

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Department of English and American Literature

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**Representation(s) of Femininity
in Angela Carter's Postmodern Female Gothic**

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1 Introduction

A door opened and a light so bright and sudden it hurt their eyes spilled through from the back. Aunt Margaret. [...] Her eyebrows were red as if thickly marked above her eyes with red ink but her face was colourless, no blood at all showing in cheeks or narrow lips. She was painfully thin. The high, family cheek-bones stuck up gaunt and stark and her narrow shoulders jutted through the fabric of her sweater like bony wings. Like Mrs Rundle, she wore black – a shapeless sweater and draggled skirt, black stockings [...], trodden down black shoes that slapped the floor sharply as she moved. She smiled a nervous, hungry sort of smile, opening her arms to welcome them as Finn had done. Finn put Victoria in her arms and she sighed and cuddled the baby with the convulsive, unpractised hug of a woman who, against her desire, has had no children. (*MT* 45)

‘Lor’ love you, sir!’ Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. ‘As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn’t I! Not billed the “Cockney Venus”, for nothing, sir, though they could just as well ‘ave called me “Helen of the High Wire”, due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*. [...] The blonde guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter with his open notebook and his poised pencil, as if to dare him: ‘Believe it or not!’ Then she spun round on her swivelling dressing-stool [...] and confronted herself with a grin in the mirror as she ripped six inches of false lash from her left eyelid with an incisive gesture and a small, explosive, rasping sound. (*NC* 3)

These lines are the first impressions readers get of two female characters appearing in Angela Carter’s fiction¹. We encounter two women characters who could not be more different, two types of women who are worlds apart. This is what the British writer Angela Carter (1940-1992) is particularly famous for – her extraordinary representations of femininity. However, her depictions of women have not exclusively triggered positive responses: “The representation of women in Carter’s work certain-

¹ The first quotation is taken from *The Magic Toyshop* and describes the character Margaret; the second quotation portrays Fevvers, the protagonist of *Nights at the Circus*.

ly seems to have been a bone of contention among critics” (Peach 1998: 5). Carter’s portrayals of women excite – and thus open up a lot of room for discussion.

But who is this author and how can we describe her writing? Angela Carter’s fictions “prowl around the fringes of the proper English novel like dream-monsters – nasty, exotic, brilliant creatures that feed off cultural crisis“ (Sage 1977: 51). This statement by Lorna Sage vividly depicts the subversive nature of Carter’s work, which is certainly one of the factors that made her reach the “forefront of contemporary English writing” (Bristow and Broughton 1997: 1) before her untimely death at the age of 51. Apart from their subversive character, Carter’s writings are difficult to pigeonhole as “her restless shifting through and between differing literary styles made her fiction almost impossible to classify” (ibid.: 4). Nevertheless, there are themes and motifs which tend to reoccur frequently in the diverse oeuvre of Angela Carter, author of nine novels, three collections of short stories and many additional works such as radio plays and essays (cf. ibid.: 1).

The probably most important thematic aspect in Carter’s works is the critical depiction of gender, sexuality and identity, most notably with the focus on women: “Few contemporary writers have looked as long and hard as Carter into the cultural construction of male and female sexuality.” (ibid.: 2). In her discussions of these topics, Carter clearly takes a feminist position:

Carter’s work has consistently dealt with representations of the physical abuse of women in phallogentric cultures, of women alienated from themselves within the male gaze, and conversely of women who grab their sexuality and fight back, of women troubled by and even powered by their own violence. (Makinen 2000: 21)

The analysis of these representations of women from Carter’s feminist viewpoint is unquestionably a major area of the scholarly research which is done on Carter’s fiction and it will also be an essential part of this paper later on.

The aspect of “violence” mentioned in Merja Makinen’s quotation leads us to a further characteristic of Carter’s writing. In her depictions of how female identity is determined by a patriarchal society, Carter often takes a radical path and is therefore nicknamed “the avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism” (ibid.: 20) by Makinen. She states that “far from being gentle, Carter’s texts were known for the excessiveness of their violence and [...] the almost violent exuberance of their excess” (ibid.).

This characteristic of her fiction often caused disturbance among her readers and the literary establishment, which “sometimes found her message and her methods troubling.” (Bristow and Broughton 1997: 2). Interestingly, this was also the case with fellow feminist writers and critics who often disagreed with Carter’s assumptions and strategies (cf. *ibid.*: 11). In spite of – or perhaps because of – their radical and subversive nature, Carter’s works achieved canonical status during the later years of her career, particularly because of the success of her collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and the novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) (cf. *ibid.*: 1).

A further characteristic of Angela Carter’s fiction are the strong philosophical influences which become apparent in her works, maybe most notably in her novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* from 1972 (cf. *ibid.*: 3). Moreover, in the middle of the 1970s, Carter’s fictions begin to leave traces of her “revisionary inquiries into folklore, legend and fairy-tale” (*ibid.*), most remarkable in the above-mentioned collection *The Bloody Chamber*, an innovative approach to traditional western fairytales. Carter uses the fields of myth, legend and fairytale to work “within and against the conventions of these genres” (*ibid.*: 13), in order to allow a “critical discussion and deconstruction” (Müller 1997: 60) of the traditional discourses.

To sum it up, it can be said that Carter “never ceased to engage – and enrage – [her] readers” (Bristow and Broughton 1997: 4), which is the reason why she and her works are at the centre of attention in this paper. The first time I encountered Angela Carter was through the study of Gothic literature, specifically through the reading of her short story “The Lady of the House of Love”, part of the collection *The Bloody Chamber*. The context of this first encounter strongly shaped my perception of Carter’s works, as I used to read her other works through the “Gothic lens” as well. This is the reason I always perceived Carter as innovative postmodern *Gothic* writer, which is, of course, only one label which can be assigned to the author. In this paper, I will therefore bring together two aspects of Carter’s writing which have fascinated me most about her works: the Postmodern Female Gothic mode of her writing and the unconventional and eccentric representation of femininity she employs in her fiction.

The purpose of this paper will be to closely analyse Carter's representations of femininity in selected examples of her writings with the aim of demonstrating her very special approach to the portrayal of women. It will be shown that Carter's depictions of femininity can mainly be divided into two types, which both, in different ways, express her feminist convictions. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that her feminist ideas are made clear with the help of her innovative use of the Gothic.

To achieve this, I will begin with a theoretical part about the literary mode of the Gothic and its relation to the concept of femininity. In a first section, I will define the nature of the Gothic and will look at typical features appearing in Gothic fiction. In the following section, I will shed light on the roots of the Gothic as literary mode. After that, I will give an insight into the particular realm of the original Female Gothic. The end of the theoretical part will be constituted by a brief discussion of the genre of the Postmodern Female Gothic.

In the main part of the paper, I will turn to selected examples of Carter's fiction, which are *The Magic Toyshop* [MT], *Fireworks*, *The Bloody Chamber* [BC] and *Nights at the Circus* [NC]², and will analyse the representations of femininity which can be found in these literary texts. To facilitate this analysis, I will make use of a model which divides the different representations of femininity into two major types of femininity depicted in Carter's writing. The first section will deal with Femininity-Type 1, respectively with the analysis of the so-called "Puppet-Woman", while the second part will be dedicated to the analysis of Femininity-Type 2, which is labelled the "New Woman". I will explain the particular features of each femininity-type and will further illustrate them with the help of selected female characters appearing in the above-listed texts. The last section of the main part will deal with processes of transformation, i.e. with female characters changing from one femininity-type to the other.

In the conclusion of this paper, I will reunite the two strands of research. I will sum up Carter's representations of femininity and will describe the specific way she uses the Gothic in her writings. To finish, a comparison will be drawn between Carter's depictions of femininity and the representations of femininity in original Gothic fiction.

² From now on, these abbreviations will be used to refer to the listed literary works within a quotation.

2 The Gothic and Femininity

When looking at the complex nature of Angela Carter's writing, a number of different theoretical frameworks are suitable to facilitate an approach to her work. The probably most popular path to approach Carter's fiction is that of feminism. However, feminism will not be the main theoretical framework to be operated with in this paper, although it will necessarily play a role in the main part of the paper when it comes to the analysis of the representation of femininity in Carter's works. In other words, the concept of feminism will be of great use when interpreting Carter's women characters, but there will not be included a portrayal of the theory of feminism in this paper.

A further possible theoretical framework to approach Carter's writing is that of postmodernism, which would, without doubt, trigger fruitful discussions about Carter's fiction. However, in this paper the postmodernist viewpoint only plays a marginal role, which will be that of locating Carter within the genre of the Gothic.

It is the literary mode of the Gothic, then, and its relation to the topic of femininity, which will serve as theoretical framework for this paper and which will be the centre of attention in this part. For better orientation, I have divided the following part into four sections. The first section will contain an introduction to the Gothic and will present the characteristics of this literary mode. This will be followed by a brief description of the historical development of the Gothic. The third section will introduce the reader to the so-called Female Gothic, and the last section will deal with a relatively new branch of the Gothic labelled Postmodern Gothic, a genre which can be assigned to our author in question, Angela Carter.

