasy for the current generation of *Midnight's Children* to hope for unification, therefore, because they are politically naive and unprepared; for the second generation of *Midnight's Children*, however, such hopes may become more practical and realistic. "We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future" says Saleem, but Aadam Sinai, the son of Parvati and Saleem's double Shiva, "... will be is already more cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist." (410).

#### ✱ *The Nights* and Orientalism

This fictional process of giving form to national experience - exemplified in Rushdie's writing - is, according to Aijaz Ahmad, being feted by critics as the dominant trope in post-colonial literature:

[p]rocedures of privileging certain kinds of authors, texts, genres and questions seem to be under way now with regard to 'Third World Literature': the essential task of the 'Third World' novel, it is said, is to give appropriate form (preferably allegory, but epic also, or fairy tale, or whatever) to the national experience.<sup>31</sup>

This means that the texts which are being canonised as 'Third World' literature are texts which represent issues such as colonialism, nationalism and the powers and corruptions of rulers. "There is no gainsaying the fact that these are among the great questions of the age" writes Ahmad, but he goes on to complain that, as a result of this process of privileging "a whole range of texts that do not ask those particular questions in any foregrounded manner would then have to be excluded from or pushed to the margins of this emerging counter-canon."<sup>32</sup> This on its own, of course, is not a criticism of Rushdie. That his fiction deals with these questions does not mean that it can be blamed for the exclusion of fictions from the counter-canon that do not ask these questions. Ahmad's target, therefore, is "not so much Rushdie's intentions as ... the conditions of his production" that have represented his intentions as the only valid ones permitted the 'Third World' writer. However, Ahmad does, on the basis of this argument, go on to offer more specific criticisms of Rushdie's intentions. He argues, for instance, that Rushdie's claim to be using traditional Indian forms of storytelling is in some sense a falsification and a pretence. "The forms of narrativisation" he employs, argues Ahmad:

... are diverse enough for critics to conjecture that they belong, in essence, to a generally non-western, specifically Indian form of non-mimetic narration, derived, finally, from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and exemplifying, in the words of Raja Rao, the characteristically Indian penchant for obsessive digressions and the telling of an interminable tale. This, of course, is Rushdie's own stance in *Midnight's Children*. It has not been possible, though, to sustain this idea of quintessential Indianess in the *form* of Rushdie's narrative techniques; the lines of descent from European modernism and postmodernism are too numerous.<sup>33</sup>

It is true that Salman Rushdie claims to employ the form of Indian storytelling extensively in *Midnight's Children*. As we have seen he tells Günter Grass: "the thing that I've taken most from [India], I think, apart from the fairy tale tradition ... is oral narration".<sup>34</sup> In defence of Rushdie, however, he at no point claims that *Midnight's Children* derives from an exclusively Indian form, as Ahmad suggests, but is also ready to stress its roots in European narrative. The reason he mentions the Indian derivations repeatedly in interview,

as he himself points out, is because of the insistence with which European and American critics have traced its links to solely to the western novel. "I think that when the book is discussed in the west," he says in a lecture, "it seems to get discussed almost entirely in terms of a certain string of writers who always get hung around its neck like a kind of garland, which is, you know, Garcia Marquez, Günter Grass, Rabelais, Laurence Sterne, Cervantes, Gogol, etc." To counter this emphasis Rushdie promises to talk instead "about its Eastern literary ancestors and the sense in which it derives out of an Indian tradition".<sup>35</sup> This does not, of course, mean that he is denying its western derivation, on the contrary, he is emphasising the fact that his writing derives from both western and eastern sources in order to suggest that the two modes of writing are not as radically different or exclusive as Ahmad implies. While it may appear as if the novel most frequently cited as one of Rushdie's key sources, *Tristram Shandy*, represents the western novel writing tradition, and *The Arabian Nights* stands for eastern storytelling, further investigation reveals that these sources are not so mutually exclusive as first impressions might suggest. Sterne, as a catalogue of his library shows, kept an edition of Galland's *Contes des mille et une nuits*; and Peter Caracciolo has suggested, on this basis, that *Tristram Shandy* is influenced by the *Nights*.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the *Nights* has been so heavily infiltrated by western influences, since its arrival in Europe in the early eighteenth century, that Muhsin Mahdi has argued that it is "a book that can now be shown to have been compiled, one could almost say fabricated, during the eighteenth century, in Paris and Cairo".<sup>37</sup> Far from being completely separate traditions, therefore, eastern storytelling and the western novel have fed into each other, and shaped each other, in significant ways. As K. J. Phillips points out:

These eastern and western influences have actually been reverberating back and forth for centuries. Laurence Sterne, for example, acknowledges Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as one of his great teachers. The narrator of *Don Quixote*, in turn, claims that he is merely transmitting the story as he heard it from an Arabic author.

This, of course, is a hoax, as Phillips notes, but nonetheless it:

reminds us that Arabic forms did, in fact, influence the development of courtly love and medieval romance in the first place. And so from Arabic love poetry to European romance to Spanish picaresque, on to the British

eighteenth century novel, and back to India's (sic) *Midnight's Children*, we have come full circle, showing a fertile interplay from east to west and from west to east.<sup>38</sup>

This complication of origins is noted by Rushdie, who is only too willing to exploit the ambiguities generated by it. "I found in novels like *Tristram Shandy*" he notes with evident approval "... a very similar spirit [to Indian storytelling]. So it seemed to me that what I was finding out was the kind of writing that stood, so to speak, at the frontier between both the cultures."<sup>39</sup>

Herein lies the flaw in Ahmad's argument: Rushdie at no point sets himself up as a 'Third World' writer, and at no point claims that he is attempting to, or qualified to, capture an exclusively Indian experience. In fact, he recognises his status between two (or more) cultures, and attempts to analyse the ambiguities that result from his culturally hybrid position. He then uses these ambiguities to undermine the idea that there is some essential difference between two cultures. He recognises valid cultural and historical differences between them, but rejects the binaristic approach to cultural relations that represents them as irreducibly opposite.

A related issue, here, that also needs to be dealt with in a discussion of Rushdie's choice of sources, is the role that *The Arabian Nights* has played in the discourse of Orientalism. Ever since Antoine Galland's translation first began to appear in Europe in 1704 the *Nights* has remained a touchstone for images of the alien, the bizarre and the monstrous: the "wicked magician" who "exercises ... demoniac gifts", the lavish hall in which "an infinity of censers" containing "ambergris, and the wood of aloes, [are] continually burning", and the ravishing princess whose "ten thousand charms of the most dazzling lustre" may be "discovered through [a] thin gauze".<sup>40</sup> Each of its major European translators, furthermore, has used it as a kind of footnote intended to support various theses concerning the nature of the Arabs. Galland was also co-author of the *Bibliothèque orientale*, which proved a major source for Orientalist writing in the subsequent century;<sup>41</sup> Edward William Lane, aside from publishing extensive anthropological notes upon the

*Nights*, making it into a “a pretext for a long sociological discourse on the east”,<sup>42</sup> also authored *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) which was influential in shaping early Victorian perceptions of the Orient; and finally, Sir Richard Francis Burton, perhaps its most notorious translator, also published several volumes of travel writing, and styled himself as an expert upon eastern culture. All these men were striving to be ‘scientific’ in their approach, and their editions of *The Arabian Nights* were a product of this pseudo-science, intended to give credence to various anthropological and historical suppositions. Throughout its European history, therefore, *The Arabian Nights* has been presented as a voyeur’s window upon the east; revealing the secret (but supposedly true) lives of the Arabs through the safe and mediating distance of fantasy. In a *Spectator* article, published in 1866, a commentator remarks that “most Englishmen [get] their knowledge of the Orient from the *Bible* and *A Thousand One Nights* (sic)” - and, improbable though it may seem, it has even been suggested that the *Nights* had a considerable influence on British imperial politics.<sup>43</sup> This view is confirmed by W. H. D. Rouse in his introduction to the Nister-Dutton edition, when he suggests that the *Nights* is worth studying because “it is not possible to govern well without understanding the governed.”<sup>44</sup>

