

## **A Vampire in Plato's Cave: Mimesis, Anamorphosis, and Simulacra in Angela Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

I argue that Plato's parable of the cave is one of the intertexts employed in Angela Carter's short story "The Lady of the House of Love." The protagonist, a female vampire, is likened to a prisoner condemned to live in the shadows under the obligations of her role. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's reading of Plato's allegory, I will explore Carter's critique of femininity as a condition associated with mimetic processes that imprison women. The protagonist mirrors several female characters that mime and ventriloquize the male desires. However, she imitates her intertextual predecessors in anamorphic ways. In Platonic terms, she can be considered a "bad copy" of the original models. Yet, as I will argue, it is her imperfection, or bent intertextual mirroring, that opens the way for her liberation.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato's cave; intertextuality; bent mirror; Irigaray; Deleuze

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In "Ariachne's Broken Woof," J. Hillis Miller relates intertextuality to the less usual term "anamorphosis" in order to describe the relationship between texts and between characters that are alike yet different, and similar though not identical. Miller envisages intertextuality as a "widening circle of contextual echoes with a difference, like so many bent and bending mirrors reflecting back distorted and yet recognizable images" (58). To

elucidate his point, he uses the motif of weaving, which brings together the stories of Philomela, Arachne, Ariadne, Penelope, and the Lady of Shalott. Like the echo and the bent mirror, other similes—the mosaic (Kristeva 37), the web (Barthes, *From Work* 160), and the music of the siren (Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 145)<sup>1</sup>—have been used to illuminate the concept of intertextuality from a sensory perspective (visual, aural, or tactile).

However, it is Miller's analogy between intertextuality and a bent mirror that offers, in my opinion, more productive ground for critical analysis in postmodernist literature, where the dynamics of specular repetition and comic distortion runs through many texts.

This article analyzes Angela Carter's short story "The Lady of the House of Love" as an example of anamorphic narrative at various levels: formal, thematic, and critical. The whole story can best be described as a fractured reflection of a number of literary texts and genres. "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," *Dracula*, "The Lady of Shalott," *Great Expectations*, Gérard de Nerval's sonnet "El Desdichado,"<sup>2</sup> the *Song of Solomon*, vampire legends, fairy tales, medieval romances, and initiation rites are some of the (inter)textual referents that Carter confronts in a parodic way through the specular device of inversion.

More particularly, I will investigate the as yet unexplored relation between Carter's story and Plato's parable of the cave, which I will connect with Carter's critique of femininity as a condition associated with mimetic processes that imprison women. Criticism of "The Lady of the House of Love" has tended to read the text in literal ways and has neglected its more allegorical side. However, as Aidan Day puts it, allegorical interpretations are "the very *raison d'être* of Carter's stories" (9). The author herself also declared her predilection for this mode in an interview by John Haffenden: "I do put everything in a novel to be *read*—read the way allegory was intended to be read, [...] on as many levels as you can comfortably cope with" (86). My analysis of "The Lady of the House of Love" is rooted in this framework.

The protagonist is a Romanian Countess, a female vampire who loathes her instinctual thirst for blood and would like to be an ordinary woman. Like all the other photophobic specimens of her kind, she cannot look at the sun because it would “dazzle her” (“Lady” 102) so she lives in the “lightless [and] cavernous interior” (99) of her castle. The narrative rewrites the figure of the female vampire into that of a prisoner in the Platonic cave condemned to live in the shadows and hopelessly consigned to the sphere of evil, animalism, and unleashed sexuality. Some of the vocabulary used hints at the cave allegory as one of Carter’s possible sources. While in her radio play “Vampirella” (1976), a former version of “The Lady of the House of Love,” Carter likens the Countess to a castle—“I am both the Sleeping Beauty and the enchanted castle” (90)—in the short story the cavern simile is preferred in a way suggestive of Plato’s parable. Veiled references to it crop up in the text: the Countess is a “cave full of echoes” (93) and her voice is “filled with distant sonorities, like reverberations in a cave” (93). Moreover, the eyes of her next victim, the British army officer who arrives at her castle, are “blue beams” (104) that will “dazzle” her like the sun if she dares to look at him without her dark glasses (cf. Plato 748).<sup>3</sup>

My approach to Plato’s cave allegory is informed by Luce Irigaray’s caustic dissection of it in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Like the cave, the castle is a space of mimesis, theatricality and simulation that foredooms the Countess to the gendered and textual imitation of her literary ancestors in order to ensure her own survival as a female vampire and the continuation of the male-constructed fantasy she acts out, something I will discuss in the first section. The second section relates the concept of anamorphosis to Gilles Deleuze’s ideas about the Platonic simulacrum, which I will employ to suggest a potential reading of intertextuality as an emancipatory resource that confronts the ideology behind the hypotext.

