ANGELA CARTER AND THE PORNOGRAPHY DEBATE

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RESUMO: Esse ensaio pretende discutir se os contos de fada de Angela Carter presentes no livro “O quarto do Barba Azul” tomam uma posição consistente em relação ao debate feminista sobre pornografia, com base nos estudos feitos por Patricia Duncker (1986) e Cristina Bacchilega (1997).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: contos de fada, feminismo, pornografia.

ABSTRACT: This essay intends to discuss whether Angela Carter's fairy tales in "The Bloody Chamber" take a consistent position in relation to the ‘pornography debate’, using ideas from Patricia Duncker (1986) and Cristina Bacchilega (1997).

KEY-WORDS: fairy tales, feminism, pornography.

The pornography debate among feminists opposes liberal feminists to radical feminists. Radical feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, understand pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women” (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 121) and see causal properties between pornography and rape, where pornography is the theory and rape is the practice. Therefore, pornographic material should be regulated, i.e., censored. Liberal feminists, as Lynn Segal, are against censorship and the dichotomies between men and women, rejecting gender stereotypes and defending consensual sexual freedom. Pornography, seen under this light, could be a means for new possibilities of erotic/gender identification for women.

Duncker and Bacchilega have divergent points of view on whether the rewriting of traditional fairy tales on Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber assumes a feminist perspective or maintain the patriarchal model of relationships. Duncker faults Carter for the choice of fairy tale genre and the way she keeps faithful to their structure when rewriting them. She argues that for this reason they
can only reproduce the patriarchal values rather than modify them. Bacchilega calls attention to the fact that the rewriting gives voices to characters and situations previously unheard. And it is on listening to those voices that we may find ways in which they break the paradigm of patriarchy and head for Duncker’s new gender/erotic identities.

Duncker uses Andrea Dworkin’s ideas to reinforce that fairy tales cannot be a tool to change the gender/erotic stereotypes. They are working tools given to children in order to imprint them rather than a means to provoke them to think and challenge them. The usage of fairy tales as a pedagogical tool began in the Renaissance, when the notion of childhood and education forgotten during the Middle Ages came to life again. The folk tales collected and written within communities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by aristocracy became ‘educational propaganda’. During this process, they were modified according to the current ideology to satisfy the dominant class.

Throughout history, they stress the differences between men and women, clearly showing that the first are superior to the latter. The man is active and dominant, while the woman is passive and submissive. This is the only characteristic woman share, although being different one from each other. They offer very little ground to differentiate women: they can be the evil stepmother, the beautiful princess, but they are all eventually submissive. In Dworkin’s words

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\text{The lessons are simple and we learn them well. Men and Women are different, absolute opposites [...]. Where he is active, she is passive [...]. There are two definitions of woman. She is the victim. There is the bad woman. She must be destroyed. The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed or punished or nullified (1974, p. 79-80).}
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Therefore, gender stereotypes are perpetuated within their ‘strait-jacket’, even in Carter’s rewriting.

Duncker believes that Carter could have gone much further than she does when rewriting the tales. She analyses the tales to say that they are expressing sexual desire, but male desire. She argues that

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\text{pornography, that is, the representation of overtly sexual material, [...] uses the language of male sexuality. [...] Carter envisions women’s sensuality simply as a response to male sexual arousal. She has no conception of women’s sexuality as autonomous desire (1986, p. 228).}
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Duncker believes that in The Tiger’s Bride, a variation of The Beauty and The Beast, although the heroin is sold to the highest bidder, she becomes the mirror image of the feline predatory sexuality. However, the passage
he dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his hand against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. ‘He will lick the skin off me!’ And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin…

(CARTER, 1995, p.67)

indicates that the girl is aware of her sexuality and that the fact that she becomes an animal for lust is a sign of equality between them, a “peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction” (CARTER, 1995, p. 67) and does not portray the woman as a “willing victim of pornography” (DUNCKER, 1986, p. 228).

