Eat or Be Eaten: Psychological and Bodily Violence in Michèle Roberts's Reworking of Fairy-Tale Cannibalism

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Abstract
This paper focuses on Roberts's counter-narrative "The Cookery Lesson" and the theme of fairy-tale cannibalism. While questioning the representation of the cannibalising and the cannibalised bodies through the analysis of the sensuous language describing the desire-violence nexus, we shall take into account the ways in which the narrative form is affected in the passage from traditional fairy tale to contemporary short story, not only as concerns the representation of characters but also as regards the use of narrative voices and narrative strategies recalling the oral origins of fairy tales. At the same time, such formal choices critically re-contextualise source stories in a modern space-time framework, thus dismantling their supposed universal value. Incidentally, at the time of their circulation, the absence of a clear space-time description (which was mainly limited to rural life) helped learned readers reject issues such as cannibalism considered as *savage*, *primitive* practices causing moral and physical loathing in western *civilised* people.

Key-words: fairy tales, cannibalism, feminist counter-narratives

1. Introduction

In her 2001 short story "The Cookery Lesson", Michèle Roberts reworks the desire-violence nexus which is symbolised by the motif of cannibalism in famous European fairy tales such as "The Robber Bridegroom" included in the Grimm Brothers' collection *Kinder und Hausmarken* (1812-1857).[1]

The short story is set in contemporary London and makes use of free direct speech in a sort of diary outpouring of an insane woman

[1] Reference to this book here is to Jack Zipes's 2007 English edition (Grimm 2007).

– as the reader soon understands her to be – who is madly in love with a TV chef from whom she has taken cookery classes.

The connected themes of food, cooking and eating are at the core of the work. Together with the motif of anthropophagy, the presence of food recalls the symbolic meanings they used to have in folk and fairy tales and renews them at the same time: death, rebirth, fertility, creativity.

Both food and the body are objects of desire and they become united in the main character's cooking-eating performances.[2] Unlike in traditional fairy tales, however, the helpless object of desire – whose bodily integrity is in danger – is a man.

Although hints at women's cannibalism are already to be found in fairy tales such as "Hansel and Gretel" and "Little Thumbling", as we shall see, on the one hand in "The Cookery Lesson" the woman who is the agent of the act of cannibalism is driven by her wish for intimate knowledge of the man she desires; while, on the other hand, at a symbolical level, she is also driven by her need to recover and re-possess the Art (cooking) which complex gender stratifications seem to have deprived her of.

Michèle Roberts subverts the dominant representation of the cannibalised body of women, which in fairy tales such as "The Robber Bridegroom" (and the Bluebeard cycle) is usually represented as the object of male violence and desire (mention might be made also of the stories in the "Little Red Riding Hood" group). Her short story represents an insane woman whose desire for possession of the chef's art and heart goes so far as to plan to chop, cook and eat him. The scene is not shown: her plans only are described in her long diaristic outpouring of emotions. However, the comparison between food and the man's body is so clear and pervasive in the whole story, that the image of cannibalism haunts the reader all along and is emphasised by the open ending of the story.

This article paves the way to a better understanding of the meaning of cannibalism in Roberts's story, taking into consideration the different significations that the representation of anthropophagy and food have not only in folk and fairy tales but also in literature,

[2] Recently, we have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the theme of cannibalism and in its links with desire and creativity within different cultural fields such as the cinema (Dwyer 2003).

from the old English classics to masterpieces of other contemporary women writers and Roberts's other works. Then, it analyses the aesthetic effects which the retelling of the motif of cannibalism has on the narrative form, with an eye to the stylistic strategies which recreate the function of marvel.

We shall be seeing how the imaginative reconfiguration of bodily and psychological violence in Roberts's short story challenges the original cannibalistic tales, generating a form of critical realism rooted in present-day gender power relations and dismantling their supposed universal value. Michèle Roberts's work, thus, reconfigures the theme of bodily violence in the original cannibalistic stories in terms of (amused and spooky) revenge for the psychic violence which produced the woman's madness.

2. Food and cannibalism

Cannibalism and its connections with desire for knowledge and appropriation are at the heart of "The Cookery Lesson", with the woman's body as a vehicle of incorporation. Roberts offers a provocative representation of such bodily "encounters" establishing a re-elaboration of traditional gender roles.

