Re-writing the fetish: Angela Carter’s tales

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It needs no inordinate critical acumen to recognise that fetishism figures prominently in Angela Carter’s works, and can be said to define both one of her fiction’s main themes and her flamboyant style, which earned her Christina Britzolakis’ comment: “she writes like an unabashed female fetishist” (Britzolakis 46). But Carter is at the same time noted for her virtuoso rewriting of her literary ancestors’ texts. The two features are in fact interwoven, as Britzolakis again suggests:

Carter has characterized her stylistic excesses as a species of decadence: ‘It’s mannerist, you see: closing time in the gardens of the West.’ This comment sits uneasily with her oft-expressed belief in her fiction as an instrument of social change and intervention. But it does resonate with the attraction in her work towards the rhetoric and iconography of a prominent, largely male-authored strand of European literary history, which runs from the mid-nineteenth century through Baudelaire, Poe, Sade [sic], much of French symbolism, the Decadent writing of the fin de siècle and Surrealism. Carter’s readings of these texts unerringly focus on their metaphorization of femininity in its most fetishized and spectacular forms. (49)

The above quotation betrays a common malaise among critics related to the embarrassing mix of feminism and literary pyrotechnics in the author’s works, along with the temptation to exorcise the discomfort by referring it to a feminist agenda. Carter’s fetishism can thus be ascribed to an attempt at redefining femininity through a critique of male fetishism, as found in the literary canon. It can also be seen to belong “in the vanguard of a popular
feminist onslaught against the conventions of horror writing” (Wisker 116). This is true enough, but what, I argue, goes unquestioned in such formulas is the literariness both of the critical object and the critical endeavour or, more appropriately in our context, the intricacies of rewriting, which I intend to investigate in some examples drawn from the collections of short stories and tales: *Fireworks* (1974), *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and *Black Venus* (1985). While I agree that Carter’s fiction rewrites male (literary) fetishism to criticise it and renew our vision of femininity in the process, I would insist that fetishism is not an indifferent object. Firstly, fetishism is already a rewriting or — to say things differently, a fiction — of the real. Secondly, as a result, any attempt at rewriting it, however critically, is bound to be fetishistic in turn and raises the issue of (re-)writing as fetishism, as acknowledged in Carter’s critique of Baudelaire’s fetishism in “Black Venus”: “Carter’s stylistic investment in Baudelaire’s text cannot help but reinscribe her, at least partially, within the iconic framework of the *Fleurs du mal*." (Britzolakis 52)
Woman as a fetish

This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth, his scent of Russian leather — all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one single twinge of regret for the world of tartines and maman that now recedes from me as if drawn away on a string, like a child’s toy. (12)

So does the heroine of “The Bloody Chamber” sum up her primary attraction to her husband, the Bluebeard-like Marquis, though little does she know yet how fatal this will prove. Thus she provides us with a perfect illustration of male fetishism as it turns woman into an object, a toy seduced by other toys, a living doll. The story indeed reads like a baroque catalogue of fetishes, from the “djinn’s treasury — parures, bracelets, rings” (BC 24) showered on the young woman to the Marquis’s collection of erotica that culminates in the bloody chamber with its display of torture instruments and corpses — as the ultimate fetish, the ultimate presence of an absence that helps the Marquis to go on believing in the mother’s penis/phallus.

In this respect, among all the jewels that define and fetter the heroine’s femininity, one stands out significantly: “His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat.” (BC 11) The choker, denying even as it foregrounds it the wound of castration/decapitation, epitomises Carter’s reading of the fetish, in most of her tales, as a negation of femininity to which women themselves can be attracted. In the eyes of its first owner, the Marquis’s grandmother, the jewel is a pointed reference to the defiant red neck ribbon worn after the Terror by the French aristocrats who had escaped the guillotine. It is then “like the memory of a wound” (11) that was and was not inflicted. But for the young bride, it works both ways, as a reminder and as a prolepsis to the beheading which she is courting and, like the heroine of Perrault’s “Bluebeard”, will also escape.

Carter’s feminist agenda here is quite perceptible, complicated though it already is by the numerous hints at the victim’s fascination for her fate. Fetishism is exposed as a means of male domination which women should be aware — and wary — of. In this way, Carter’s

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1 See Freud’s well-known theory of the fetish (“Fetishismus”).
fetishes serve a critique of phallocentrism to which the heroine’s virago mother puts the finishing touch — she will save her daughter in the nick of time by putting “a single, irreproachable bullet” (40) through the husband’s head.