It is arguable, on this basis - in support of Ahmad’s argument - that far from using ‘Indian’ sources, Rushdie is simply using the western conception of what an ‘eastern’ text might be, and unwittingly reconfirming Orientalist prejudices. But again, this is an unjust accusation. In the first place, I would argue, Rushdie is fully aware of the compromised nature of the *Nights*, and on one level is trying to reclaim it from Orientalist discourse as a valid representation of Indian culture. This he does by stressing the relationship between the *Nights* and other Indian story collections that have not been “infiltrated by the culture of empire” to such a high degree.<sup>45</sup> In *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, Rushdie notes that Whisky Sisodia’s films are “drawn from the *Katha-Sarit-Sagar* [*The Ocean of Streams of Story*]” - and takes the opportunity to inform us that this text is “longer than *The Arabian Nights* and equally as fantasticated”.<sup>46</sup> In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, similarly, when Haroun and his father stay on the houseboat *Arabian Nights Plus One*, it is not, as might

be expected, *The Arabian Nights* that Rashid finds in his bedroom, but the *Ocean of Streams of Story* - which Rushdie states explicitly to be “written in a language Haroun could not read” (51). In both cases Rushdie is drawing attention to a more ‘authentic’ Sanskrit source for the *Nights* in order to place a renewed emphasis upon its non-western origins and focus upon the role it has played, and continues to play, in Indian culture. He takes *The Arabian Nights* - a text which has been appropriated by Europe, and used to represent the ‘east’ in perverse and unflattering ways - back to its sources which, whilst not exactly pure and unpolluted, are nevertheless more Indian than they are English.

Simultaneously Rushdie is not reluctant to *use* the idea that the *Nights* has become a text implicated in the discourse of Orientalism. In fact, I would argue, he employs the *Nights* precisely because of its compromised authenticity; for such an ambiguous text, originating in the ‘east’ and shaped by the ‘west’, becomes an excellent tool for the exploration of his own cultural position. It enables him, as Timothy Brennan expresses it, to “reflect the uncomfortable similarities between himself and an adventurer stationed in London selling oriental wares to a public”.<sup>47</sup> If we [expatriates like himself] look back to Indian culture, Rushdie notes:

we must do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost .... It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.

But there is a paradox here. The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed ... The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present.<sup>48</sup>

The *Nights* works in *Midnight's Children* as just such a broken mirror. Like his own writing it is also a complex mixture of east and west; and, in exploring its complexities - embracing its ambiguities - Rushdie is able to examine the ambiguities of his own position without retreating into nostalgic simplicities about cultural authenticity. As a text which has, in itself, become hybrid as a result of the complex interactions that have taken place

between Indian and European culture, it becomes the perfect model with which to explore the kinds of identity that have been generated by these complex interactions.

### ✱ Conclusion

To sum up: *The Arabian Nights*, as a source, allows Rushdie to maintain a complex and often paradoxical position. Because it offers a model of narration that simultaneously contains a body of narratives and implies that the potential narratives it could contain are infinite; it sets a precedent for a conception of a nation that contains a distinct body of subjects, but puts no limit upon the potential number of subjects that could belong. Furthermore, because it, as a text, both belongs to a distinct cultural tradition, yet simultaneously demonstrates the impurity and perplexity of all cultural traditions, it shows how the individual can belong to a nation and not belong at the same time. Rushdie has no intention of reconciling these paradoxes, because to reconcile them would be to falsify and simplify experiences which are complex and are perplexing. Instead, he uses storytelling to convey experiences in ways that do not diminish or reduce their ambiguity. He conveys them, in Bhabha's words, "at the insurmountable extremes of storytelling", and it is here that "the question of cultural difference" can be encountered "as the perplexity of living and writing the nation."

Recently I visited an exhibition of Anish Kapoor's sculptures at the Hayward Gallery in London. Viewing the overwhelming, vast abstract forms I began to ask myself why Kapoor, an Indian migrant living in London, should be so keen to achieve – as his press release puts it - the physical embodiment of the sublime in his work. Why, moreover, was a detail from one of these monolithic forms on the cover of Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, and what was it about Kapoor's work that had seduced Bhabha to give a speech for the opening of the exhibition?<sup>49</sup> The reason, it struck me, was the same reason I have identified for Rushdie's use of *The Arabian Nights* in his narratives. These sculptures, like the *Nights*, provide a concrete means of envisioning and embodying, in a finite form, that which is 'anti-final'. To borrow a phrase from Lyotard, they offer a means of inventing

“allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.”<sup>50</sup> In Kapoor’s use of monolithic forms and in Rushdie’s use of the *Nights*, in other words, the Kantian sublime is being put to political uses. It provides the migrant with a means of understanding belonging, without having to define belonging as something that is exclusive; it enables the displaced individual, for whom nationalism is a threat and an anathema, to imagine a form for nationhood.



- <sup>1</sup>J. C. Mardrus and Powys Mathers, trans., The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1964) vol. 1, 345 and vol. 4, 536. Spellings of Scheherazade are not homogenous; for convenience's sake I adopt Rushdie's spelling, except where it is spelt differently in quotation.
- <sup>2</sup>For accounts of this process see Gerhardt, 39-40; the chapter 'The Storyteller's Craft,' in Robert Irwin, The Arabian Nights: A Companion (London: Penguin, 1995) 103-119; and David Pinault, Story-Telling Techniques in The Arabian Nights, Studies in Arabic Literature 15 (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 13-15.
- <sup>3</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Midnight's Children and Shame,' Kunapipi 7.1 (1985): 7-8.
- <sup>4</sup>Rushdie, 'Midnight's Children and Shame,' 8.
- <sup>5</sup>Rushdie, Midnight's Children (1981; London: Cape, 1993) 11. All subsequent references will be to this edition and included in the text.
- <sup>6</sup>The term is borrowed from Irwin, 113.
- <sup>7</sup>Gerhardt, 46.
- <sup>8</sup>Pinault, 18.
- <sup>9</sup>Pinault, 16-18.
- <sup>10</sup>Rushdie, 'Midnight's Children and Shame,' 3.
- <sup>11</sup>Their first European translator, Antoine Galland published volumes one and two of Les Mille et une nuits in 1704 and continued translating and publishing them until his death in 1715. The final two volumes were published posthumously in 1717. Although tales had undoubtedly circulated prior to this date (i.e. those brought back from the crusades) this was the first time that Europe became aware of the Nights in a substantial form.
- <sup>12</sup>Irwin, 278.
- <sup>13</sup>See Peter Caracciolo, ed., The Arabian Nights in English Literature: Studies in the Reception of The Thousand and One Nights into British Culture (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 38. Caracciolo is here referring to the Jataka, an earlier collection that was incorporated into the Nights.
- <sup>14</sup>The quotations are from Samuel Beckett, Endgame, The Complete Dramatic Works (1986; London: Faber, 1990) 93. There is a legend, cited by Burton, that no-one can finish The Arabian Nights without dying, perhaps this is because it is in the structural definition of the Nights that the stories can go on and on generating further stories until the narrator or the auditor actually dies. Richard Burton 'Terminal Essay,' A Plain and Literal Translation of The Arabian Nights' Entertainments, now Entitled: The Book of the Thousand Nights and A Night, trans. Burton, vol. 10 (Kamashastra: Benares, 1885) 166.
- <sup>15</sup>Carter, Expletives Deleted, 2.
- <sup>16</sup>The talented story-teller, like Scheherazade, has a good memory, and a good way of re-telling an ancient story, but she does not create the tales she tells. She is only one link in a long and interwoven chain. "[C]reativity among The Arabian Nights redactors", writes Pinault "... often consisted not in the writing of new stories ... rather craftsmanship was displayed by how well a redactor arranged his inherited stories to fit the overarching theme of the narrative-cycle into which they were inserted." Pinault, 32.
- <sup>17</sup>Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' Image, Music, Text, trans. Stephen Heath (1977; London: Flamingo, 1984) 146.
- <sup>18</sup>Barthes, Image, Music, Text, 142.
- <sup>19</sup>Interview with David Brooks, Helix 19 (1984): 56. Cited in Cundy, 104.

