Rewriting as Violence against Fairy Tales, Myths and History

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Abstract
This paper investigates contemporary retellings of traditional fables, myths and history by women writers who critically explore the field of violence depicted in mythic and fairy-tale genres, and history. It is contended that at the core of several contemporary rewriting lies the concept of metamorphosis as illustrated through the Ovidian sense of fluidity, multiplicity and shape-shifting; and through recent reconfigurations by cultural history, storytelling, and postcolonial literature. In the wake of current critical approaches to re-vision and rewriting, special relevance is given to the regenerative presence of past literature in some contemporary re-visions of classical fairy tales, myth and history, where geographical, temporal and mental spaces are perceived as complex cross-cultural zones and migrant points of communications between cultures. The process of retelling is perceived as a subversive gesture of violence against the existing body/corpse of literary and historical canons. Thus, the resulting products replace and yet perform the metaphorical or literal significance of the very acts of violence already inscribed inside them. They point to new cultural and aesthetic ways of rethinking the present and changing the future, imaginatively.

Key-words: violence, contemporary narrative, metamorphosis.

A Wellcome Trust Exhibition was held successfully at the London Science Museum between October 2002 and February 2003; its engaging title was *Metamorphing: Transformation in Science, Art and Mythology* and it was organised by Sarah Bakewell, former curator of the Science Museum and, most appropriately, by cultural historian, critic, novelist and short story writer, Marina Warner, whose book on *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds. Ways of Telling the Self* had come out in 2002. In the course of her brilliant and wide ranging journey of exploration of the dynamic principle

of metamorphosis from classical mythology, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Inferno*, Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights,* early modern fairy tales and eighteenth-century Oriental tales stemming from French and English versions of *The Arabian Nights* spreading across the Western world to Victorian uncanny storytelling – above all, Stevenson's representation of the metamorphic split personality in *Jekyll and Hyde*, and Carroll's depiction of doublings of personae and dislocations of time (in the *Alice* books) and events (in the *Sylvie and Bruno* books), and the Caribbean magic of narratives such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and postcolonial re-renderings, Warner reflects:

> Now it seems to me metamorphosis embodies the shifting character of knowledge, of theories of self, and models of consciousness that postulate the brain as an endlessly generative producer of images and of thought through fantasy, observation, and memory. (Warner 2004: 202)

Going back to the above mentioned *Metamorphic* exhibition, Marina Warner's imprint is clearly recognisable in its display-journey across different places and times, where change and transformation are portrayed not only in all their manifestations, from biological to cultural, but also through the reciprocal interplay which contributed to give shape and meaning to many human beliefs, superstitions, fantasies, fears, and uncertainties. Indeed, Dr. Robert Johnston's brief but dense and slightly Freudian review of the exhibition pointed out precisely the same metamorphic aspect and rationalising function you may find in many contemporary fictional re-workings of old stories, classical myths, and traditional historical narrations. He commented thus:

> This exhibition not only shows the roots of many of our psychological preoccupations, but also holds out the hope that rationality and reason will help us to understand myths and superstitions and enable us to understand our changing world without the fear that bedeviled our forebears. (Johnston 2002)

Metamorphing was divided into six major sections: the room on 'Generation' showed examples of bodies (human, animal, vegetal) that are transformed in time through acts of generation including not only the natural processes of growing, decaying, and dying, but

also change brought about by supernatural and mysterious powers. 'Healing' was the room where bodies in pain and minds powerfully affected by sufferings are portrayed in the heat of crisis and therefore in need of being urgently healed. The section illustrating 'Modification' critically highlighted the contemporary obsession with appearance showing how and why bodies might be artificially transformed, changing the bodies' original shapes significantly: such a metamorphosis was made patently evident through clothing, hairstyles, dieting, bodybuilding. Perhaps, the room on 'Mutation' appeared as the most 'natural' by stressing the inescapable and vital evolution of bodies for their own survival in the course of time. The rather disturbing section on 'Transfiguration' showed both altered shapes of bodies, caused by physical and mental illness or drugs, and altered states of perception brought forth by drugs, psychological illness, religious ecstasy or magic.