A careful reading of the other stories also supports this point of view. The first piece, which gives name to the book, is a rewriting of the Bluebeard’s tale. Where we could be led to believe that the girl is naïve and does not know anything about her husband sadomasochist tendencies, there are several indications that she is not so innocent and knows what she is dealing with even before the marriage, as this passage clearly demonstrates

I saw him watching me...I’d never seen, or else never had acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it [...] And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away (CARTER, 1995, p. 11)

After she discovers the bloody chamber, she is desperately making plans to get rid of the castle and does not give them up even when he arrives back from his pretended trip. The fact that her mother comes to rescue her, instead of the brothers of the original version is so utterly feminist that even Duncker recognizes as the greatest point, saying that “here, Carter is transforming the sexual politics of the fairy tale in significant ways” (1986, p. 235). And in the end, the girl comes back to live with her mother and the blind piano tuner (a symbolic castration), for the marriage with a disabled man is the only way a woman can be equal to a man.

Duncker (1986, p. 235) points out that Carter could have played more with the fairy tales and with the ambiguities of the sexual language that they carry. One example is the fact that Little Red Riding Hood’s name in French is masculine: Le Petit Chaperon Rouge. Another example will be discussed later, when Duncker discusses the symbolism of the girl entering the house where the wolf is lying on the bed. In the end, Duncker (1986, p. 236) claims that “we need the space to carve out our own erotic identities, as free women”.

For Cristina Bacchilega (1997), these identities emerge from the new texts. For her, rather than only rewriting to adapt the tales to a different readership, postmodernist revision raises questions and voices previously forgotten or left aside. In her words

Postmodern revision is often two-fold, seeking to expose, make visible, the fairy tale’s complicity with the ‘exhausted’ narrative and gender ideologies and, by working from the fairy tales’ multiple
versions, seeking to expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexploited (BACCHILEGA, 1997, p. 50)4

She defends Carter against critics that blame her for keeping to patriarchal attitudes by analysing the three versions of Little Red Riding Hood that had existed before (the folk oral one, Perrault’s and Grimm brothers’) and the two versions that Carter wrote (The Werewolf and The Company of Wolves). The oral and the literary tales mix with the rewritten versions, rendering situations and characters never thought possible.

In the oral tradition5, the girl goes to her grandmother’s house, but there is no warning from her mother’s side not to stray from the path. She meets the wolf in the woods and each of them goes to the grandmother’s house by a different way. The wolf arrives first, kills the grandmother and when the little girl arrives, she eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her grandmother and the wolf asks her to strip off her clothes and to lay with him. Then there’s the litany about the parts of the body and when he answers that such a big mouth is to eat her with, she is clever enough to realize on her own that this is a dangerous situation and she must go. She tells him she needs to go outside and runs back to her house.

For Bacchilega (1997, p. 56), considered in its context6, this folk tale had an actual reason, for wolves were a true danger for peasants and the belief in werewolves was current. It symbolizes a child’s ability to defeat danger. The central relation is the one of the girl to the grandmother: to eat her grandmother’s flesh and to drink her blood means to incorporate her grandmother’s knowledge and to take her place in society.

In Perrault’s version7, the little girl’s mother orders her to take some food to her grandmother. On the way, she meets the wolf and tells him where she is going, the wolf goes to the grandmother’s house by another path and eats her. When the girl arrives, she lies on the bed with him (believing him to be his grandmother) and he eats her too. In the end, there is a moral to the story

Young children, as we clearly see,
Pretty girls, especially,
Innocent of all life’s dangers,
Shouldn’t stop and chat with strangers.
If this simple advice beats them,
It’s no surprise if a wolf eats them.

