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**"CaRterbury Tales:
Romances of Disenchantment in Geoffrey Chaucer and Angela Carter"**

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To couple romance with the illusion-breaking strategy of postmodernism may at first seem paradoxical, yet, in fact, romance is being increasingly taken as the privileged mode staging the hybridity and openness of contemporary critical discourse. Associated with excess, impurity, and self-difference, romance shares the aesthetic and political agenda of postmodern literature and theory: through textual dispersion and playfulness, it provides a counternarrative to the project of knowledge as deployment of authority and conquest of certainty.¹ Beyond periodization and formal categories, romance can thus indicate a state, a certain attitude towards the cultural and historical heritage and its representation which is at work whenever a straightforward *quest for meaning* in fact becomes *questioning of meaning*--whenever, instead of offering a pleasurable escape to a freer world, narrative crosses the conceptual and aesthetic boundaries between referentiality and representation disputing the neutrality of both.

The works of Angela Carter suitably illustrate such destabilizing approach to enthralling fantasies. With her blend of literary tradition and mass-culture stereotypes, this British contemporary writer creates a sophisticated fictional world that investigates our knowledge of reality exposing to which degree culture and power inform such knowledge. Romance is particularly suitable to this purpose because of the highly codified ideology that is sedimented within its structure, namely, the anticipation of a utopian idyll.² The more conventional and crystallized Carter's target is, the more provocative her reinscription turns out to be. That's why her imaginary territory mainly takes over the magical realm of children's fables. Disfigured by gothic and macabre motifs, dreams become indistinguishable from nightmares. Interrogated by gender, an apparently naive genre as romance reveals that its wish-fulfilling mechanism can not only perpetuate but also subvert the cultural values embedded in narrative form. Carter is all for "putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (*Notes* 69). It is by writing as an analyst of mythologies and as a skeptical female fantasist that she can explode the practices and roles imposed by male tradition. Thus, romance for Angela Carter--like myth for Roland Barthes--can be either oppressive or liberatory depending on how it is appropriated. It is never innocent, always an alibi.

Although Angela Carter's revision of romance is receiving considerable attention, most studies concentrate on her reinscription of modern literature--for instance, her parody of Perrault's and Grimm's stories, or her appropriation of the gothic tradition, of symbolism and surrealism, of Hollywood myths and of the culture of consumerism. In fact, however, Carter's own statements, as well as the observations of her friend and scholar Lorna Sage, emphasize the equally pivotal role played by medieval literature in her

education at Bristol (*Carter ix*): precisely medieval texts allowed her to cheer up "the leftover Leavisite canon" (*Flesh and the Mirror 4*), leading her "into the territory of romance and folk tale" (*Flesh 5*). Carter's journey towards the roots of storytelling, however, is anything but a search for an *ur*-text: rather, it brings to the foreground the notion of a communal literary patrimony, belonging to nobody and being constantly disseminated and manipulated by everyone. "Who first invented meatballs?"--Carter asks in her much-quoted Introduction to *The Virago Books of Fairy Tales* (x). "In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup?" (x). Romance invites us to think of literature "in terms of the domestic arts" (x): just as in cooking I can only tell "how *I* make potato soup" (x), narratives of myth and magic become each time what our craft makes of them. Literature, like folklore, is not so much created as re-used, taken as raw material for new stories and contingent truths.

Walking along Carter's road from the ghosts of modern fiction back to the old wonders of yarn-spinning we find another pivotal author who adopts romance to negotiate between repetition and reinterpretation of his literary and cultural heritage beyond stable meanings and values--Geoffrey Chaucer. For its enactment of chivalric models and simultaneous questioning of their authority, Chaucer's literary operation prefigures what in Carter's terms becomes "speculative fiction", that is, storytelling as "a system of continuing inquiry" (Katsavos 14). Actually, in the post-feudal world of *The Canterbury Tales*, where such tellers as the clerk, the miller, the cook, and the merchant outnumber the figure of the knight, "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (*Canterbury Tales III, 857*) appear as unquestionably remote. By reducing the themes of the quest and of courtly love respectively to pilgrimage and marriage, Chaucer domesticates the dangerous adventures and the sense of mystery that shape Arthurian literature, thus deeply revising medieval romance.³ *The Canterbury Tales* can be said to stand at a crossroads: they are indebted to knightly and courtly culture, yet, at the same time, they portray and address a late 14th-century social structure in which the spreading mercantile class challenges precisely the ethics of feudal aristocracy. Far from accidental, the role played by romance in such an ambivalent context has significant effects. On the one hand, the insertion of bourgeois threads in an idealized texture decrees the inadequacy of a narrative mode of the past vis-à-vis the more complex society of Chaucer's time, and hence betrays a polemical reception of such daydreaming fantasies because of their conservative impulse. On the other hand, Chaucer's allegiance to the fundamental components of romance despite his attempts at experimentation reveals that the very "pastness" of this genre can play a significant role in his narrative world. As they reenact the feudal order, *The Canterbury Tales* problematize those conditions for imaginary excitement that the Middle Ages represented as natural.⁴ The ultimate aim of romance in *The Canterbury Tales* may well be that of making us dream once more--an aspect with which Auerbach would agree--yet not without passing through the "earthly contingencies" (*Mimesis 136*) of their time, not before grounding such