Other tales will similarly take up the theme of fetishistic entrapment. Women’s fate is bound by fetishes, most of which are found in the story just mentioned. Thus, the Beast, in “The Tiger’s Bride” (BC), will offer the heroine diamond earrings and a sable cloak in the hope to see her naked. Complete with furs again, “high shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs” (BC 91), gloves and diamond brooch, the Countess in “The Snow Child” (BC) seems to come straight out of some reverie à la Sacher-Masoch. Lady Purple, the prostitute turned puppet turned woman again, to take one last example, is nothing if not the sum of metonymic substitutes: glass rubies, mother of pearl, enamelled tin, Baudelairean “chevelure” (F 26), clothes of “vibrating purple”. So women are fetishised, turned into inert or living dolls, or, as for the Marquis’s wives, dead ones. They are commodities, whose exchange value only matters — which Carter bluntly reminds us of in the opening line of “The Tiger’s Bride”: “My father lost me to The Beast at cards.” (BC 51)

But Carter’s critique is more subtle and more profound than this, in that she extends the field of fetishes to less “material” instances. Among the fetishes that constitute the young bride’s gilded cage in “The Bloody Chamber”, books, paintings and engravings, for example, are not to be overlooked. They are not only fetishes in their own rights, to be ranked with anything the Marquis collects but they also foreground art’s part in submitting women to a male-defined role. The numerous, acknowledged or unacknowledged, quotations from his “favourite poet” (27), Baudelaire, are a dizzy mise-en-abyme of fetishism, especially in the defloration scene, with the bride naked but for her choker and the bridegroom intoning two lines from — of all poems — “Les Bijoux”: “Of her apparel she retains/Only her sonorous jewellery.” (BC 17)

In “Black Venus”, the title story of a later collection, Carter will, in a distinctly parodic fashion, stress her point about Baudelaire’s poetry by partly allowing Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire’s mistress and muse, to express her own view on the subject. More ironic than parodic, “The Erl-King” (BC) features an undefined heroine who is lured to her gilded cage by the music played by the Erl-King and, implicitly, by the fascination of the Romantics’ image of woman — as suggested by the wealth of hidden quotations from Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Goethe and their avatars.

2 “La très chère était nue, et, connaissant mon cœur, / Elle n’avait gardé que ses bijoux sonores” (Baudelaire 158).

3 For an extended study of this tale, see H. Kramer Linkin or my own “Obscurs éclaircissements.”
The fateful attraction of poetry is indeed exemplified in the very image of the Erl-King and its magic flute, being a cross between Orpheus and the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Male love poetry is thus criticised for its fetishising of woman, who may be viewed as a pearl (“The Tiger’s Bride”), a flower (“The Lady of the House of Love”), or a bird (“The Erl-King”) — the latter, which is kept in cages for her song being hardly animal, but rather comparable to the Emperor of China’s nightingale in Andersen’s tale. But what she is actually, is a wonderful artefact, a Hoffmann-like puppet, like Lady Purple, “a great, ingenious piece of clockwork” like the eponymous heroine of “The Lady of the House of Love” (BC 102), or “a marvellous machine, the most delicately balanced system of cords and pulleys in the world” like the heroine’s maid in “The Tiger’s Bride” (BC 60). Except, of course, that the wonderful machine is eventually made of words, of poetic images. Take for instance, the eponymous heroine of “The Lady of the House of Love”. She is doomed because she cannot help being her father’s daughter — i.e. Nosferatu’s daughter — and accordingly feeds on the blood of young men lured to her mansion. As such, she is no more than a signifier in the male fetishist’s signifying chain, that which we call the gothic. As Carter repeatedly implies, she is the stuff that gothic tales are made of: “a ventriloquist’s doll” (102), or better still “a cave full of echoes, […] a system of repetitions, […] a closed circuit” (93), forever repeating the same text in “the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires” (97).

But the living doll has her revenge — or has she?