Each of the themes on display in the exhibition could also be tracked easily in oral storytelling, traditional literature and the visual arts related to metamorphosis. Moreover, the subject has been investigated in recent scholarly research and popular culture on monstrosity and examined particularly in manuscripts, texts, paintings, visual productions, and critical readings stretching backwards to the so called Dark Ages and forwards to the Digital Age.[1] Variously, all of these studies have touched on the different relations between fantastic and violent representations of monsters, bodies, and writing. Some of them have focused on female re-writings seen as necessarily 'monstrous', drawing inspiration above all, as argued by Lidia Curti in her *Female Stories, Female Bodies* (1998), from feminist thought and practice. In the perspective hinted at earlier, highly telling and worthwhile quoting here in length, is one of the many citations from Hélène Cixous's essay "Sorties" (1986) that Curti offers in her chapter "…and Monstrous Bodies in Contemporary Women's Writing":

Unleashed and raging, she belongs to the race of waves. She arises, she approaches, she lifts up, she reaches, covers over, washes ashore, flows

[1] See, among others: Haraway 1991; Huet 1993; Russo 1994; Cohen 1996; Braidotti 2002; Di Michele 2002; Chialant 2002.

embracing the cliff's least undulation, already she is another, arising again, throwing the fringed vastness of her body up high…She has never 'held still'; explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance, she takes pleasure in being boundless, outside self, outside same, far from a 'center.' [2]

This is the vision of a female, furious, continuous 'multiple being,' boundless and in an unceasing metamorphosis. In a way, it seems to suggest a similitude with what was narrated in the rooms, through the objects and the bodies on display in the London Science Museum. Somehow they all seemed to mingle together, breaking up conventional notions of separation and exhibiting clear signs of change, of unconscious and, at times, of conscious search for metamorphic identities.

It appeared that there were no established hierarchies among the rooms of the exhibition, and in fact you could choose to wander from one place to another freely, to move from one period to another and from some bodies to others, indifferently and without any specific order. You sensed that everything was flowing without interruption from one room into another, and another, and yet another, from one body into another, from one storytelling into another without any precise temporal or spatial border. In the end, everything created a striking visual effect that led you to connect and reflect on bodies, images, shapes, lines and colours in a sort of unexpected, never ending, shape-shifting re-reading of the already narrated story.

There were over 100 items in the exhibition, from the prehistoric to the Victorian periods; but, not surprisingly, modern technologies and contemporary artists were also present adding a very intriguing, Gothic-grotesque, and highly imaginative touch of fascinating strangeness conveyed to represent bodies, atmospheres and story-telling. Their work encouraged ways of thinking about violence and cruelty in literature, visual arts, and history, and of course about ourselves. As Marina Warner states in her *Fantastic Metamorphoses*:

Tales of metamorphoses express the conflicts and uncertainties, and in doing so, they embody the transformational power of story-telling itself,

[2] In Curti 1998, p. 109: the quotation from Cixous's "Sortie" is taken from H. Cixous and C. Clément 1986, p. 90.

revealing stories as activators of change. Why tell stories? The great granary – to borrow Keats's phrase – of Hellenic and Roman narratives has fed us for millennia: there is indeed a fresh surge of hunger for revisionings, attested by many contemporary writers' inventions and versions – they are continuing Shakespeare's way of plundering and mining and recasting. (p. 210)

Among the most effective artists present in the *Metamorphing* exhibition, it was Portuguese-British Paula Rego who seemed to offer the most intriguing and challenging transformation products to make you understand the workings of re-visioning approaches to myths, literary traditions, and storytelling proposed by contemporary women writers. It is well known that Rego's paintings do not ask for the viewer's rational explanation, nor are the stories they tell particularly comfortable, sharply criticising conformity in art and life alike. From the interview Rego gave to *The Guardian*'s art reviewer Suzie Mackenzie one perceives the idea of her never-failing social engagement, especially when imaginative metamorphosis is explored; Mackenzie's words perfectly summarise some of the curious aspects of her work, apparently hidden though well visible beyond the signs, colours and attitudes of the figures and stories represented. Mackenzie explains:

In Rego's work, it is the world of the imagination that becomes the greater reality, as if she is handing us a magic mirror in which to see things that perhaps we would normally choose not to see. And always there are mysteries, suggestions of what may have happened, what may be to come. (Mackenzie 2002)