In Western popular imagination cannibalism has come to be identified with *savages* and *natives*, in a form of racial discrimination, with many examples from English classics. Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest* is represented as a *savage* (with this pun cannibal/Caliban, although he is no cannibal at all), a *native* of the island and son of Sycorax, the witch; and one of the fears of Robinson Crusoe is that of being devoured by the *savages* (on this topic see Barker, Hulme and Iversen 1998). However, as Marina Warner has pointed out, ancient myths from the Greek tradition (as well as from the Judeo-Christian one) also have cannibalism as one of their basic motifs; for example, Zeus is saved by his mother, who replaces him with a stone before his father Cronus can devour him as he has his other children (Warner 1994: 88).

Fairy tales are steeped in images of consumption of human flesh, with witches, ogres, but also mothers and fathers who slaughter their children, as in Greek mythology. It is precisely for its introduction of cannibalism that "The Cookery Lesson" reminds the reader of some of the best-known tales in European popular culture, as

mentioned above: "The Robber Bridegroom" with its echoes of "Bluebeard", both included in the Grimms' collection (Bluebeard also features in Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*), and "Hansel and Gretel", which bears many similarities to Perrault's "Little Thumbling".

Although the cannibalistic act is not overtly shown in "The Cookery Lesson", the main themes in the story are undoubtedly eating and cannibalism, the latter at a literal and symbolical level. The desire for possession of the man's body is recalled in each page by the sensuous descriptions of the meals prepared and consumed by the speaking voice and by the eagerness of the character to incorporate meat:

> I bought a free-range organic chicken and carried it home with me on the bus, nursing it on my lap like a baby, and poached it according to your recipe. Then I cut it up, just as you had, darting my knife into the tender joints. I ate it, every last scrap, thinking of you meanwhile. As though I were kissing your flesh and tasting you. I licked up lemon, tarragon, white wine and cream. Then I made stock from the bones. (Roberts 2001: 88)

The portrayal of the woman's voracity recalls the terms with which cannibals are normally described. As Enrico Comba (1992) states, anthropologists consider that cannibalism is an empowering ritual through which the person attains full realisation of his(/her) social role.

Going back to fairy tales, as Francisco Vaz da Silva writes in his specific entry on cannibalism included in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*: "cannibalistic imagery has survived literary sanitization" (2008: 157). The several versions of stories within the same groups, recorded in different countries, keep the motif of cannibalism untouched and the crude descriptions of women's bodies being (or about to be) chopped, cooked and eaten are to be found from earlier to later versions. It is the case of Giambattista Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia" and "The Golden Root", Charles Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" and "Little Thumbling", and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel", "Snow White" and "The Robber Bridegroom".

"Little Thumbling" and "Hansel and Gretel", which belong to the same group of tales, are of interest because although the act of violence is directed towards children, it is a woman who performs

or causes the risk of having them cooked and eaten: either the witch in the forest or their stepmother (the two characters mirroring one another).

Wherever children are concerned, as in "Hansel and Gretel", the issue of cannibalism is linked to the mother figure. The children of a poor woodcutter (an occupation which possibly anticipates the theme of cannibalism), Hansel and Gretel, are victims of their stepmother, who wants to be rid of them because during a period of famine the family does not have enough food. In the Grimms' version it is the mother who is guilty of this terrible crime, with her husband as her accomplice. The figure of the mother, moreover, coincides with that of the witch, who wishes to eat the two hungry children, lured there by her appetising gingerbread house; Gretel kills the witch, saves Hansel and they return home to find that their stepmother too has died.

It is useful to observe that in Perrault's "Little Thumbling" it is the male characters who play the roles of villains (the father and the ogre), while the female characters are represented as traditional, protective mothers. This is also true in the case of the ogress, who warns Little Thumbling and his siblings of the danger and tries to hide and protect them from her husband. If one compares the Grimms' 1812 version of "The Robber Bridegroom" and their 1857 edition of the same tale, the focus on the cannibalised body is the same; however, in the first version the victim whom the young heroine sees in the bridegroom's house is her own grandmother and not another beautiful young woman. These tales show underlying symbolic patterns of cannibalism; as Da Silva affirms, anthropophagy "connotes passage and transubstantiation, death and renovation, and encodes reflections on feminine power and kin entanglements [...]" (pp. 157-8).