2.1 What Is the Gothic?

Ever since, Gothic literature has fascinated readers of all ages, men and women alike. But what are the ingredients of Gothic literature, how can we define a Gothic text? Interestingly, the Gothic as a literary mode is as "shadowy and nebulous" (Kilgour 1995: 3) as the atmospheres it describes. It seems almost impossible to clearly define the genre of Gothic writing, as it is "[...] a mode that exceeds genre and categories,

restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period.” (Botting 1996: 14). The Gothic emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century and has been popular down to the present-day – of course in metamorphosing shapes. Nowadays, we encounter the Gothic in literature, in the cinema, and as a lifestyle with its own way of clothing and its own cultural events.

Even though it seems difficult to define the Gothic as a literary mode, most Gothic writings share a number of characteristics which, in retrospect, have been categorised by scholars as “typically Gothic”. A comprehensive overview about these Gothic features is given in Fred Botting’s *Gothic* (1996). The two most important features he uses in his argumentation are “excess” and “transgression”.

For Botting, “Gothic signifies a writing of excess” (Botting 1996: 1), “an over-abundance of imaginative frenzy” (ibid.: 3). Gothic literature depicts feelings and characters in their extremes, thus alluding strongly to the reader’s imagination and his or her emotions (cf. ibid.). Emotions which are depicted in Gothic texts and which are felt by the reader of these texts range from mistrust, fear and terror to love and desire. Due to the typically excessive nature of the Gothic, these feelings often appear exaggerated, which means that Gothic literature not only evokes terror but also laughter among its readers³ (ibid.: 1).

The Gothic characteristic of “excess” cannot be discussed separately from its companion, the feature of “transgression”. What Botting means by transgression is that Gothic literature goes beyond the limits of what is commonly accepted. On the one hand, this concerns the exceeding of social and moral boundaries and, on the other hand, the transgression of the rules of reality and probability (cf. ibid.: 1-13). Situations which illustrate the first-mentioned category might be the deceitful seduction of a virtuous maiden by a lecherous villain, the murder of an innocent person, somebody’s feigning of a different identity or the usurpation of somebody’s property. These situations are “stock ingredients” of Gothic plots and are one source of feelings such as horror and terror in Gothic fiction.

The other possibility of transgression refers to the frequent use of the supernatural in Gothic fiction. The appearance of supernatural beings like ghosts or monsters and seemingly impossible incidents like the famous “moving portrait” consti-

³ The parodic effect of the Gothic will be discussed in more detail in section 2.4.

tute a second important source of feelings like horror and terror. The element of the supernatural is often used to enable the typical “disturbing return of pasts upon presents” (Botting 1996: 1) or, in other words, the “return of the repressed” (Kilgour 1995: 3). This might be represented through a ghost appearing to its descendants and revealing their evil machinations, as in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), for example.

As we have seen, Gothic fiction aims to provoke feelings of horror and terror⁴. This is not exclusively achieved by the outlined techniques of transgression, but also through the concept of the “sublime”. Sublimity is often evoked by vast objects like mountains or tall buildings that “suggest[...] divinity and infinity” (Botting 1996: 40) and “confront[...] the individual subject with the thought of its own extinction.” (ibid.: 39). An example would be the description of the Alps in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), a terrifying but at the same time magnificent sight for Victor Frankenstein.

By now, we have looked at the most central elements of the Gothic: its quality of excess and transgression, the resulting emotions such as horror and terror, and its use of the supernatural. Of course, there are further characteristics which are important for the Gothic mode. For example, there is a typical setting in which a Gothic story takes place. The story is usually “set in times and places different from contemporary life” (Kelly 2002: xix), for example in medieval times and in countries like Italy or Spain, in order to detach it from established conventions and the accepted range of possibility at the time of the appearance of the text. Furthermore, there is a “major locus of Gothic plots” (Botting 1996: 2), which is the medieval castle: “decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways” (ibid.). This setting helps to create the typical gloomy and suspenseful atmosphere in Gothic fiction. This atmosphere is often caused by a menacing darkness that surrounds the protagonists, which leads to the characters losing control over the situation and makes their imagination run riot.

In such a mysterious surrounding, several “stock characters” of Gothic stories can be identified. Amongst others, these are the “malevolent aristocrat” (ibid.: 44), the “persecuted heroine” (ibid.) respectively the “damsel in distress”, monks and

⁴ For a distinction of the terms “horror” and “terror” see Botting 1996: 10.

nuns, criminals and bandits. Derived from these fundamental characters, there can be identified some typical Gothic plots, such as the persecution of a virgin heroine by a “predatory” villain, most likely through the labyrinthine subterranean passageways of his castle, as well as plots of “usurpation and restoration, concealment and revelation of identity, crime and injustice” (Kelly 2002: xix).

The above-mentioned “stock characters” show that there are typical roles for men and women in original Gothic fiction. The most common depiction of a woman in a Gothic text is that of beautiful and young virgin, who is particularly pious, virtuous and good-hearted. In most Gothic texts, this innocent girl catches the attention of a “predatory” male villain who will henceforth be in pursuit of her and her life⁵. The woman thus quickly falls into a passive “victim role” and she does not have any alternative than to attempt to escape her pursuer, who, in turn, has the active role of “chasing” her.

After this brief introduction to the typical elements of the Gothic as literary mode, I will turn to the description of the roots of the Gothic and how it developed into a distinctive literary genre.

2.2 Historical Development of the Gothic Mode

To understand the development of the Gothic as literary genre, one has to shed light on the very origin of the word “Gothic”. It is derived from the Goths, “a German tribe who lived on the northern and eastern borders of the Roman Empire, who [...] launched a widespread invasion of the empire in 376 AD” (Ellis 2000: 22). Ellis relates that the Goths were seen as “the barbarians who destroyed classical Roman civilisation and plunged the civilised world into centuries of ignorance and darkness” (ibid.). Thus, the adjective “Gothic” initially had the sense of “‘crude’, ‘barbarous’ and ‘uncivilised’” (Kelly 2002: xviii) and was therefore used as clearly pejorative attribute. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the connotation of the word “Gothic” had undergone a complex shift and it had by then “also acquired positive senses, largely displacing the pejorative ones” (ibid.)⁶.

⁵ This constellation can be seen for example at the characters Manfred and Isabella in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and at Ambrosio and Antonia in Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796).

⁶ For an explanation of the nature of this shift of values see Kelly 2002: xviii.

As Kelly explains, “when fiction called ‘Gothic’ began to appear in quantity, in the 1780s [...] through to the 1820s, commentators distinguished it from the modern novel and referred to it as ‘romance’ or ‘Gothic romance’” (ibid.). Before turning to the differences between the genre of the “novel” and that of the “romance”, it has to be made clear that “works of fiction were subjected to general condemnation as wildly fanciful pieces of folly” (Botting 1996: 25). Nevertheless, critics did not bestow the same amount of contempt upon the novel as on the romance. Romances were derogatorily described as “wildly extravagant and fanciful tales of knights, giants, fabulous entities and marvellous incidents.” (ibid.: 27). Novels, however, due to their more realist nature, were seen as “instructive observations on the living world” and as instrument to “highlight virtue and elicit a reader’s abhorrence at depictions of vice” (ibid.). Thus, Gothic fiction, following the tradition of the romance, had to cope with the critics’ negative attitude towards the genre and its “unacceptably unrealistic mode of representation” (ibid.: 46).

Despite its discredit among the literary establishment, Gothic fiction quickly became very popular and acquired a large readership. The work which has come to be known as the “first Gothic novel” is Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764. The novel contains numerous features which later have been categorised as typically Gothic and can thus be considered as important “role model” for all the following Gothic writings. The Gothic genre experienced its production boom in the 1790s (cf. Wright 2007: 1), and by 1820 most of the key texts of the original Gothic had been published (Botting 1996: 15). The Gothic continued as successful literary mode during the following centuries, of course always reinventing itself because of the ever-changing *Zeitgeist*:

In a world which, since the eighteenth century, has become increasingly secular, the absence of a fixed religious framework as well as changing social and political conditions has meant that Gothic writing, and its reception, has undergone significant transformations. Gothic excesses, none the less, the fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries, continue to produce ambivalent emotions and meanings in their tales of darkness, desire and power. (Botting 1996: 2)

In the nineteenth century, for instance, the locus of the Gothic castle was preferably substituted by the gloomy atmosphere of the modern city, the list of stock characters

grew with the characters of the scientist and the ‘monstrous double’, and the common “externalisation of objects of fear and anxiety” (Botting 1996: 10) changed into a internalisation of the sources of horror, meaning that the horror now emanated from the human being itself (cf. *ibid.*: 2-12). These new techniques “destabilised the boundaries between psyche and reality, opening up an indeterminate zone in which the differences between fantasy and actuality were no longer secure” (*ibid.*: 12).