The perception that something else is at play, behind, across and beyond the scenes one looks at, suggests that what is pictured is in fact not finished at all: the stories that are told in/through them still go on; they are transformed further by the viewer. It is the never-ending travelling in other times and other places that confers something magical to Rego's acts of retelling and re-writing: her violent and cruel re-visioning of past traditions (iconic, literary, folk and fairy tales, children's tales that mingle even with her own family history in Salazar's Portugal and her married life in London) inspires the making of her defiant pictures. Significantly, in paintings such as *The Family* (1988) or her Kafka-inspired *Metamorphosis* you

look at a grotesque and terrifying narration of her own vision of life and art located in a strangely changing present in view of other possible metamorphoses in the future. Rego is a storyteller; over the years she has drawn on folk stories from her native Portugal and popular children's tales such as Mother Goose, Little Red Riding Hood, and Peter Pan. But many of her paintings and prints seem to concern above all her own story: they are narratives of family life in which the real and the imagined overlap and elide, often pervaded with unpredictable and disturbing undercurrents of violent sexual transgressions, cruelty and unease.

Her work shows her deep interest in what she calls 'the beautiful grotesque,' cruelty, and a systematic rejection of conventions both ethical and aesthetical: in this way, Rego consciously acts as an unsettling artist, entirely devoted to threatening the stability of many unquestioned beliefs (sexuality, childhood, religion); such a process of undermining prejudices about social relationships, human nature, and conventional ideas of art and beauty puts her work on a par with Angela Carter's and Marina Warner's metamorphic retellings of traditional stories, fairy tales and myths. Rego's figures, especially her female figures, challenge stereotypical ideas of feminine beauty and harmonious bodies, and seem to recall Carter's bird-woman of *Nights at the Circus* (1984), a parodic remake of the Greek (winged or wingless) goddess of victory, Nike, a mythical metamorphic figure who was studied with great originality and immense erudition by Marina Warner in her *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985).[3]

In Carter's *Nights at the Circus* we come across a grotesque, political re-visioning of the Nike figure of the classical tradition: Fevvers overturns the traditional evaluations of female beauty and deletes [annihilates] stereotypes of the feminine. She is a real spectacle to look at for American journalist Jack Walser and for the public in the London Alhambra:

> From aloft, they lowered her trapezes.
>
> As if a glimpse of the things inspired her to a fresh access of energy, she seized hold of the bars in a firm grip and, to the accompaniment of drum-roll, parted them. She stepped through the gap with elaborate and

[3] See Warner 1985, ch. seven ("The Goddess of Success"), pp. 127-45.

uncharacteristic daintiness. The gilded cage whisked up into the flies, tangling for a moment with the trapeze.

She flung off her mantle and cast it aside. There she was. (Carter 1984: 14)

Now the fabulous bird-woman is ready to exhibit her huge and hybrid body:

In her pink fleshings, her breastbone stuck out like the prow of a ship; the Iron Maiden cantilevered her bosom whilst paring down her waist to almost nothing, so she looked as if she might snap in two at any careless movement. The leotard was adorned with a spangle of sequins on her crotch and nipples, nothing else. Her hair was hidden away under the dyed plumes that added a good eighteen inches to her already immense height. On her back she bore an airy burden of furled plumage as gaudy as that of a Brazilian cockatoo. On her red mouth there was an artificial smile. (p. 15)

She is naturally gigantic, but her colossal size is further increased by kitschy, baroque, and exotic animal-like additions: her *aerialiste* costume stresses her ambiguity as an animal or human, real or fake character. She is cheeky and provokes the onlookers' gaze:

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvelous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.

She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!

LOOK AT ME! (p. 15)

Fevvers is self-confident and delights in teasing and surprising her public:

She rose up on tiptoe and slowly twirled round, giving the spectators a comprehensive view of her back: seeing is believing. Then she spread out her superb, heavy arms in a backwards gesture of benediction and, as she did so, her wings spread, too, a polychromatic unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingoes pink.

Oooooooh! The gasps of the beholders sent a wind of wonder rippling through the theatre. (p. 15)

Ironically, Carter compares the spreading out of her wings (or arms? Walser asks himself) to a strange gesture of benediction in reverse,

and to the wide span of huge animals (eagles, condors, albatrosses, and smaller flamingoes).

