

--There is lots of animal/human transformation/miscegenation in Carter's stories. Thinking sideways is always useful in such contexts:—what else do we already know about this? Swift's Houyhnhnms, the rational horses in *Gulliver's Travels*? The transformation of Bottom in *Midsummer Night's Dream*? The use of such devices for comic effect as in, say, the old sea-song of "The Eddystone Light"—"My father was the keeper of the Eddystone Light / And he met with a mermaid one fine night; / From this union there came three- / Two of them was fishes and the other was me."

--There appears to be much stress on the transformative power of love; an old theme, but here it can turn a human into an animal, seemingly, as easily as it can turn an animal into a human; vide Carter's grotesque but insightful story in which Beauty becomes a Beast.

"Puss in Boots" (pp.68-84): features a cat with a braggadocio swagger: a pander, a procurer, a thief, a cheat at cards. Amazing opening sentence—at once establishing the persona: suave, bustling, chic, sardonic; at the same time he's subtly undercut by his creator: see the reference to his voice in paragraph two of the story. The setting, the northern tourist town of Bergamo near Milan at the foot of the Alps is full of Mozartian and Rossini implications and was itself famous in music as the birthplace of composers Donizetti and Locatelli. Here is a classic example of the creation of character through the establishment of a certain tone of voice. The atmosphere of the tale in which a swashbuckling puss inventively assists his impoverished but devilishly handsome young master is drawn straight from the *Commedia del Arte*. Flamboyant tension between form and content: "I went about my ablutions, tonguing my arsehole with the impeccable hygienic integrity of cats, one leg stuck in the air like a ham bone." (p.70) There is a coarse, earthy quality about this cat-familiar, as you would expect from its creator. Both cat and master are unbridledly salacious, see pp.71-2. So puss assists his master seduce half the women of the town, in an atmosphere of roistering British seaside-postcard fun. (For a sample of this kind of deliberate vulgarity, see [Postcards of the Past: Comic "Seaside" Postcards.](#))

And yet, behind the fun there's a characteristic note of sour cynicism: "love is desire sustained by unfulfilment. If I lead him to her bedchamber and there he takes his fill of her lily-white, he'll be right as rain in two shakes and next day tricks as usual." (p.72) We get another strong dose of the writer's essential coarseness again: "all good women have the missionary streak, sir; convince her her orifice will be your salvation and she's yours." (pp.73-4). The artificial, dandified tone is underlined by a series of playful alliterative sequences on p.76 and 80: "lovely lady's lubberly husband hump off his horse" and so on. Such is the over-egged verbal exuberance that we get a Scotticism, "havering" (to speak long-windedly and aimlessly) on p.78. Puss's speech meantime is strewn with Gallicisms.

"The Erl-King" (pp.84-91), rapturous, lush evocation of love affair with the spirit of the woods. The trick, for the writer, is how to make this weird, inhuman being, sexy. I'm not sure Carter manages, although she does evoke his otherworldliness surprisingly effectively in lush, strange physical imagery. Here comes Autumn: "It struck the wood with nicotine-stained fingers, the leaves glittered...withered blackberries dangled like

their own dour spooks on the discoloured brambles...haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being; the year, in turning, turns in on itself. Introspective weather, a sickroom hush.” (p.84) Here we see the same lust for erotic self-annihilation that we do in a number of these stories; all seem variations on the theme of *Liebestod*. And it is very powerfully present here (see pp.88-9). Pp.84-5, look for clunking shift from second to first person narrative. Does this work? Lovely inventive imagery: “little brown bunnies with their ears laid together along their backs like spoons”. The Other, the Erl-King is creepily introduced by his effect on the animals around them. “There are some eyes can eat you.” And so the girl enters the tangled wood; we never learn who she is or why. He is both lover and protector, maybe executioner too: “I always go to the Erl-King and he lays me down on his bed of rustling straw where I lie at the mercy of his huge hands. He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love.” [eh?—Shouldn’t that be the other way around?] p.87 He is the bird catcher, and his woodland abode is full of caged birds. [A re-fashioning of the Papageno/Papagena relationship in the *Magic Flute*, then?]; he wants to turn the narrator into a bird and keep her in a cage. [high-falutin’, “poetic” kind of bondage urge?] There is a half hearted attempt at religious mysticism: “the robin, the friend of man, in spite of the wound in his breast from which Erl-King tore out his heart.” p.91 Deliberate callow high-school blasphemy. [We remember, of course, that in traditional folklore the robin’s breast is red because he flew about the Cross trying to pull out the nails with his beak. The blood is Christ’s]. The narrative stance changes from first person to third, again clunkingly, in the final three paragraphs of the story. She is going to strangle him in his own hair and release his birds who will turn back into girls. Ends with the classic Fairy Tale motif “mother, mother, you have murdered me” (from My father ate me, my mother murdered me). [If you didn’t know the original Brothers Grimm tale, what would be the effect of these remarks?]

“The Snow Child” (pp.91-2). Miniature; a tiny sketch based on Snow White; the sexual rivalry is blatant and explicit as only Carter can do it, and for some reason, unexplained, the father-figure necrophiliacally ravishes Snow White in full sight of his wife. Snow White melts. [Balance? Plausibility? Sado-masochistic disgust?].