In the twentieth century, a “diffusion of Gothic traces among a multiplicity of different genres and media” (*ibid.*: 13) is particularly striking. One sphere in which the Gothic resonates extremely powerfully is the cinema, with its numerous representations of “vampires, Jekylls and Hydes, Frankensteins and monsters” (*ibid.*). But also in the literary field, Gothic influences are still powerful in the twentieth century, which will be discussed later on in this part.

2.3 Female Gothic

It might have been noticed that in my brief account of the historical development of the Gothic mode I did not mention any facts related to women writers or women readers of Gothic fiction. This seems odd because women played a significant role in the production of Gothic texts as well as in their “consumption”. Therefore, this topic will be treated separately in the following section.

Before turning to the topic of the Female Gothic itself, one has to recall the role of women and their reputation prevailing in the time of the emergence of Gothic fiction:

Writers in a wide range of discourses, from medicine through moral philosophy and aesthetics to conduct books and sermons, represented women, and especially young women, as less rational and self-disciplined and more liable to fantasy and desire than men, and thus as particularly susceptible to the seductions of novel-reading and particularly impaired by its evils for their destined and ‘proper’ roles as wives, mothers and professionalised domestic managers. (Kelly 2002: xvii)

First, this statement explains the negative attitude in general that men had concerning women and their potential in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, it also illustrates how men regarded women in relation to their roles as readers of fiction. As men-

tioned above, reading fiction had the reputation to spoil the people's character (cf. Kelly 2002: xvii); and women were seen to fall into this trap even more easily than men. Nevertheless (or perhaps *because* of their bad reputation), novels and romances were extremely popular and quickly gained an immense readership (cf. *ibid.*: xix). Women avidly read fiction also because this was a discourse *accessible* to them. As they were denied access to higher education, it was almost impossible for them to participate in discourses concerning fields like philosophy, politics or science (cf. *ibid.*: xxviii). Thus, women were virtually "excluded from discourses of modernisation" (*ibid.*: xii), which signified a severe discrimination of their rights as human beings.

However, women found ways to partly "sail around" the obstructions set up by a male-dominated society, and one of these ways was the writing of Gothic fiction:

Though women writers were virtually excluded from genres and discourses of high cultural status, those genres with low status, especially the novel, were open to them. These were the very kinds that had the widest circulation, and because the novel was the most widely read form of print, apart from newspapers and magazines, its writers could reach a wide segment of the reading public – the revolutionary class of the time. (Kelly 2002: xxviii)

Thus, women "secretly" managed to express themselves on topics they would normally not have been allowed to talk about by *fictionalising* "political themes that were of pressing interest to the reading public (*ibid.*: xxiv). This was particularly easy within the developing genre of the Gothic, because "its relatively open generic texture⁷ [...] could be used to appropriate and diffuse all kinds of discourses otherwise barred to women" (*ibid.*: xxix). Therefore, women eagerly engaged in the production of Gothic texts, not only for pleasure but also with the aim to diffuse political and philosophical ideas they were otherwise denied to express.

As Clery reports, "there were more than fifty women writers from the 1790s to the 1820s writing in what we now call the Gothic genre" (2000: 2). These women writers have not always stood in the focus of research about Gothic fiction. In the last

⁷ For more information about the "open generic texture" of the Gothic novel see Kelly 2002: xxix-xxx.

decades, however, the interest in the so-called “Female Gothic” has increased significantly. The term Female Gothic was originally coined by Ellen Moers in her work *Literary Women* from 1976: “What I mean by Female Gothic is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (Moers 1976: 91). So, who are these women writers of Gothic fiction? Unfortunately, with the exception of the “star” Ann Radcliffe, many writers of the Female Gothic are still rather unknown today.

As the two pioneering writers of Female Gothic might be considered Clara Reeve and Sophia Lee (cf. Kelly 2002: xxxi-xxxiv). Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* from 1778⁸ is often regarded as the “follower” of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Also Sophia Lee’s *The Recess; or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783-85) is seen to follow Walpole’s traces (cf. *ibid.*: xxxii), a reason for Clery to describe these two novels as “*Otranto* feminised” (Clery 2000: 37). What are the characteristics, then, of these early examples of the Female Gothic? As Kelly explains, the novels avoid

elements of the Gothic romance that were considered extravagant and exaggerated, such as the supernatural, and incorporate[d] the domestic and social realism of the contemporary novel of manners. It *does use* [my emphasis] central Gothic elements and themes, such as concealed identity, usurped rights, plots and conspiracies, persecution by malign opponents and persecution by unjust institutions. (Kelly 2002: xxxiii)

Another feature of these Gothic texts by women writers is that they are “female-centred”, which means that they usually revolve around a female protagonist and her dilemma (cf. *ibid.*). Moreover, these women writers had a clearly political agenda fixed in their works which was designed to “intervene in late eighteenth-century political discourse of reform, but in the interest of concerns, knowledges and social roles conventionally recognised as ‘feminine’” (*ibid.*).

The Female Gothic experienced a further development with the writings of Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe during the late 1780s to the mid 1790s (cf. *ibid.*: xxxv). Ann Radcliffe, probably the best-known writer of Female Gothic today, was very successful with her Gothic fiction at the time (e.g. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

⁸ Originally published one year earlier (1777) under the title *The Champion of Virtue*.

from 1794) and her works were even considered “models of Gothic romance” (Kelly 2002: xxxvi). What is typical of Radcliffe’s work is that they “emphasise the subjective merit of a female protagonist through measured and restrained use of Gothic incidents and especially through increasing amounts of picturesque description and poetic texts” (ibid.: xxxvii). Radcliffe’s method of incorporating the prestigious genre of poetry and skilfully “crafted” picturesque descriptions shows the reader that “the narrator, or author, is a person of aesthetic sensibility” (ibid.), which, in turn, leaves the reader with a positive image of women and their potential.

The question I want to pose now is how is femininity depicted in Female Gothic fiction? Does it promote images of femininity fixed by a patriarchal society or does it oppose these ideas? Can it be considered as a “feminist” genre or is it perhaps even “counter-feminist” (cf. ibid.: xiii)? As always, there is not one “correct” answer to these questions; the opinions of critics on this topic differ significantly (cf. Ellis, K.F. 2000: 258).

On the one hand, the Gothic heroine is seen to “‘destabilise’ the patriarchal foundations underpinning the eighteenth century’s critiques of women as writers, readers, family members and ‘rational beings’” (Wright 2007: 130). Kelly suggests that “by accepting and indeed emphasising women’s conventional social and cultural roles, these women writers showed that the asymmetrical polarisation of public and private spheres [...] marginalised women and their interests” (2002: xvi).

On the other hand, there are critics who believe that the Female Gothic rather serves a “counter-feminist” purpose. Anne Williams, for example, is said to claim that “rather than ‘Female Gothic’ acting as a critique of victimization, it acknowledges and celebrates passivity and dependence” (Wright 2007: 141). The argument of Diane Long Hoeveler goes into a similar direction. Wright explains that Long Hoeveler argues that “Gothic feminism enables its heroines to *masquerade* as victims in order to survive the patriarchally nightmarish spaces through which they travel” (ibid.: 142).

This discussion focuses on the typical representation of the Gothic heroine as victim of male persecution. Next to this portrayal of women as innocent, virtuous and good-hearted, we can find another important representation of femininity in (Female) Gothic fiction. A prime example of this type of femininity is Bertha Mason in Char-

lotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). She is a typical example of how sexual women were depicted in Gothic fiction (cf. Becker 1996: 71):

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards: what it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours: it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (*Jane Eyre* 321)

This description of Rochester's first wife, the "madwoman in the attic", shows the negative image of sexual women that was spread in original Gothic fiction: They were described as animalistic, dehumanised creatures who have lost their sanity and the control over their passions. Like Bertha Mason, they should better be locked away and silenced, in order to prevent that the public finds out about their existence. Susanne Becker puts it in a nutshell: "The figure of Bertha Mason has thus become a prototype of the sexual woman in the feminine Gothic: affirmative femininity turned into the monstrous – or, in narratological terms, into a voiceless textual *object*" (Becker 1996: 72).

But, as always, there are exceptions to a rule. Not all women characters in the Female Gothic were depicted as either innocent and virtuous or as mad, monstrous and, as a consequence, silenced. One example is the writer Charlotte Dacre, whose novel *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806) shares particular similarities with Lewis's sensational *The Monk* from 1796. Dacre's protagonist and "anti-heroine Victoria di Loredani [is] tempted to act upon her passions by a Moorish Satan, the eponymous Zofloya" (Wright 2007: 143). In contrast to the common depiction of the female heroine as virtuous, chaste and innocent, Dacre's heroine is portrayed as "unrepentantly violent, jealous and sexually active" (ibid.: 146). The critic Adriana Craciun argues that Dacre's protagonist "seeks to master her world and those in it and is decidedly sadistic, tormenting and murdering for the pleasure of exerting her will" (Craciun 2003: 146). In contrast to the "madwoman in the attic", this self-confident and sexually active female character is not silenced and locked away, but freely acts upon her own wishes. But, of course, this depiction of a sexual woman still has a negative connotation, as the protagonist is incited by the devil and as her actions are particularly cruel and pitiless.