Fevvers is always moving and, of course, flying; she learned how to fly from pigeons, seagulls and the clock with the statuette of winged Father Time. She soon understands how to shape her independent life precisely by learning the art of flying. Her formation as an independent, courageous and strong monstrous being, bird-woman, depends on the many transformations she undergoes any time she decides to oppose defiantly all the traditional, ethical, physical and intellectual attitudes that would be expected of her in the late nineteenth century, during the age of Victoria. In the end, the rational reporter Walser too must surrender to Fevvers's creative power, to her intelligent ability to subvert everything, to live with imagination, pleasure and jouissance. Even with her broken wing, she does not want to be represented in the way she appears in Walser's eyes:

> She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I a fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what he thinks I am?' (p. 290)

Obviously, the answer to that question is negative. Fevvers recovers her first authentic identity when her subversive nature explodes into a contagious, violent laughter:

> Fevvers' laughter seeped through the gaps in the window-frames and cracks in the door-frames of all the houses in the village; the villagers stirred in their beds, chuckling at the enormous joke that invaded their dreams, of which they would remember nothing in the morning except the mirth it caused. She laughed, she laughed, she laughed. (pp. 294-5)

The elegant, epic form of the Nike crystallised in stone or bronze monuments from the ancient times of classical Greece and Rome down through its Christian metamorphosis, nineteenth century and early twentieth century adaptations disappears and undergoes a significantly comic and grotesque transformation: she is fractured into hundreds of invisible splinters under the violent blow of "the spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter [which] began to twist and shudder across the entire globe" (p. 295).

Women writers and artists often use subversion of conventional hierarchies and unending transformations/adaptations when they aim at recasting the structure, texture, characters and style of the work they dialogue with. This often results in strongly polemical, alternative and fluid narrations against the normative, patriarchal and hegemonic corpus/body of traditional ways of telling. And this is exactly what Carter does in this sparkling novel and in the short stories where she rewrites traditional fables and fairy stories, where visuality, so predominant in *Nights at the Circus*, is also the cipher of her re-visioned characters and plots.[4] But, the past corpus/body of her recast models from fairy tales is still there in her new characters and plots, and yet it is fragmented, reversed, mutilated, and partially erased: the operation of rewriting acts violently offering renewed ways of seeing and telling, with a difference.

Often, marginality becomes the regenerative centre of the current rewriting strategies of canonical texts. When we think of one of the best known retellings of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), we focus our attention on Rhys's paratextual title that makes us travel firstly towards the dangerous sea, lying between Europe and the West Indies, and later reach the wild Caribbean islands, where most of the story is set. We are taken from Brontë's England to Jamaica and Dominica, the West Indian periphery of the British empire, and back to nineteenth-century England. Antoinette's description of the natural scenery of Spanish Town and Coulibri Estate confirms the image of a strange, rich but wild place:

> Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchids flowered – then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white,

[4] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979. See also: *The Passion of New Eve*, London, Vintage, 1977; *Several Perceptions*, London, Virago, 1995; *Burning Your Boats. Collected Short Stories*, with an Introduction by Salman Rushdie, London, Vintage, 1996.

mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it. (Rhys 1997: 6)

The earlier religious atmosphere has abandoned the place and it has taken on a threatening aspect: the flowers' mixed smell of freshness and death and the animal-shaped orchids resembling snakes or octopuses warn of some hidden danger; the richness of nature's colours adds an increased sense of unease: the *green* light underneath the tree ferns, the *brown* tentacles of the octopus orchids, and even the rich mixture of *white*, *mauve*, and *deep purples*, though wonderful to look at, suggest a kind of unexpected chaos. Antoinette concludes: "The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it."

Later on, in the second part of the novel, when Antoinette and her husband (who acts as the narrator and, significantly, has no name but is clearly modelled on Mr. Rochester, the master of *Jane Eyre*) reach their honeymoon house near the village that has the sinister name of Massacre,[5] it is the husband who expresses his strange, inexplicable, sensation of some impending danger:

The road climbed upward. On one side the wall of green, on the other a steep drop to the ravine below. We pulled up and looked at the hills, the mountains and the blue-green sea. There was a soft warm wind blowing but I understood why the porter had called it a wild place. Not only wild but menacing. Those hills would close in on you. (p. 42)

Wilderness, impenetrable trees, mountains, the gorge, blue-green sea, climbing upward and looking downward make him feel he is near to death and will be buried under those menacing hills. The Englishman then thinks: "Everything is too much I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger" (p. 42).

[5] In the "General Notes" to the Penguin edition of the novel we read: "The text hints at secret histories, with the suggestion that the descendants of both the exploiter and the exploited want to hide what happened from Antoinette's husband. The significance of the name of the village on the honeymoon island, Massacre, has oblique links with the plot of the novel, in that the massacre it records was the probable murder of the illegitimate mixed race Indian Warner by his half brother, Colonel Philip Warner, in 1675 […]" (p. 132).

