

P

ostmodern Fairy Godmothers: Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson



Naile Sarmaşık

Department of Translation and Interpretation, Atılım University

Abstract

The tradition of telling stories starting with the oral tradition continued with the emergence of fairy tales. Although their primary object is to instruct the readers and to impose what is good and what is bad, fairy tales throughout the years have been a perfect resource for especially postmodern writers who aim at deconstructing metanarratives. The main purpose of this study is to discuss Angela Carter's and Jeanette Winterson's feminist approach to the patriarchal understanding of the traditional fairy tale by dealing with issues such as gender, marriage, love and gender roles through postmodern techniques of rewriting, parody and intertextuality.

Keywords

Rewriting, fairy tale, parody, deconstruction, gender

*You hear stories of old / Of princes bold /
 With riches untold / Happy souls /
 Casting it all aside / To take some bride /
 To have the girl of their dreams / At their side /
 But not me / I couldn't do that /
 Not me / I'm not like that /*

(Depeche Mode, "Stories of Old")

In the world of children, fairy tales are one of the main devices to create and settle the notion about what is good and what is bad or what is ideal and what is imperfect. Since the first telling of fairy tales they have been retold, rewritten, changed, manipulated and in some cases transformed into new stories. Angela Carter's collection of retold fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1986) and Jeanette Winterson's retelling of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" in her novel *Sexing the Cherry* (2001) are only two of the examples which challenge the portrayal of female characters in fairy tales. While "putting new wine into old bottles" (Carter 1998, 37), stories in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* make a feminist criticism by using parody as well as elements from different genres such as fairy tales, pornography and the gothic. Likewise, Jeanette Winterson, who can be regarded as a feminist postmodern writer, deconstructs the patriarchal fairy tale of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses."

The origin of the fairy tale actually comes from the oral tradition and it appeared as a literary genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the help of Charles Perrault in France, Hans Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm in Germany who collected the household tales recounted by the local folk. The purpose of the Brothers Grimm in making this collection was to support the unification of the German people and their intended audience was initially adults. Despite their scholarly intentions they soon discovered that children could be a significant audience and they made changes to the tales with an attempt to meet the moral needs of children. (Nodelman 1996, 249). Thus, teaching moral lessons became an important characteristic of the genre, in which the beautiful princess always gets in trouble and is saved by the handsome prince, and the good is rewarded whereas the bad is punished at the end. This tradition of moralizing reflects the understanding of a male dominated patriarchal society which considers women as weak, passive and submissive, and men as strong, brave and active. Furthermore, the fairy tales once told by the local folk and generally known as the old wives tales in the oral tradition possessed masculinity with the writing down of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm which in their rewritings Carter and Winterson oppose by rewriting them in order to subvert the patriarchal conventional representations of women in these tales.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyze Angela Carter's first story "The Bloody Chamber" in her collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* and Jeanette Winterson's "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" chapter in *Sexing the Cherry* as a postmodern rewriting to undermine the patriarchal myths about women and to deconstruct

and subvert the predetermined judgments imposed by fairy tales, which are told from a patriarchal perspective.

Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* defines postmodernism as “rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said” (1989, 1). According to Hutcheon, “postmodern’s initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (...) are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us” (1989, 2). Angela Carter in “The Bloody Chamber” and Jeanette Winterson in “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” question and challenge the representation of female characters in fairy tales which attributes conventional gender roles to women. Furthermore, they both deconstruct and reconstruct already established patriarchal values through the use of postmodernist techniques.

Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a collection of short stories each of which is based on well-known fairy tales like “Puss-in-Boots,” “Blue Beard” and “The Little Red Riding Hood.” However, unlike the original fairy tales, the purpose of which is to put the readers or the audience (which are mostly children) to sleep or sometimes to teach a moral lesson, Carter’s stories aim at awakening and forcing the reader to question the predetermined judgments on issues of gender and gender roles. Aidan Day suggests that “[i]n *The Bloody Chamber* Carter is concerned not simply to point out what is wrong with conventional representations of gender; she is concerned at once to offer different representations, different models” (1998, 134). In her rewriting of old fairy tales the story telling tradition is very explicit and Carter demythologizes the naturalized fictions surrounding gender and fictionality.