This section has shown that Female Gothic itself is not easy to define and generalise, and neither is the depiction of femininity in this literary mode. It is important to keep these representations of femininity in mind in order to compare them with Angela Carter's depictions of women in her Postmodern Female Gothic later on.

2.4 Postmodern Female Gothic

After having explained the origins of the Female Gothic, I want to make a leap in time and look at a Female Gothic which was written two hundred years later than its ancestor. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik explain how this relatively recent literary mode of the Postmodern Female Gothic came into being:

In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of women novelists [...] found in the traditions of Gothic the potential for writing transgression that challenged patriarchal assumptions and expectations in the late twentieth-century context. In Gothic's hybridity they discovered ways of opening up parodic spaces to comic and liberating effect. Through self-reflexive and parodic writing they challenged the scripts of femininity as they manifested themselves through religion, culture and fiction itself. (2005: 116)

In order to comprehend this quotation, one has to familiarise oneself with the Gothic's relation to "parody". Leslie Fiedler puts it in a nutshell: "The Gothic mode is essentially a *form of parody* [my emphasis], a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limits of grotesqueness." (Fiedler 1960: 452). If we bring back to our mind the above-mentioned characteristics of the Gothic, it becomes obvious that the important aspect of "excess" can easily let Gothic fiction appear absurd and ridiculous. This effect is intensified by the use of the so-called "stock characters" or typical plots which can make Gothic novels rather predictable.

Exactly this inherent parodic quality of the Gothic is what writers of Postmodern Female Gothic such as Angela Carter find useful and work with in their fiction. Emma Pi-tai Peng points out that Angela Carter's parody of the Gothic "is a double play, a postmodern mimicking of Gothic horror which is itself theatrical" (2004: 101). A typical characteristic of Carter's work which arises through this technique is the "carnavalesque": "Typically turning the world upside down, carnival

creates a cathartic alternative to established values and meanings” (Wisker 1997: 120).

Through the technique of parody, the usage of the “grotesque” and the “turning of the world upside down” Angela Carter and other writers of the Postmodern Female Gothic creatively reinvent the Gothic mode in order to discuss contemporary fears and problems in our society (cf. Butter and Eitelmann 2007: 165). In Carter’s case, the fears and problems which are discussed mainly have to do with questions of sexuality, gender, and female identity, and the fictional discussion of these topics aims to critique the patriarchal assumptions on which Carter sees our world to rest. How Carter deals with aspects like femininity and sexuality will be analysed further in the following section of this paper.

3 Representation of Femininity in Angela Carter's Fiction

When people read Angela Carter's fiction their attention will, without doubt, be drawn to one particular aspect of her writing: her depiction of femininity. Carter's women protagonists stand out – they provoke, they shock, they surprise. They also stir pity and open the readers' eyes to problems they may never have conceived before. They can make the readers laugh or cry, they can provoke sympathy or contempt, but one thing is sure: No reader will ever stay "untouched" by Carter's women characters.

For this reason, Carter's representation of femininity in her fiction will be the main subject of analysis in this paper. As it would go beyond the scope of the paper to take into consideration all of the female characters appearing in her writing, I chose to work with representatives of two of her most influential novels, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and of two of her collections of short stories, *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Due to the fact that Carter's depiction of femininity is multifaceted, it is useful to bring into play a model⁹ which helps to roughly categorise Carter's women characters. The model is simple: It divides Carter's representations of femininity into two main types, which I would like to label Femininity-Type 1 respectively the "Puppet-Woman" and Femininity-Type 2 respectively the "New Woman". In the following two parts of this paper, I will closely look at these two sides of the model. One after the other, I will explain the femininity-types and will give examples from Carter's women characters who fit into this category. In a third part, I will take a look at processes of transformation which occur in Carter's writing, i.e. transformations from one femininity-type to the other.

3.1 Femininity-Type 1: The "Puppet-Woman"

The idea to approach Carter's depictions of femininity by means of a model came to my mind after the reading of Paulina Palmer's essay "Gender as performance in the

⁹ The model is based on a very similar pattern presented by Paulina Palmer in her essay "Gender as Performance in the Fiction of Carter and Atwood" from 1997.

fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood” from 1997. In Palmer’s study I first found the suggestion of a binary division of Carter’s women characters: “In general terms, the representation of femininity in Carter’s fiction reflects two contrary approaches. One we might call ‘femininity as entrapment’, the other ‘femininity as self-invention and role mobilization’” (Palmer 1997: 31). A further suggestion made by Palmer is that Carter’s “trajectory as a writer displays [...] a shift from the former to the latter” (ibid.), which means that Carter’s women characters in her earlier works can be considered to be more of the “entrapment”-type and the women characters in her later works more of the “self-invention”-type.

What Paulina Palmer has termed “femininity as entrapment” will correspond to my idea of the representation of women as “puppets”, respectively Femininity-Type 1. This first femininity-type Angela Carter represents in her fiction was – and still is – a very common type of woman. As Paulina Palmer expresses it, in Carter’s manifestations of the first femininity-type she “represents woman as a puppet, performing scripts assigned to her by a male-supremacist culture” (ibid.). In this statement Palmer uses the “puppet metaphor”, which is of utmost importance for Angela Carter and the understanding of her first femininity-type. A puppet is the embodiment of passivity, as she does not have any power of her own. Instead, she is completely controlled by another person, the puppet player, who freely exerts his or her power over the puppet. These are, basically, the characteristics of Carter’s women characters belonging to the first femininity-type, the puppet-type.

The above-mentioned quality of passivity is a fundamental characteristic of the “Puppet-Woman”. One simple, but strong “personification” of this quality is the character “Sleeping Beauty” from *Nights at the Circus*, an “exhibit” of Madame Schreck’s Museum of Woman Monsters:

‘Oh, what a tragic case, sir! She was a country curate’s daughter and bright and merry as a grig, until, one morning in her fourteenth year, the very day her menses started, she never wakened, not until noon; and the day after, not until teatime; and the day after that, her grieving parents watching and praying beside her bed, she opened her eyes at supper-time and said: “I think I could fancy a little bowl of bread and milk.”’ (NC 70)

Madame Schreck hears of this extraordinary girl and, under false pretences, manages to obtain Sleeping Beauty for her bizarre brothel. The beautiful girl is fast asleep now all the time and only wakes up at sunset for a few minutes. Every night, naked Sleeping Beauty is part of the exhibition of Madame Schreck's Women Monsters and is stared at by lustful men. The state of sleeping can be seen as an unmistakable metaphor for passivity. Interestingly, the girl falls into this state of ongoing sleep when her menstruation starts, that is when she becomes a woman. Thus, the state of being a woman is clearly equated with an extreme passivity and lack of control over oneself. Therefore, the Sleeping Beauty in *Nights at the Circus* can be regarded as prototypical, but relatively simplistic representation of Carter's puppet-type of femininity.

Further representations of the "Puppet-Woman" can be found in the female protagonists of one of Carter's earlier novels, *The Magic Toyshop*, a story pervaded by a distinctly Gothic atmosphere. Both the fifteen-year old Melanie and her aunt Margaret can be considered to be representations of Carter's puppet-type of femininity. An essential characteristic both female characters share is that they can literally be regarded as puppets on strings which are controlled by the omnipotent male protagonist in the story, Melanie's uncle Philip (cf. Armitt 2000: 205). Both Melanie and Margaret are completely dominated by Philip and his "totalitarian regime" and live in fear of his cruel actions, unable to ever freely express their own wills or act according to their own wishes. Melanie's feelings become clear, amongst others, in the following passage:

She saw her uncle only at mealtimes but his presence, brooding and oppressive, filled the house. She walked warily as if his colourless eyes were judging and assessing her all the time. She trembled involuntarily when she saw him. [...] She sensed his irrational violence in the air about him. (MT 102-3)

Aunt Margaret feels the same when being in the presence of her husband, but seems even more submissive than Melanie: "Aunt Margaret, frail as a pressed flower, seemed too cowed by his presence to even look at him." (MT 82).