Naturally, Rhys is describing the surrounding landscape keeping well in mind, by contrast, the typically peaceful, wide, sweet and flat English landscape. That is the countryside, the landscape, the country called England where the unhappy Antoinette wishes to go and live: and it is the place she imaginatively builds out of the pages she turns of the atlas with an enthusiastic eagerness to learn and know all about England:

I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me… England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy looking. Exports, coal, iron, wool. Then Imports and Character of Inhabitants. Names, Essex, Chelmsford on the Chelmer. The Yorkshire and Lincolnshire wolds. Wolds? Does that mean hills? How high? Half the height of ours, or not even that? Cool green leaves in the short cool summer. Summer. There are fields of corn like sugar-cane fields, but gold in colour and not so tall. After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes. (p. 76)

This is England's portrait as Antoinette imagines it, also comparing it to her own country: England's geographic description is supplemented by accurate details of its economic resources, the character of its inhabitants, the names of its counties, the weather conditions in summer and in winter. Of course, she is fascinated by the gold colour of corn fields in summer and, more, by the snowfall in winter: poetically, she compares the snowflakes to what she knows already, "white feathers" or "torn pieces of paper" falling. This is the image of the foreign (language, climate, produce of the earth, seasons) country as she imagines it, between fact and fiction, and it is very different from her Jamaica.

When in England, she does not recognise its reality, and at night, when Grace Poole and Leah are asleep, Antoinette steals the keys, opens the locked door and explores what appears to be made of cardboard; the dark colours – brown, dark red and yellow with no light in it – give the place an atmosphere of sadness.

Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always knew, made of cardboard. I have seen it before somewhere, this cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light

in it. They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don't remember, but we lost it. Was it that evening in the cabin when he found me talking to the young man who brought me my food? I put my arms round his neck and asked him to help me. He said, 'I didn't know what to do, sir.' I smashed the glasses and plates against the porthole. I hoped it would break and the sea come in. (p. 117)

Fragments of memories come to her in the darkness of the house, and her suffering mind recalls her being treated like a prisoner on board the ship that was heading towards England; she remembers her coquettish and violent actions to attempt to escape and gain her freedom. In the English house – which maintains all the aspects of a Gothic place, very similar to *Jane Eyre*'s Thornfield – Antoinette is under strict surveillance; however, she succeeds in getting hold of a knife and furiously attacks the man she does not recognise as her own brother. Likewise, Richard Mason does not recognise her. Grace Poole tries to discover how she got hold of the knife and thus inquires:

You rushed at him with a knife and when he got the knife away you bit his arm. You won't see him again. And where did you get that knife? I told them you stole it from me but I'm much too careful. I'm used to your sort. You got no knife from me. You must have bought it that day when I took you out. (p. 119)

Antoinette explains: "When we went to England" and Grace Pool replies mockingly: "'You fool,' she said, this is England'" (p. 119). But Antoinette knows better: she has another idea of England, and refuses to believe all that they tell her. Inside brackets, Rhys makes 'the madwoman' Antoinette remember her imagined trip to 'England':

(That afternoon we went to England. There was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water. This, I thought, is England. If I could be here I could be well again and the sound in my head would stop. Let me stay a little longer, I said, and she sat down under a tree and went to sleep. A little way off there was a cart and horse – a woman was driving it. It was she who sold me the knife, I gave her the locket round my neck for it.) (p. 119)

She is getting ready for her final act of violence against the cruelty of her English husband (who insists on calling her 'Bertha' depriving her of her real identity and, in fact, sending her into a world of strangeness), of Grace Pool and, England, metaphorically contained in the house: she wishes to set fire to the building, and everything and everybody in the same way she has already seen in her recurring desperate dreams. She dreams that she is back in her Jamaica with Christophine, and Aunt Cora, and Tia, and her mother's ghost, and sees the natural scenery she longs for: "all colours, the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life" (p. 123). At this point of the story, a splendid blurring of the remembered past at Coulibri and the grim present in England occurs: the visual effect of such a confusion causes Antoinette extreme sufferance but also inspires resolute violence against all those who 'hated' her (pp. 122-4).

