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Angela Carter's «Puss-in-Boots»: *Commedia*

dell'arte meets the Bluebeard story

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“Puss-in-Boots” [...] is a Rabelsian/Carteresque romp, a tribute to the playful kitten aspect of the cat family. It is above all a hymn to here-and-now

common sensual pleasure, to ordinary human love, to slap-and-tickle delight – not as an aspect to be

won, achieved or stolen, nor to be reserved by the rich and privileged for themselves, as in de Sade, but available to all, tabby cats as well as young lads and lasses.

Margaret Atwood, «Running with the Tigers»

In spite of the vast bibliography that Angela Carter's *oeuvre* has produced «Puss-in-Boots» has received little attention on the part of critics because, it seems, it is not pervaded by a sense of the potentially tragic, but the comic can also be a vehicle for weighty ideas. But it is precisely this aspect that makes Margaret Atwood like it as «Carter thumb[s] her nose at de Sade and tell[s] him to lighten up»¹. It is on the whole a comical piece, the first Carter wrote with that purpose², where the leonine beast of the tales preceding it («The Courtship of Mr Lyon» and «The Tiger's Bride») is reduced to a witty, unscrupulous cat.

¹ Margaret Atwood, «Running with the Tigers», in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, London, Virago, p. 127. In the same year that Angela Carter published *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, the collection where «Puss-in-Boots» is integrated, she also published *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* in which Carter revisits the sexual and gender politics of Marquis de Sade's literature. In that work Angela Carter argues that de Sade contributed to a positive change in approaching women's rights to a free exercise of any type of sexuality as in his books women are both victims and torturers. Furthermore, she argues, insofar as women accept the role of the victim willingly they should enjoy the pleasures of that, and of any, form of sexual practice. This revolutionary approach to pornography has obviously aroused great controversy, particularly among feminists whose opinions are still divided. *The Bloody Chamber* can be considered the fictional counterpart to *The Sadeian Woman* as in it Angela Carter explores the complexities of feminine sexuality. Margaret Atwood's words refer to this issue.

² Vd. Angela Carter's interview with Anna Katsavos, «An Interview with Angela Carter», *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Angela Carter and Tadeusz Konwicki*, 14:3, Fall 1994, p. 15.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trad. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984,

All the tales in the collection are pervaded by the type of the grotesque that Mikhail Bakhtin theorised in his well-known study *Rabelais and his World* and that he denominated grotesque realism. It is based on a deeply positive bodily principle which Bakhtin gathered had reached its peak with the medieval and Renaissance grotesque as at the time it remained faithful to its origin with the folk and their myriad carnivalesc manifestations (thus also the term carnivalesque-grotesque): «It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; [...] The material bodily principle is contained not on the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. That is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable»³. In *The Bloody Chamber*, however, the celebratory aspect of the body is largely associated with the aforementioned matter of women's sexuality, and, by extension, men's as well, and though the iconography of the grotesque is still used at times its affirmative potential can be questioned. Images or suggestions of rape, murder, dismemberment, and child abuse are part of Angela Carter's fiction and of her particular use of the grotesque.

«Puss-in-Boots», however, is constructed in a lighter vein through *commedia dell'arte* which Bakhtin inserted in the tradition of the grotesque. *Commedia dell'arte* originated in Italy in the 1550s and spread throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was a form of improvised theatre where the actors were expected to perform and make up the dialogue as they went along. Each performance was therefore unique and unrepeatable. Bakhtin aligned the *commedia dell'arte* with the art of Molière, Voltaire, Diderot and Swift while keeping it closer to its carnivalesc origin of folk culture. Bakhtin regarded that the works of these writers and *commedia dell'arte* shared the same function: «to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things»⁴.

Bakhtin actually establishes a direct link between the *commedia* and the beginning of the academic discussion on the grotesque. The *commedia*, originated in Italy in the 1550s, spread throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It arrived in France, England, Poland, Austria, Germany and even Russia. The company of Francesco Calderoni and his wife Agata enjoyed a distinguished reputation which allowed them to tour all over Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. From 1687 to 1691 they played in Munich with considerable success and their presence along with that of other companies contributed decisively to the establishment of Harlequin in German theatres.