- <sup>20</sup>Michael Gorra, After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 113-7.
- <sup>21</sup>Rushdie is summarising Said's argument here. 'On Palestinian Identity: A Conversation with Edward Said,' Imaginary Homelands, 168.
- <sup>22</sup>Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 179.
- <sup>23</sup>Haffenden, 239 & 248.
- <sup>24</sup>Salman Rushdie is not the first writer to offer the narrative structure of The Arabian Nights as an allegory for social cohesion. Pier Paolo Pasolini the Italian film director argues that the Nights provides a "structural parallel, between models of storytelling and models of social and economic aggregation", thus revealing "an ethical dimension of style." This parallel is exemplified in Pasolini's film Il Fiore delle Mille e una Notte (1974). (Quoted from Patrick Rumble who is discussing this theory as developed by Pasolini in Empirismo erectio, Allegories of Contamination: Pier Paolo Pasolini's Trilogy of Life (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996) 64). For a discussion of the ways in which Rushdie also uses classical Indian myths as "forms of appropriate national style" see Timothy Brennan, Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1989) 113.
- <sup>25</sup>Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' The Kristeva Reader, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 188-9.
- <sup>26</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 139.
- <sup>27</sup>Borges, 45-6.
- <sup>28</sup>Bhabha, Location, 163.
- <sup>29</sup>Claude Lefort, The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 212-4. Cited in Bhabha, Location, 161.
- <sup>30</sup>Haffenden, 244.
- <sup>31</sup>Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (London: Verso, 1992) 124.
- <sup>32</sup>Ahmad, 124.
- <sup>33</sup>Ahmad, 126.
- <sup>34</sup>Rushdie, 'Fictions are Lies,' 15.
- <sup>35</sup>Rushdie, 'Midnight's Children and Shame,' 6.
- <sup>36</sup>This information is reported by Henri Fluchère, Laurence Sterne: From Tristram to Yorick, An Interpretation of Tristram Shandy, trans. Barbara Bray (London: OUP, 1965) 162. See also Caracciolo, 2 (n. 62).
- <sup>37</sup>Muhsin Mahdi, The Thousand and One Nights (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 1.
- <sup>38</sup>K. J. Phillips, 'Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children: Models for Storytelling, East and West,' Comparative Literature East and West: Traditions and Trends: Selected Conference Papers, ed. Cornelia N. Moore and Raymond A. Moody, Literary Studies East and West (Hawaii: U of Hawaii P, 1989) 202.
- <sup>39</sup>Rushdie, 'Fictions are Lies,' 15.
- <sup>40</sup>Respectively: Thomas de Quincey, Collected Writings, ed. David Masson, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Black, 1889) 129; William Beckford, Vathek, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: OUP, 1983) 109; and Anthony Hamilton, 'The Four Facardins: An Arabian Tale,' Fairy Tales and Romances, trans. M. Lewis, et al. (London: Bohn, 1849) 94.
- <sup>41</sup>Galland became assistant to Barthélemy d'Herbelot on the dictionary in 1692 and completed it after his death in 1695. It was finally published in 1697.

<sup>42</sup>Rana Kabbani, Europe's Myths of Orient (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986) 37. It is just such scholarly annotation, claims Kabbani, that make what is an essentially frivolous text appear "an important and culturally reflective one." (43).

<sup>43</sup>Caracciolo, 159-160.

<sup>44</sup>Caracciolo, 41.

<sup>45</sup>See Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto, 1993) 253.

<sup>46</sup>Rushdie, Satanic Verses, 342.

<sup>47</sup>Brennan, 86.

<sup>48</sup>Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 10-12.

<sup>49</sup>This speech is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. See Homi K. Bhabha, 'Anish Kapoor: Making Emptiness,' Anish Kapoor, essays by Homi K. Bhabha and Pier Luigi Tazzi (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) 11-41.

<sup>50</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; Manchester: U of Manchester P, 1984) 82.

CONCLUSION:  
HAPPY ENDINGS AND UTOPIAS



*After a short story, a fable or tale, sketch or exemplum, a moral draws out an unpretentious, localised, and provisional bit of wisdom, soon to be forgotten. Morals often, heedlessly, contradict each other. Together, they make a rustling of maxims, a cheerful lament: that's life.*

*Today, life is fast. It vaporises morals. Futility suits the postmodern, for words as well as things. But that doesn't keep us from asking questions: how to live, and why? The answers are deferred. As they always are, of course. But this time there is a semblance of knowing: that life is going every which way.*

Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>1</sup>



In 1985, after seeing Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie together at a reading of *Nights at the Circus*, the writer and journalist Helen Simpson decided to set up a 'talk' between them for *Vogue* magazine. One of the things that emerges most strongly from this interview is their mutual passion for politics and their desire to use fiction to challenge and question existing political arrangements. Both of them lament the apathetic approach towards politics that was becoming widespread in Britain in the 1980s. "It's a real British phenomenon," says Carter, "this passionate distaste for writers and artists who become involved in public issues." "Have you noticed" adds Rushdie "how, in England, 'activist' is seen as a term of abuse? As though it were wrong to be active. As if a passivist would cut a more interesting figure":

**SR:** One of the things that was always attractive about this country was its tradition of dissent, of stepping outside the bounds of conformity and looking again - and of saying, it's not like that, it's like this. One of England's great gifts to the world. What does concern me now is the way in which social criticism has more or less stopped.

**AC:** Yes, something happened during the seventies. It showed in literature too. Culture lost its nerve. Everything became more insular. People started to want to read about the fluff in their navel. Rather than about the fluff in other people's navels. Or about the fluff in the cosmic navel.

**SR:** Before that, in the sixties, people believed there were always alternatives. It was a creative way of thought. Now people accept loss of energy and loss of faith in their ability to change their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this cynical attitude towards the capacity of the British for social criticism, however, both writers do go on to suggest that the novelist or artist still has the power to challenge such apathy. The writer will never change the world, Carter observes when Simpson asks them if they write to change things, "it's only *bad* books which change the world. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ... and even *they* do it only by accident". But still, the writer has the power to affect people. "You can't set out to change the world with a book" says Rushdie. "What you *can* do is change something small inside the minds of a few people. Whatever book you read that makes a really profound impact on you in some way changes you forever."<sup>3</sup> It is this aspect of storytelling, I think, more than anything else, that characterises the fiction of Carter and Rushdie: a belief that it does still have a social and political relevance, and a willingness to use it to cajole, bully and surprise people out of their stubbornly held perceptions in order to encourage a more inclusive and reciprocal social attitude.

One of the problems that I have used to link Carter's and Rushdie's work in this thesis, however, focuses upon the difficulties involved in their desire to make their novels and stories politically relevant and 'effective'. How can writers who reject a coherent conception of selfhood, and a coherent unified conception of community support political causes that seem to require a coherent agent and a vision of an ideal community? How, furthermore, can writers who embrace relativity, and argue that no one way of understanding the world is any better than another, argue that a society without racism, or a society without sexism, is preferable to a society with? One possible answer to this dilemma, I have suggested, lies in their use of fairy tale, and can be formulated in two distinct ways. Firstly, their use of fairy tale allows them to, to some extent, side-step the

problem. Rushdie and Carter do not believe that individuals or societies develop in a progressive dialectic manner, so they present dialectical progression in the form of a fairy tale, or some related fantastic narrative. This enables them to write narratives of progress and development, that culminate in the ideal social and personal integration of their principal characters, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from such narratives on the basis that they are 'only fairy tales'. This effectively makes them into the 'private ironists', described by Richard Rorty, who recognise the need for coherent ideals in the social and political sphere, whilst they mock and ridicule such idealistic hopes in their own personal sphere.<sup>4</sup> In this sense they have no valuable contribution to make to a practical, institutable political agenda - they can only indicate that though practical political agendas must be instituted, they are inadequate, because they will inevitably fail to take account of the infinitely various interests of those that they are meant to legislate. This is a fairly negative and cynical explanation of Carter and Rushdie's use of fairy tale. More positively, one could argue that they do offer a constructive response to the problem, via fairy tale, if the fairy tale is seen not as a definitive map of progress but as a small, localised narrative, that will not offer any final answers, but can at times help us to make sense of our situations in the passing moment. Within small narratives, within local stories, in the Lyotardian sense, there can be a progression and a development, but this progression and development is not being presented as the inevitable and natural form of narrative or experience - it remains a 'provisional bit of wisdom, soon to be forgotten.' Storytelling enables us to think in local and contingent ways without the need to assume that all stories will aggregate into one universal tale. Some stories can come together as bodies of work, some can enable us to understand one another, some can create a sense of solidarity, but they do not, in order to do this, need to accord to a grand plan. "For public purposes", as Rorty argues, "it does not matter if everybody's final vocabulary is different, so long as there is enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express the desirability of entering into other people's fantasies as well as into one's own."<sup>5</sup> In other words, human solidarity is created by imaginative identification, not through a realisation of objective commonality: solidarity is created, not made - and one of the principal agents

of that creation is narrative. Again, as Rorty argues, the turn against theory and towards narrative is “emblematic of our having given up the attempt to hold all sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary. It [amounts] to a recognition of ... the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling.”<sup>6</sup>