In Rhys's re-visiting of *Jane Eyre*, we witness the original creation of a story which gives voice to Brontë's very marginal characters, completely subverts the consolatory ending of the Victorian novel, converts the ancient suffering subject 'in the attic' to the point of transforming her into the authentic pivot of *Wide Sargasso Sea*; such a movement of the marginal characters from the borders to the centre of the plot is even more visible when the unnamed husband's narrative voice and Grace Poole's voice take over the narrator's role, recounting the events happening both in Jamaica and in England. In these narrations, the main character is Creole, Antoinette/ Bertha, who brings along with her in her memory other West Indian characters (Christophine, Tia, Annette, and others) and traditions (rites and beliefs, obeha) of her culture, even suppressed memories of slavery.

Metaphorically, the complexity of the literary tradition represented by (and objected to) *Jane Eyre* has been violently changed and symbolically abandoned; at the same time, though, it is exhumed in the sense that it is uprooted and exposed, but also newly revealed and reborn. The last pages of Rhys's novel highlight Antoinette's last vision while she tries to escape from "the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha!" (p. 123):

The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when looked over

the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky was so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream*? I called 'Tia' and jumped and woke. (pp. 123-4)

Being now well awake and extremely conscious of her feelings and actions, Antoinette knows what is left for her to do:

[…] then I got up, took the keys and unlocked the door. I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage. (p. 124)

Darkness will disappear, the candle will give her light, and the erasure of Englishness through the fire will destroy/purify everything.

Certainly, it seems that a new tale may be re-written, and women, having painfully scrutinised within themselves, may reach a complete autonomy both as active subjects and authors of their own stories, as Miranda does in Warner's *Indigo* some years later. Of course, Miranda owes her own independence to Seraphine's magical authorial talents and oral storytelling qualities: from her Miranda learns to resist the damaging heritage the Everards prescribed for her and to shape her own identity.

But Miranda understands that she embodies, as a woman and as half-Creole, her Calibanic heritage as well, which she learns to decode through Feeny's fairy tales. Through the first story of 'the fat man,' little Miranda learns not only of gender differences but also the young princess's desires (her own desires):

– Gradually, the people in the palace are coming in closer to listen. The servants, the ministers, and …the king's daughter, She's now in the room, she sees her father, but he doesn't see her, The fat man's speaking of an island – he and all the gang have been there together once and never forgotten it, how could they? It's called Enfant-Béate, Blessed Child – you know this, sweetheart – the fat man is telling them, and it lies to the west, down the path of the setting sun, curving in the sea. Like the spine of a seadragon, we say. They sailed there in a big ship with white sails and came in to land in little boats. They rowed ashore from the deepwater harbour where two rivers flow together from the red mountain at the centre. This is

where I was born, right there, in that village, that's called Belmont. Where your granddaddy was born, and your father too. (Warner 1993: 7)

Feeny's tale describes the island where Prospero/Everard lives and where the story of Miranda's curiosity and self-formation will develop in the future. Feeny's great merit as author-narrator of the story resides in her ability to conflate the fiction of her invented fairy tale (in fact, the metamorphic history of the Everards) with the reality of Miranda's life. To do so, Feeny brilliantly acts as a performer in front of an audience (the little girl) whose attention has to be held and whose mind has to be drawn within the story itself. While Miranda is picking daisies to make a chain, from time to time giggling at Feeny's narration, the story of the fat man goes on highlighting the little princess's desires:

The king's dreaming of being king there as well, and, by his side, his daughter's got a dream too – a new world, a new life. You know, people often dream of being different. Never content with what we are. No, no. She longs – (And Seraphine tapped her chest.) – In here, the princess feels a hole she wants to fill all up with something, she don't yet know what it might be. She'll find out, in time. But that's a long story and have to keep. (p. 8)

And, indeed, it is a long story Miranda will discover in time. Seraphine continues undauntedly in her retelling:

– Then, at that moment, the fat man's young master roars through the door, a gang of young boys and girls all about him. A girl on each arm, a boy tugging at the paw of a wild-animal skin he has tossed across his shoulders. Others, they're blowing whistles and banging tambourines and shaking bells, hooting and shouting and kissing and squealing and jumping. With them a cloud of stale jasmine and coriander, musk and cinnamon, sweat and liquor – a powerful rich stink! The fat man beams from ear to ear to see them again. "Darling boy," he murmurs. "Found you! At long last!" the young man his master says, and throws himself down beside his fat friend and leans over to drink from the same glass. "I was beginning to think we'd lost you for ever. And I didn't like it." He pouts – (Seraphine pouted, Miranda giggled) – and he puts his curly brown head on the fat man's half-naked shoulder. "I never go missing for long," the fat man replies, and he pats the curly handsome boy, "no, you shan't get rid of me that easily." (pp. 8-9)