It is in this context that in the late eighteenth century a controversy broke out

p. 19.

⁴ Id., *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵ Id., *ibid.*, p. 35. Bakhtin obviously has in mind Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756) where the author made the beautiful coincide with smooth, gentle, and

around that stock character, one that has at its root the grotesque and classicist rivalry. For the classicist mind the lewd humour of Harlequin should not be included among the art forms which defended the principle of the Sublime. In 1761 Jüstus Möser publishes *Harlekin, oder die Verteidigung des Grotesk-Komischen*, a defence of Harlequin's grotesque-comic temperament which becomes the first scientific consideration and the recognition of the grotesque as a literary and aesthetic tendency. Bakhtin paraphrases Möser's view who refers to *commedia dell'arte* as a world which «constitutes a whole; it has its own legitimate order, its own criterion of perfection which does not obey the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime»⁵. Though Möser defends the grotesque based on the principles of caricature, parody and laughter, in a Bakhtinian view it is an insufficient defence, especially because Möser separates *commedia* from the spectacle of the marketplace viewed as a low form. It is therefore Möser's disregard for the folkloristic culture of the people, whose paradigmatic place of encounter and carnivalistic production is the marketplace, which undermines the theory.

The carnivalistic principles of the grotesque and of the *commedia dell'arte* are indeed found in «Puss-in-Boots». The protagonists are the cat and the pair of lovers. The cat participates as the ironic character assisting in the mischievous plans to unite his Master and his beloved, a badly-married young beauty. Though the characterisation of the Master concentrates on his impracticable dreams of love it is alternated by traits which could be found in earlier embodiments of the beast and father figures in *The Bloody Chamber*. The gentleman so infatuated that he stops eating and sleeping is a drinker, gambler and a compulsory womaniser. He is «proud as the devil, touchy as tin-tacks, lecherous as liquorice and [...] as quick-witted a rascal as ever put on clean linen»⁶. Together, the Master and his cat steal in the market but only for the excusable motive of being hungry. The Master was a regular customer in every brothel in town and used to make periodical unauthorised visits to the convent and under the carefree eye of his cat he made «the beast with two backs with every harlot in the city, besides a number of good wives, dutiful daughters, rosy country girls come to sell celery and endive on the corner, and the chambermaid who strips the bed»⁷. Not even the Mayor's wife escaped his lustful attention, or the notary's and his daughter who «shook out her flaxen plaits and jumped in bed between them and she not sixteen years old»⁸. That love should come to such a licentious character appears ridiculous, the cat's commentary only confirming the absurdity of the conjunction: «And she. A princess in a tower. Remote and shining as Aldebaran⁹. Chained to a dolt and dragon-guarded»¹⁰.

The plot is one familiar to the *commedia* wherein Pantalone, the spurned husband, has his very young wife shut away and guarded by a hag, in the Master's eyes, the tending and pleasurable referents and the sublime with huge, obscure or terrible ones which invigorate and elevate the mind.

⁶ Angela Carter, «Puss-in-Boots», *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, London, Virago, 1979, p. 70.

⁷ Id., *ibid.*, p. 71-72.

⁸ Id., *ibid.*, p. 72.

⁹ Aldebaran is the brightest star of the constellation of Taurus and means in Arabic «The Follower».

¹⁰ Id., *ibid.*, p. 70.

¹¹ Id., *ibid.*, p. 71.

¹² Id., *ibid.*, p. 74.

dragon. The exaggerated tone of romanticism and amusement is certainly typical of the *commedia*:

There is a lady sits in a window for one hour and one hour only, at the tenderest time of dusk. You can scarcely see her features, the curtains almost hide her; shrouded like a holy image, she looks out at the piazza as the shops shut up, the stalls go down, the night comes on. And that is all the world she ever sees. Never a girl in all Bergamo so secluded except, on Sundays, they let her go to Mass, bundled up in black, with a veil on. And then she is in the company of an aged hag, her keeper, who grumps along as a prison dinner¹¹.