At the end of “The Loves of Lady Purple”, we see the puppet biting back and draining the puppeteer’s blood, just as, at the end of “The Tiger’s Bride”, the heroine’s sables, once dropped to the floor to leave her stark naked, resolve themselves “into a pack of black, squeaking rats that rattled immediately down the stairs on their hard little feet and were lost to sight” (BC 66), as if to say: farewell the fetish, welcome nakedness. However, seeing the literary network in which Carter’s fetishes are caught, we may wonder whether the fetish is not inextricably enmeshed in textuality — hence the need of rewriting it — and consequently can ever be dispelled.
Beyond the fetish?

We may first note that there is no beyond of fetishism in the tales. It is true that Carter’s fetishism writes back against the male literary tradition which has woman as its fetish, but parody, let alone irony, is not easily distinguishable from fascination. One cannot shake off literary furs as simply as one would sables to expose the text’s naked truth, as a few examples will show. The tiger’s bride may well discard the precious furs and find herself stark naked. The last fetish, the earrings that she keeps to meet the Beast, may well go the same way in the very end, turning back to water — they are, indeed, tears from the tiger’s eyes:

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

Yet the fur that the beast’s licking reveals has an ambiguous status. On the one hand, it stands for a return to pre-lapsarian nature. On the other hand, however, the symmetry may look too pat to be a true representation of reality, and the story closes on unmistakably fetishistic images, that Baudelaire, for one, would not have found amiss to evoke femininity. The text has not reached beyond the fetish to the realm of the true object — if there is such a thing as true object — because the text cannot reach beyond itself.

Likewise, while “The Erl-King” is a warning against Romantic fetishising, its conclusion is not a literal statement about the true state of things. Rather it is so literary that it can spell no clear way out of the prison of language. It sets off auspiciously enough, with the victim planning to kill her tormentor: “I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair [...] and [...] I shall strangle him with them”. Liberation seems within reach: “Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls [...]” But already the “pronominal acrobatics” (Fludernik) casts doubt about the extent of the victory. If “I” exist(s) as a victim and the source of yearnings, “she”, the autonomous subject, is yet to come. But neither will have the concluding word:

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4 See G. Agamben, Stanze, part 2.
she will string the old fiddle with five single strings of ashbrown hair.

Then it will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out: ‘Mother, mother, you have murdered me!’ (91)

So the personal victory song turns out to be an impersonal, inhuman lament, issuing of itself from an inanimate object, the last, literary fetish. Is this revenge?

It seems that even Lady Purple’s revenge is questionable. I will agree with Gina Wisker that “Lady Purple embodies both the vengeful vampire and the lifeless marionette. Yet in her determination to stalk into the village, she ultimately returns the horror genre to its own sick source. Brought alive, the living doll at last has her revenge.” (Wisker 130) This revenge yet cannot be straightforward, for reasons similar to those we pointed in reference to “The Erl-King”, the ontological status of the victor being in doubt. Lady Purple “might now perform the forms of life not so much by the skill of another as by her own desire that she did so” (F 37); but a paradox remains: “had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now, living, to parody her own performance as a marionette? Although she was now manifestly a woman, young and beautiful, the leprous whiteness of her face gave her the appearance of a corpse animated solely by demonic will.” (37-8) Once a fetish, always a fetish. This is still puppetry, “discordant”, rather than triumphant music, still outside the subject’s “own accord”.

The paradox of course belongs in the feminist debate about femininity as masquerade, but my argument here is that it is not only thematic but structural as it depicts at the same time the equivocation of character in fiction. For what are characters if not puppets that reading somehow brings to life? The depiction of prostitutes as “mannequins of desire” (F 30) can be seen to work as a mise-en-abyme of the art of building characters in fiction. The stylised gestures of “these hetaerae” makes each one of them “as absolutely circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric” to become “a metaphysical abstraction of the female” (30). Lady Purple’s metamorphosis from woman to puppet to woman may serve as an allegory of characterisation: at one end of the process, characterisation is always dependent on some intimation of real life, but creates a lifeless, abstract, linguistic structure that must be animated. A parallel can also be drawn between the author and the puppeteer who turns his creature into “a monstrous goddess” (26) whose actions are “a distillation and intensification of those of a born woman” (27). However, Carter’s use of the fetish image here is cunning in that there is nothing surprising in the first metamorphosis,
from woman to puppet, while the most dramatic moment is the reverse transformation into a vampiric woman, the stress being therefore laid not only on mimesis or linguistic abstraction, but also and primarily on the performativity of desire in language — not on the kiss of death, but on the kiss of life. For it is a kiss that brings Lady Purple back to life. It is the usual, if not perhaps entirely casual, kiss the puppeteer gives his doll to say good-night that suddenly become sits/her kiss. Its nature is worth pondering:

Her kiss emanated from the dark country where desire is objectified and lives. She gained entry into the world by a mysterious loophole in its metaphysics and, during the kiss, she sucked his breath from his lungs so that her own bosom heaved with it. (36)

I take the dark country where desire is objectified and lives to be that of fetishism, because the latter channels desire through an object and doing so allows it expression. This is the place where his (the creator’s) kiss becomes hers (the creature’s). In fact, his kiss (Pygmalion’s) issues from the same region, but as seen from inverted perspectives, and is thus returned to its own (sick?) source. This is the paradox which we may call Lady Purple’s paradox: of whether a character results from the fetishising of reality or is a fetish returning to reality. The mysterious loophole in the world’s metaphysics that allows either, I would further suggest, is fantasy and Carter is thus implying that no fiction really comes to life without it. I clearly do not intend to verify that claim for fiction as a whole, but as far as Carter’s tales are concerned, at least, I would say that this kinship may explain why there is no beyond of fetishism, as my reading of “Black Venus” hopes now to show.

In the critique she mounts with this short story against Baudelaire’s fetishising of femininity — or, more specifically, of his black mistress, Jeanne Duval — Carter, as Britsolakis points out, is faced with a stylistic problem, “the problem of re-presenting Baudelaire’s icon without colluding with the Baudelairean eloquence which denies her language” (Brisolakis 52). The way out is “to construct a narrative voice which moves in and out of Jeanne Duval’s subjectivity”. In other words, Carter’s text oscillates between “embracing the fetishistic imaginary in which Jeanne figures” and exposing, through Jeanne’s mundane response, “the banal character of the poet's fantasies” (52).

The critique is thus classically achieved through abrupt shifts from the poetic to the grotesque or the down-to-earth. For instance, the poet will tell his lover that she dances like a snake and get the retort that “snakes can’t dance: they’ve got no legs” (BV 6). Or Baudelaire’s dreams of leaving it all to go and live in “a miraculous elsewhere, a happy
land, far, far away, [in] the land of delighted ease and pleasure” (3) are deflated by a seemingly more realist and to be sure gloomier vision of the real world where one is “nipped by frost and sulking” and looks “like an old crow with rusty feathers in a miserable huddle by the smoky fire which she pokes with spiteful sticks” (2), worrying a little about “a persistent vaginal discharge that smelled of mice” (6). Jeanne, the perfect literalist, is so impervious to Baudelaire’s art that she manages to sell his manuscripts or lights her cheroot with them. The only inheritance from the poet she will indeed transmit, the narrator informs us in the concluding words, is “the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis” (14).

Which poetry, we may wonder, could survive such onslaught? Well, Baudelaire’s, for one. There are several reasons for that. One is Carter’s “stylistic investment in [his] text [which] cannot help but reinscribe her, at least partially, within the iconic framework of the Fleurs du mal” (Britsolakis 52). As said before, the perspective is not Jeanne’s throughout, it oscillates from hers to the poet’s too. Actually, Jeanne rarely speaks for herself (but for a very few lines of dialogue). Most of the time, her voice reaches us through the filter of an impersonal narration or is nearly lost in the indeterminacy of free indirect speech. By comparison, Baudelaire’s voice is more distinct. The poet is allowed one long monologue, and his own images seep constantly into the narrative, from which they cannot be separated easily. The tone of the narrative is more than once distinctly Baudelairean, on account of the themes (autumn, spleen, dreams of exotic journeys, …) or of the quotations, be they veiled or not.

As a matter of fact, Carter’s treatment is more ironic than satiric. The satiric here results from a discord between the poet’s ideal and Jeanne’s — supposedly — real world, and depends on a clear distinction between the two voices. When the latter is achieved, the satire is unmistakable. For instance, Baudelaire’s rhapsodising about exotic exile — Carter’s literal rendering of “L’Invitation au voyage” — is blown to pieces by Jeanne’s emphatic rejection:

‘No!’ she said. ‘Not the bloody parrot forest! Don’t take me on the slavers’ route back to the West Indies, for godsake! And let the bloody cat out, before it craps on your precious Bokhara!’ (3)

The divorce between the two characters could not be more obvious, especially as not long before venting her disgust, Jeanne twisted a discarded manuscript “into a spill for her small, foul, black cheroot” (2). There seems to be no threshold between the two conflicting
universes, rather a hard and fast frontier, which Carter underscores. But except for such moments, there is no solution of continuity between them.

