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“I Am Half Sick of Shadows”: The Tennysonian Intertext in Angela Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love”

María del Mar Pérez-Gil

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Perhaps the most alluring of all Alfred Tennyson’s characters, the Lady of Shalott has inspired over the years painters, writers, and musicians alike. Women writers, in particular, have conjured up her figure in their works, some of which feature female characters that feel as forlorn and oppressed by gender role prescriptions. Elizabeth Stoddard, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Sarah Grand, Elizabeth Bishop, Dorothy Hewett, Margaret Atwood, Jessica Anderson, A. S. Byatt, Patricia McKillip, Marion Chesney, and, more recently, Sarah Gridley are part of the genealogy of writers who have been attracted to Tennyson’s Lady.¹ Noted for the highly allusive strain in her fiction, Angela Carter’s Gothic reworking of Tennyson’s poem has gone unmentioned in previous studies. Though her short story “The Lady of the House of Love” has received much critical attention, none has been paid to the presence of Shalottian parallels in the text.

The theme of the woman enclosed in her chamber (bloody or virginally white) brings together Carter’s story and “The Lady of Shalott” in significant ways. The narrative presents a tragicomic vision of a female vampire who is half sick of her condition and wishes to escape from her “shuttered room” (93) in order “to be human” (95). A British army officer on tourism in Romania stops at her castle. In a *volte-face* from the poem, he enters the Countess’s place and meets her in person, but, like Sir Lancelot, he breaks unawares her perpetual routine and brings about her death.

Cursed to the shadows and banned from historicity, the Countess Nosferatu is a sadly “damned” creature (105) living under the ritualistic obligations of a vampire role she dislikes.

Dualistic images of the cursed woman coexist in her that reveal her self-alienation and inner fragmentation: she resembles Sleeping Beauty and the Lady of Shalott, on the one hand, and their inverse doubles, the female vampire and the *femme fatale*, respectively.² The Countess dreams of a man who will “free [her] from the shadows” (103). She and the Lady typify polar, yet equally constraining, gender roles that limit both women’s freedom to be someone else. As Jan Marsh argues, the Lady of Shalott’s prison-like room and the tangled yarn that binds her pictorial alter egos in John William Waterhouse’s and William Holman Hunt’s famed drawings³ serve as metaphors of the “confined and restricted world of the Victorian woman” (152). In Tennyson’s poem and Carter’s short story, the female protagonists are immersed within a patriarchal system that condemns them to a scripted, monotonous, and empty existence. For the Countess and the Lady of Shalott, “all is as it has always been and will be” (97) as long as they acquiesce in their condition. Both characters head straight into tragedy when the fancy of love bedazzles them and insinuates the possibility of liberation.

Endowed like Lancelot with a symbolic stature as an emblem of light, the officer’s appearance marks the textual collision between reality and fantasy, allegorized in sexual terms. He embodies “change and time” (the story takes place at the outset of the Great War) in contrast to “the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires” (97). Although some parallels may be drawn between him and the fairytale prince or even the hero of any romance novel—he is young, “blond, blue-eyed [and] heavymuscled” (97)—the male protagonist is as indifferent to love as the Countess is fancifully aroused by the prospect of it. Instead of a horse, he rides a bicycle, a “two-wheeled symbol of rationality” (99). Additionally, his innocence and virginity are the reverse image of Lancelot’s “blazing sexuality” suggested in the poem by the imagery of fire (Poulson 186; Culler 45).

The narrative follows the structural pattern of the solar hero’s descent to the underworld, which Carter employs in other of her novels and short stories. The Countess’s château and the desolate village below are Hadean spaces infested with shadows into which the officer penetrates when the sun is setting. He traverses an intoxicating and “luxurious” “jungle” (98) of red roses, out of which emerges the Countess’s “fatal castle” (103). Its gloomy shadows are counterpointed to the officer’s beaming radiance. His eyes are compared to “blue beams” (104), he makes his appearance in the “golden light” of the “flaming sunset” (98), and, when he enters the Countess’s room, he retains about him “all the golden light of the summer’s day” (103). By contrast, the mansion is the site of darkness. It has “dark entrails” (99), a “sombre visage” (98) and “dark portals” (103), and every “leak of natural light” is kept out of the chatelaine’s suite by closely “barred shutters and heavy velvet curtains” (94).