This idea is expressed concisely by Mark Ravenhill’s central storytelling character Robbie in his recent play *Shopping and Fucking*:

I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we’re all making up our own stories. Little stories. But we’ve each got one.<sup>7</sup>

Echoing Jimmy Porter’s ‘[t]here aren’t any good, brave causes left’, Robbie laments the passing of a time when there was something to have belief or faith in; something to give the individual a *raison d’être*.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Jimmy Porter, however, in a change that marks the difference between 1956 and 1996, it is not the loss of the actual cause that is the root of Robbie’s distress, but the loss of the narrative coherence implicit in the cause. There is never any supposition that the cause in itself had value or meaning, his distress arises from the fact that the myths are no longer large enough, or convincing enough, to account for everybody. Grand narrative has been swapped for *petits récits*. A universal explanation is no longer tenable, so we have settled for the proliferation of explanations, a mass of smaller stories, that offer no wider, generalised vision of coherence. On one hand, this is an alienating realisation - we do not all connect to one large story, we have no necessary coherent basis for association. But, as Robbie suggests, there is also room for optimism because it means that everybody has a different story to tell. The grand old stories that he marks the passing of are all founded upon the implicit exclusion of *other* stories and *other* belief systems; they are partial ideologies that have established their appearance of universality by the forced denial of alternative competing ideologies. Given this partiality, the breakdown of such stories can only be a good thing, since it testifies to the

abandonment of exclusivity, and the acceptance of heterogeneity. Beliefs are no longer formulated through the forced exclusion of others, because each belief system is regarded as a different story which remains positional and partial. Whilst individuals are not connected because their stories are essentially the same, furthermore, the fact that they all have a unique story means that they can still connect if they take the trouble to try to understand or empathise with other stories. Human solidarity, therefore, is still possible even if it is not based upon a universal experience, because human solidarity can be forged through the attempt to hear stories which are different from our own. This is one of the intentions that lies behind attempts to proliferate stories by contemporary writers of metafiction: to encourage awareness of the multitude of different subject positions that are available, and, through the narration of some of those different subject positions, create a basis for solidarity where none existed previously. This is the utopian suggestion that Carter and Rushdie are attempting to make in their use of narrative, storytelling and, above all, fairy tale: that it is possible to create societies based not upon exclusion and competition, but upon inclusion and dialogue; not upon monolithic belief systems that by definition resist variation and modification, but upon variant expressions, passing tales, that reflect diversity and multi-vocality.

The fairy tale, as a narrative which was formulated through a process of interaction and communication and which makes no claim to permanent transcendental truth-telling, thus becomes an ideal narrative model for this contingent approach to solidarity. Fairy tales are little stories, passing stories, *petits récits* that, unlike mythologies do not aggregate into greater, grander narratives, but remain temporary, even frivolous expressions of identity. They exist as a means of conveying the ideas, attitudes and convictions of the teller - but they do not elevate those ideas, attitudes and convictions into universal precepts. The fairy tale remains partial and, however entrancing or seductive they are in the telling, the reader or listener is always aware that other tales exist which reflect different systems of value and different ideals.



## ✿ Happy Endings

The ambiguity involved in Carter and Rushdie's approach to fairy tale is evinced most clearly in their attitude towards the happy ending. Once again, as in their approach to other features of the genre, they combine a mistrust of the convention with a simultaneous willingness to exploit it for their own ends. It is a useful device, and worth appropriating, but only once device has been subjected to a thorough investigation and demystification.

The happy ending is one of the most vital generic features of the fairy tale. The transformation and metamorphosis of the hero or heroine, I have suggested, is one significant continuity in the genre, the *success* of this transformation must evidently be another. Not only must the hero or heroine be willing to change their lot in life, they must also be able to achieve that transformation. Of course, in the vast range of fairy tales, there are exceptions to this rule. Little Red Riding Hood, in Perrault's tale, comes to an unfortunate end in the jaws of a ravenous wolf, and the man who meets the magic flounder in the Grimm tale ends up with nothing to show for it.<sup>9</sup> But these are just two exceptions amongst thousands of tales from many different periods and many different places that see their protagonists happily married, in charge of a kingdom, or simply in front of the biggest banquet they have ever seen in their lives. The persistence of this pattern in fairy tale is affirmed by almost every commentator. Vladimir Propp, analysing the tale from a formalist perspective, argues that the most basic narrative movement in the fairy tale is from lack to liquidation of lack; psychoanalytic commentators such as Bettelheim translate this idea into a metaphor for the confrontation and resolution of psychological problems, and commentators with a sociological bent, such as David Buchan, hold that the tale must end happily in order to affirm and validate the values of the group to which the tale belongs.<sup>10</sup> "The successful solving of a dilemma facing the protagonist", Steven Swann Jones concludes, "is essential to the plot of the fairy tale. *This happy ending is such a basic and important aspect of the genre, it may be regarded as a ... definitional feature.*"<sup>11</sup>

The prevalence of this definitional feature in fairy tale explains why writers with a distinctive political agenda are drawn to it. It offers the model of a quest in which the protagonist is transported from an insufficient state to a sufficient one. It offers a model of *progress* - and progress, no matter how cynical a political writer might be, must be regarded as a desirable end to political pursuits. In the fiction of both Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie, the appeal of this model of progress is certainly apparent. Fevvers, the Chance sisters, Saleem, Haroun and (as we shall see shortly) Saladin Chamcha, are all tantalised with the fairy tale promise of improvement, advancement and success. At the same time as they are hoping for fairy tale transformations and fairy tale endings, however, they are also - each one - aware that life is rarely like a fairy tale. The fairy tale map of progress may be desirable as a representation, it may be useful as a means of encouraging hope and resisting apathy (the most pertinent of contemporary dangers, as Carter and Rushdie both argue) but it is also a falsification of experience because it refuses to recognise the importance of external, social conditions. Whilst their protagonists desire happy endings, and in some cases get them - therefore - the happy endings are always wrapped in qualifications and disclaimers. The Beauties in Carter's 'Beauty and the Beast' stories, Fevvers and the Chance sisters, as we have seen, end their narratives in happier states than they begun. Beauty and Fevvers, in particular, follow explicitly fairy tale trajectories towards their goals of happiness, but in both instances the happy ending seems forced and unconvincing. In 'The Courtship of Mr. Lyon', the kitsch prettiness of the ending, which sees the lovers walking in their garden whilst "the old spaniel drowzes on the grass, in a drift of fallen petals", forces the reader to recognise its narrative conventionality.<sup>12</sup> In *Nights at the Circus*, similarly, Fevvers gets her prince, but only after Lizzie has reminded us about the perils of happy endings. "Don't you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes?" she warns. "True lovers' reunions always end in a marriage" (280). In both cases the happiness of the heroines is linked to their ability to overcome barriers created by gender hierarchies and unite with their partners on a basis of equality and reciprocity. Carter evidently wants this kind of conclusion, because it is a conclusion

that affirms her own beliefs; it supports her feminist politics. At the same time, however, as a cynic, as a writer who owes her principle intellectual allegiances to writers such as Nietzsche and Foucault, she does not want to suggest that life always turns out this way. She wants a happy ending for her own heroes and heroines, but she does not want to reaffirm the enlightenment idea that life is characterised by progress towards higher and higher goals. As a result she employs the happy ending in some of her narratives, but simultaneously parodies that happy ending by recognising concurrently that happy endings are nothing more than unrealistic and idealistic consolations.