## Caves, Fakes, and Female Specters

Carter did not hold Plato in much esteem. In “Notes from the Front Line” (1983), one of her essays, she calls him “the father of lies” (73), and in her post-apocalyptic novel *Heroes and Villains* (1969) she debunks his division of the perfect state into three classes (guardians, auxiliaries, and producers) which the community of the Professors puts into effect with dystopian consequences.

Together with his teachings concerning the ideal polis, the allegory of the cave is among Plato’s beliefs that have had a largest impact in the Western literary imagination. As is well-known, the story deals with a group of fettered prisoners that have never seen the light. Their eyes are always turned toward the back wall of the cave to the shadows projected by other men. When these men talk, their voices are echoed in the back wall, but the prisoners believe that they originate in the reflected shadows. Ignorant of any other reality but the one they have experienced during their life-long captivity, the prisoners deem the shadow world to be the only existing truth.

“Plato’s *Hystera*,” the last part of *Speculum of the Other Woman*, includes one of the keenest and most incisive critiques ever written of this allegory. Although Irigaray conceives the cave as, basically, a metaphor of the womb, her discussion also addresses the question of specular projections and the masquerade of truth resulting from them. According to Irigaray, the society of the Same and its treatment of women reproduces the power hegemony and ocular dynamics of the cave. Men take on the role of the magicians who control the scene and cast the shadows on the back wall. Women are these shadows and the prisoners in the cave who impersonate the fantasized selves that men project onto the wall. Women act as the “passive” matter on which men “imprint” their fancies, wishes and speculations (141), what Irigaray calls the “masquerades” and “disguises” passing as the truth about women.

Mimesis is the systemic element around which is organized the topography of the cave. Women are driven to imitate a conception of the feminine devised by men and some of whose manifestations occasionally verge on caricatures. The prisoners are never able to perceive that the reflected shadows are no more than phantoms, fantasies and replicas that appear to be real but are, in fact, a perversion of the truth. Irigaray compares what goes on within the cave to a “mimodrama” (280). Men, like women, are caught up in an interstitial space of delusion, masks and lies whose very fictitiousness and stage-like arrangement recall a theatrical performance. Often, Irigaray uses theatrical similes in order to refer to the cave: the cave is a “stage” (251, 260, 263), a “circus” (254, 256, 265), the “scene of representation” (255, 260, 268, 291, 345), a “show” (250, 252, 253, 255, 266, 285) and a “theater” (253, 256, 260, 265, 266, 268). Additionally, the mirror also functions as another simile. The shadows in the cave—Irigaray notes—are “images in a mirror” or “copies” (289).

In Carter’s story, the Countess is trapped in the prison of her vampire role. Arguably, the female vampire is a clichéd figure falling invariably within a well-defined, preestablished pattern: she is “sensual,” “erotic,” “monstrous,” “abject”, and “dangerous” (Creed 60-61). On her are projected the man’s fantasies for a sensual and sexually unrestrained woman. A prisoner in/of the shadows, and a screen for the projection of the Same’s desires, the Countess is doomed to repeat over and over again a bewitching masquerade of femininity, a schizoid ceremony of seduction and murder she cannot avoid, imprisoned as she is by the mandatory mimesis that her vampire role demands of her.

Everything in the Countess’s life is scripted and foreordained. She *must* be an alluring woman dominated by her animal drives, and the evil seductress who leads her helpless male victims to carnal ecstasy before she kills them. Her ancestors “condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions” (“Lady” 103). The vicious crimes of her murderous

lineage are immortalized through the Countess. The fact that she feeds on blood, that she dwells in a gloomy mansion, or that she lies in her coffin for the whole day only to rise at sunset, is part of the Gothic script she *must* follow: “Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror” (“Lady” 95). If she steps off the ‘mimodrama’ predestined for her, then she will fall into nonexistence.