The Lady of the House of Love's condition ironically inverts that of the Lady of Shalott. She sits next to a mirror, while Carter's Lady has "to keep mirrors and all reflective surfaces away from her" (95). On the day the Lady of Shalott sees Lancelot, the sun comes "dazzling thro' the leaves" (l. 75); if the queen of the vampires dared to look at the officer without her dark glasses, he would "dazzle her like the sun she is forbidden to look at" (102). Whereas Tennyson's Lady sees in her mirror "a curly shepherd-lad" going by to Camelot (l. 57), the Countess entices "the shepherd boys and gipsy lads" (96) to her bed in order to kill them.

Sex is for her a primary drive that cannot be dissociated from her murderous predatism. In the night, she always wears an old-fashioned wedding dress that she changes into a white negligee stained with blood as she prepares to rest in her coffin for the day. This attire evinces her recurrent dramatization of the ritual of virginity and defloration and differs from the Lady of Shalott's "snowy white" robe (l. 136), a symbol of her sexual purity. Similarly, the chastely white lilies that grow round Shalott make a contrast with the necrophagous roses that lustfully bloom in the Countess's garden and feed on her lovers' remains. The isle "imbowers" the Lady (l. 17); the roses form "a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates" the Countess (95).

Both women are doomed Sisyphean figures caught up in the endless repetition of the same actions over and over, which nonetheless gives them some sort of prescient control over their own destiny. Night after night, the Countess sits at her table and reads her gaily colored Tarot cards. She resorts to their "magic comfort" (95) in order to ease the routine of her drab existence, as the Lady of Shalott does with her "magic web" (l. 38). Every time the Countess lays out the cards, they accentuate her sense of imprisonment by disclosing a predetermined future that she cannot evade. Once and again, the cards show the same ominous images—the Popess, Death, and the Tower: she "shuffles the cards, lays them out, reads them, gathers them up with a sigh, shuffles them again, constantly constructing hypotheses about a future which is irreversible" (95). The word "always" appears often as if to suggest the inevitability of her fate: the "Tarot always shows the same configuration" (95); "always she turns up" the same three cards (95); when the young men are invited to her house "the cards on the table always show the Grim Reaper" (96), the "cards always fall in the same pattern" (97). This monotonous rhythm of unvarying deals is eventually broken when the Countess turns up the card of the "two young lovers" (101): "Never, never before . . . never before has the Countess cast herself a fate involving love" (97). The reflection of "two young lovers" (l. 70) in the Lady of Shalott's mirror preludes, as do the arcana of the Tarot, the "hand of love and death" (97) that awaits both women.

When the Countess meets the officer face-to-face in her room, her “butterfly dazzle of painted cards” (101) ominously fall to the floor. This functions as a *mise en abyme* of the impending chaos and disorder that come to her life. She foresees her disgrace: “Her mouth formed a round ‘o’ of woe” (101). However, the officer’s reaction burlesques this momentous event and its fateful significance. As he picks up the cards, his visual attention is focused on the dirty carpet:

[H]e saw to his surprise [that the carpet] was part rotted away, partly encroached upon by all kinds of virulent-looking fungi. He retrieved the cards and shuffled them carelessly together, for they meant nothing to him . . . What a grisly picture of a capering skeleton! He covered it up with a happier one—of two young lovers, smiling at one another. (101)

In a curious catoptric inversion of the poem, the officer looks at the Lady and sees his own image reflected twice in her mirror glasses: “Her blind spectacles gave him his handsome face back to himself twice over” (102).⁴ The scene in which she leads him into her bedroom in order to kill him relates her ultimately to the motif of the cracked mirror. She trembles “as if her limbs were not efficiently joined together, as if she might shake into pieces” (105). Her glasses also fall to the floor when she takes them off, and they smash to pieces, a noise that “breaks the wicked spell in the room” (106). The next morning she lies dead in her white wedding dress. Unlike the Lady of Shalott’s face, which Lancelot finds “lovely” (l. 169) when he sees her in the boat, the Countess’s death makes her a less appealing visual object to be gazed upon: “In death, she looked far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human” (107).