Another controversial and one of the most remarkable contemporary British novelists who deals with fairy tales in her works is Jeanette Winterson. Her fiction is particularly interested in expressing how subjectivity is formed within a specific cultural framework and system of belief, whether these be the heterosexual family, the church, England, elsewhere (López 2007, 150). In her essay book *Art Objects* Winterson says:

When a thing is perfectly made it had no fastenings or seams. It will not come apart in your hands. What you do manage to pull to pieces is a construct of your own. A fully realized piece of work cannot be put into ‘other words’. Change the words, even by trying to substitute dictionary definitions and you will change the meaning. This is not because language is imprecise and subject to landslide, it is because it is exact. In the right hands it is exact (1996, 171).

Winterson and Carter in their works use rewriting to turn the familiar into unfamiliar. According to Sceats “[w]hile Carter’s stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are clearly different from traditional tales (being highly literary and certainly not written for children) there is nevertheless a degree of commonality with the more traditional tale, evident in a kind of intersection, between tradition, ideology, expectations and the shock of the new” (2010, 144). What is common for both Carter and Winterson in their stories is the use of parody:

one of the major features of the postmodern writing. With the use of parody different forms can be rewritten for different purposes, for criticizing, for deconstruction or for subversion. In her book entitled *The Politics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon defines parody as:

— often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality - is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders. For artists, the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the past in such a way to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention (1989, 93).

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a rewriting of the famous fairy tale "Blue Beard".¹ The original story was actually a French folktale and it was collected and written down by Charles Perrault in 1679, which tells the story of a wealthy man despised by the ladies because of his blue beard. In spite of his "blue beard" he has managed to marry several times however nobody knows what has befallen his early wives. When the man wants to marry one of the daughters of an aristocratic lady, the youngest one consents. The girl is taken to his chateau and when her husband is away for a business she discovers a dark secret about the Blue Beard: that he had killed his wives and locked them in a chamber. When he returns, Blue Beard realizes that his wife had entered his private room even though he warned her and thus he decides to kill her. At the end of the story the two brothers of the girl come and kill Blue Beard and save their sister.

In Carter's retelling, the narrator who is a seventeen year old girl is married to a Marquis of great fortune much older than she. The Marquis had three wives before, all of whom had died (or disappeared) under mysterious conditions. As the story continues it is understood that what allures the narrator about the Marquis is his unimaginable wealth and the narrator tells how her mother had queried her about whether she loves the Marquis or not. When she says she is sure of marrying him the mother says no more. Here, as Aidan Day puts it, Carter introduces the potential distinction between love and marriage and the narrator of the story "recounts how her marriage defined a leaving behind of feminine and an assimilation of the masculine" (1998, 152).

One day the Marquis is called to a business trip urgently and before going, he leaves the keys of every room in the castle to his wife, but following the original storyline, he forbids her to enter only one room which he says is his private study. After the Marquis has gone, the narrator meets the blind piano tuner named Jean Yves. She passes her time playing the piano, however when she realizes that she has nothing much to do she calls her mother on the phone and when she hears her voice she bursts into tears. Deciding to explore the house she enters the forbidden room and she finds out that it is actually a torture room in which she comes across the dead bodies of her husband's former wives. Horrified by the scene, the narrator drops the key into a pool of blood. Hastily, she grabs the key and returns to

¹ The name varies from "Bluebeard" to "Blue beard." In the English translation of Charles Perrault "Blue Beard" is used.

her room thinking of a way to escape the castle before the Marquis comes back. She tries to call her mother but the phone is dead, “dead as his wives” (Carter 1986, 30). She plays the piano in order to remain calm and Jean Yves accompanies her. When they hear the sound of a car approaching, the terrified narrator tries to wash away the blood stain on the key but it is enchanted and the stain doesn’t go off. She tries to hide the key however, it is the first thing the Marquis asks when he gets home. He sees that the bloodstain on the key has formed the shape of a tiny heart and he presses the key on the forehead of the narrator which leaves its mark on her.

Just as the Marquis raises his sword to kill her, they hear a galloping horse carrying her mother whose instincts had told her that her daughter was in trouble. The mother kills the Marquis with a bullet through his head. The story is finalized with a happy ending with the narrator, her mother and Jean Yves living together in the castle. The narrator tells that they turned the castle into a school for the blind and she runs a music school. She is also thankful that her lover, Jean Yves cannot see the indelible mark left on her shadow from the bloody key “because it spares her shame” (Carter 1986, 41). This mark on the narrator’s forehead becomes very ironic at the end of the story when the mother shoots the Marquis through his head. It turns out to be even more ironic as the mother uses the narrator’s father’s gun to kill the Marquis. Although Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” has much parallelism with the original story, she ends hers in a different way: In the original fairy tale the brothers of the young girl come and save her from the Blue Beard whereas in Carter’s story it is the mother who saves the heroine at the end of the story rather than her brothers or some other men. In this respect, the technique of rewriting plays with the reader’s knowledge of the original text and forces the reader to dismiss the predetermined knowledge from his/her mind and be open for the new text.