In fairy tales, cannibalism is usually condemned by society (as in "The Robber Bridegroom", "Sun, Moon, and Talia", and "The Golden Root") as an immoral act, later explicitly as a sin: cannibals are duped or punished and their victims remain safe and alive. Apart from the symbolic links between death and resurrection, the risk of being cannibalised and the actual act of cannibalism (as in stories such as "Little Red Riding Hood") might represent initiation rites which include sexual intercourse (Nikolajeva 2008: 368).

Nikolajeva points out that as rituals around eating have their origins in archaic beliefs of life, death, and rebirth, they also make reference to sexuality, fertility, and procreation. This is a theme that finds fertile terrain in Roberts's short story if we consider that, as Nikolajeva goes on, "meals in myths and folktales are circumlocutions of sexual intercourse" (p. 368). In our story there is a strong connection between food and sexuality, the promise of the speaking voice that she will chop her beloved, cook him and eat him is the result of her unappeasable desire. The succulent meals which she prepares and devours before her promise [?] are all substitutes for (unrequited) love and desire. Cannibalism thus could also be considered as a sign of extreme love, which can be found in some folk tales (Nikolajeva 367) where, when a man – or sometimes a woman – eats the person they love, they own them completely. Roberts includes this parallel between food and intercourse, oral and sexual gratification in her story and weaves the diaristic outflow of her feelings, through free direct speech, around this symbolical meaning of cannibalism.

Food, which is thus another powerful theme in Roberts's story, is a recurrent presence in folk and fairy tales. Like cannibalism, food is tied to initiation rituals, linked as it is with death and resurrection. As Nikolajeva claims, the act of eating in fairy tales often accompanies the passage of the "novice" into the other world, represented by a cave or a hut, emphasising the role of food and eating in the "chain of death-fertility-life" (2008: 367).

Nikolajeva's challenging views on food actually connect early mythical representations of human sacrifices to the later Christian sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the ritual of the Holy Communion (pp. 368-9). Jesus's prescription that His body be eaten stands for the spiritual union this symbolism enacts. Between those who eat of his body and He who, being eaten, guarantees the resurrection of the body. To eat and to be eaten can thus be considered as two related acts that transfer the power of the one who is eaten to the one who eats. This is an issue we shall be returning to in its connections with the acquisition of knowledge and art in the short story.

This symbolical meaning of Christian sacrifice appears in Michèle Roberts's 1997 novel *Impossible Saints*, where Josephine is haunted by the meaning of this sacrament. Josephine puts an

end to her inner fight between spirituality and physicality when she finally understands the symbolical meaning of drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ that had puzzled her for years. Cannibalism, then, is an image that had already appeared in Roberts's fiction, although in an indirect way, before she published "The Cookery Lesson".

The other central function of food in folk and fairy tales is that it highlights the opposition and, at the same time, the connection between nature and culture. In fact, although food comes from nature, it is transformed within culture, in a culturally biased way. This is an issue that Roberts wanted to address in "The Cookery Lesson", linking it to the image of women in modern society and their conflictive relationship with food.

In an interview which Roberts granted Patricia Bastida Rodriguez in 2003, she claims that eating and cooking are activities which are central to her writing because she considers them as sources of power: "I have been writing stories about it recently. I think, in one very simple way, cooking is a very ancient traditional image for female creativity. So given I want to reclaim things for women, you can very simply reclaim cooking [...]" (p. 102). She goes on to affirm that the issue connecting women and food is not only linked to cooking but also, at the level of narrative representation, to their bodies:

> [...] throughout history women have had this task in culture of giving to others, and saints have used it as an image. So there's a long tradition of women saints sometimes doing without food to transcend the body, which they felt horrid, because Catholicism taught you that the female body was somehow more corrupt and more evil than the male one and you had to rise above it to find God. So women were very interested, I think, in doing without food. [...] The imagery around Holy Communion, for example, is very powerful and rich, of incorporating God as man, as body into yourself. (p. 102)

"The Cookery Lesson" is aimed at "confronting the desires at the bottom of the fear of eating" (p. 103) of modern women. Rewriting being a mode which characterises Roberts's fiction, retelling tales on anthropophagy allows the author to use the transformative power of fairy tales which, she affirms, should be used by and for women.

It is not by chance that many pieces of fiction published by contemporary women writers such as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood (Sceats 2000) and Toni Morrison (Parker 1998), apart from emphasising the role of fairy tales and popular culture in influencing women's choices, also suggest that it was not easy to find images of women eating in literature; more often than not they were eaten. Roberts's subversive reworking of old tales, and in particular of the "Bluebeard tales", is a cultural practice that she shares with writers such as Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood in their respective works *The Bloody Chamber* (and the eponymous story) and *The Robber Bride*. Images of metaphorical cannibalism are also to be found in Morrison's *Beloved* (see Rice 1998).