A visible sign of the total control Philip has over his wife Margaret is the choking necklace he wants her to wear on Sundays (cf. Armitt 2000: 202):

The necklace was a collar of dull silver, two hinged silver pieces knobbed with moonstones which snapped into place around her lean neck and rose up almost to her chin so that she could hardly move her head. [...] When she wore the collar, she ate only with the utmost difficulty. [...] Bristling with moonstones, the collar was primitive and barbaric; the mastiff of a prince of medieval Persia might have worn it for going out hawking in a miniature. (*MT* 126-7)

The most impressive incident of Philip exerting his power over the women in the household, in this case over Melanie, is the rape scene during Philip's puppet performance on Christmas where Melanie is "literally transformed into the doll of Uncle Philip's imaginings" (Wisker 1997: 122). What is new in this example of his absolute control is that he crosses the "boundary" and tries to dominate Melanie even sexually. Melanie has to play the female protagonist in Philip's puppet performance of the "Leda and the swan" myth and thus finds herself on stage with a fake puppet-swan, controlled by her uncle Philip:

The swan settled its belly on her feet. She felt it. Looking up, she could see Uncle Philip directing its movements. His mouth gaped open with concentration. [...] 'Almighty Jove in the form of a swan wreaks his will.' Uncle Philip's voice, deep and solemn as the notes of an organ, moved dark and sonorous against the moaning of the fiddle. The swan made a lumpish jump forward and settled on her loins. She thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came down all around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realising she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. The obscene swan had mounted her. (*MT* 186-7)

By means of the swan, Philip is able to give vent to his sexual fantasies concerning Melanie and to rape her, even though the act of the rape is carried out indirectly through the swan. This is the most striking example of how Philip has turned Melanie in one of his "puppets", especially because she actually takes in the place of a puppet which would normally have performed in Philip's play. As a result of the

rape scene, Melanie is completely shocked: “She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place” (MT 186). As Wisker states, “this sentence clearly points to her disempowerment, and her loss of identity” (Wisker 1997: 122). In order to be able to bear the loss of dignity and the feelings of horror and shame, she has to distance herself *from herself*: “Yet she still felt detached, apart.” (MT 188). This aspect of Melanie losing her own identity nicely leads over to the next characteristic both female protagonists in *The Magic Toyshop* share.

It seems that both female characters are so much oppressed by Philip, the incarnation of male authority, that their personalities slowly fade away. One remarkable example is Aunt Margaret’s dumbness: “‘Not a word can she speak,’ said Finn. [...] ‘It is a terrible affliction; it came to her on her wedding day, like a curse.’” (MT 41). Thus, the fact of being married to Philip literally turned Margaret into a voiceless being, a woman not capable of contradicting her husband. Her dumbness is even visualized by the above-mentioned necklace, which seems to strangle her and which makes it impossible for her voice to come out. Moreover, the loss of her voice implicates the loss of a facet of her personality, as she is hardly capable of expressing her thoughts and desires to other people. Thus, the presence of her husband Philip severely limits her capabilities as human being.

Another example for Melanie’s and Margaret’s personalities slowly fading away is their clothing and outer appearance. Particularly interesting is the dress Margaret wears – respectively has to wear – every Sunday: “The dress itself was old-fashioned and made of cheap, unyielding woollen material in a deadly, flat shade of grey, a shade which was a negation of colour, an annihilation of any possibility of prettiness, an ultimately dejected and miserable grey.” (MT 124). Uncle Philip likes to see his wife in this dress, a dress which expresses her lack of joy and happiness, her unfulfilled desires and dreams and the negation of her very own personality. Every time Margaret puts on this dress, it “sucks out” more of her individuality. In the same way, her body seems to be worn out by Philip’s constant “fight” against her personality. Margaret is described as “painfully thin” (MT 45), her face being “colourless, no blood at all showing in cheeks or narrow lips” (ibid.).

Another important quality which defines Angela Carter's puppet-type of femininity and which can be found in the characters of Melanie and Margaret is the internalisation of traditional role models. Especially for Melanie, traditional roles assigned to men and women seem natural; she subconsciously accepts them without questioning their rightness. The first incident where this attitude announces itself is when Melanie, still at her parents' house, poses in front of the mirror, trying to imitate certain representations of femininity:

A la Toulouse-Lautrec, she dragged her hair sluttishly across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet. [...] She was too thin for a Titian or a Renoir but she contrived a pale, smug Cranach Venus with a bit of net curtain wound round her head [...]. (*MT* 2)

As Gina Wisker points out, "Melanie designs herself according to the male gaze to fulfil her interpretations of various fantasies of women produced by male artists [and] writers" (Wisker 1997: 122). Moreover, Melanie has completely internalised the woman's role as "wife"; for her this seems to be the desired and natural role a woman should fill: "'What will happen to me before I die?' she thought. 'Well, I shall grow up. And get married. I hope I get married. Oh, how awful if I don't get married.'" (*MT* 7). In addition, she relatively quickly accepts the role of a mother she has to fill after her parents died and left Melanie and her younger brother and sister orphaned: "A little mother. 'I am responsible,' she thought as they sat in the train and Victoria pulled up seat cushions to see what lay beneath them and Jonathon studied a diagram of the rigging on a schooner. 'I am no longer a free agent.'" (*MT* 35). Although this last statement shows that Melanie grasps the nature of the situation she finds herself in, she nevertheless has internalised a woman's role as wife and mother so much that she thinks there is no alternative than leaving herself to her fate.

Another example which shows that Melanie has quite concrete ideas of what women apparently have to endure can be taken from the kissing scene with Finn:

When she saw him do this, Melanie knew he was going to kiss her or to try and kiss her. She could not move or speak. She waited in an agony of apprehension. If it was going to happen, it must happen and then she would know what it was like to be kissed, which she did not know, now. [...] Everything went black in the shocking folds of his embrace. She was very startled and near to sobbing. (*MT* 117)

Melanie clearly does not want to be kissed by Finn; nevertheless she thinks it is her duty as woman to make this experience and to endure this situation, no matter how much disgust and horror this triggers in her. This situation shows Melanie's fatalism, as she is not capable of believing that there is an alternative to a life in which all the rules are laid down by men. Melanie may not appreciate these rules, but she nevertheless accepts them and regards them as the natural "status quo". This also becomes clear when Melanie refrains from talking to anybody about the fact that Finn kissed her against her will. She remains silent about the incident and thus accepts what she believes to be her natural fate as a woman.

A last impressive example which shows how both women have internalised the traditional roles of men and women appears in the scene in which Melanie asks Margaret for some money in order to buy Christmas presents:

‘But he doesn't let me have any money, myself. [...] There is credit at the shops. I don't really need ready money, you see. And it is his way.’ She tried to gloss over the humiliation of it. ‘I understand,’ said Melanie. An ancient, female look passed between them; they were poor women pensioners, planets round a male sun. (MT 157)

3.2 Femininity-Type 2: The “New Woman”

After having dealt with the first femininity-type Carter represents in her fiction, I will now turn to the second type. This type corresponds to what Paulina Palmer has termed “femininity as self-invention and role mobilization” (Palmer 1997: 31) and is labelled the “New Woman” in my model, an expression which is taken from Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. As it is common practice with two-sided models, the second type of femininity can be considered the opposite of the first type of my model. It is, thus, a deliberate negation of the concepts that define the puppet- type of femininity.

In comparison to the passive “Puppet-Woman”, it is the quality of being active that fundamentally characterises the second type of femininity. In Paulina Palmer's words Carter's female characters belonging to this type dispose of “a strong degree of agency and self-determination” (ibid.: 32), which is a clear sign of their activeness. In contrast to the “Puppet-Women”, the “New Women” do not let them-

selves be controlled by a “puppet player”; they take the strings into their own hands and live their lives according to their own rules and ideas. Consequently, women belonging to this type of femininity are much more self-confident and self-assured, which can be seen both as result of the control over their lives *and* as source for the control they have achieved. Of course, this self-confidence also influences their sexuality: Women of this type are more aware of their sexual needs and desires and deal with their sexuality in an open way. They enjoy flirting and mostly they are the “performer” of seduction and not its object.

Moreover, women of the second type are not “stuck” in the net of traditional role models for women and men. They are open for changes regarding these conventions and believe that these changes can be successful. In fact, they already “live” these changes in the way that they constantly reinvent the concept of “femininity” and the way how men and women live with each other.

One of the prototypes of Carter’s representations of the “New Woman” is Fevvers, the female protagonist of her highly praised novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984). Fevvers is certainly a character who stays in a reader’s mind very vividly. One of Fevvers’ most striking characteristic is her outer appearance. As Mary Russo points out in a distinctly Gothic manner, “Everything about this creature is sublime excess” (Russo 2000: 137). First and foremost, this statement can be applied to Fevvers’ size. “She was twice as large as life” (NC 13), the reader is told; or more precisely: “At six feet two in her stockings, she would have to give Walser a couple of inches in order to match him” (NC 9). She is perceived by Walser as “marvellous giantess” (NC 46) and he is indeed impressed by her size and strength: “God! She could easily crush him to death in her huge arms, although he was a big man with the strength of Californian sunshine distilled in his limbs.” (NC 57).