The reserved posture of this Our Lady-like woman is soon to be lost to a totally unholy love-making and adultery. Her initial restraint due to her being «too much in love with virtue» is easily surpassed once given the chance¹² and she defiantly puts her hand on the Master's breeches¹³. Puss's Master follows this Lady to Mass attired with a uniform boasting a rank not fit to his position, and when he succeeds in touching her dress it is a religious experience as «she is the divinity he's come to worship»¹⁴. The cat reflects our cynicism for this love in the name of which the business of scamming is abandoned since the reader, as the spectator of a *commedia* show would have been, is only prepared to view love in this context as «desire sustained by unfulfilment»¹⁵.

In turn, Panteleone is the stereotyped husband of eighteenth century performances, a fool and a miser (*BC*, 73): «Poor, lonely lady, married so young to an old dodderer with his bald pate and his goggle eyes and his limp, his avarice, his gore belly, his rheumaticks, and his flag hangs all the time at half-mast indeed; and jealous as he is impotent, tabby declares – he'd put a stop to all the rutting in the world, if he had his way, just to certify his young wife don't get from another what she can't get from him»¹⁶. From his laughable impotence to his ailments and moral faults, Panteleone appears to deserve the twists and turns that culminate in his dishonourable death, performing the decrowning ritual that Bakhtin encapsulated in the carnivalistic pair of the king and the fool¹⁷. His death benefits all around him and is justified insofar as he gives more importance to extorting rents from already impoverished farmers, indicating that his ambition is immoral, than to overcoming his impotence which condemns his wife to a life devoid of pleasure. The depiction of Panteleone enhances his stinginess:

They set the cathedral clock by him, so rigid and so regular his habits. Up at the crack, he meagrely breakfasts off yesterday's crusts and a cup of cold water, to

¹³ Vd. p. 78.

¹⁴ Id., *ibid.*, 72.

¹⁵ Id., *ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ Id., *ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁷ In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin wrote: «Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, —expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester». (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trad. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 124).

spare the expense of heating it up. Down to his counting-house, counting out his money, until a bowl of well-watered gruel at midday. The afternoon he devotes to usury, bankrupting, here, a small tradesman, there a weeping widow, for fun and profit. Dinner's luxurious, at four; soup, with a bit of rancid beef or a tough bird in it – he's an arrangement with the butcher, takes unsold stock off his hands in return for a shut mouth about a pie that had a finger in it. [...]

And while she [his wife] breathes the air of evening, why, he checks up on his chest of gems, his bales of silk, all those treasures he loves too much to share with daylight and if he wastes a candle when he so indulges himself, why, any man is entitled to one little extravagance. Another draught of Adam's ale healthfully concludes the day; up he tucks besides Missus and, since she is his prize possession, consents to finger her a little. He palpitates her hide and slaps her flanks: 'What a good bargain!'¹⁸

Panteleone, like the Marquis of «The Bloody Chamber», is compared to king Croesus, so great is their wealth, but both know the same end; Panteleone because he cannot get interested in his or in his wife's sexual happiness and the Marquis because he is too interested in his own sexual satisfaction.

The humour of the story is derived from the use of popular language and imagery: the flag at half-mast, the proposition to "antler" Panteleone, Pierrot braying in the cold, the account of intercourse between cats as «the customary tribute of a few firm thrusts of [the Puss's] striped loins»¹⁹, the lady showing her lover the target towards which he must aim his dart or the description of the dragon-governess: «This hag turns out to be the biggest snag; an iron-plated, copper-bottomed, sworn man-hater of some sixty bitter winters who – as ill luck would have it – shatters, clatters, erupts into paroxysms of the *sneeze* at the very glimpse of a cat's whisker»²⁰. The hag's allergy to cats provides the opportunity for simple effective humour and for the plan used to make her lose the lady out of sight. The hag, like Panteleone, and thus wickedness, proves easy to deceive through the machinations and determination of lovers.

The carnivalesque-grotesque imagery derived from references to copulation and defecation abounds as well. The cat appears in the gravest situations systematically cleaning himself: considering the existence of love he «tongu[es] [his] arsehole»²¹, taking his time while his Master jumps from bed to bed he «wash[es] [his] face and sparkling dicky»²², and while his Master writes the letter declaring his love he claims to have had the time «to lick the coaldust off [his] dicky»²³. The cat opines that he «fall[s] to

¹⁸ Angela Carter, «Puss-in-Boots», p. 80-81.