“The Werewolf” (pp.108-110), is written in brutally blunt, short sentences in the present tense in Carter’s idea of the bald folk-narrative style, quite unlike her usual sumptuous, trope-strewn style; here grandmamma is a witch and a werewolf, and it is she who attacks Little Red Riding Hood in the woods. This also is very short, a mere dozen paragraphs or so; Little Red Riding Hood succeeds Grandmamma in her cottage, after the locals kill Grandma. Will Little Red Riding Hood become like her? No indication. The story ends simply “she prospered.” [another example of the prevailing moral inversion? This time it’s the woman who is the predator?]

“The Company of Wolves” (pp.110-118): would-be-scary Gothic introductory sequence asserting (unsuccessfully) how terrifying wolves are. Then we get to the bit: a hunter traps a wolf, cuts off its head and feet, then finds “the bloody trunk of a man, headless, footless, dying, dead.” (p.111). A Werewolf, then. So, next we get a peasant marriage: bride goes to bed, groom goes outside to ease nature and never returns; from the forest she hears “That long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its fearful resonance, some

inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition.” [sense of alienation from one’s true self? Does this motif appear elsewhere?] (p.112). Episodic structure. The peasant girl marries again, and has two children by her second husband; then, seven years later, the first husband comes back, ragged, wild, angrily demanding a bowl of cabbage. He has been living among the wolves, and seeing the happy domesticity of the scene wishes aloud that he were a wolf again, at once becomes one, and has to be chopped to death with the wood axe but not before biting off the eldest son’s left foot. Then there follow pseudo-folkloristic notes on werewolves, their habits and how to recognise them, before we start off in conventional fictive mode again with a young girl taking a basket of goodies to her grannie in the woods. By degrees we are persuaded that there is something magical about this girl, she’s just on the cusp of puberty and carries her virginity like an invisible pentacle (pp.113-4). She has a knife, and the suggestion is that she knows how to use it; she’s afraid of nothing: at the height of the action she laughs openly at the wolf. There are a number of hints that the charming young huntsman she meets in the forest instead of the expected wolf, is indeed a predator of some kind “gleaming trails of spittle clung to his teeth” we’re told (p.114); later we learn he has been snacking on the raw game birds he carries over his shoulder; Little Red Riding Hood is dangerously complicit once more; when he sets off to Grandmother’s cottage, she deliberately dallies so he will win the race and get there first. I dislike the grim, sadistic relish with which he is allowed to devour grannie despite all her folkloristic counter-charms: but one wonders about the exact nature of his transformation: “his genitals, huge. Ah! Huge. The last thing the old lady saw in all this world was a young man, eyes like cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed.” (p.116) So he eats up grannie and hides her bones under her bed. Then Little Red Riding Hood comes. He has volunteered to carry her basket with her big protective knife in it, and the reader becomes alarmed, but when the true state of things begins to emerge “since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid.” They go through the ritual of burning her clothes, and just when you think he’ll gobble her up, she laughs at him, rips *his* clothing off and throws it in the fire, and seduces him. [Reads like a pornographic version of Roald Dahl? Except she cannot have read Dahl, because...?] A reference to werewolves in the plural, and seemingly in passing, suggests to the alert reader that she is one too. And looking back over the story, two things emerge strongly; in the professorial passages on werewolves and their distinguishing marks, we are told with great emphasis that however normal their outward appearance, you can always tell them by their eyes; and lo and behold, although hair and skin tone and such are lovingly described by the author in the sections in which she introduces Little Red Riding Hood, no mention is made of her eyes...[so we see here again, a typical confusion of good and evil which Carter seems to love doing. Compare with traditional Fairy Tale morality?]

“Wolf-Alice” (pp.119-126): a feral-child story; Alice is brought up among the wolves and returns to humanity reluctantly; the same profound misanthropy we see in other stories informs this one: her re-humanisation is imperfect and demeaning. The nuns who are looking after her give her up to the Duke, a werewolf, who lives by robbing graves. One night out on the prowl, the villagers shoot him with a silver bullet. The wolf child licks his wound clean and his reflection begins to re-appear in the mirror, presumably indicating recovered humanity. Odd, distasteful affair, based on an exploration of what it must be like to slowly and for oneself construct such basic concepts as self and time.

Looking at the stories as a whole, what emerges? I expect feminist critics may be fairly overjoyed; there is a new sense of female agency. But how expressed? Well, the mother as the avenger in “Bluebeard” comes immediately to mind. In Carter’s forest, Grannie not the wolf is the predator. The problem is that in re-working existing tales one is in large degree constrained by existing parameters, and female victimhood is also present here, although with an unusual degree of joy and complicity, in the sense of “let-s all have a jolly good wallow in the moral gutter together”? The main change in terms of narrative is probably in point-of-view; there have been female protagonists before—think of Cinderella, Rapunzel, or Little Red Riding Hood, but events were never viewed through their eyes, it was always an omniscient 3rd person narrative. So this alone automatically confers a heightened sense of agency even if the overall narrative arc remains similar (which it doesn’t always do).

And, of course, to come to this material straight from Disney is to be reminded how many more demands upon the cultural equipment and intelligence of the consumer this makes than the masscult stuff we’ve just been watching. The effect of this is to sharpen up rather than dumb down, which, as we will recollect, was exactly the point of Dwight Macdonald was making in *A Theory of Mass Culture*. The decadent moral quality [might words like “corrupt” and “depraved” cover it? Have a root about in your *Thesaurus*] also contrasts very strongly with the world Disney evokes. How many of these tales involve some sort of degradation and how does this affect us as readers?

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