All this illustrates that Fevvers is a woman who “takes up space”, both in a literal *and* in a figurative meaning. “Taking up space” in this context means being self-assured and considering oneself to be valuable and significant in life, so that one literally feels the right and the power to claim a certain space for oneself. In this respect, Fevvers differs greatly from women of the puppet-type, for example from Margaret. Margaret’s strategy seems to be to take up as little space as possible, in order not to upset her husband Philip. In Margaret’s world, it is only men who have

the natural right to take up space; the more women make themselves “invisible”, the more they are accepted in this world governed by men. As illustrated above, Fevvers’ body is an obvious contradiction to this “convention”; which means that her body itself is a rebellion against traditional gender roles.

Of course it is not only her size which makes Fevvers’ body special. The most bizarre aspect of her physical appearance is, without doubt, the fact that she has wings:

Then she spread out her superb, heavy arms in a backwards gesture of benediction and, as she did so, her wings spread, too, a polychromatic unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingoes pink. (NC 13)

Talkative as usual, she reports about the nature of her birth: “for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*. ‘Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!’” (NC 3). Half woman, half bird, Fevvers can be seen as the embodiment of the “grotesque”, of the “other”, the “unknown”. With her wings she challenges the concept of the typical female body and thus, again, can be seen as symbol of rebellion against traditional male expectations of women.

Not only her wings are a revolt against the typical female appearance as it is accepted by men, also her face is described in a manner quite untypically for a woman: “Her face, broad and oval as a meat dish, had been thrown on a common wheel out of coarse clay” (NC 9). In another passage it is described that her face “might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships” (NC 37). These descriptions do not have anything in common with the usual portrayal of women as angel-like, tender, beautiful and well-proportioned. The way Fevvers’ appearance is described is shocking; readers have the subconscious feeling that this is not the way you should describe a “lady”, that this kind of depiction is not “*comme il faut*”. This is the case because we as readers are used to the practice that a successful, admired and popular woman is also described in a positive and complimentary way, by emphasising the above-listed qualities such as tenderness and symmetry. In Fevvers’ case, the coarseness of her appearance is a symbol of her denial of male expectations

of how women should look like. Through her seemingly “unwomanly” physical appearance and through the fact that she is proud of her body and loves to attract men with it, the traditional norms of how women should look like are undermined and destabilised.

This destabilisation is achieved not only through her body, but also through her “disgraceful” behaviour. One revealing example is the following passage:

Free and easy as his American manners were, they met their match in those of the *aerialiste*, who now shifted from one buttock to the other and – ‘better out than in, sir’ – let a ripping fart ring around the room. She peered across her shoulder, again, to see how he took *that*. (NC 8)

With a clearly provocative intention, Fevvers emphasises all physical phenomena which elegant and honourable women usually tend to hide:

but her mouth was too full for a ripost as she tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies’ fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety. Impressed, Walser waited with the stubborn docility of his profession until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched. (NC 21)

Fevvers gulps down gigantic quantities of food, she produces “such blatant physical utterances” (Müller 1997: 63) as belching and farting and undermines in every possible way the typical ladylike behaviour people would expect from a woman of her status:

[S]he yawned. But not as a tired girl yawns. Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk. (NC 57)

Interestingly, all these examples of Fevvers’ behaviour seem to be regarded in our culture as illustrations of typical male behaviour. When dealing with men, this kind of behaviour is normally accepted and even interpreted as sign of their manliness. When transferring this behaviour to women, however, it is quickly regarded as disgusting and appalling. Once again it becomes clear that Fevvers deliberately pro-

vokes people – mainly men – with her behaviour. With consciously behaving unladylike, she calls attention to the existing norms for women constructed by a male-centred society. She makes people aware that these traditional norms “choke” women and repress their nature and, silently, she poses the question why women should not belch and fart in public with the same right as men do.

Besides her grotesque body and her unladylike behaviour Fevvers shows another quality that is important for the second type of femininity in Angela Carter’s fiction, a quality which gives this femininity-type its title: Fevvers considers herself – and is considered by others – to be a representative of the “New Woman”. The first time this theme comes up is in Ma Nelson’s exclamation after having seen Fevvers spreading her wings for the first time: ““Oh, my little one, I think you must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground.” (NC 25). The theme reappears later in the novel when Fevvers and Lizzie travel through Siberia, and Fevvers, in love with the reporter Walser, wonders which steps to take next. Lizzie answers:

‘That’s another question, innit,’ she replies, unperturbed as ever. ‘You never existed before. There’s nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One. You haven’t any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create.’ (NC 232)

Of course, Lizzie mainly alludes to Fevvers’ status as exceptional being caused by her wings. Nevertheless, her statement also implies the assumption that Fevvers belongs to a new kind of woman, one which has never existed before. She considers Fevvers as the starting point of a revolutionised femininity, as a beginning of changing relationships between men and women. Fevvers herself confidently believes that she can transform the way men and women live with each other, which becomes clear when she ponders how a relationship with Walser could look like:

‘Oh, but Liz – think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he’ll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well – I’ll *sit* on him, I’ll hatch him out, I’ll make a new man of him. I’ll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we’ll march hand in hand into the New Century –’ (NC 334)

Fevvers dreams of a relationship with Walser in which she will not be the downtrodden and helpless wife of a dominating husband. She expects to have equal rights in this relationship and she wants to influence Walser so that he accepts her as equal partner. She wants to play an active part in the relationship and design the partnership according to her wishes. Even more passionate and optimistic are her plans for the future in the following “proclamation”:

‘And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, ah, then! All the women will have wings, the same as I. This young woman in my arms, whom we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it; she will tear off her mind forg’d manacles, will rise up and fly away. The doll’s house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed –’ (NC 338-9)

In her vision of the future, Fevvers imagines all women with wings; in this context a powerful symbol of freedom and self-determination. She imagines all women “flying away” from their imprisonment, their oppression and their discrimination, freeing themselves from male supremacy. However, Fevvers’ vision of the future seems slightly too optimistic and cheerful, which is expressed through Lizzie’s immediate response: “It’s going to be more complicated than that” (NC 339). Lizzie realises that such an abrupt change might be unrealistic and that it might still be a long way to go for women to become independent. Nevertheless, it is important that Fevvers sees the chance for herself as woman to change her life and to create new ways how men and women will live together in the future.

3.3 Processes of Transformation

After having illustrated the main characteristics of the two different types of femininity depicted in Carter’s fiction, I will now discuss instances of transformation from one type of femininity into the other. As Angela Carter is a distinctly feminist writer, these changes mostly occur from Type 1 towards Type 2. This movement mirrors the

development of women throughout history and echoes Carter's ideas of how women should see themselves.

The central question which lies behind these processes of transformation is brought up by Carter in her short story "The Lady of the House of Love" (1979): "Can a bird only sing the song it knows or can it learn a new song?" (BC 108). This is a powerful metaphor for the question if it is possible for women to break free of their old, rusty roles and to reinvent themselves. This question is essential for Carter and her fiction and in the following I will look at a couple of examples of her writings which deal with this topic.

The first female character whose transformation I want to analyse is Lady Purple from Carter's short story "The Loves of Lady Purple" (1974). Her transformation can be seen as the most basic, but at the same time as the most vivid one to be discussed here. Lady Purple can be seen as the prototype of Carter's puppet-type of femininity as outlined above because she *is*, in fact, a puppet. She is the heroine of the Asiatic Professor's puppet performance (*Fireworks* 26), playing the role of a murderous femme fatale, a men-devouring vamp who, in the end, falls into misery because of her own immoral lifestyle (*ibid.*: 29-33). Worthy of note in this story is the ambivalence between the facts that Lady Purple is a puppet who is not able to exert any power herself and that, during the puppet play, she performs the role of a femme fatale who manipulates all men around her. The actual transformation I want to look at is the passage when the puppet Lady Purple mysteriously comes to life. As usual, the Asiatic Professor kisses his favourite puppet good night, when suddenly "his chapped and withered mouth opened on hot, wet, palpitating flesh. The sleeping wood had wakened." (*ibid.*: 36). Interestingly, the story permits two different readings: On the one hand, the puppet could have come to life; but on the other hand, she could have been a living woman all the time, being kept in a "lifeless" puppet-state by her master (*cf. ibid.*: 37).

However, Lady Purple's transformation from the puppet-type to a free and self-determined woman is not very successful. Although she has come to life, she still performs the same actions as she did in her role as puppet in a play: "So, unaided, she began her next performance with an apparent improvisation which was, in reality, only a variation upon a theme. She sank her teeth into his throat and drained

him” (*Fireworks* 36). Being held in the puppet-state for so long, “her brain [...] contained only the scantiest notion of the possibilities now open to it.” (*ibid.*: 37). Although she is her own master now, Lady Purple still has internalised the principles from her time as puppet, and, as if steered by an invisible power, she makes “her way like a homing pigeon, out of logical necessity, to the single brothel [the town] contained” (*ibid.*: 38). She continues her life as before, not knowing how to use the chance to finally revolutionise it. One could say that in this example of transformation the basic change from puppet to woman is successful; nevertheless Lady Purple cannot take advantage of her newly won freedom and falls back into the patterns she was accustomed to from her time as puppet.