The narrative foregrounds, at various levels, the Countess’s imprisonment, not only gendered but also scenic, semantic, architectural, and chromatic. The “funerary urns” in her room, the catafalque “surrounded by long candles in enormous silver candlesticks” (“Lady” 94), her dark and dusty chateau, and the typical bestiary of owls, foxes and bats, are the “impedimenta” of her vampire condition (“Lady” 104), as the text humorously puts it. Her “shuttered room” (“Lady” 93) with “tightly shuttered windows” (“Lady” 104) and the “huge, spiked wall” of roses “that incarcerates her” (“Lady” 95) add to the idea of spatial enclosure and, more generally, of entrapment.

Even the flamboyant Gothicism of the initial pages that portray the Countess and her lugubrious garden and castle (“Lady” 93-96) is built through a semantic scenography that constitutes a further element of oppression. This vocabulary and imagery mystify as well as incarcerate the Countess who, as Rebecca Munford argues, is “[s]uspended on the boundaries of the pre-scripted and reiterative syntax of the Gothic” (61). The ostentatiously Gothic display of the beginning strips the Countess of any individuality, as her description is semantically contained within a preexisting discourse from which she cannot escape. To do so would mean both her death at the level of the fabula and her “death” as a creature of the literary imagination.

Like Plato’s parable, the narrative allegorizes the clash between truth and the shadows, albeit from a feminist perspective. The officer is the male embodiment of light, the real, and scientific thought against the shadows represented by the Countess. This chiaroscuro

split between genders conveys the fictions and fantasies—or the “shadows”—that make up the concept of woman. Under the Countess’s raptorial and libidinous mask is a frail woman victimized into the forced performance of a cruel spectacle she loathes. The monstrous “queen of terror” is a pitiful and pathetic creature behind the scenes who is overwhelmed by compassion for the men she reluctantly kills. She would prefer to be an ordinary girl who pets her rabbits, feeds them “on lettuce . . . and make[s] them a nest” (96). A Gothicized replica of Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*, Carter’s *Lady* would like to break free from the vampire curse that has fallen on her and to escape from the shadows.<sup>4</sup> She finds her condition to be alienating and she wistfully longs “to be human” (95). The constrictions and obligations of her role, along with her psychotic and compulsive need to satisfy her lust for blood, fill the Countess with disgust and plunge her into a state of continual suffering and melancholy.

Enclosed as she is in her mansion, the protagonist has seen only fragments of the real world and fills her love void with trite romantic fantasies produced for women. Hence, she makes her liberation rest on the act of passively waiting for a fairytale hero who will kiss her out of her hapless plight, as Prince Charming woke Sleeping Beauty from her hundred-year sleep. The officer seemingly takes on this role. He is the sun-hero who comes to the Countess’s rescue, or so she thinks. When she first sees him coming through the door, she delusively believes that his presence “might irradiate” her perpetual darkness (“Lady” 103). She creates an idealized picture of this intrepid knight-at-arms, yet comically deflated by her unappeased desire to bite him, since his arrival at the castle coincides with dinnertime.

The Countess’s use of figurative language when she describes the officer reveals her figmental construction of reality. She employs similes whose referents in the real world are entirely unknown to her on empirical or experiential grounds and originate in her

imagination: “your golden head, of a lion, although I have never seen a lion, only imagined one, of the sun, even if I’ve only seen the picture of the sun on the Tarot card, your golden head of the lover whom I dreamed would one day free me” (“Lady” 105). What the Countess sees are “phantasms” of the real (Plato 748). Even the artistic illustrations that feed her mind with visual images (like those in the Tarot cards) simplify reality into iconic—and therefore incomplete—representations.

Mimesis, analogues and reduplications articulate in various ways Carter’s short story. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray talks of the cave as a “den of reflection” (285) that spawns “fakes, shadows, copies of copies of objects which are [...] artificially fabricated, mimed” (266). Earlier in the book she contends that, in the society of the Same, “resemblance proliferates all the more in a swarm of analogues” (135). This last phrase may well illustrate what happens in Carter’s story. Chaucer-like, she enters the House of Love only to find there a spectral swarm of anamorphic—different, yet analogous—female characters, from Sleeping Beauty to her opposite the female vampire, a cursed woman too like the first.