The manner in which the dialogue just mentioned is staged is a good case in point. Interestingly enough, the two cues are separated by four paragraphs, adding up to a page or about a page in which voices are not so straightforwardly distinguishable. The first one is an impersonal depiction of Jeanne as an old crow resentful of the chilly weather, while the second is partly free indirect speech conveying her far from poetic feelings for the West Indies and partly external depiction again. On the whole, these first two paragraphs, are devoted almost exclusively to Jeanne although the reader is never allowed direct access to her subjectivity, as if there were a collusion between her and an implicit narrator. The remaining paragraphs are more equivocal. The third one is devoted to Baudelaire’s lodgings. On the one hand, it reads like some excerpt from a literary biography, couched in a rather more refined language that could not be Jeanne’s. But, on the other hand, it seems that the poet’s vision is catchy and permeates the biography, as if it were an attempt to see the place and the night clouds drifting past the window panes through the poet’s eyes as well: “marvellous clouds drift past the windows, those spectral clouds of the night sky that are uncannily visible when no light is there” (2) — “marvellous clouds” indeed is Baudelaire’s phrase, straight out of the prose poem “L’Étranger”. The last paragraph, which is abruptly interrupted by Jeanne’s spirited rejoinder, apparently goes on with the literary biography, describing the room’s precious furniture. At the same time, it is distinctively poetic — i.e. closer to Baudelaire’s medium than Jeanne Duval’s — in comparing the place to a cabin that “will loose its moorings” “at the inspiration of a gust of wind”, “at the invitation [another Baudelairean echo] of the mysterious currents of the heavens” (2). But the last word suddenly challenges any certainty the reader might have reached:

At the inspiration of a gust of wind such as now rattles the tiles above us, […] at the invitation of the mysterious currents of the heavens, this well-appointed cabin will lose its moorings […], and will deposit us —

‘No!’ she said. ‘Not the bloody parrot forest! […]’ (2-3)

The pronoun that concludes the narrative interlude will allow different readings, as it interweaves three different narrative voices, each of which being equally unsettling, because equally possible. We might first surmise it is still the impersonal voice, as
opposed to either the poet’s or his mistress’s, “us” here involving the reader in the
metaphoric take-off. But the metalepsis is all the more unexpected as the ontological
status of the story’s narrative voice is in doubt. The pronoun might as well be Baudelaire’s
to refer to Jeanne and himself, as if his voice, as heard in the previous monologue, could
not be muted but shockingly found its way back in the language and thoughts of others.
Lastly, “us” might also refer to Jeanne and Baudelaire from Jeanne’s standpoint, as if in
the last sentence of the paragraph, she was beginning to become infected by Baudelaire’s
rhetoric, already drifting with him and his marvellous clouds — but just in time checking
herself to stop his bloody nonsense.
To sum up, Carter’s satire is mitigated with a considerable amount of irony which leaves
the reader in doubt as to what her argument on Baudelaire exactly is. Moreover, the very
satiric strategy cannot help but strike a Baudelairean chord: bringing the poet’s ideal down
to earth, showing how clumsy he is when not dreaming up poetic chimeras, is but
repeating his allegory of the albatross, so princely up in the skies, so awkward on the
ground. Can we really believe that Carter the writer sides with Jeanne the literalist against
the decadent poet, that she might object with her that a serpent cannot dance? She also
takes pains to end the story not with the devastating reference to Baudelaire’s syphilis, but
to his poetic legacy, offering in an erudite postscript the French text of the poem partly
translated on page 7 (“Sed non satiata”) and a list of the Jeanne Duval poems, many of
which, it might be shown, found their way into Carter’s text. Lastly, Jeanne Duval, for all
we know about her as a historical character, exists through Baudelaire — hence the
addenda —, and she came to us, Carter included, first and foremost through the poetic
channel as a male-authored icon.
Fetishism as misprision