Making reference to Atwood novels such as *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, Emma Parker claims that the Canadian author "probes the prohibitions on the public display of female appetite", since as results from her writing "eating is unequivocally political" (1995: 349). It is not only in Roberts's fiction, then, that eating and consumption are linked to the relationship between men and women and to the power which the gaze of men has on the conflictive relationship that women have with food.

In Atwood's fiction, identity issues are closely related to eating disorders, loss of control and autonomy; "the powerful are characterised by their eating and the powerless by their non-eating" (p. 349), as Parker observes. The theme of cannibalism underlies *The Edible Woman,* in a metaphorical way: when Marion, the main character, realises that she has let her husband-to-be consume and take full control of her, she faces him by making a cake shaped as a woman for him to eat.

Michèle Roberts**'**s cannibal, on the other hand, is in total control of her actions. Although the reader cannot but judge her as insane, because of her uncontrollable desires, all her decisions are consciously made. Food is thus also linked to the traditional fairy-tale function (in Proppean terms) of prohibition (Nikolajeva 2008) in Roberts's work. If one of the main meanings of cannibalism is that by consuming your enemy, you inherit his powers, it can be remarked that the theme of learning highlighted by the title "The Cookery Lesson" makes reference to the action of eating: the

protagonist aims to incorporate her cooking teacher, his knowledge and his body, finally accomplishing all his teachings on how to cut and cook meat.

As Nikolajeva remarks, in an earlier version of "Little Red Riding Hood", entitled "The Story of the Grandmother", for example, the young woman ends up eating her grandmother's flesh and drinking her blood (2008). Although the girl is of course accused of being a cannibal, the final outcome is that she has become wiser as she succeeds in saving herself from the wolf because through her grandmother's body she has acquired her knowledge.

3. Modifying attitudes: characters and the form

In the Grimms' story "The Robber Bridegroom", women assume active roles as it is they who make the decisions. However, their actions are violent and monstrous inasmuch as both the stepmother and the witch try to kill the children in order to feed themselves, an act "against nature", as women are considered to be feeders and nurturers by nature.

This is a biological perspective that Roberts challenges in "The Cookery Lesson", shifting her focus on cultural and contextual issues. The writer focuses the action on the character of a cannibal woman and her desire for appropriation and erases the traditional "happy ending", thus recognising the disruptive potency and potentialities of such myths, showing that women are not maternal "by nature".

The risk Roberts runs in this story is that of reinforcing the myth of female knowledge and *agency* as evil and corruptive, whereas her fiction is usually aimed at dismantling these images of women (i.e. the good and passive mother or the evil witch), through fresh images of connectedness in which patriarchal discursive dichotomies are erased.

This story, through its mythical lure, risks continuing the transmission of the idea of the body as a mere object of desire, though it is not the female body that is the object of such representation. Its symbolism has to be explained in terms of re-appropriation of the knowledge and artistic abilities which, as Roberts seems to suggest, women have been robbed of.

Even "The Robber Bridegroom" sees the presence of an active female character, the young bride, who is forced to accept the bridegroom that her father chooses for her but who does not resign herself to her fate, since she does not like him. She follows her instinct, which leads her to mistrust her husband-to-be, and decides to mark (like Hansel and Little Thumbling) the path from her house to his. Warned by a magic bird that the house belongs to murderers, she is then hidden by an old woman, the only human being in the house, who reveals to her that her bridegroom-to-be intends to chop her up into pieces and devour her. Thanks to her female helper, the heroine escapes her fate and returns home, where she awaits her persecutor. Then, through a tale, which she calls a dream, she reveals to all the wedding guests that the man is a robber who has cooked and devoured another young girl and that she was intended to meet the same fate. The young bride, unlike the majority of (non-monstrous) females in fairy tales, shows great intelligence and promptness of action, as she also keeps some proof of the bridegroom's crime, one of his last victim's fingers, which she then uses to frame and unmask him.

The protagonist of Roberts's short story retains these features of dexterity and forward planning, and the figure of the female helper, who is also present in "Little Thumbling", disappears. In "The Cookery Lesson", it is just one character that embodies both the figure of the mother and of the daughter, thus constituting a maternal, extra-textual connection between the young bride, the old woman and Gretel, who is also acting on her own initiative. Gretel actually outwits Hansel, who at first steers their parents' plan towards failure but then reassures Gretel that he will find a way to get them out of their "sweet" prison; however it is Gretel who saves him from being boiled and baked in the oven.