Like Mary Anne in Carter’s novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), the Countess is a bent mirror or refracted copy of her intertextual predecessors. Both Carterian characters are psychically fragile women who resemble, albeit parodically, Sleeping Beauty. Mary Anne inhabits a ruinous mansion reminiscent of the run-down houses in which Tennyson’s Mariana and Dickens’s Miss Havisham live enclosed. Many elements in the description of Mary Anne’s rose garden anticipate the vegetable *mise-en-scène* of “The Lady of the House of Love,” whose protagonist is a further tragicomic mirror image of Miss Havisham and the Lady of Shalott. Some of the scenes in Carter’s story evoke those in the texts by Perrault, Dickens, and Tennyson.<sup>5</sup> Except for the fairytale princess who pertains to a higher level of fantasized reality, none of the other women



whose intertextual specters roam the House of Love is rescued from her madding situation by a male hero. Something similar occurs to the Countess. She and the rest of these female characters (that have so fascinated the male imaginary) end their lives in tragedy, in an ironic reversal of the fairytale ending.

The Countess is a “haunted house” (“Lady” 103). The swarm of female others that she mirrors is made of fantasized women who mime and ventriloquize the male desires, as the Countess also does in her vampire role. All these characters are the “human images” that rise above the wall (Plato 747) and are reflected by the protagonist, another prisoner in the male-built House of Love. Rather than “‘signifiers’ within their own narratives,” these women are “‘signified’ objects in someone else’s narrative” (Peach 11). The Countess herself casts no reflection in the mirrors because she is the mirror that reflects what others project onto her. Those who pull the strings of her fate speak through her, a shadow on the back wall of the cave that echoes their voices. Hers is “curiously disembodied” and seems to “come elsewhere than from her white, still throat” (102).

Like the protagonist, the narrative is another “system of repetitions” (“Lady” 93) and a locus of textual mimesis. The Tarot cards the Countess lays out, a *mise en abyme* of her condition, always show the “same configuration,” a “future which is irreversible” (95) and from which, like the lark she keeps in a cage, she “cannot escape” (94). Phrases, words, rituals and events mime back others appearing earlier, thus creating a relation of deferred specularly with them: “now you are at the place of annihilation” (a sentence appearing on page 93 and echoed on page 104), a single kiss “woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood” (97, 103), adventurers and lads who stop to drink at the fountain (95, 96, 98), and the ceremony of serving coffee and chattering with her would-be victims (96, 101, 103). All these repetitions emphasize the dull eternal recurrence that weighs down the Countess’s existence.

The use of the future tense of predestined actions, with which the text is so often punctuated, also helps to shape a fatalistic narrative pervaded by a sense of doom. The Countess is a “closed circuit” (“Lady” 93). She rehearses a well-known plot where past, present and future are always one and the same thing. Men “will follow” the crone when she invites them to the castle (96), as later on the officer “will follow” the Countess into her room (104). His head “will fall back” when she bites him (105), and, after he dies, the crone “will bury his bones” in the garden (105) as she has done with the bones of the other men the Countess has killed (96). This verbal tense controls the life narrative of the Countess and will aim to do so with the officer’s, but to no avail. His overpowering rationalistic views will frustrate each and every attempt to blend him ontologically into the fantastic plotline of the vampire story and the fairy tale.

Unlike the fairytale princess or the Lady of Shalott, the female vampire inhabits the darkest caves and most tenebrous rooms of the House of Love, the underworld into which the officer descends. She is the negative anima on which the man projects the fears and fantasies of his unconscious. Various referred to as a “death demon,” a symbol of “destructive illusion,” and a “malefic,” “lethal,” “malevolent,” “deadly”, and “dangerous” creature (von Franz 178, 180), the dark anima appears to be rather a repository of synonymic terms that shape and standardize a stereotyped image of female monstrosity. Witches, female vampires, the *femme fatale*, the Sirens, the Lorelei, the “poison damsel,” the “beautiful creature who has weapons hidden in her body or a secret poison with which she kills her lovers during their first night together” (von Franz 179), all these mythic, spurious—sometimes grotesque—manifestations of the dark anima embody man’s anxieties and terrors about the evil lurking in woman and the threat she may pose to his sexual and psychological integrity. Deathly fangs, the vagina dentata, snake-like hair,

bewitching songs, and an overwhelming sexuality are part of the iconography of this archetype.