This preoccupation with the device of the happy endings is also apparent in Rushdie's novels and stories. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, particularly, the concept of a happy ending is treated to a thorough investigation. "Initially, before I found the key," Rushdie told David Tushingham:

I thought ... [i]t might be a more grown up story in which there is not the conventional happy ending, and Haroun and his father come back from the adventure close and able to live by themselves and you just accept that mummies and daddies get divorced. That was my original intention.

But, as Rushdie goes on to say, the story:

...simply willed a happy ending. It suddenly struck me that I couldn't impose this modern sensibility on a story which was demanding a happy ending. And I thought: Actually, I've never written a happy ending before. I'd suddenly become very interested in the subject of happy endings.<sup>13</sup>

The result of this self consciousness, in regard to the ending of the tale, is a great deal of confusion as to whether the reader is supposed to accept the conclusion of the tale or not. On the one hand Haroun does get a happy ending; the city that cannot remember its name recalls it, and all the people of the city suddenly cheer up. Haroun's mother, more importantly, returns to live with him and his father. On the other hand, these happy endings are qualified by a plethora of provisos and stipulations. The Walrus tells Haroun that "[h]appy endings are much rarer in stories, and also in life, than most people think" (201) and that all happy endings can do is "cheer things up for a while" (202). More problematically, Haroun realises that his happy ending is invalid because it has been

synthesised by the Walrus and his eggheads. “Don’t you get it?” Haroun says to his father, “[i]t isn’t real. It’s just something the Eggheads got out of a bottle. It’s all fake. People should be happy when there’s something to be happy about, not just when they get bottled happiness poured over them from the sky” (208).

Haroun’s argument here reflects a standard response to utopianism. He is almost, at the end of the tale, reaffirming the doctrine of Khattam-Shud (which the entire narrative, to that point, has been striving to refute) by asking what the point of things that aren’t even true is. Rushdie’s answer, presumably, would be akin to the standard defence of utopianism: they are useful because they can help us reflect upon who we are and what we believe. They can also help us to “learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled.”<sup>14</sup> Wish fulfilments, utopias, happy endings, in short, let us know what we want. But Haroun’s question remains in the reader’s mind, even after the story is over. Was the happy ending real, or wasn’t it? Should we trust in the utopian outcome, or would that be an act of self-delusion? The ending of *Haroun*, as a result, serves to signify Rushdie’s distance from his own utopian, fairy tale suggestions. This doesn’t mean that he rejects all of the fairy tale suggestions made in *Haroun*, merely that he qualifies them by recognising that they *are* fairy tale suggestions. The reader is given a happy ending but, like the happy ending of *Nights at the Circus*, it comes with a series of qualifications that remind us that fairy tale endings are nothing more than conventions and wish-fulfilments. They are useful for writers like Carter and Rushdie because they allow them to suggest that it is possible for individuals and even societies to progress from an unsatisfactory state of affairs to a satisfactory one - but at the same time they are dangerous if they include the implication that human life and human society always and inevitably progresses towards a state of perfection. “Utopia contains power, the power of transformation,” writes Ruth Levitas, “... but utopia is also impotent in that its negative content inevitably leads to failure and disillusion. This contradictory nature of utopia ... calls for its transcendence.”<sup>15</sup>

## ✱ Saladin and the Wonderful Lamp

In Rushdie's comments to David Tushingham, quoted above, he suggests that the only happy ending he has written to date is in *Haroun*. In fact, this is only part true. *The Satanic Verses* offers a happy ending to one of its two central protagonists, Saladin Chamcha, and allows the reader to experience half a happy ending. Since this happy ending is mediated, once more, through the lens of fairy tale, and since the happy ending for one character is explicitly compared and contrasted with the unhappy ending of another, it will be useful to finish this thesis with a brief consideration of this text, and the use that Rushdie makes in it of 'The Tale of Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp' (AT 561).

'Aladdin' begins with the death of Aladdin's natural father, as a result of his grief over Aladdin's waywardness. Aladdin then falls under the influence of a Moroccan sorcerer, who claims to be his uncle and promises "to be a father to him, in place of the dead".<sup>16</sup> This sorcerer, true to his word, looks after him for a time, buying him magnificent clothes, and even fitting a shop out for him, but ultimately it transpires that the Moroccan has evil intentions and is plotting to get his hands on Aladdin's birthright, a treasure 'written in Aladdin's name', which can only be obtained when Aladdin recites his father's name and his father's father's name before that. The plot is fairly well known, but what is interesting in Galland's version (the oldest surviving) is the way in which he stresses the issue of paternity.<sup>17</sup> The sorcerer is clearly a dark substitute for the father and the treasure that he unwittingly bequeaths Aladdin is a symbol of the father's legacy to the son, ratified by generations of men before him. It is this treasure, the power of the genie, representing a masculine potentiality, that enables Aladdin to look after his mother, obtain a bride for himself, and finally become a father in his own right. Given this theme of fatherhood and conflict, the comparison A. S. Byatt makes between 'Aladdin' and the British 'Jack the Giant Killer' cycle (AT 328) is a telling one.<sup>18</sup> Both tales begin with the absence of the legitimate father, and then explore the ways in which the son confronts and defeats the father's evil replacement, stealing from him that which is necessary to provide wealth, means and a wife. In both cases those aspects of paternity that the son finds threatening

are split off from the natural father, and embodied in a villain, whom the son is able to kill without compromising the ideal of the good father.

The attitude to the father in these tales, one of 'reaction-formation', can clearly be related to the attitude to the father in the Oedipus myth, as it is used by Freud to describe the process of identity formation undergone by boys in late infancy. The young boy at first identifies himself with the father as a model for what he himself ought to be - but this identification "takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father" when he sees that he is in competition with the father for the affections of the mother.<sup>19</sup> The child then fortifies himself to repress the Oedipus conflict by "borrow[ing] strength ... so to speak, from the father" - and it is in the process of this repression that the child is able to "consolidate the masculinity" in his own character. In Freud's words:

Along with the demolition of the Oedipus complex, the boy's object-cathexis of his mother must be given up. Its place must be filled by one of two things: either an identification with his mother or an intensification of his identification with his father. We are accustomed to regard the latter outcome as more normal; it permits the affectionate relation to the mother to be in a measure retained. In this way the dissolution of the Oedipus conflict would consolidate the masculinity in a boy's character.<sup>20</sup>

In symbolic terms, a very similar process takes place in 'Aladdin' or 'Jack and the Bean Stalk': a young boy is first seen living with, and dependent upon, his mother, after the death of his father. Some form of grotesque masculine power then appears, which he defines himself against, and yet steals from in order to gain the strength to defeat. It is only with the defeat of this power that the boy is able to take up the role of the adult male, transferring his affections from the mother to a more legitimate object of sexual desire (a princess), and becoming the principal earner of the family. The only major difference between the narrative of the fairy tale and the Oedipal rite of passage is that - to soften the blow - the father, as father, is allowed to die and be replaced by an evil variant whom the child can define himself against unproblematically.

In Rushdie's novel *Changez Chamchawala* represents the domineering father, Salahuddin Chamchawala (later Saladin Chamcha) the suffering son. Changez represents

all that is enviable in the father; he is powerful, he is successful, he can “smell money from a hundred and one miles away”; Salahuddin represents the Oedipal child who sees his father as a ‘giant’.<sup>21</sup> For the young Salahuddin this paternal gigantism isn’t a threat initially, for the giant owns a magic lamp which, he assures the young boy, will one day be his. “The promise of the magic lamp”, as Rushdie’s narrator observes, “infected Master Salahuddin with the notion that one day his troubles would end and his innermost desires would be gratified, and all he had to do was wait it out” (36). It is only when it becomes apparent that this fairy tale wish is not going to be fulfilled, “that his father [will] smother all his hopes unless he [gets] away,” (36-7) that the hatred begins to develop, and it is at this point that the father begins to mutate into the sorcerer, the “crock of gold” turning suddenly “into a sorcerer’s curse.” (42). When Saladin returns to India some years later, the transformation has been completed, and the son finds not the father, but the villain, “his nose and lips curled, by the withering sorcery of the years, into a feeble simulacrum of his former ogre-face” (67). The accusation he levels against his father is that he, like a sorcerer, was the one to withhold his birthright:

Of what did the son accuse the father? Of everything ... [but] ... [a]bove all, of magic-lampism, of being an open-sesamist. Everything had come to him, charm, women, wealth, power, position. Rub, poof, genie, wish, at once master, hey presto. He was a father who had promised, and then withheld, a magic lamp. (69).