At the beginning of Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” the nameless narrator tells about her voyage from her mother’s house to her husband’s castle in a train wagon. Through the course of the story it is understood that the narrator’s voyage is not an ordinary one from a place to another but a voyage from girlhood to womanhood. The story is told from the perspective of first person narration which adds a psychological effect to the story since the reader experiences the story through the eyes of the narrator. Furthermore, the use of simple past tense in the narration also indicates that the narrator has survived the bitter end, which intensifies the tension of the reader about how she managed to survive. In her book *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* Cristina Bacchilega asserts that Carter’s narrative doubling in “The Bloody Chamber” pushes for knowledge:

“The Bloody Chamber”’s first-person retrospective style of narration embodies what Danielle Roemer has called Carter’s “doubled voice” strategy. The narrator’s sensual style both uses and exposes seduction as a trap. The survivor looks back on her victimizing experience from varying distances; an oscillating focalization that tricks readers – and women readers especially- in and out of identification

with the heroine's disturbing *mélange*² of displayed cleverness and passivity (1997, 121-22).

In "The Bloody Chamber" as well as in other stories in the collection "situating her tales within carefully defined cultural moments, Carter employs a wide ranging intertextuality to link each tale to the zeitgeist of its moment and to call attention to the literary fairy tale as a product, not of a collective unconscious but of specific cultural, political, and economic positions" (Kaiser 1994, 35). Carter also uses intertextuality in her story by combining pornographic elements and gothic elements with the traditional fairy tales. When the Marquis strips the narrator in the great "hereditary matrimonial bed" surrounded by mirrors, the narrator resembles herself like an artichoke which he approaches "with a weary appetite" and defines herself as "bare as a lamb chop" (Carter 1986, 15). The use of pornographic elements is also obvious in the portrayal of the bloody chamber. When the narrator finds the dead bodies of the Marquis' ex-wives she realizes that they are all naked. Furthermore, Aidan Day says that what Carter emphasizes through the torture room "is the objectification of the female in the Marquis' castle, where women have literally been denied subject- status and have been turned into objects, dead meat" (1998, 153).

According to Sceats, "[C]arter disappoints the expectations established by the well-known tales, indeed by the genre itself (for familiar patterns and elements make predictable endings)" (2010, 145), and in a way offers an escape for women from this limited and predefined roles that the society forces upon them. As Kaiser says "[C]arter deconstructs the underlying assumptions of the 'official' fairy tale; that fairy tales are universal, timeless myths, that fairy tales are meant exclusively for an audience of children, and that fairy tales present and idealized, fantastic world unrelated to the contingencies of real life" (1994, 35). Unlike the traditional fairy tale, Carter doesn't end her stories with a moral lesson. As Linda Hutcheon puts forward:

There is a long tradition of instructional literature whose purpose is to tell women how to 'appear'(...) Angela Carter's feminist use of postmodernist parody in her rewritings of 'Bluebeard' and 'Beauty and the Beast' in *The Bloody Chamber* exposes the inherited sexist psychology of the erotic. Parody, rewriting, representing woman is one option which postmodernism offers feminist artists in general, but especially those who want to work within the visual arts, overtly contesting the male gaze (1989, 155-56).

Gade says that "[J]eanette Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry*, is a fabulous narrative that challenges general perceptions of reality and destabilizes our notion of time and matter" (1999, 27). The novel takes place in two different settings, one being the seventeenth century the other being the twentieth century. The first part which is set in the seventeenth century tells the story of the Dog Woman and Jordan in the puritan England. It consists of various stories as it conveys both the physical and the spiritual journeys of Jordan who is

² Meaning "mixture, confusion."