Although the Countess is to all effects a representation of the negative anima, she is, more than this, a wretched and self-dispossessed woman. Irigaray notes that a self-conscious and ludic use of mimesis and hysteria can function as strategies of subversion against patriarchy; however, when mimesis is a passive act “caught up in a process of *imitation, specularization, adequation, and reproduction*” (*Sex* 131), it causes the subordination and victimization of women. Recalling the theatricality that this philosopher attributes to the Platonic cave, the similes that identify the Countess highlight the performative nature of her femininity, along with her enforced mimesis of it: she is a “ventriloquist’s doll” echoing her master’s voice and moving according to his will; she is an “automaton” mechanically repeating the actions scripted by others; she is a great “piece of clockwork,” a “sad Columbine” (102), a female vampire in a harlequinade. All these expressions evince the dissociation between the role women play and the void of the self hidden beneath this mask:

she seemed inadequately powered by some slow energy of which she was not in control; as if she had been wound up years ago, when she was born, and now the mechanism was inexorably running down and would leave her lifeless [...] . The carnival air of her white dress emphasized her unreality (“Lady” 102)

Like the audience in a play, the Countess’s ancestors look intently at her: she “sits all alone [...] under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence” (“Lady” 93). Their panoptical gaze adds to the sense of suffocation, claustrophobia and restraint. The *mise-en-*

*scène* of the castle displays a similar stage-like quality. The artificiality of the décor is laid bare the next morning, when the Countess dies and the sunlight penetrates every corner of her room. Largely reminiscent of the properties used on the stage, the furniture and fabrics in her chamber reveal the theatricality of the setting and the thespian nature of the entire show: “now you could see how tawdry it all was, how thin and cheap the satin, the catafalque not ebony at all but black- painted paper stretched on struts of wood, as in the theatre” (“Lady” 106). The Countess’s status as fiction or fantasy is likewise evidenced toward the end of the story when she says “I was only an invention of darkness” (107).

So far I have concentrated for the most part on the Countess, but the officer is also an instrumental figure in deconstructing the figure of the female vampire. Like the Countess, he reflects—and is the ironic counterpart of—previous literary characters: he is a fearless Jonathan Harker and a comic parody of a medieval knight. His irruption in the narrative—and, notably, his logical reasoning—constitute some kind of ontological, linguistic and speleological “exorcism” (106) of vampire literature.

The predominant narratorial mode when the Countess is described once the officer comes into her room is, basically, carnivalesque. Derogative terms, often combined with burlesque expressions, make fun of the archetype of the dark anima and deprive it of its numinosity. Moreover, the fatal seductive power accorded to her is parodied: she is compared to a “bedizened scarecrow” (“Lady” 100) and a “shipwrecked bride” (101). A symbol of Logos—in opposition to Eros typified by the Lady of the House of Love—the officer does not find her sexually appealing. Her lips invite neither a chaste nor a burning kiss from him, who finds her mouth repelling: “her extraordinarily fleshy mouth, a mouth with wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson, a morbid mouth. Even—but he put the thought away from him immediately—a whore’s mouth” (101).<sup>6</sup> The Countess only evokes in the officer a feeling of commiseration. He even thinks that she must be

physically and mentally ill, which is why he does not want to take advantage of her when she tries to seduce him. To crown the whole, he intends to aestheticize the “monstrous feminine” by putting the Countess’s vampire teeth “into better shape” and seeking the aid of a “competent manicurist” that may do her “claws” so that she may look again a “lovely” woman (107). Rather than a helpless victim (the natural role he would fill in gothic tales), the officer takes action to try to rescue the imprisoned maiden, ironically the dark anima, the one in need of help.<sup>7</sup> He ascends from the “cave” as ignorant as he entered it and unable to rescue her from the shadows.