dreams into "the practical business" (*Mimesis* 137) of Chaucer's world. Thus Chaucer rechannels desire from the sexual adventures of medieval aristocracy to the institutionalized husband-wife liaison within domestic walls; he appropriates the convention of *gentillesse* but he derives it not so much from lineage as from individual virtue; he does not repudiate the prodigies of the marvelous but now he associates them with the rationality of science and the power of money.

Janus-like, romance hence looks both back and ahead, according to a dialectical process that recalls--but only to a certain extent--the tension proposed by Frederic Jameson between ideological and Utopian impulses in literature (*Political* 105; 286-92). Chaucer's retrieval of romance could at first correspond to what Jameson describes as an ideological standpoint: by adopting romance as a form for some of his tales, Chaucer may also be said to reinscribe its originary "socio-symbolic message" (*Political* 141). *The Canterbury Tales* would thus appear as an example of utopian, positive hermeneutics à la Frye, one which treats the text as a compensatory space with the aim of strengthening the link between the mythical patterns of romance and a post-feudal social and cultural reality. In fact--as I will try show--there is no innocent displacement in *The Canterbury Tales*. The irony underlying Chaucer's experiments with romance breaks the sense of continuity with the feudal code in a significant way. Not only does it point at that fall into history which for Jameson determines the secularization and the reinvention of romance. It also challenges the presence of those "magical categories of Otherness" (*Political* 131) that medieval romance allegedly "found ready to hand in its socioeconomic environment" (*Political* 131). Chaucer reads the celebration of the golden age of Arthurian romance as a nostalgia for a mythical organic society which was a myth even before the collapse of feudalism or before what Jameson describes as the commodification of desire brought about by capitalism. As he resurrects the dead language of romance, the author of the *Canterbury Tales* also employs the *topos* of the Middle Ages as a dream fabricated by the rationalized world--a utilitarian *bricolage*, as Eco would say, in the service of the fantasies of the modern era (*Travels* 61-72).⁵

As a functional example of the historicity of romance, Chaucer's collection of stories can be located at the beginning of a line of "magical narratives" (*Political* 103) which traverses all subsequent cultural manifestations down to contemporary ones. Nevertheless, starting from the *Canterbury Tales*, I would like to enrich the analysis of the transformations of romance in *The Political Unconscious* by calling attention to *ironic* reinscriptions of such a mode. Jameson seems to leave open the possibility of irony, but only in his brief discussion of romance in our century,⁶ when the desacralization of good and evil replaces the reinvention of mystery through secular equivalents like theology or psychology (*Political* 134-5). In fact, however, Chaucer himself already questions both the raw materials and the substitute codes of the older magical contents. Therefore, on the one hand, as an enclave of freedom from the

oppression of the reality principle, the fairy-tale atmosphere can accommodate social and ethical conflicts, and even restore the prospect of salvation. On the other hand, *The Canterbury Tales* show that the *topoi* of romance can as well be employed to thwart the very expectations of freedom and reconciliation they seem to encourage. The dreamlike aura of a tale may result inadequate to contain antinomies; it may be unable to absorb an unappealing or problematic present into the oblivion of immemorial time.