My examples demonstrate that it is not easy to dispose of male fetishism, when language itself seems to be complicit in its survival, or to let the fetishised victim speak for herself, when the narrative medium, perhaps inevitably, is the fetishist’s. It could be argued that this is partly due to the fact that Carter’s fetishes are literary at least in expression, if not necessarily in origin, which makes rewriting more ambiguous. However, this begs the question of why her fetishes should be literary. One answer would be that so are her tastes, but that would not be the end of the story by far, since, by another turn of the paradox of Lady Purple, it is impossible to decide whether her tales rewrite (male) texts that happen to be fetishistic, in order to expose their fetishism, or the other way around — i.e. whether they revisit fetishes that happen to be literary. Beyond that, what is at stake is the issue of literary fetishism: how the becoming-literary of the fetish is inseparable from the fetishising of literature — its becoming-fetish(istic). These hypotheses clearly are too involved to allow a cursory treatment, even if it were restricted to my corpus, and I will not try to pursue them further in the present argument. But, to return to the question of why Carter’s fetishes should be literary, I will now, both as a conclusion to this paper, and a prelude to a discussion of literary fetishism, survey briefly the parallel between fantasy or fetishism and fiction I alluded to earlier, and argue that there is something about the fetish that renders its link with literature unavoidably intricate. In short, I intend to examine the fetish as a *linguistic* or even a *rhetorical* structure.

Carter herself offers an insight into that linguistic dependence, when she describe the uncouth upland people in “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” (F):

> They yearn passionately after the most deplorable depravity but possess not the concrete notion of so much as a simple fetish, their tormented flesh betrayed eternally by the poverty of their imaginations and the limitations of their vocabulary, for how may one transmit such things in a language composed only of brute grunts and squawks representing, for example, the state of the family pig in labour? (19)
Fetishism and language are strangely conjoined here as it seems that those people are made miserable by the absence of both. Carter's allusion is a reminder that no fetish exists independently of a semiotic system, be it mainly collective — tribal, in this case — or rather individual. But the point is made negatively and tells us nothing about how far the fetishistic semiotic system is comparable to the one we call literature or about how the two would interact. To answer these questions we will have to turn to Giorgio Agamben's work on fantasy and fetishism (Stanzas: The Word and the Phantasm in Western Culture).

Agamben insists on the paradox of the fetish in Freud's understanding: it is both the presence of a nothing, the mother's penis, and an index to its absence, standing for one thing and its opposite. As a substitute, it simultaneously recognises and disavows reality. In Freud's eyes, the paradox is a compromise "between the weight of the unwished-for perception and the strength of the counter-wish" (XIII 313), a compromise "which is only possible under the domination of unconscious thought-formations — the primary processes". Freud also underlines the fetishistic process of substitution which defines the fetish as an object that takes the place of "the normal sexual object" to which it is related while being "totally unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim" (V 52). The Ersatz may thus be sexually an inappropriate bodily part (foot, hair, ...) or "an inanimate object bearing a recognisable relation to the sexual partner, or at the best her sexuality (piece of clothing, underwear)" (V 52). This has Agamben venture a parallel between fetishistic disavowal and a common trope: synecdoche or metonymy. Just as these tropes substitute the part for the whole, or an object for another adjacent to it, with the fetish part of the body or an object related to it stands for the sexual partner. This is no superficial analogy, Agamben argues, since in both cases, the substitute both denies and conjures up the object it replaces — which is what Freud understands as disavowal (Verleugnung). The same, according to Agamben, can be claimed about metaphor, especially when seen with Ortega y Gasset as the substitution of an object to escape or elude another or with Heinz Werner as a replacement for a tabooed object.

We must pause to consider the apparent indeterminacy in the philosopher's argument which yokes together three tropes that rhetoric carefully distinguishes. In fact, the three are conflated, but not confused. To begin with, the elusiveness of the fetish, as an object that is at once material and intangible — as the presence of an absence — ensures its volatility: fetishists are known endlessly to collect and multiply fetishes since none can ever

Translators from the German are mine.