The next example of transformation deals with the female protagonist of Carter’s short story “The Lady of the House of Love”. Again, the protagonist has an ambiguous role: On the one hand, she is a bloodthirsty vampire who murders and devours her victims; but on the other hand, she is a typically passive and unconfident illustration of the “Puppet-Woman”. She is completely controlled by the expectations of her “atrocious ancestors” (*BC* 107) who want her to behave like a “proper” vampire, with the result that the “beautiful somnambulist helplessly perpetuates her ancestral crimes” (*ibid.*). She is imprisoned in the traditions that her ancestors determined, “herself a cave full of echoes, [...] a system of repetitions, [...] a closed circuit” (*BC* 108). Her belonging to the puppet-type becomes even clearer when the reader gets to know the thoughts of the young soldier who happens to be her guest:

[S]he is like a doll, he thought, a ventriloquist’s doll, or, more, like a great, ingenious piece of clockwork. For 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. (*BC* 118)

However, in the young soldier she sees a chance to finally change her life and, perhaps, to fulfil her wish and “be human” (*BC* 109). The soldier’s fearless and unprejudiced attitude and the fact that he is seeing her the way she *is* – and not how others want her to appear – gives her the strength to revolt against her ancestors and, at last, to change her life. She does not kill the young soldier – what would have been the expected behaviour by her ancestors – but decides to let him live (*BC* 123). This is a brave decision, as it entails her own death. She finally makes her own decision,

even if the sacrifice for her freedom is death. “In death, she looked far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human.” (BC 124). When comparing this transformation with the one of Lady Purple, it can be seen that here, again, the transformation does not succeed entirely. The protagonist of the second story manages to free herself from her puppet status and is successful in taking an important decision for herself, which is a good progress on the way from “Puppet-Woman” to “New Woman”. Nevertheless, she cannot make much use of her newly-won freedom, because the price of this freedom is death.

A transformation which goes further than the ones explained above is illustrated in Carter’s short story “The Tiger’s Bride”, also included in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* from 1979. The female protagonist in this story is again a typical example of the puppet-type of femininity. She is controlled by the male world around her, first and foremost by her father who loses her at cards: “I watched with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly, while my father [...] rids himself of the last scraps of my inheritance.” (BC 56) Her father loses her to a mysterious character called “The Beast”, who “wears a mask with a man’s face painted most beautifully on it” (BC 58) in order to hide his true identity, which is that of a tiger. As a child, the girl has always been warned of the danger and evilness of beasts like him and she was told that the beast would surely “gobble her up” (cf. BC 62). Now, she finds herself in the hands of The Beast, who has the only wish to see the girl naked (cf. BC 64). The girl refuses and, as a “punishment”, she has to see The Beast “naked” instead. The sight of his natural “beastliness” shocks her, but not only in a negative way: “I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound.” (BC 71). She is so impressed by his openness that she freely shows him her naked body in return, an act which triggers extreme feelings in her: “I felt I was at liberty for the first time in my life.” (BC 72).

Later in the story, she willingly visits The Beast in his room; again she is stark naked. The two come closer and, unexpectedly, the tiger begins to purr: “The sweet thunder of his purr shook the old walls, made the shutters batter the windows until they burst apart and let in the white light of the snowy moon.” (BC 75). His purr is the sound of revolution, the sound of old conventions and traditions breaking

apart: “It will all fall, everything will disintegrate.” (BC 75). The final stage of the protagonist’s transformation takes place when the tiger now begins to lick her skin:

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (ibid.)

The girl has finally become a “beast” herself by recognising “the feared Other in [herself], in all its cruelty as well as its beauty” (Wisker 1997: 117). Merja Makinen reads the beast as “the sensual desires that women need to acknowledge within themselves” (Makinen 2000: 30), a sensuality which they “have been taught might devour them, but which, when embraced, gives them power, strength and a new awareness of both self and other” (ibid). So, the protagonist’s transformation succeeds because she recognises her sexual needs and desires and, through that, finds to her true self.

A transformation which is not quite as magical as the ones outlined before happens to the character Mignon in *Nights at the Circus*. She is the embodiment of an oppressed and tormented woman: Her husband, the Ape-Man treats her like a piece of meat on which he can vent his anger. The Ape-Man marries Mignon when she is only fifteen and he takes her on “solely in order to abuse her” (NC 163). Their marriage quickly falls into a well-known routine: “On the third day on the road, he beat her because she burned the cutlets. [...] On the fourth day, he beat her because she forgot to empty the chamber-pot [...]. On the fifth day, he beat her because he had formed the habit of beating her.” (NC 164).

After the Ape-Man finds out that Mignon had sex with the Strong Man, she is “beaten to tatters and thrown half naked on to the Russian winter streets by her husband.” (NC 147). She asks Walser for help and, with the support of Fevvers, they tend her and manage to get her a role in the performance of the Princess of Abyssinia (cf. NC 181). Now Mignon’s life begins to change. She finds satisfaction in what she does and finally finds something she has not experienced in her life before – true love. She and the Princess of Abyssinia become a loving couple and both flourish in the light of their new happiness. Mignon has transformed from a downtrodden victim of male violence to a self-determined and self-confident young woman who freely lives out her sexual desires in a happy and fulfilling relationship.

When recapitulating the illustrated processes of transformation, it can be said that the first two examples only show the initial starting phase of a transformation from the “Puppet-Woman” into the “New Woman”. The women in the third and fourth example, however, go further in their transformation and can be regarded as having successfully reached the other “level” of femininity. In a last example, I now want to show a female character who seems to have already completed her transformation and who can be considered, next to Fevvers, as another prototype of the “New Woman”.

She is the protagonist of the short story “The Company of Wolves”, one of Carter’s creative rewritings of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood. Already at the beginning of the story, the protagonist is described in a way that reminds the reader strongly of the second type of femininity. The girl is said to be “strong-minded” (*BC* 132), she is “quite sure the wild beasts cannot harm her” (*ibid.*) and she “has been too much loved ever to feel scared” (*BC* 133). On her way to her grandmother she meets a handsome young man with whom she makes a bet on who will arrive first at her grandmother’s house (*cf. BC* 134). The young man, having arrived first at their destination, turns out to be a (were)wolf and devours the girl’s grandmother. When the girl finally gets there, she realises that something is terribly wrong and that she is “in danger of death” (*BC* 137). Nevertheless, she does not lose control over the situation and does not let herself be terrified by the wolf: “[S]ince her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid.” (*BC* 138). Instead of passively waiting for her own death, she becomes active and takes off her clothes of her own accord. Unbidden, she also begins to undress the wolf and even gives him a kiss. What is following is the key scene of the story:

What big teeth you have! She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the room was full of the clamour of the forest’s Liebestod but the wise child never flinched, even when he answered: All the better to eat you with. The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing. (*BC* 138)

The fact that the girl bursts out laughing and her active sexuality make the wolf’s threats seem ridiculous, with the result that his intimidations completely lose their

menacing power. The girl, empowered by her own self-confidence and inner strength, simply refuses to be eaten by the wolf. She does not let herself be made the victim of this situation, but rather takes control over the situation and changes it according to her wishes. At the end of the story, both characters end up as affectionate couple: "See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf." (*BC* 139). Not only does the girl take control of the situation, she also acknowledges her natural sexual desires and freely fulfils them by entering a relationship with the wolf. Again, the wolf as wild beast can be read as "projection[...] of a feminine libido" (Makinen 2000: 31), as a "forbidden" sensuality which is, in this case, embraced and acknowledged by the female protagonist. Because of her behaviour and her typical characteristics the girl is another representative example of the "New Woman", a woman who is self-assured, who actively takes control of her life, and who recognises and fulfils her sexual desires.

4 Conclusion

In this paper I have looked at a number of different topics, ranging from the literary mode of the Gothic and its relation to femininity to the fiction of Angela Carter and her way of representing femininity in her writings. The following conclusion will serve the purpose of bringing these different thematic strands together and of presenting central theses which can be derived from my findings. To achieve this, this conclusion will be divided into three parts: As a starting point, I will take up the discussion of Carter's two femininity-types presented in the main part of my paper. In a second part, I will reflect on Carter's use of the Gothic and her relation to this literary mode. To conclude my paper, I will compare the representations of femininity in original Gothic fiction with those in Carter's works.

In the main part of my paper I have used a model to classify the central types of femininity appearing in Carter's fiction. Of course, it has to be mentioned that this model is a simplification of Carter's representation of women and their characteristics; not every female character presented in her works fits into this pattern. Nevertheless, the model succeeds in showing two very *important* types of femininity we can find in her writings.