Even though the beautiful bride and Gretel free themselves from the decisions made, in the first case, by the father, and in the second case, father and brother, once their adventures are over, they return to their fathers' homes and revert to being under their control.

Christine Goldberg argues that the presence of the "female helper", which has been analysed in feminist terms by Daniela Hempen and Rose Lovell-Smith, is actually a motif that is shared by various folk tales, not only when it is a young woman who is

threatened by a murderous husband, but also when the person who risks being attacked or eaten is a boy (Goldberg 2004). Daniela Hempen observes that the role of the old woman is rather ambiguous because, while she warns the girl of the risks she is running and later helps her escape from the robbers' house, she still keeps preparing the cauldron of boiling water for the robbers to cook her and actually helps them cook the young woman, whose horrific death is witnessed by the bride from her hiding place (Hempen 1997). However, as Lovell-Smith has remarked, this figure has been widely reworked, not only in contemporary fiction but also in 19th and early 20th century romances and short stories (Lovell-Smith 2002. On gender-genre relationship see Cranny-Francis 1997 and Greene 1991).

If one takes into consideration the "Bluebeard tales" and "Hansel and Gretel" as important sources of inspiration for "The Cookery Lesson", it can be argued that Roberts operates a form of clear gender reversal. It is evident from the very first lines, via the psychological landscape that the reader is offered, that the female protagonist (the speaking voice) is represented as the traditional hunter-predator character. Roberts's readers are unexpectedly and abruptly taken into the mind of the protagonist: the first person, the use of free direct speech in this kind of intimate outrush of uncontrollable emotions contribute to drawing the reader straight into the heart of the story told by the woman.

Using her imaginative exploration of the theme of cannibalism, Roberts reworks the issues of pleasure and desire, creating a female character with a personality whose main feature is a strong degree of calculation and whose behaviour can certainly be defined as cold-hearted, deliberate and manipulative.

The overpowering and insidious attitudes of the woman at the same time recall the image of the hunter and that of the witch in classical folk and fairy tales. This idea is reinforced by her wandering around London, from her small bedsit in Camden Road to the far-away world represented by the 'posh' villas in Holland Park, where she waits for her prey to return home and where she carefully studies her enemies, as we note in her material language: "women with crisply ironed striped shirts, collar wing-tips upturned above strings of pearls, gilt bars on their shoes [...]" (Roberts 2001: 86).

In this gender reversal, the reader shares the "predator's" intruding observation of her prey, whom she studies while starting to savour in advance the pleasure of possession: "I began to love you when *I met you in the flesh* [...]" (Roberts 2001: 85, my emphasis).

The desire for intimacy with the object of one's passions is often described in mythology and fairy tales through the motif of cannibalism, and the semantic field of physicality and bodiliness emphasises the prominence of the body and its carnality.

Roberts anticipates the horrific ending of the story on the first page by introducing images of animal dismemberment: "I wanted to [...] understand more intimately how you worked. I wanted to focus on how you dealt with gutting fish, preparing kidneys and liver, hooking the giblets out of ducks" (Roberts 2001: 85). These images assume a literal value in the sense that the object of the protagonist's desire is the body of a famous chef, well-known in his country, whose manual skills in dealing with animal bodies arouses the protagonist's desire to know and possess the chef's art and his "flesh".

Reflecting on the occurrence of the theme of cannibalism in mythology and European culture, Marina Warner goes back to the meaning of the Eucharist, mentioned above, and remarks that it is also based on an image of cannibalistic incorporation, since it signifies (through transubstantiation) eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. Like passions, this sacrament is seen to "possibly" meet "a fundamental human desire to incorporate the object of passion, of wonder, of worship, of dread, of love" (Warner 1995: 88). This image of "total commingling intimacy", as Warner would have it, is at the heart of "The Cookery Lesson".