There are two crucial differences between the fairy tale and Rushdie’s narrative. Firstly, in the fairy tale, Aladdin obtains the lamp near the beginning, whilst in the novel Saladin doesn’t obtain it until the end. Secondly, in the fairy tale the father and the sorcerer are separate beings, in the novel they are compounded into one. Both of these differences would suggest that, on one level, *The Satanic Verses* inverts the wish fulfilments offered by the fairy tale; for whilst in ‘Aladdin’ there is a consolatory distance between father and sorcerer, in *The Satanic Verses* there is none; and whilst ‘Aladdin’ is the tale of a boy who gets a magic lamp, *The Satanic Verses* is the tale of a boy from whom it is kept back. These differences, however, are only superficial, and it is possible to argue that Rushdie is, in fact, simply making the themes of the fairy tale more explicit. The

sorcerer and the father in 'Aladdin' are clearly both manifestations of the father figure, the sorcerer being created out of the child's disillusion with the father, so it is a logical step for Rushdie, in his more literal narrative, to keep them as the same person and make the transformation from father to sorcerer a product of Saladin's changing perceptions. Likewise, although Aladdin is given the lamp at the very beginning of the tale, and Saladin must wait till the end, it remains the case, in both instances, that it stands for the difficulties involved in getting and holding on to the power represented by the father. In both cases the protagonists endure considerable trials in their quest to obtain the lamp; in both cases furthermore, despite the difficulties involved, the two protagonists do in the end manage to acquire it.

There is a dual reading of the story being offered by Rushdie here which is now familiar. On the one hand the tale of Aladdin and the lamp represents an escapist fantasy for Saladin that leads him astray. In this reading, the tale stands for his deluded belief that the lamp is easy to obtain, and that his father will simply give it to him when he comes of age. On the other hand, Rushdie also recognises that Aladdin, like Saladin, endured considerable suffering in his quest for the lamp - and in this reading the tale comes to stand as a valid paradigm for Saladin's experience: showing the protagonist exactly how hard it is going to be to get what he wants. This duality results from two simultaneously held but contradictory approaches to the fairy tale; one that emphasises the belief that the fairy tale is a fantastical piece of wish fulfilment, not to be mistaken for real life; and one that reads the fairy tale as a narrative which recognises the difficulties and complexities that need to be confronted by the growing child. In the first, far away lands, magic lamps and magicians are the key features of the fairy tale, and the message is: if you want the lamp then *magically* it will be yours. In the second, far away lands, magic lamps and magicians are only the external trappings of the fairy tale and underneath it is the harsh tale of a masculine rite of passage, of Oedipal struggle against the father, and of final accession to maturity, self knowledge and reconciliation. If Saladin reads the fairy tale as a means of escape it is not useful to him, it simply enables him to evade the issues he should be facing up to. If, however, he reads the fairy tale as a symbolic rendering of the maturation



process that can enable him to comprehend his relations with his father more accurately it becomes a potent, guiding narrative. Far from being a disillusionment, on this reading, a careful study of the tale of the lamp would have assisted Saladin in his quest. It would have told him exactly how difficult it was going to be to wrest the lamp from his father but would also have consoled him with the knowledge that if he were to persist he would get the lamp in the end. "This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form", Bettelheim argues:

that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence - but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.<sup>22</sup>

It is this dual emphasis that accounts for the ambiguous approach to fairy tale apparent in the final chapter of *The Satanic Verses*. The title of this section, 'A Wonderful Lamp', is not without irony; for this section, far from being wonderful and fantastic, is the most realistic and most galling of the novel, because it deals with the illness and death of Saladin's father. "There was no place for djinns or ghouls or afreets here", notes Rushdie, "no spooks or fancies could be permitted. No magic formulae; just the impotence of the pills." (525). At the same time, however, the title is not entirely ironic, because this *is* the chapter in which Saladin finally gets the magic lamp, and achieves his fairy tale wish. He rejects the fairy tale escapism of his childhood, "he could no longer believe in fairy tales. Childhood was over" (547). Yet, at the same time, he achieves the goal of the fairy tale and thus, symbolically, maturity. Even as the fairy tale is being explicitly rejected as a valid mediator of experience, the novel is offering fairy tale conclusions and fairy tale consolations. Even whilst the expectation that life will follow a fairy tale pattern is being mocked, Saladin's life has taken on the structure of the fairy tale; of progressive, dialectical growth towards reconciliation and integration. From a state of initial innocence, of blind faith in the benevolence of the father, he has progressed through a liminal period of disillusionment and hatred of the father, towards an advanced state of maturity that allows for reconciliation with the father. This is done with full Rushdian irony, of course, in self-awareness, and in self-parody. The djinn that appears when Saladin in a moment of

superstition rubs the magic lamp to complete “the process of renewal, of regeneration” is not a supernatural spirit of the earth or the air, it is Zeeny Vakil, “his very own djinn” (534). The kind of reconciliation achieved, furthermore, is very different from the kind that is conventionally offered in fairy tales. Heralded by Zeeny, proponent of the utopian hope of the novel that a national culture can be created based upon an “ethic of historically validated eclecticism” (52), it sounds more like the eclectic unity-in-multiplicity that is Rushdie’s ideal:

Saladin felt hourly closer to many old, rejected selves, many alternative Saladins - or rather Salahuddins - which had split off from himself as he made his various life choices, but which had apparently continued to exist, perhaps in the parallel universe of quantum theory. (523)

Nevertheless, it remains true that a kind of fairy tale resolution, a kind of happy ending, has been attained. Saladin, a fractured, confused, fragmented individual in London has passed through this liminal zone and become renewed and regenerated in India.

Zeeny’s timely re-entry into the story also serves to remind us that the issue of regeneration has a cultural dimension. Saladin’s reaction against his father was not just a private, Oedipal experience, it was also a reaction against, and a rejection of the fatherland. His rejection of his father’s values, was also a rejection of India, and the brutalisation of his patronymic represented an attempt to anglicise himself and deny his Indian roots - Salahuddin Chamchawala becoming Saladin Chamcha. His final re-integration, therefore, represents, not only a personal, psychological resolution, but also a resolution of competing strains of his national identity. Having abandoned India and attempted to become a Vilayeti, he is now able to return and find an acceptable balance between his conflicting cultural allegiances; his strands of east and west. In the words of the narrator, he has learned how to bridge the “immeasurable distance” between ‘Indianness’ and ‘Englishness’ (41). He denies neither, he remains hybrid, but he has found a way - through Zeeny and the Lamp - to cope with his hybridity. In the character of Saladin, in other words, Rushdie is embodying the utopian hopes of the novel: hopes that there can be some form of personal integration, hopes for a reconciliation of different

aspects of national identity, and hopes for a reconciliation between easternness and westernness.

It will be apparent, given this reading, that 'Aladdin' in *The Satanic Verses* fulfils a similar function to *The Arabian Nights* in *Midnight's Children*. As shown in the previous chapter the *Nights* provides a model of containment that allows different stories, divergent narratives, to coexist within a single fictional frame, and thus becomes a model for the nation which contains all the differences and perplexities of its people under the umbrella of a single state. In like fashion, 'Aladdin' becomes a narrative that allows Saladin to resolve the various conflicts that have made him into a multiple man and exist in spite of those conflicts. Like the chimeran graft that he notices whilst channel hopping, he too realises that he can grow "vigorously out of a piece of English earth"; "he, too, [can]cohere, send down roots, survive" (406). In both cases Rushdie is using fairy tale to offer the possibility of a satisfactory resolution of the various discontinuities that fracture and fragment his novels.