Heinz Werner, Die Ursprünge der Metapher [The Origins of Metaphor], 1919.
hope to replace the nothing they stand for. Secondly, Agamben’s thesis is not that the fetish is simultaneously synecdoche, metonymy and metaphor, it rather points out that each figure of speech is structurally similar to the fetish, and this in fact suggests a fourth trope that is related to them: *catachresis*[^7]. Catachresis is usually understood as the improper use of a term to refer to a thing it does not actually denote and for which there is no proper term. The fetish is doubly catachrestic then: it is a misprision of an object to appropriate an absence, as well as a misprision of a term to make up for the absence of a proper one — e.g. Freud (ab)uses the word “fetish” to refer to sexually inappropriate objects and likens the notion to the original fetishes “in which savages believe their gods are embodied” (V 52). Furthermore, it must be noted that Fontanier classifies catachreses according to the tropes they are based on. He thus lists: catachreses of metaphors, of metonymies, or of synecdoches (Fontanier 213-9).

So these tropes and the fetish share a structure which aims at appropriating absence, and are all related to the figure of misprision: catachresis. Their very kinship makes it difficult for literature to demystify fetishism, to deal with it from a safe distance, since there seems to be no proper ground on which to do this. Yet, at the same time, if the fetish is inevitably catachrestic, catachresis is by no means necessarily fetishistic, so that literature may be a quite relevant medium to understand the former. Things do get involved indeed when the fetish already is literary, as is the case with Carter’s preferred sources (Romantic poetry, Baudelaire, Surrealism, …). This has to do with the troubled kinship between fetishism and literature and between hypotext and hypertext as well. As a result, Carter’s literary critique of fetishistic literature cannot but court ambiguity.

There is no returning the fetish to its own source, no more than it is possible for the Marquis’s young bride to find “the kingdom of the unimaginable” (BC 36) and gain access to her husband’s “real self” (26). To the bloody chamber she *does* come, but there to be faced to “a little museum of his [the Marquis’s] perversity” (28), which, for all its enacted horror, echoes the one celebrated in his “prayerbooks” (17), such as *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk* in which one can find such revealing engravings as “Reproof of Curiosity”, or “Immolation of the Wives of the Sultan” (17), or by the treasures in the picture gallery, like “Moreau’s great portrait of his first wife, the famous *Sacrificial Victim*”, Ensor’s *The Foolish Virgins* or Gauguin’s *Out of the Night We Come, Into the Night We Go* (20). The bloody chamber therefore is not the real thing but a representation,

[^7]: I am indebted here to Lisa Freinkel’s illuminating parallel between the fetish and catachresis, in “The Use of the Fetish”.
or more accurately: a re-presentation of former representations. It is a catachresis of the unimaginable, and Carter's own misprision of that misprision. This is not to deny any bite to her rewriting of fetishism, but to assess it more accurately. Admittedly, Carter's tales as a whole more than suggest that there is all the difference in the world between fantasy (the Marquis's collections) and its enactment (his fetishistic museum of dead wives), and Carter implies that fantasy plays a crucial part in male domination. But I would argue that her critique carries further with the questioning of the "reality" of the fetishistic enactment: the possibility of it being yet another fantasmatic representation — which it is, at any rate, for the reader. What the revisiting of the bloody chamber suggests is that fetishes, having no signified as such, can only be replaced by other fetishes or signifiers. Similarly, Lady Purple's emblematic metamorphosis from puppet to living woman, while it diegetically represents a victorious rewriting of man's reification of woman, just as well repeats Pygmalion's old fetishistic love even as it rejects it — like a fetish denying what it asserts.
Conclusion

To conclude then, we might say that, from being the butt of Carter’s satire, male fetishism has become her fetish, a means to seize upon the unimaginable — let us call it provisionally femininity — and expose its misappropriation. It is no mere repetition, for thus does Carter open up — or, which amounts to the same, draw attention to — a truly critical space, if we agree with Agamben that criticism, like any genuine quest, does not consist in finding its object, but “in ensuring the terms of its inaccessibility”\(^8\). This is bad news for those in search of ideological certainties but should keep us nimble on our toes to face the challenge fetishism — and not least literary fetishism — poses to our conception of desire. Thus it is true that rewriting fetishism in Carter is part and parcel of a postmodern strategy to rewrite gender. It indeed corroborates E. L. McCallum’s assumption that “fetishism offers a compelling model for understanding how feminism can embrace postmodernism and still retain its progressive political specificity.” (McCallum 25)

Works cited


\(^8\) “Come ogni autentica quête, la quête della critica non consiste nel ritrovare il proprio oggetto, ma nell’assicurare le condizioni della sua inaccessibilità.” (Agamben xiii)

Notes