found at the beginning of the book by the Dog Woman. Dog Woman, as her name refers, is not an ordinary woman and depicted as a grotesque character having great physical power and a huge body. Because of her ugliness and hugeness she cannot find a match and therefore cannot give birth to a child. But she becomes a mother for Jordan who travels throughout the novel seeking one of the twelve dancing princesses named Fortunata and this search turns out to be a search for his identity. In the second part of the novel the story shifts to the twentieth century in which we are faced with the counterparts of Jordan and the Dog Woman in the characters of Nicholas Jordan and the feminist ecologist. These counterparts can also be considered as the alter egos of Jordan and the Dog Woman as Nicholas Jordan meets this feminist ecologist and tries to help her. As a result of this ontological instability, fragmentation of the narrative position is further complicated by a high level of incorporated stories (Gade 1999, 31). The story is told from the perspectives of these four persons and in order to make a distinction between the narrators the writer uses different icons: a pineapple for Jordan, a banana for the Dog Woman, a chopped banana for the twentieth century nameless woman and a chopped pineapple for Nicholas Jordan.

In the novel Winterson, like Angela Carter, makes use of one of the well-known fairy tales “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” which was published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812. In the original story there was a king who has twelve daughters and every morning he found that their shoes have been worn out as if they had been dancing all night. In order to find the truth the king announces that he will give a present to the person who discovers the secret behind this mysterious event within three days and three nights. An old soldier comes to solve the mystery and when he was walking in the forest he sees an old woman who gives him a cloak having the power of invisibility unless he eats or drinks something. The soldier pretends to be fast asleep until the princesses dress up and leave the castle. Wearing the cloak of invisibility the soldier follows the princesses secretly and they come to a lake where each one of them gets into a boat with twelve princes waiting for them. The soldier, too, gets in one of the boats and passes the lake. Across the lake the princesses and the princes go to a castle where they dance till their shoes are worn out. The soldier follows and witnesses this for the other two nights and on the third night he takes away a golden cup with him to prove his story. When he tells the story to the king the princesses also confess and the soldier chooses the eldest princess as his wife.

Winterson’s rewriting of “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” appears as a chapter in the book and it is composed of eleven stories which are told at first hand by the eleven of the twelve princesses. The last princess’ story remains untold by the end of the book and as she becomes an object of Jordan’s quest she also becomes an object for the reader’s quest throughout the book. The princesses in their stories tell what happened to them after they were married with eleven princes but the stories are not like those “they lived happily ever after” stories and they include violence as most of the princesses had killed their husbands. “According to Bacchilega, (...) these postmodern transformations do not exploit the fairy tale’s magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings” (1997, 23). The satirical atmosphere in the stories is an attack on the

patriarchal values portrayed in the traditional fairy tales. As Gade says “[W]interson’s writing itself is deconstructive: the text undermines the innocence of conventional forms of representations and seeks alternative ways of describing human experiences” (1999, 29).

The story of “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” does not serve only as a rewritten chapter in the book as the princesses step out of the story and turn out to be characters in the novel. In one of the journeys of Jordan he comes across a curator in a museum and Jordan tells: “He asked me if I knew the story of ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses’. I said I had heard it, and he told me they were still living just down the road, though of course they were a quite a bit older now. Why wouldn’t I go and see them?” (Winterson 2001, 43). The first princess begins the story from the beginning and reveals the writer’s feminist point of view by rewriting the fairy tale: The princesses all sleep in a room in white beds and every night they fly to the silver city where they dance the whole night. Even their father does not realize where they are going at night but one day a clever prince who had eleven brothers catches them flying through the window. The princesses’ hands are given in marriage with these princes and as it always says they lived happily ever after. However the princess adds “We did, but not with our husbands” (Winterson 2001, 48). One of the princesses, who enjoys swimming, falls in love with a mermaid and abandons her husband who remarks that she stinks like fish. The other princess likes to collect religious items and when her husband burns her collections she wraps him in cloth and continues her life. The third one marries a prince who loves a boy and she kills them with a single arrow thinking “it was poetic” (Winterson 2001, 50).

Winterson likes to make use of fairy tales and while telling a story-within-a-story she continues to tell and rewrite other stories. In the tale of the fifth princess the writer intermingles other fairy tales like “Rapunzel” and “The Frog Prince” in which Rapunzel who is forced by her parents to marry the prince next door leaves her home and goes to live with an older woman who turns out to be our fifth princess. One day this prince comes to the tower where Rapunzel lives disguised as our princess and ties Rapunzel up and blinds her lover- the princess. As for the fifth princess, she marries one of the eleven princes who turns into a frog when she kisses him. The sixth princess marries a prince who likes to hunt and one day while watching through her window the princess sees a deer which reminds her the days when she was free. She leaves her house and her husband. The next one says that the man she married was a woman and they have lived in a castle for eighteen years until someone discovers them and tries to burn them down. Realizing the intention the princess kills her lover. The stories of the princesses continue like this until the last one, Fortunata, who refusing to marry one of the princes manages to escape on her wedding ceremony and never returns.