Whereas in "The Robber Bridegroom", the robber's victim is a young bride and the cannibal is a male, in "The Cookery Lesson" the relationship is subverted because the "monster" is a woman and the victim is a man. He is seen through the eyes of his executioner-to-be in terms of "flesh" to be consumed: "you were a celebrity wrapped in privacy like a fillet of beef in pastry" (Roberts 2001: 86). This relationship certainly brings to mind "Hansel and Gretel", where the first chosen victim of the witch is the boy. The chef's house, where the meeting between the two characters takes place, precisely like Hansel's meeting with the witch, is described

in the same sensuous language belonging to the semantic field of pleasure:

> Your house sparkled as though carved from sugar. A big white villa festooned with balconies, columns, cornices. I stood still for a moment, learning it. Then I trod reverently up the cream and grey marble steps and rang the bell. (Roberts 2001: 86)

The protagonist's gaze does not leave the body of the chef. It is an intruding stare that follows him everywhere, as she waits for him outside his house and tries to see what is inside, behind half-drawn curtains. This reminds the reader of the old witch in "Hansel and Gretel", who seems to track the children's progress with her eyes as they approach her house – made of bread, sugar and cakes –, at which point the two starving children are lured to her door.

The title of Roberts's short story seems to be symbolic of the role reversal around which it is built. The chef runs his cookery school in his own house and the woman becomes one of his students in order to get closer to him and enter the intimacy of his home. This time it is the cannibal who enters the realm of the victim. However, Roberts plays with the roles of victim and executioner and the physical language she uses, making reference to parts of the body and the actions of cutting, suggests sensual images anticipating her cannibalistic desire:

> At the end of the first afternoon, I remember, you *carved* a chicken while we watched. How elegantly you *dismembered* it, parting *muscle* from *bone* with flicks of your razor-sharp knife, while we clustered around you and admired your unerring aim, your exactitude. (Roberts 2001: 87, my emphasis)

Although the images of ingestion evoked by cannibalism according to Sarah Sceats usually represent the desire to literally incorporate another person as they convey "[...] a lust for total possession or a rage for obliteration and supremacy" (2000: 34), the images of *visual ingestion* evoked by the skilful actions of the chef in dismembering an animal body signal an unspoken desire for knowledge and learning. Whereas the chef represents the figure of an artist, the woman is seething with the desire to dominate his art, which men seem to have culturally appropriated and 'stolen' from women

(consequently bringing it into the public sphere of action). The house of the chef, the movements of the woman as she explores its meanderings and the kitchen where he runs his cookery school bring to mind the cellar in "The Robber Bridegroom", where the act of cannibalism takes place. The Grimms' tale unfolds so:

> The beautiful bride moved from one room to the next and explored the entire house, but it was completely empty. Not a soul could be found. Finally, she went down into the cellar where she encountered a very, very old woman, whose head was constantly bobbing (Grimm 2007: 189).

Like the cellar, the kitchen of Roberts's chef is in the basement of the house; moreover, his detached behaviour while working, coupled with the status of the women students, who are "not precisely beginners" (Roberts 2001: 86), hints at a sort of "robbery" of one of the expressive means of communication with which women have traditionally been connected:

> You, my darling, didn't bother trying to put us at our ease. You were brisk and professional and just got on with the job. You shrugged at our clumsiness as we cracked eggs and dripped hot stock on to whisked yolks. You shouted at us when we dropped ladles or curdled our infusions of butter and meat juice. (p. 87)

The overbearing behaviour of the chef is indicative of the appropriation of power which feeding and nurturing have given women; at the same time, however, it is the biological ability of women to feed their babies that has crystallised their identity as mothers and limited their activities to the private domain of the household. Men who feed and men who cook, on the other hand, do so in the public domain as "food artists". Roberts deprives the chef of his role through the cannibalistic images of incorporation and re-appropriation.

In her work, which analyses food in women's writing, Sceats has argued that women write about food and eating because women usually have the role of feeders. They have "traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others" (Sceats 2000: 32), and because of their biological function, this has endowed them with the images of both power and service. These images may have contributed to spreading contrasting images of women either

as angels of the house or as predatory monsters, thus "the caring, providing roles and their malign counterparts certainly contribute much mimetic content to women's writing" (Sceats 2000: 32).