### **Ideological (Inter)texts and Intertextual Simulacra**

Intertexts—the old texts that haunt the new ones—can function as ideological bits and pieces through which is conveyed the ventriloquized voice of the Same. In Carter’s story, the presence of these texts articulates the tension between past gender conventions and new forms that try to contest their authority. As seen in previous pages, many of the intertexts that Carter employs in “The Lady of the House of Love” exhibit a heavily stereotyped image of woman. To put an example, death is the formulaic ending that past literary conventions prescribe for those women who yield to sexual desire. Unable to repress her sensory (visual) longings, the Lady of Shalott turns around to look at Sir Lancelot. Unlike the fairytale prince who looks in rapture at Sleeping Beauty, the Lady of Shalott—a woman—is not allowed to look at a man and appease her visual desire. Her violation of the rule brings her condemnation. The female vampire, for her part, enjoys the freedom to be sexual, but her transgression demands that she be punished. Punishment comes as something *natural* in the social *milieu* in which these texts originate and is a literary norm dictated by the ideological code.

These intertexts function as a prison-house for the Countess. She exists in a relation of intertextual mimesis with several other female characters—as stereotyped as her—whose stories determine to a greater or lesser extent her actions and even her own self. For instance, like the Lady of Shalott the Countess is “half sick of shadows” (l. 71), and, like Sleeping Beauty, she waits for the hero who will rescue her. These (inter)texts preexisting the Countess, much like the gender and genre conventions of vampire literature she is bound to reproduce, limit her freedom as a character to the point of prefiguring her demise. Although the story reminds us on two occasions that a single kiss woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, the protagonist—like the female vampire, the *femme fatale*, the Lady of Shalott, or Miss Havisham—seems more doomed to die than be romantically revived by a kiss.

Even if the Countess mimes or resembles these characters, she also departs in several ways from them. She is a fractured mirror and a travestied imitation of her female predecessors. However, it is her imperfection—or the Countess’s anamorphic reflection of the original—that opens the way for her liberation. Anamorphosis works as a feminist strategy wherewith to break the pattern of female catoptric submission to the man. Clearly at odds with the kind of image produced by the patriarchal flat mirror, anamorphosis helps to destabilize the specular paralysis or predictability that articulates the society of the Same.

To develop this point, I will resort to Deleuze’s ideas concerning the simulacrum, which I connect with the notion of intertextuality understood as both mimetic and anamorphic practice. Deleuze explains that, in Plato’s philosophy, copies resemble the model or Idea, whereas simulacra do not, which is why they are considered inferior. Deleuze is against downgrading simulacra and privileges them over what he calls the Same (the model) and the Like (the copy), which he reveals as illusions of truth. The simulacra

“are built on a dissimilitude, implying a perversion, an essential turning away” (47). Their claim, he remarks, “is made from below, by means of an aggression, an insinuation, a subversion” (48).

It is my belief that intertextuality works in “simulacral” ways in “The Lady of the House of Love.” The narrative rejects the fetishistic reproduction of the models it employs and aims at their humorous deflection. While the copy demands subservience to the original, the simulacra are anamorphic images and objects designed for critical and intellectual confrontation. Both the Countess and Carter’s short story are simulacra, or playfully perverse copies of the “idols” (Deleuze 47, 53) they are modeled on. The Countess deviates from the traditional idea of what constitutes a vampire. Additionally, she is a “bad copy” of her other intertextual predecessors. She functions as a specular surface that produces both flat and anamorphic reflections.

Similarly, Carter’s story constitutes a purposely failed imitation of the genres that frame the text: the narrative is—and is not—a fairy tale and, naturally, it is something more than a vampire story. Such aggression perpetrated on the master texts creates a different, yet by no means inferior, aesthetic product. As Deleuze puts it, the “goal is the subversion of this world, ‘the twilight of the idols.’ The simulacrum is not degraded copy, rather it contains a positive power which negates *both original and copy, both model and reproduction*” (53). Objects will no longer be valued for their likeness with the model (in Plato’s thought, whatever diverges from the model is deemed an imperfect copy). Now difference is in the genesis of the creative process, a difference that operates on the parodically perverse distortion of and resemblance with the original.

## Conclusion

“The Lady of the House of Love” is a space of mirrors, bent reflections and, why not, unfulfilled readerly expectations for those who had dreamed of a fairytale ending for the Countess. Lingering in the narrative is the echo of a question twice repeated: “Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?” (“Lady” 93, 103).<sup>8</sup> The Countess mimes her ancestors’ actions as a strategy of (literary) survival. Her dark lonely castle in Transylvania, her thirst for blood, her retinue of ghosts and shadows, along with other typical motifs, form the Gothic tapestry in which the vampire is woven. But can she change the story and unwind the spool of fate? Can the queen of the vampires—for whom “all is as it has always been and will be, whose cards always fall in the same pattern” (97)—escape from the gender and genre conventions imposed on her?