In her story, like Angela Carter, Winterson rewrites well-known fairy tales with an aim to subvert gender roles imposed on human beings again by the traditional fairy tales. Furthermore, by dealing with issues like lesbianism or homosexuality she tries to undermine conventional understanding of homophobia. Through the use of parody, irony and in some parts comedy Jeanette Winterson creates intertextuality to deconstruct the

patriarchal system of values. As Hutcheon puts forward “parodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as background material thus making any real attack self-destructive” (1991, 44). Irony on the other hand forces the audience to adopt an inferential strategy to understand the parodist’s interpretation and evaluation of the target text (Hutcheon 1991, 53). Although parody sometimes is regarded as a negative approach, Winterson in her rewriting uses it in order to build a new understanding of gender roles.

To conclude, in “The Bloody Chamber” Angela Carter with her postmodern rewriting of the fairy tale and her feminist approach in the depiction of the narrator’s psychological voyage as well as the unconventional characterization which is typical of her, creates a spellbinding and complex atmosphere in her stories that captivates the reader and makes the reader identify with the heroine. Likewise, in her rewritings of fairy tales as a postmodernist feminist writer what Winterson is trying to achieve is to fight against the oppression of women in a patriarchal society by de/reconstructing the fairy tales and offering the reader the freedom to have different perspectives through the use of postmodern techniques such as parody, pastiche, irony and intertextuality. Both Carter and Winterson in rewriting well-known fairy tales aim at redefining gender roles and female identity in a male dominated society.

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Öz

Postmodern Masal Perileri: Angela Carter ve Jeanette Winterson

Sözlü anlatım geleneği ile başlayan hikaye anlatma geleneği peri masallarının ortaya çıkması ile devam etmiştir. Birincil amacı okuyucuları eğitmek ve neyin iyi neyin kötü olduğunu okuyucunun zihnine yerleştirmek olsa da peri masalları yıllar boyunca üst-anlatıları yıkmayı amaçlayan yazarlar, özellikle de postmodern yazarlar için mükemmel bir kaynak teşkil etmiştir. Bu makalenin amacı Angela Carter ve Jeanette Winterson'ın cinsiyet, evlilik, aşk ve cinsiyet rolleri gibi konuları postmodern yazım teknikleri olan yeniden yazım, parodi ve metinlerarasılık unsurlarını kullanarak geleneksel peri masallarının ataerkil anlayışını yıkmayı amaçlayan feminist bakış açısını irdelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler

Yeniden yazma, peri masalı, parodi, yapı sökülme, cinsiyet

About the Author

Naile Sarmaşık was born in Denizli in 1983. In 2004 she graduated from the department of English Language and Literature, Ankara University. She received her master's degree in Hacettepe University in the department of Translation and Interpretation in 2008 with her thesis entitled A Descriptive Study on the Translation of Children's Fantasy Literature: *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Between 2004 and 2009 she worked both as a full-time translator and editor and a freelance in several private translation bureaus. She has been working as a full-time lecturer in Atılım University in the Department of Translation and Interpretation since 2009 and since 2010 she is a doctoral student in the Department of English Literature and Culture in Atılım University.

Yazar Hakkında

Naile Sarmaşık 1983'te Denizli'de doğdu. 2004 yılında Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü'nden mezun oldu. Yüksek lisans eğitimini Hacettepe Üniversitesi İngilizce Mütercim Tercümanlık Bölümü'nde A Descriptive Study on the Translation of Children's Fantasy Literature: *The Chronicles of Narnia* başlıklı tezle 2008 yılında tamamladı. 2004- 2009 yılları arasında çeşitli özel çeviri bürolarında full-time ve freelance olarak çevirmen ve editör görevlerini üstlendi. 2009 yılından bu yana Atılım Üniversitesi Mütercim-Tercümanlık bölümünde öğretim görevlisi olarak çalışmakta, 2010 yılından bu yana aynı üniversitenin İngiliz Edebiyatı ve Kültürü doktora programına devam etmektedir.