The atmosphere of this sort of 'antimasque' performance is decisively carnivalesque, transgressive and licentious, and the fat man's patron is the principal handsome actor in it. And it is a young man who starts courting the princess who, like Miranda meeting Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, sounds deeply curious and is fascinated by him:

– The princess starts, "Where have you come from?" She's never seen anyone like him, so polished and smooth, like a cobnutshell all over and with shining black eyes like liquorice. Her father sees her looking like that, and he feels a pain inside, he gets to feel scared he'll be bound to lose her. (p. 9)

But, in Feeny's account the young man resembles the dangerous character of Shakespearean savage Caliban more than Ferdinand for the blackness of his body, the shining of his black eyes and for his being dressed with an animal skin. Moreover, he looks too much taken by the princess, as the king soon realises:

The master laughs, reaches out a hand, he's about to make her sit beside him, and whisper to her, her father can tell, so he cuts in quickly instead and says, "Her mother… I, I have always wanted nothing but her happiness…" He's afraid, he's stammering. The young master frowns, the fat man giggles, "I want her safe…You see, she's the most precious thing I have." (p. 9)

The young man does not give in:

"My word, so serious! What about some fun? What about her fun?" He throws back the cloak of fur he wears off his shoulders, he holds out his hand to the girl once more. But her father puts his arm around her. The youth shrugs, he turns to the fat man, "God, I don't know how you've hung around here so long, my old friend. It's been five days you've been gone, you know." "He's not so bad," the fat man replies. "it's your fault, dear boy. You're… overwhelming." He laughs, and he turns to the king, who's forcing a smile of agreement. His daughter stands quietly by, wishing, wishing, – for something, she wishes she knew what. (p. 10)

The Caliban-like young man wants the princess/Miranda desperately, but she is under her father's protection/possession, as he had told

earlier defining her "the *most precious thing* I have." (my emphasis). The fact is that the black young man is so attractive and the princess starts asking herself what it is that she wishes for. Gender and race differences start coming into question until they are confronted and integrated, especially at the end of *Indigo*, when the photographer Miranda and the black actor George start a new life together in London.

At this stage of the story, though, it is Feeny's tales once again to anticipate what Miranda's life will be like. After revealing that everything, the king and the king's daughter were changed to gold, she looks at Miranda: "And Miranda, when she heard this story, gasped and forgot about the daisies, and came closer to Seraphine to look at her mouth while she was speaking, as if by watching her lips move she might understand the story better" (p. 11).

The act of retelling is also an act of rewriting and knowing oneself, looking backward while moving forward. In a much quoted passage from "When We Dead Awaken", Adrienne Rich writes: "Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in new cultural history; it is an act of survival" (1980: 35). With regard to this, particularly fruitful is Paola Bono's recent essay "Passeggiate re-visionarie. Riscritture a invenzioni d'amore" (2011), where she offers a critical overview of many types of re-writings of fables and myths, of Shakespeare's works (*The Tempest* and *King Lear*, above all), of H.D.'s re-visionings of female figures (Sappho, Penelope, Claribel), of *Le livre de Promethea* (1983) by Hélène Cixous. What is highly relevant is that Bono suggests a critical approach whereby the texts of the past should not be transmitted but read 'with a difference',

> per l'accento che pone sulla visionarietà, sull'immaginazione, su un investimento creativo che non modifica solo il singolo testo, ma inserendovi nuovi fili ritesse con effetti liberatori l'intera rete 'canonica', aprendo la strada a interventi successivi. (Bono 2011: 8)

This same attitude is clearly visible in all the essays collected in a volume entirely dedicated to the appropriations and metamorphoses

of the figure of Sappho, *Saffo. Riscritture e interpretazioni dal XVI al XX secolo* (2015), where again the question of disappearance-and-survival of the past through retellings is variously faced. [6]