¹⁹ Id., *ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁰ Id., *ibid.*, p. 73. Italics in the text.

²¹ Id., *ibid.*, p. 70.

²² Id., *ibid.*, p. 71.

²³ Id., *ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁴ Id., *ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁵ Vd. P. 75.

the toilette of [his] hinder parts [as a] favourite stance when contemplating the ways of the world»²⁴.

Occasional appearances or comparisons are made with respect to other *commedia* characters. Puss's acrobatic ascent to and descent from the lady's bedroom is equated with the mastery of Harlequin's jumps²⁵ while the Master uses a Pierrot costume to serenade his beloved. He pawned the sword for the guitar and «outlandishly rigged out in some kind of vagabond mountebank's outfit he bartered his gold-braided waistcoat with poor Pierrot braying in the square for, moonstruck zany, lovelorn loon he was himself and even plastered his face with flour to make it white, poor fool, and so ram home his heartsick state»²⁶. Even the Master's posing as the Il Famed Dottore so as to infiltrate himself in the house for a second time after his act as a rat-catcher is a play on the incompetent medical character of the *commedia*²⁷.

One of the customary characteristics of love in a *commedia* play is the erotic, even sexually explicit, expression of love. Thus the seduction manoeuvres, given the pathetic attempts by Puss's Master to serenade the lady and write love letters, are very aptly described by the wise cat, wiser than any of the other characters, as letting her know she is the centre of the world, or, in his plainer words, that «her orifice [is his] salvation»²⁸. Another play is made around the notion of a hole standing as a metaphor for the female genitalia. Getting down on his hands and knees, assuming, that is, a position of sexual insinuation, the false rat-catcher gets under the bed and with orgasmic enthusiasm declares: «"My god!" he cries. "There's the biggest hole, here in the wainscoting, I ever saw in all my professional career! And there's an army of black rats gathering behind it, ready to storm through! To arms!"»²⁹. His career is that of whoring and the rats are a metaphor for the spermatozoids which the Master is so eager to release that he emits a war cry. But so vigorous is the love-making that the music of Venus (groans of lustful pleasure) could not camouflage the music of Diana (rat-killing) attracting the attention of the governess who comes to her lady's door to enquire on those strange noises. From the inside the phoney rat-catcher shouts: «Peace! [...] Haven't I just now blocked the great hole?», both meaning of course the supposed hole under the bed and the lady's vaginal entrance³⁰. A similar word play is made with relation to «beast». Previously appearing in the expression «beast with two backs», a synonymous phrase for love-making, it is re-introduced later in the tale when the lady shows the blood-stained

²⁶ Id., *ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁷ The rat-catcher is also called Signor Furioso which is probably both a play on his vigorous love-making and on Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* published in 1516. Being a work on knight errantry, its heroes contrast with the Master of «Puss-in-Boots» who, though also involved in humorous adventures, lacks any sense of chivalry. The evidence for that is, for instance, the episode in which he introduces himself under false pretences in Pantaleone's house wearing a disguise.

²⁸ Angela Carter, «Puss-in-Boots», p. 74.

²⁹ Id., *ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁰ Id., *ibid.*, p., 79.

³¹ Id., *ibid.*, p. 79.

³² Id., *ibid.*, p. 82.

³³ Id., *ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁴ Id., *ibid.*, p. 83.

sheets as proof to the governess that Puss had had «a mighty battle with the biggest beast», a synecdoche for the penis³¹.

The second encounter has a carnivalesque spirit even more accentuated. It is a superimposition, through black humour, of life and death described as only Carter could: «As soon as they are left alone, no trifling, this time; they're at it, hammer and tongs, down on the carpet since the bed is occupé. Up and down, up and down his arse; in and out, in and out her legs. Then she heaves him up and throws him on his back, her turn at the grind, now, and you'd think she'll never stop»³².

One element that is also present in previous stories is the issue of nakedness. Here it is faced straightforwardly, as a preliminary move to intercourse. Its beauty is regarded almost as if it is a religious moment of revelation so that it is no less significant. It falls on the cat to make a comment on the subject:

Accustomed as I am to the splendid, feline nakedness of my kind, that offers no concealment of that soul made manifest in the flesh of lovers, I am always a little moved by the poignant reticence with which humanity shyly hesitates to divest itself of its clutter of concealing rags in the presence of desire³³.