Given this reading *The Satanic Verses* is probably the most optimistic work in Rushdie's 'India Trilogy', since it does embody the possibility of unification, even if this possibility is only offered ironically via a fairy tale. *Midnight's Children* offers the reader no final resolution or reassurance, leaving us with the gradual dissolution of the central character, Saleem, and *Shame* ends with the suggestion that the successive regimes of India and Pakistan will go on and on annihilating themselves as a result of corruption and violence. Saladin's reconciliation with his father, by contrast, and corresponding reconciliation with his Indian heritage, does offer a kind of closure; a kind of happy ending. "The denouement of *The Satanic Verses*" as Catherine Cundy argues "provides a sense of closure and resolution that is uncharacteristic ... of Rushdie's earlier works ... with their variously pessimistic and apocalyptic endings".<sup>23</sup>

To remind us that the happy ending is not the only possible or inevitable outcome, however, Rushdie also intertwines, with Saladin's successful tale of progression and development, a tale that is markedly less optimistic, and is more in tune with the pessimism of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. This is the tale of Gibreel Farishta, who,

like Saladin, left India on the aircraft Bostan and fell into the babel of London, where he became a multiple, schizophrenic being. Unlike Saladin, however, Gibreel doesn't find his final paradise of Gulistan, and he is unable to reconcile the numinous voices in his head. When he opens up the magic lamp, shortly after Saladin, he does not find Zeeny, the djinn of unification and reconciliation, but a gun, which proves to be a djinn of destruction:

Gibreel rubbed his hand along side of the magic lamp: once, twice, thrice.

The revolver jumped up, into his other hand.

*A fearsome jinnee of monstrous stature appeared*, Salahuddin remembered. *'What is your wish? I am the slave of him who holds the lamp.'* What a limiting thing is a weapon, Salahuddin thought ... The true djinns of old had the power to open the gates of the Infinite, to make all things possible, to render all wonders capable of being attained; how banal, in comparison, was this modern spook, this degraded descendant of mighty ancestors, this feeble slave of a twentieth-century lamp. (546, Rushdie's italics)

In this instance the fairy tale device does not offer hope and consolation, it is prelude to Gibreel's suicide. On the one hand, the spirit of the fairy tale, in the form of Saladin's djinn, is a helpful and benevolent one. On the other hand, this spirit, in the form of Gibreel's djinn, proves a destructive one. Either Saladin reconciles his voices, and the djinn from the lamp proves a spirit of unity; or Gibreel is unable to reconcile his, and the spirit proves an agent of destruction.

### ✱ Conclusion

Angela Carter, I have argued, uses the fairy tale as a key means of imagining utopian and idealistic scenarios. In the first chapter I suggested that the use of alternative fairy tales, and the multiplication of the kinds of fairy tale it was possible to hear and tell, enabled Carter to revise the model for social harmony reflected in the dominant canonical tales and offer instead a model of 'strange harmony', which establishes a basis for the solidarity of previously marginalised groups. In the second chapter I argued that Carter used the fairy tale in such a way as to highlight the positive transformational potential of rite of passage narratives, combining rites of passage endured by young men, with rites of

passage endured by young women, in order to show, again, how the two can come together in fruitful union without the desires of one determining the desires of the other. In the third chapter I have attempted to take more of an overview of Carter's work on fairy tale, showing how she treats it as a form of the carnivalesque that we should be suspicious of to some degree, but which can also enact productive disruptions, disturbing settled hierarchies to allow for the institution of more inclusive and tolerant social orders. In all cases, the fairy tale is used to create a vision of a society that is hybrid, tolerant and multiple. It is used to create a space outside convention, outside the everyday, in which characters who would not usually come into conjunction are able to form new relations, or 'strange harmonies', that challenge the 'official', 'accepted' ideas of what it is possible to conjoin.

Salman Rushdie employs the fairy tale in a comparable way. In *Haroun* the ideal of a multi-cultural society in which the beliefs and outlooks of many different cultures mingle freely and productively together achieves vivid illustration in the image of the Sea of Stories. In *Midnight's Children* likewise the ideal of a nation that exists as a coherent entity, yet does not define itself by the exclusion and alienation of certain kinds of identity, is expressed through *The Arabian Nights*. In *The Satanic Verses*, finally, 'Aladdin' is used to illustrate the ideal cultural integration of Saladin Chamcha. For both Carter and Rushdie, then, worlds, societies, scenarios created on the model of fairy tale become the most potent and vivid reflections of their political hopes and ideals.

As I have suggested, however, the fairy tale serves a double function in providing the foundation for these worlds because it gives Carter and Rushdie a medium through which to represent utopia, and simultaneously shows how fantastical such utopias would have to be. It allows them to be hopeful whilst simultaneously, implicitly, saying (to repeat the words Rushdie uses in *Shame*) "I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need ... take anything I say too seriously."<sup>24</sup> On some occasions this act of distancing has a very real and practical application. Rushdie was already under a sentence of death when he wrote *Haroun* and was probably anxious not to exacerbate his misfortune. The primary reason for their concealment of idealism in fairy tale guises,

however, is more to do with intellectual pride than physical security. They aren't simply defending themselves bodily against tyrants, they are also defending themselves as thinkers against ridicule. It is evident that the ideals they express, at the time they express them, are not realistically achievable. They are suggesting that this is how it should be, rather than this is how it is, and as a consequence are toying with ideas that do not have an immediate practical application. To protect themselves against charges of naivety or simplistic thinking, therefore, they have distanced themselves from their own tentative suggestions by couching them in narratives which allow them to express utopian hope whilst simultaneously avoiding utopian naivety. It enables them to say: this might be so, this could be so, *but* ... this is only a fairy tale and we must remember that, in the majority of cases, this will not be so.

This ambivalent approach to the fairy tale is economically expressed by the leitsatze that runs throughout *The Satanic Verses* 'it was so and it was not so', a formula derived, as Rushdie tells us, from 'old stories,' (35) which can be found in sources as diverse as the Arabic oral narrative and, intriguingly, the English 'Mr. Fox' which so appealed to the imagination of Angela Carter. It is a formula that summarises, very concisely, the attitude of both writers to the fairy tale. They are on one level 'not so', being frivolous fantasies of escapism, taking place 'once upon a time in a land far away', and yet, simultaneously, 'so', because they are symbolic renderings of the social values of the communities that have generated them. It is this ambiguity, as I have been arguing, that makes the fairy tale into a potent narrative tool in the hands of these politically motivated writers, since it enables them to formulate ideals whilst recognising the element of wish fulfilment in these formulations. It is this tendency to use fairy tales as a tentative but nonetheless productive means of envisioning new and utopian possibilities for identity that, I would add, represents a significant trend in contemporary appropriations of the genre. Having concentrated solely upon the work of Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie it is evident that any conclusions I have drawn are specific to their writing. I wish to suggest, however, that these two writers can be used to illustrate a recent change in approaches to

fairy tale, and that the patterns of ambiguity and duality I have identified in their use of the genre might serve as a starting point for an analysis of other contemporary texts.

<sup>1</sup>Lyotard, preface, Postmodern Fables, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (1993; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1997) viii.

<sup>2</sup>Helen Simpson, 69.

<sup>3</sup>Helen Simpson, 69.

<sup>4</sup>See Rorty, Chapter 4, 'Private irony and liberal hope.'

<sup>5</sup>Rorty, 92-3.

<sup>6</sup>Rorty, xvi.

<sup>7</sup>Mark Ravenhill, Shopping and Fucking, Royal Court Writers Series (London: Methuen, 1996) scene 12, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup>John Osborne, Look Back in Anger, Faber Library 9 (1957; London: Faber, 1996) Act III, scene 1, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup>See Zipes, Beauties, Beasts and Enchantments, 58-60; and Zipes, Complete Fairy Tales, 72-79. There is a convincing argument to be made that these are in fact 'moral' tales and not 'fairy tales' precisely because they lack a happy ending. The aim of the tales is to offer a warning to their readers - don't run away with your desires, don't ask for more than your lot.

<sup>10</sup>See respectively Propp, ; Bettelheim, 24; and Buchan, 979.