But, of course, Shakespeare – who was himself an excellent rewriter both in his dramas and in his poetical works, as is brilliantly demonstrated by many scholars all over the world [7]– has always been and will continue to be a rich terrain for exploration and theoretical reflection about rewriting for critics and authors. The transformation of the tragedy of *King Lear* (1605) in *A Thousand Acres* (1992), the tragic novel by Jane Smiley is a successful re-vision of Shakespeare's play. It is a narrative text which analyses and criticises the gloomy, violent and cruel atmosphere penetrating landowner Larry Cook's family and dominating the sick, sexual, and financial relations between the patriarch Larry and his three daughters. Primarily, the metamorphosis of the Elizabethan tragedy into the contemporary American story narrated by Smiley relies strongly on the shift from the literary genre of tragedy to the narrative genre of the novel, and from the masculine perspective to the female position inside and outside the plot: in Smiley's narration it is both the gaze and the voice of the narrator Ginny (the Shakespearian Goneril) that guides the reader through the intricate, maze-like texture of the text, completely reversing the Shakespearian play's patriarchal standpoint. The journey Ginny experiences within herself takes her back in memory to the story of her family to discover disturbing, painful episodes of the past (above all, her father's abuse of power and sex): words, attitudes, events come up from her unconscious and repressed, 'buried' inner world (Smiley 1992: 113; 188-96; 305).[8] Smiley/Ginny rewrites Shakespeare, also reshaping a new happy ending, rewrites herself and suggests that alternative ways of seeing, talking, writing, and living are not only possible, but highly pursuable.

It is possible – as Marina Warner's *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992) demonstrates – to replace patriarchy and try to make

[6] See the whole book, ed. by Adriana Chemello (2015).

[7] See among others, Bate 1993, Zabus 2002, Hulme and Sherman 2000, Di Michele 2005.

[8] See, among others, Di Michele 2000; Erickson 1994; Sprenghnether 1996 (pp. 1-3 and *passim*); Novy 2000; Bono 2011 (pp. 20-3).

significant efforts to establish the basic principles, perhaps utopian, of a more-enduring and equalitarian society. At the end of the novel, we see that Miranda is going to the church a company of actors uses for rehearsals, to meet George Felix/Shaka Ifetabe and take pictures of him for the illustrators' agency, *Velvet*; the play they are rehearsing is *The Tempest* and Miranda does not recognise him immediately. All of a sudden, memories come back at the sound of his erotic voice:

> And now she remembered George Felix, though she had not thought of him for years – he had simply become one of the score or more bodies with whom she'd dug up so much pleasure in those days when it cost her nothing to find it, curled up inside her waiting to unwind. She was thinking, as she watched him in the scene on stage rehearsing again, Oh God, how I'd like to learn me a new language. Beyond cursing, beyond ranting. (Warner 1992: 388)

Is it Caliban/George who wants to learn a new language? Is it Miranda who desires a new language? During their encounter, you get the impression that both of them are looking for new ways of talking, of establishing relations which would stem from their remembrance or forgetfulness of their past in the Caribbean islands. Miranda is afraid that she will be trapped once again "in the fantasy, that someone like him could melt you and take you down to the thing you've lost touch with – the longed for, missing Primitive. Light my fire! Show me paradise! Blow me away! Be an animal, show me the beast inside!" (Warner 1992: 388-9). And that is exactly what happens to the two of them: they discover and accept themselves and, what is more important, they learn to accept each other.

> 'Miranda! I'm forgetting hard as I can. And are you? How about you? You getting the drift now, you learning to forget?'
>
> 'No,' she said, the beat inside her getting louder, so she wondered would he hear it. 'And I don't think that's what you'd like either.
>
> They had begun play. Their openings were well-tried, unadventurous. But these same familiar moves would take them in deep: face to face and piece by piece they would engage with each other so raptly that for a time they would never even notice anyone else outside looking in on the work they were absorbed in, crossing the lines, crossing the squares, far out on the board in the other's sea. (p. 395)

Their reunion (and their repeating of the mythical meeting of Eros and Psyche) transforms the meeting of Miranda and George into new stories: after all, in the T-shirt he had selected from Miranda's bunch of solidarity items there is "a gleaming meteorite, like a lump of coal, all aglow round its edges, with the caption in Miranda's crabbed hand: 'New beginnings are in the offing'" (p. 390). And, indeed, they are: a new way to deal with otherness; a new intersubjective relation encouraging contiguous alterities to bring back the suppressed or silenced dialogue; a new language curing past sufferance and scars without hiding or erasing them; and, hopefully, a new narrator/performer, like Seraphine or the newly born Seraphine.

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