Far away from Romania, once he has rejoined his regiment, the officer finds the fanged rose that that “lovely” and pitiful girl (107), as he recalls her, left him for a present. Contrary to all logic, he tries to resurrect the rose by putting it into water. Similar to the Lady of Shalott, who sees “the water-lily bloom” (l. 111) before the curse falls on her, the officer sees the rose balefully bloom before he is sent to the battlefield and the thorny, bloody garden of the French trenches.

The conflict between reality and imagination that lies at the heart of Tennyson’s poem equally informs Carter’s text. As also happens in her novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), an earlier exploration of this question, the real prevails in the end over the fantastic. From the beginning, the Countess tries to assimilate the officer into her

fantasy world of fairytales, Tarot cards, wishes, curses, and dreams. However, his practical-mindedness and skepticism make the romanticism of fairytales—and the terror seething in vampire stories—vanish. The officer feels no attraction for the Lady when he sees her. Imbued with a steady pragmatism, he also dismisses vampires as pure nonsense and the product of irrational fears and superstitions. Unlike Dracula's antagonist Jonathan Harker, the officer is not overcome by fear nor does he hardly think of it. "Immune to shadow" and lacking all imagination, he does not know "what there is to be afraid of" (104).

He finds a coherent explanation for everything that he sees. For example, he ascribes the Countess's strange behavior and physical aspect to some disease, probably nervous hysteria or tuberculosis. Moreover, the coffin in her chamber reminds him of some necrophilic sexual practices mentioned by his colonel. The officer feels that the Countess needs fresh air and to come out of the house. A dentist may align her teeth, any "competent manicurist will deal with her claws" (107), an ophthalmologist can cure her of her photophobia, which is caused, he thinks, by "some hereditary condition of the eyes" (104): "We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares" (107).

Occasionally, his excessive rationality verges more on ignorance. In fact, his nightly adventure in the realm of fantasy constitutes a hilarious travesty of medieval romance, as the hero sometimes looks more like the fool. Allegedly a symbol of the light of reason, the officer sets on a journey through a Gothic landscape peopled by a female vampire, mischievous ghosts, and an infernal "army of shadows" (95). Comically, throughout his ordeal he is unaware of what is happening around him. Not only is the virtue of rationality he embodies put to the test, but he also vanquishes his opponent without ever realizing that she was a true menace to his life. As he travels through the ghastly territory of fantasy, the knight-hero remains impenetrable to the shadows. The terrors of an underworld more real than those created by the imagination loom ahead in the bloodlust of the trenches.

Notes

¹ See Stoddard's "Before the Mirror" (1860), Phelps's "The Lady of Shalott" (1871), Grand's *The Beth Book* (1897), Bishop's "The Gentleman of Shalott" (*North & South*, 1946), Hewett's "Country Idyll" (*Windmill Country*, 1968), Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978), Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), McKillip's *The Tower at Stony Wood* (2000), Chesney's *Sick of Shadows* (2005), and

Gridley's *Loom* (2013). Emilie Autumn adds yet another twist to the story in her song "Shalott" (*Opheliac*, 2006).

² Charles Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" is also an intertextual source for Tennyson, who clearly reverses the visual interplay in the tale. The prince's act of gazing redeems Sleeping Beauty from the curse. By contrast, the Lady of Shalott falls from her prelapsarian state of innocence and brings disaster on herself when she turns around and looks at Lancelot. Her act of visual appeasement ruins her morally and finally "condemns" her. In both texts, the gaze can be read as a metonymy of sexual desire. The Lady and the prince see "the most beautiful sight" they "had ever seen" (Perrault 10), arresting tableaux endued with a sensuous aestheticism and/or a tempting eroticism that amount to icons of gendered desire: a valiant knight in armor riding his horse and a young woman of "radiant beauty" (Perrault 10) lying asleep on her bed. According to Carol Christ, the "desire to look at a forbidden erotic object . . . animates many of Tennyson's poems," of which "The Lady of Shalott" is an example (387–88).

³ John William Waterhouse's "The Lady of Shalott" (1894) and William Holman Hunt's "The Lady of Shalott" (c. 1886–1905).

⁴ In Tennyson's poem, the Lady sees Lancelot reflected twice in the mirror. As David M. Martin argues, since "Lancelot enters 'From the bank and from the river' . . . *two* Lancelots in effect appear: one is an image 'from the bank'; the other, an inverse reflection 'from the river'" (255).

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