By providing a literal twist Roberts subverts the meaning of the patriarchal idea of men as providers of food for their women (the woman says "you've only to tell me your desire and I'll provide you with what you want"; Roberts 2001: 92): the chef in her story actually becomes food for the woman who wishes to possess him. In the same way as in "Hansel and Gretel", the heroine resists the process and psychological violence of victimisation, deconstructing the model of passive victim by herself becoming the executioner of the man who has mocked her desire to know and learn:

> I can't stand rejection, being dropped into the bottomless black pit, where there is only the starving monster tearing with its fangs at its human prey, where there is only mouth and teeth and biting and death. You must not send me there, darling. I shouldn't be able to survive. Not after I have known this love. So I'll creep into your bedroom while you're still asleep. […] Then out of my handbag I'll take my Sabatier knife, the one you recommended, that I use for carving. You won't need to be afraid. You won't feel a thing, I promise you. I'm your apt pupil. I shall be accurate. I shall be swift. I'll hold you in my arms and kiss your beautiful hands and then I'll cut you up and cook you and eat you and we'll never be parted again, oh no nevermore, my sweet angel, you'll be mine for ever and you won't be able to leave me, darling flesh of my flesh, not this time, oh no never again. (pp. 98-9)

While she dismantles the models and conventions through which women's experience is filtered, through these images of female violence, Michèle Roberts recognises their evocative potency and questions the complexity of human involvement. The cookery lesson then takes on all the features of an exemplary demonstration of the role of monstrosity as instrument of *agency.*

In re-elaborating traditional fairy tales, Roberts's "The Cookery Lesson" connects the old figures of violent cannibal mothers and ambiguous female helpers, central to her source texts. She offers up an image of female violence which is empowering, because in removing the traditional happy ending, the heroine of her story neither perishes nor is domesticated, as usually happens to cannibal women in fairy and folk tales. This is sustained by a specific bodily

language, which, in spite of and because of its crudeness, describes and defines women as autonomous and gives them back their instruments of artistic expression, which include cooking.

The use of free direct speech reveals the protagonist's intentions: her passionate desire to possess her loved one shows in a first-person outpouring of images of sensuous desires and messages conveyed straight to the subject of her attention, addressed in the second person. This is a narrative strategy which gives back the lost quality of orality, as a narrative mode, to storytelling (an aspect lost in the passage to the written literary versions of fairy tales), thanks to the repetition of the pronoun "you", as if the man were there, listening to her. Such an inclusion and the close link established between the speaking voice and the subject of the story, to whom she is addressing her words, echoes the direct relationship of the storyteller and her audience often included in oral forms of folk-tale narration.

The luring quality of the narration examined above is maintained throughout the story precisely by the continuous connection of teller and listener achieved through the use of "I" and "you". Moreover, the flow of the narrator's feelings is conveyed through sharp short sentences in the free direct speech, as in the passage already recalled above: "You must not send me there, darling. I shouldn't be able to survive. Not after I have known this love [...] You won't need to be afraid. You won't feel a thing, I promise you. I'm your apt pupil. I shall be accurate. I shall be swift." (Roberts 2001: 98-9). The voiced uttering of the story and the frenzied rhythm these sentences create actually recover the spooky pleasure created by listening to fairy tales replete with images of bodily violence and cannibalism.

4. Conclusion

The fact that Michèle Roberts's short story "The Cookery Lesson" is set in contemporary London and is told through free direct speech, with features belonging to new urban Gothic fiction, is connected to her urgency to use the transformative power of fairy tales within a contemporary cultural and social frame which tends to unveil discriminating stratifications in gender relationships.

Her narration deploys a suggestive, luring language which not only recalls the atmosphere of traditional tales like "Hansel and

Gretel", but which also creates a certain sense of uneasiness due to the identification between the heroine and the reader.

The prominent role that marvel is given in this story leaves out any overtly critical comments on the role of women – for once in Michèle Roberts's fiction – leaving non-resisting readers (Fetterley 1979) oblivious of the subtle mechanisms of interpretation towards which the author implicitly leads them.

This could not have been so if the author had not modified the structure and form of traditional tales using a speaking voice in the first person through free direct speech (in the guise of a diaristic outburst of passions). Furthermore, the writer takes the body, both of the female cannibal and of her victim to the centre of the action where language becomes more sensuous. This emphasises the author's interest in telling stories about issues such as women's desire and pleasure that were silenced in later versions of traditional fairy tales in favour of moralising representations. In this story, the actual act of cannibalism is never openly described, it is left to the reader's imagination, the open ending is rooted into an atmosphere of anticipation, so that the issue of cannibalism is tackled as a form of liberation through the imaginary elimination of the oppressor. This strategy contributes to the Western "modernisation" of the tale with a critical eye on contemporary society and to changing the focus from the male to the female perspective thanks to the use of free direct speech and the inclusion of fairy tale motifs and language.

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