Admittedly, the Countess is a parodic mirror of other female characters, but the deep intertextual trace left by some of them also determines her fate. The protagonist is eventually “killed” by the hypotextual *music of the siren*, the echoes of the former texts and characters with which her own story is tangled. It is not so clear that the Countess’s death at the end of the story brings about her liberation, as some critics have argued. Michelle Buchel, for example, believes that the Countess’s death is an “escape” from the officer’s desire to shape her into “the image of a decorous wife” (30) and claims that the Countess saves herself by “actively refusing” to perpetuate the suffocating role of the vampire (31). However, the narrative makes it explicit that the Countess does not contemplate the possibility of death and that this comes accidentally after she “fumble[s] the ritual” (“Lady” 105): when she cuts her finger, the officer puts his mouth to the bleeding wound (“kisses” it), something that turns upside down the active/passive roles typical of the vampire’s blood-drinking ceremony. Moreover, her demise ultimately reproduces the same old convention in which death comes as a natural part of the gendered



script written for the vampire and the other female characters that break the sexual code. Better than death, I believe it is Carter's tragicomic rewriting of the myth of the female vampire, or her "simulacral" perversion of the model, that breaks down the sequence of specular repetitions and helps to liberate the Countess in more convincing ways.

Myths—says Carter—redefine women in "insulting" ways (*Sadeian* 5). By establishing a parallel between the Countess and the prisoners in Plato's cave—taking Irigaray's reading of this allegory as the basis for my discussion—I have sought to analyze the figure of the female vampire as a victim of an imposed and histrionic notion of the feminine. The Countess is a masquerade of femininity and a mirror for others to cast upon her the shadows of their desires. In the end, the Gothic plot does not develop into a fairy tale and the hero's single kiss does not exile the protagonist, as it did *Sleeping Beauty*, into some other room of the House of Love.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Julia Kristeva says in one of her most highly quoted phrases, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations" (37). Roland Barthes employs the web as metaphor in "From Work to Text," where he claims that the text is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages . . . which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (160). In *Roland Barthes*, he says that the "intertext is not necessarily a field of influences; rather it is a music of figures, metaphors, thought-words; it is the signifier as *siren*" (145).

<sup>2</sup> The Countess is the "tenebrous belle" (94) and she is "inconsolable" (96). One of the three Tarot cards she always turns up is "La Tour Abolie." Notice the echoes with the first two lines of Nerval's sonnet: "Je suis le Ténébreux,—le Veuf,—l'Inconsolé, / Le prince

d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie" ("I am the tenebrous one,—the widower,—the unconsolated / The prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower").

<sup>3</sup> In *The Republic*, we read that if the freed prisoner "lift[s] up his eyes to the light" he will feel pain "because of the dazzle and glitter" and will be "unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw" (748).

<sup>4</sup> For the intertextual similarities between "The Lady of the House of Love" and "The Lady of Shalott," see Pérez-Gil.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the scene in which the crone takes the officer to see the Countess in her room is modeled on that in which Estella takes Pip to see Miss Havisham.

<sup>6</sup> This scene brings parodic echoes of the classical scene, in both fairy and vampire tales, in which the hero is stunned by the vision of a beautiful woman. Always an object of desire, this woman possesses either an almost divine grace or an irresistible sexual allure that inflames the hero with love or carnal passion, respectively. When the prince contemplates the chaste and beautiful sleeping princess he becomes enamored of her; when Jonathan Harker sees the three female vampires, he feels a "wicked, burning desire" that they kiss him with their "voluptuous . . . red lips" (39).

<sup>7</sup> In the hero myth, the hero rescues and liberates a maiden in distress (Henderson 125). Invariably, this woman is associated with the positive anima, so Carter comically inverts the expected plot.

<sup>8</sup> While the question is left open in the short story, in "Vampirella" Mrs Beane, the governess, provides the answer: "The skylark's song was written out for it when it was hatched, my dear, and, without the intercession of, let us call it 'grace' for the sake of argument, may not change its tune by so much as a single sharp or flat" (98).

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