Femininity-Type 1, or the representation of women as "puppets", has been illustrated with the help of the characters Melanie and Margaret from *The Magic Toyshop*. It has been shown that these women characters are literally degraded to puppets by the omnipotent men in their surroundings. They are not in control of their own lives and have to watch how the male-dominated society takes the decisions for them. The puppet-type is the embodiment of passivity, and this also holds true for their sexuality: They are not able to fulfil their own sexual needs and desires, but have to endure the fact that men unscrupulously use – and abuse – them to live out their passions. In addition, women of the puppet-type do not have a chance to develop their personality. Their individuality is oppressed by the male "ruler", who forms the female "puppets" as he pleases. The most fatal characteristic of the "Puppet-Woman" is that she resigns herself to her fate and that she accepts her disadvantaged status as inevitable. She does not believe that there is a possibility for her to change her life and her position in society.

The “Femininity-Type 2”, respectively the “New Woman” was mainly illustrated with the help of Fevvers, the flamboyant protagonist of *Nights at the Circus*. It has been shown that this femininity-type is characterised through a strong self-confidence and a high degree of self-determination. The “New Woman” actively takes decisions and plans her life according to her own wishes. Moreover, she openly deals with her sexuality and eagerly pursues her erotic desires.

Like Fevvers, her appearance and behaviour may not correspond to what is commonly regarded as “feminine”; through her very own style and manners the “New Woman” creates her own form of femininity, a sort of femininity she herself feels comfortable with. In contrast to the “Puppet-Woman”, she does not cling to traditional role models concerning men and women; for her these roles are changeable and she believes in a future in which men and women will live together in a revolutionised way.

As Paulina Palmer pointed out¹⁰, one can detect a shift in Carter’s writings concerning her use of the first and the second type of femininity. In her earlier works (to which *The Magic Toyshop* belongs), the depiction of the “Puppet-Woman” prevails, whereas her later works (e.g. *Nights at the Circus*) chiefly portray characters belonging to the type of the “New Woman”. This has to be seen in relation to her development as decidedly feminist author. The puppet-type of femininity mirrors the traditional image of women, an image kept alive throughout the last centuries. This image of women as helpless “puppets” is what Carter emphatically condemns. Better said, she criticises the patriarchal society that turns women into these passive and “voiceless” beings. For Carter, the “Puppet-Woman” represents everything she fights against as feminist critic and writer: the powerlessness of women, their disadvantaged position in society, and their abuse by men. In her earlier works, she calls attention to this status quo in our society by using these “Puppet-Women” as protagonists in her fiction. With the help of characters such as Melanie and Margaret she wants to make the readers aware of the current situation of the majority of women and wants to make them realise that they should stand up and fight against this injustice. Thus, the “Puppet-Woman” represents the femininity-type Carter would like to see eliminated.

¹⁰ See p. 17 of this paper.

After having made clear against what she fights, Carter dedicates herself to clarifying what she sees as the kind of femininity that should “replace” the “puppet-type”. This is the second type of femininity, the “New Woman”, which she presents in her later works. For Carter, this type of woman represents the “ideal” which she would like to see achieved in the future. Corresponding to the characteristics of the “New Woman”, she would like the future to bring self-confident and powerful women, women who autonomously take decisions and who acknowledge and live out their sexual needs and desires.

This desired development from the “Puppet-Woman” to the “New Woman” is also portrayed in the above-illustrated examples of transformations which happen in Carter’s writings¹¹. As I have shown, not all of these transformations are fully successful. The main reason why some of them have failed in the end is that the traditional image of femininity and of a woman’s role in society is still deeply-rooted in the female protagonists’ minds. They are not *aware* that they are, in fact, able to change their fates and, in addition, they are still unsure of what to make of their newly gained freedom and power¹². The protagonists in the other examples, however, show that they are able to change their ways of thinking and thus prove ready for transforming their lives. This obviously has to be seen in relation to the development of women and their self-perception outside of Carter’s fictional world. Women in our society had to – and have to – go through the same kind of processes of transformations, and this is what Carter impressively mirrors in her works.

Besides the discussion of Carter’s representation of femininity, this paper has also dealt with the literary mode of the Gothic, a mode that has not lost its fascination over the centuries. The question I want to pose now is why Carter chooses to work with the Gothic in her fiction. What does the Gothic offer her? On the one hand, the Gothic is suitable for Carter’s writings because of its defining qualities of excess and transgression¹³. These are exactly the techniques Carter uses in her literature: She transgresses limits, she shocks and she provokes. Furthermore, the Gothic proves useful for Angela Carter because of its rather fixed conventions concerning charac-

¹¹ See section 3.3.

¹² This can be seen, for example, at Lady Purple in Carter’s short story “The Loves of Lady Purple”, see p. 28 of this paper.

¹³ See section 2.1.

ters, settings and plot developments. The fact that these conventions exist enables Carter to deconstruct them, following the motto “Rules are meant to be broken”.

Thus, she creatively reinvents the Gothic; she plays with its conventions and rewrites the literary mode according to her own wishes. The purpose of this rewriting is to direct the reader’s attention to contemporary problems, mostly related to her feminist viewpoint. Thus, Carter uses the Gothic, amongst others, as a foil to reflect upon depictions of femininity. An example for this can be found in her short story “The Company of Wolves”¹⁴. The original Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale, upon which this story is based, cannot be counted to the literary mode of the Gothic as defined above, but it is unquestionably a fairy tale which contains distinctly Gothic elements. Merja Makinen explains how Carter uses the original fairy tale in order to express her feminist ideas:

[“The Company of Wolves”] is not read as a story read for the first time, with a positively imaged heroine. It is read, with the original story encoded within it, so that one reads of *both* texts, aware of how the new one refers back to and implicitly critiques the old. We read ‘The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat’ as referring to the earlier Little Red Riding Hood’s passive terror of being eaten, before she is saved by the male woodman. We recognise the author’s feminist turning of the tables and, simultaneously, the damage done by the old inscriptions of femininity as passive. (Makinen 2000: 24)

As Makinen has shown, Carter uses the original figure of Little Red Riding Hood as a foil for her own female protagonist. Only through the comparison with the passive and helpless fairy tale character, Carter’s protagonist can be fully understood and Carter’s feminist intention can be recognised.

This aspect nicely leads over to the third part of my conclusion, which is the comparison of representations of femininity in Gothic fiction and in Carter’s works. As I have stated above¹⁵, the most common type of femininity in original Gothic literature is that of the innocent, beautiful and virtuous “damsel in distress”, a passive and helpless character who is usually pursued by a male villain. If we compare this type of femininity with Carter’s depictions of women, it becomes clear that it corre-

¹⁴ See section 3.3.

¹⁵ See section 2.1.

sponds to her puppet-type of femininity. Both representations of femininity, the “damsel in distress” as well as the “Puppet-Woman”, share the same features, such as passivity and powerlessness, for example. However, the attitude towards this type of women differs completely in Carter’s fiction and the original Gothic. While in original Gothic texts, this type of femininity is praised as the ideal kind of woman, Carter considers this representation of femininity as abominable and wants to free women of their “puppet-status”. So, in both literary discourses, this type of femininity is used, but the intention behind the usage is a completely different one.

Another representation of femininity which can be found in Gothic literature is that of the “madwoman in the attic”¹⁶. As explained above, this type represents the sexual woman who is regarded as monstrous and insane by the public and who is locked away and silenced in order not to infect the society with her “sickness”. This representation of femininity has undergone a significant change in the fiction of Angela Carter. From the “voiceless [...] *object*” (Becker 1996: 72), the sexual woman has changed into the “speaking subject” (ibid.) and now enters the stage of Carter’s writings in form of the “New Woman”. The expressing of a woman’s sexuality is not seen as detestable anymore, but is regarded as necessary for a fulfilled life by Carter. In some ways, the “New Woman” might still be considered as “monstrous”, if one thinks of Fevvers’ outer appearance, for example. However, this “monstrosity” is a positive one; a positive “differentness” from traditional images of women and a revolt against male expectations of femininity. So, again, attitudes towards this type of femininity have changed significantly from the original Gothic to Carter’s fiction: The hideous creature of the “madwoman” has transformed into the celebrated star of Carter’s stories.

This paper has demonstrated that Angela Carter uses the Gothic to present femininity in a very distinct way. The purpose of her special representations of women is to express her feminist convictions and to make her readers aware of problems women had *and* have to face. Here, we see the connection to Carter’s precursors, the writers of the original Female Gothic. Just as Angela Carter, these women writers used the literary mode of the Gothic to diffuse their political and philosophi-

¹⁶ See section 2.3.

cal ideas¹⁷. The methods they used unquestionably differ from those of Carter, but the intention behind their writings is the same: To revolutionise the perception of women and their position in society.

¹⁷ See section 2.3.

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