It is towards the end that the connection with the Bluebeard element previously presented in «The Bloody Chamber» becomes clear thus providing structural cohesion to the collection. Up to this point the association had been veiled and imprecise with the exception of the feline beastliness used to characterise the Marquis but that in «Puss-in-Boots» is embodied by the not so beastly cat. The conclusion is the same as in «The Bloody Chamber»: a dead husband, a new husband, and a wealthy widow. The matter of the lady's coming into her husband's wealth is resolved by her getting hold of the key-ring the «old buffoon» kept tied to his waist³⁴. The fact that «Master comes into a great fortune» is achieved through his now pregnant wife who had the cold-mindedness to go for the key first and to buy off the governess's silence concerning the murder³⁵. The fool is thus turned into a king but only because the woman by his side puts him there. The woman's holding the key which previously was her husband's is in this tale an image of empowerment. The lady gains through it her right to denied or illicitly practised sex as well as to finance. Once a forced recluse, with that key no harm comes to her; only her freedom.

The conclusion of the tale presents a happy ending which is similar in the traits but not in quality to that of fairy tales. It presents a future of «fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance»³⁶ (the Missus is already rounding and even Puss and Tabs bear a litter) but the pair of lovers is far from having gained bourgeois respectability³⁷. In fact, their happiness is compared to that of pigs, as Carter politely puts it, in plunk³⁸

³⁵ Id., *ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 19.

³⁷ Tabs is described also as a soubrette which, for the unusualness of the comparison leaves no doubt concerning the intention of recalling the mechanical doll of «The Tiger's Bride» depicted in the same manner (vd. p. 60 and 76).

³⁸ Angela Carter, «Puss-in-Boots», p. 83. Excremental imagery is paramount is the Bakhtinian idea of the grotesque and to the principle of degradation by which he means a close relation between the earth and the

so that the short story does end with a note of the grotesque. The closing lines are revealing of the new morals, if the readers feel the need for any, which Angela Carter proposes:

So may all your wives, if you need them, be rich and pretty; and all your husbands, if you want them, be young and virile; and all your cats as wily, perspicacious and resourceful as:

PUSS-IN-BOOTS ³⁹

The grotesque does not live through its dark side alone. Given that in most other cases of Angela Carter's collection that darkness is more strongly felt than the life-affirming impulses which must be dug out from amid goriness, this tale is invested with a particular relevance within the whole of the collection. It provides balance, a combination of lightness in the midst of direness and that is also part of the grotesque. In Margaret Atwood's much more fluent words quoted at the opening of this paper, it is about ordinary human love. In addition, as Nicole Ward Jouve observes, it occupies a decisive role in the direction Angela Carter's fiction takes from then on while providing closure for *The Bloody Chamber*: «Suddenly Carnival was there. Queen Carnival. Belching, farting, drinking, dyeing, flying, dancing, fucking, in the train of Puss-in-Boots there came Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus*, then Dora and Nora among the multitudinous twins of *Wise Children*. The Bloody Chamber had been crossed. The initiation rites, menstruation and all, gone through. The beasts, the tigers and the wolves had been encountered, mated with. Body was there»⁴⁰.

Resumo

No conto «Puss-in-Boots» Angela Carter reescreve o clássico de Charles Perrault «Le Chat Botté» mas acentuando a veia cômica através da *commedia dell'arte* que no final subverte o uxoricídio que se avizinha e o *Leitmotiv* de «O Barba Azul». A combinação de humor com o terrífico materializa mais uma forma do grotesco carteriano que abunda em *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

body, its organic functions and natural decay: «To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. [...] [Degradation] has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one». Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 21.

³⁹ Id., *ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁰ Nicole Ward Jouve, «Mother is a Figure of Speech», in Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, p. 149.

Abstract

In the short-story «Puss-in-Boots» Angela Carter rewrites Charles Perrault's classic «Le Chat Botté». She enhances the comic element by constructing it in the vein of *commedia dell'arte* which at the end subverts the up-coming uxoricide and the «Bluebeard» *Leitmotiv*. The combination of humour and the terrible represents yet another form of the Carterian grotesque abounding in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