And this warning take, I beg:
Not every wolf runs on four legs.
The smooth tongue of a smooth-skinned creature
May mask a rough and wolfish nature.
These quiet types, for all their charm,
Can be the cause of the worse harm. (PERRAULT, 1993, p. 34)

According to Bacchilega (1997, p. 57), Perrault’s tales were “written for the aristocracy, with a style to satisfy the highly cultivated adult reader, and morals meant to educate the young in civilized behaviour. In order to do so, he bans the passage where the girl eats her grandmother and also the way she escapes from the wolf, for there could not be any way out. The girl (and women in general) is seen as a victim and seducer, the red colour being an evidence of her complicity with the devil.
The brothers Grimm’s version introduces the mother’s warning to the little girl: “stay on the path and remember, don’t talk to strangers (GRIMM, 1992, p. 151). The girl meets the wolf and he tricks her by encouraging her to pick flowers to her grandmother, so that he could arrive at her house first. After eating the grandmother, the wolf also eats the girl and falls asleep and snores loudly. However, a huntsman passing by notices it and goes into the house to check the old lady. The huntsman cuts the wolf’s belly, finds the girl and her grandmother alive and replaces them with wood, so that the wolf drowns into the water when he wakes up.

Besides the warning from the beginning of the tale, another difference is at the end: the girl stays alive, but she needs someone (a man) to rescue her from danger. Eventually, the girl acknowledges that she has learnt a lesson: “as long as I live I will never leave the path, or speak to strangers, and I will do as my Mother tells me, like a good girl (GRIMM, 1992, p. 155).

Bacchilega acknowledges the main feature of the oral version concerning sexual desire and male/female stereotypes: that the girl strips and lies on the bed with the wolf. Suppressed from the literary tales, it comes again in The Company of Wolves. Indeed, this version has almost the same line when the wolf tells the girl what to do with her red shawl (a symbolism for having periods, therefore being a woman): “Throw it on the fire, dear one. You won’t need it again” (CARTER, 1995, p. 117). In the tale written by Carter, the girl is aware of her sexual desire, she willingly loses a bet to be able to give the man/wolf a kiss. And she is also aware that “the wolf is carnivore incarnate” (CARTER, 1995, p. 110).

As in all stories, the wolf arrives first to the grandmother’s house. In The Company of Wolves, he has sex with her and eats her. The death of the grandmother symbolizes the passing of generations: the old ones have to die for the young ones to assume their role in the society. When the girl arrives at the house, the wolf/man is lying on the bed, waiting for her. The fact that he is lying and that she enters the house is one of the aspects Duncker blames Carter for not having perceived. It goes contrary to the patriarchal model of submissive woman waiting for the active man. It reinforces what was said before about the girl being aware of her sexuality. She strips off and recites the famous litany about the parts of the body

What big arms you have.
All the better to hug you with.

[...] What big teeth you have!
[...] All the better to eat you with.
The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire. (CARTER, 1995, p. 118).

When he answers that his big mouth is to eat her with, she laughs because she knows that there is no “to fuck” or “to be fucked”. Both parts will enjoy it, since they have the same desire for flesh, and not dead meat. The abrupt ending “See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.” offers, as Bacchilega (1997, p. 64) suggests, that the story is no longer a “closed system”. When the girl abandons her victim-like propriety, the wolf is able not to be the “other” anymore.
In the end, Bacchilega’s argument is the one that most fits with a detailed analysis of the rewritten stories. Duncker, instead, keeps on criticizing the book for what it is not, and looking for features that Carter did not bond herself to show.

Bacchilega’s suggestion of the multiple voices that the tales render is the place to search for new gender stereotypes, as we can see in The Company of the Wolves: where Perrault and the Grimm brothers did not dare to represent a sexually aware woman, Carter brings it to us, along with a man who is not going to be the predator anymore.

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4 Bacchilega also refers to Duncker’s essay and criticizes her for the way she provided a history of the transformation of the folk tale into fairy tale. Bacchilega argues that this overview has clearly left aside some valuable contribution from different authors in order to support her opinion.
6 The oral version can be traced to the late middle ages, in the French, Tirolian and Italian Alps.
9 This is clearly shown at the end of The Werewolf: “now the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered” (CARTER, 1995, p. 110).