<sup>11</sup>Jones, 17. The emphasis is not mine.

<sup>12</sup>Carter, Bloody Chamber, 51.

<sup>13</sup>Tushingham, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia (New York: Allan, 1990) 8.

<sup>15</sup>Levitas, 103.

<sup>16</sup>Mardrus, vol. III, 376.

<sup>17</sup>The first known source of 'Aladdin', surprisingly, is Galland's French version which, his diary tells us, he first heard in 1709 from a Maronite Christian named Hanna Diab in Aleppo. Two Arabic versions of the tale have since been found, purporting to be authentic Arabic originals, but both of these have proved to be forgeries, based upon Galland's French. For further details of the textual history of 'Aladdin,' see Husain Haddawy, introduction, in Muhsin Mahdi, ed., The Arabian Nights, trans. Haddawy (New York: Norton, 1990) xiii; and Mahdi, The Thousand and One Nights, 31-3.

<sup>18</sup>A. S. Byatt, 'Nights to Remember: Arabian Nights Vol. 2: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories,' The Sunday Times 17 Dec. 1995, 5.9.

<sup>19</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id,' in The Freud Reader, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989) 640. For the variations in this process as it is experienced by developing girls, according to Freud, see 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,' Freud, Reader, 670-8.

<sup>20</sup>Freud, Reader, 640.

<sup>21</sup>Rushdie, Satanic Verses, 36. All subsequent references will be included in the text.

<sup>22</sup>Bettelheim, 8.

<sup>23</sup>Cundy, 104.

<sup>24</sup>Rushdie, Shame, 70.



## Appendix I

### Selected Landmark Dates in the Development of the Fairy Tale

c. 850 AD	Earliest surviving fragment of <i>The Arabian Nights</i>
1085	Bhatta Somadeva: <i>Katha Sarit Sagara</i>
1368	Oldest existing manuscript of Giovanni Boccaccio's <i>Decameron</i>
1387	Chaucer begins <i>Canterbury Tales</i>
1550-5	Giovanni Straparola: <i>Le Piacevoli Notti</i>
1634-6	Giambattista Basile: <i>Lo Cunto deli Cunti overo Lo Trattenemiento de' Peccerille</i>
1690	Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy: <i>Histoire d'Hippolyte, Comte de Douglas</i> including the tale 'The Island of Happiness'
1695-8	Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier: <i>Oeuvres Meslées</i>
1697	Charles Perrault: <i>Histoires ou contes du temps passé, or Contes de ma Mère L'Oye</i>
1697-8	Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy: <i>Les Contes des fées</i>
1704-17	Antoine Galland's translation of <i>The Arabian Nights</i> into French
1729	Robert Samber's English translation of Perrault's tales
1740	Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve: <i>Les Contes marins ou la jeune Américaine</i> , which includes <i>La Belle et la Bête</i>
1757	Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont: <i>Le Magasin des Enfants</i>
1786-1789	<i>Le Cabinet des Fées</i> (42 volumes)
1811	Jonathan Scott's English translation of <i>The Arabian Nights</i>
1812-1815	The Brothers Grimm: <i>Kinder und Hausmärchen</i>
1823	Edgar Taylor's English translation of Grimm
1826	Carlo Collodi: <i>Pinocchio</i>
1837	Hans Christian Andersen begins to publish <i>Fairy Tales</i>
1838-41	Edward Lane's English translation of <i>The Arabian Nights</i>
1846	Hans Christian Andersen: English Translation of <i>Fairy Tales</i>
1847	Giambattista Basile's tales translated into English as <i>The Pentamerone, or The Story of Stories, Fun for the Little Ones</i> , by J. E. Taylor
1850	John Ruskin: <i>The King of the Golden River</i>
1864	George MacDonald: <i>The Light Princess</i>
1865	Lewis Carroll: <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i>

- 1872 George MacDonald: *The Princess and the Goblin*
- 1885-8 Richard Burton's English translation of the *Arabian Nights*
- 1888 Oscar Wilde: *The Happy Prince*
- 1889-97 Andrew Lang: *The Blue Fairy Book* to *The Pink Fairy Book*
- 1890 Joseph Jacobs: *English Fairy Tales*
- 1891 Oscar Wilde: *A House of Pomegranates*
- 1892 W. B. Yeats: *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*
- 1894 Joseph Jacobs: *More English Fairy Tales*
- 1899-1904 J. C. Mardrus French translation of *The Arabian Nights*
- 1900 Frank L. Baum: *The Wizard of Oz*
- 1924-28 C. H. Tawney translation of *Katha Sarit Sagara* into English as *The Ocean of Story*
- 1937 J. R. R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit*
- 1954 N. J. Dawood's English translation of *The Arabian Nights*
- 1956 Italo Calvino: *Fiabe Italiane*
- 1970-1 Katharine Briggs: *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*
- 1990 Muhsin Mahdi's edition of Syrian manuscript of *The Arabian Nights*
- 1991-2 Angela Carter edits *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, 2 vols.

## Appendix II

### Selected Literary Texts Involving Fairy Tale Published Since 1960

- 1958-64 Chinua Achebe, *African Trilogy*
- 1962 *Labyrinths*, Jorge Luis Borges
- 1963 *The Collector*, John Fowles  
*The Unicorn*, Iris Murdoch
- 1967 *The Magic Toyshop*, Angela Carter  
*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- 1969 *Pricksongs and Descants*, Robert Coover  
*Grimm's Fairy Tales*, David Hockney, Prints.
- 1970 *The Donkey Prince*, Angela Carter  
*The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Jorge Luis Borges
- 1971 *Transformations*, Anne Sexton
- 1972 *Chimera*, John Barth  
*Princess Hynchatti and Some Other Surprises*, Tanith Lee
- 1973 *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*, Russell Hoban  
*The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales*, Jay Williams
- 1974 *The Girl Who Cried Flowers*, Jane Yolen
- 1977 *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, trans. Angela Carter  
*Der Butt*, Günter Grass  
*Beginning With O*, Olga Broumas
- 1979 *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter
- 1980 *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, Doris Lessing  
*Riddley Walker*, Russell Hoban
- 1981 *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie  
*Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison
- 1982 *Neptune Rising*, Jane Yolen  
*Stories for Free Children*, Letty Pogrebin  
*Sleeping Beauty and Other Favorite Fairy Tales*, trans. Angela Carter  
*Arabian Arabian Nights and Days*, Naguib Mahfouz
- 1983 *Waterland*, Graham Swift  
*Shame*, Salman Rushdie  
*Red as Blood Or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer*, Tanith Lee

- Telling Tales*, Sara Maitland
- 1984 *Arabian Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter
- 1985 *Disenchantments An Anthology of Modern Fairy Tale Poetry*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder
- Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson
- 1986 *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood
- Bluebeard's Egg*, Margaret Atwood
- Don't Bet on the Prince*, ed. Jack Zipes
- 1987 *A Book of Spells*, Sara Maitland
- The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson
- 1988 *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie
- The Lost Father*, Marina Warner
- The Fifth Child*, Doris Lessing
- Charades*, Janette Turner Hospital
- 1989 *Sexing the Cherry*, Jeanette Winterson
- 1990 *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. Angela Carter
- Possession*, A. S. Byatt
- The Life and Death of My Lord Gilles de Rais*, Robert Nye
- Nursery Rhymes*, Paula Rego (illustrations)
- Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Salman Rushdie
- 1991 *Wise Children*, Angela Carter
- The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, John Barth
- Pinocchio in Venice*, Robert Coover
- 1992 *The Last Magician*, Janette Turner Hospital
- The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. Angela Carter
- 1993 *The Robber Bride*, Margaret Atwood
- 1994 *The Oxford Book of Modern Fairy Tales*, ed. Alison Lurie
- The Daydreamer*, Ian McEwan
- East, West*, Salman Rushdie
- The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, A. S. Byatt
- Once Upon a Time*, John Barth
- The Skrieker*, Caryl Churchill
- 1995 *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salman Rushdie
- Moonlight into Marzipan*, Sunetra Gupta
- 1997 *Kissing the Witch*, Emma Donoghue

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