Through a comparative reading of Chaucer and Carter I propose a supplement to Jameson's genealogy of redeeming romances--a trajectory of magical narratives at least equally conscious of the historical discontinuity between mythical past and prosaic present, but also increasingly *self-conscious* to the point of shattering any promise of delusory re-enchantment. The authors chosen for this parallel are not the only options, but they occupy significant positions in this revisionary tradition of romance, being almost its chronological alpha and omega.⁷ Furthermore, extraordinary analogies emerge from their repertoires of narrative situations, besides a common adherence to the form of the tale. With these observations I do not mean to suggest that Angela Carter wants to rewrite precisely *The Canterbury Tales*, although, as we have seen, the literature of Chaucer's time had considerable weight in her eclectic education.⁸ In any case, the two authors can be legitimately treated as *bricoleurs* of a mythical patrimony they share: in *The Canterbury Tales* and in such collections of stories as *The Bloody Chamber* and *Saints and Strangers* Chaucer and Carter stage the textual nature of romance and make it inseparable from a critical examination of the ideology it transmits.

"Can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it learn a new song?" (*Bloody* 103) asks Carter in "The Lady of the House of Love,"⁹ that is, can romance be renovated in such a way as to raise new issues, as to become an effective means of investigation of a new reality? Both authors answer in the affirmative. Nevertheless, a comparison of some of their tales highlights the qualitatively different solutions provided by Chaucer and Carter to the questions of good and evil, innocence and experience, fact and fancy, in line with the paramount epistemological changes that separate the postmodern condition from the late Middle Ages. Romance's critique of the medieval world in *The Canterbury Tales* is the literary correlative of a transitional moment in which conflicting social forces and ethical principles overlap as a result of an institutional and ideological shift. Those clashes are reflected in the form of romance, with its dichotomy of masculine and feminine, "authority and submission, familiarity and exoticism, justice and mercy, public and private" (Crane 12). Although Chaucer depicts binary oppositions as precarious and questionable, he is still faithful to a clear-cut and hierarchical systems of distinction. In the paradoxical universe of Carter's fables such contrasts become chronic. Carter's romance, in other words, rethinks history as "an ironic coexistence of temporalities" (Elam 3): the only reality that romance reinvents is itself contaminated by

the blurring of those values, classes, codes and styles it is expected to clarify.

1. Picking the withering "flour of chivalry"

On his way to Canterbury, Chaucer the pilgrim tells the most rigorously parodic romance of the whole collection: "Sir Thopas." The tale of the "fair and gent" (VII, 715) knight riding out into the "contree of Fairye" (VII, 802) in search of the "elf-queene" (VII, 795) at once displays and undermines all the canonical components of medieval chivalric poetry. We owe to Angela Carter's imagination another epigone of Sir Perceval, namely, the intrepid officer of "The Lady of The House of Love," a short story in which the topoi of romance already parodied by Chaucer are subject to an additional twist, and charged with a new message.

Young, blond, "blue-eyed" (BC 97) and "heavy-muscled" (*Bloody* 97), Carter's officer rivals in beauty and strength with Chaucer's "doghty swayn" (VII, 724), whose hair and beard are "lyk saffroun" (VII, 730) and whose skills are unequaled in "wrestlyng" (VII, 740), "in bataille and in tournayment" (VII, 716). However, each of them only seems to possess the qualities of the perfect knight. The allusions to Sir Thopas's lips as "rede as rose" (VII, 726), to his "rode...lyk scarlet in grayn" (VII, 727), and to his "sydes smale" (VII, 836) ridicules the chivalric *topos* of young age by reducing it to images of childhood, chastity and effeminacy.¹⁰ Also the officer in "The Lady of the House of Love" is virgin and inexperienced, and needs to remind himself that he is "no child, now, to be frightened of his own fancies" (*Bloody* 99). Yet Carter's way of commenting on her character's features endows parody with more subtle and more complex effects than the ones in "Sir Thopas." Carter's protagonist "has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potentia, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance" (*Bloody* 97). With this openness to the future, with this promise of achievement, the story seems to adhere to the motif of a challenging vocation which in medieval romances engages youthful aspirations (Stevens 24). However, not unlike the "ripe summer in the *pubescent* years of the present century" (*Bloody* 97. My emphasis) when the story takes place, the officer has already used up all his potential sense of mystery and of excitement for the new: when he "quixotically" (*Bloody* 97) decides to explore the uplands of Romania by bicycle, he mainly sees "all the humour of it" (*Bloody* 97), and it is a cynical laughter that accompanies his departure.

Therefore the adventure in "The Lady of the House of Love" begins under the aegis of irony, one which the character shares with his creator. Being "rooted in change and time" (*Bloody* 97), the officer is aware of his own historicity, which makes him "collide with the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires" (*Bloody* 97) he is about to join. Ready to step into the world of romance, he remains a prisoner of self-consciousness and disenchantment, and is therefore unable to suspend his disbelief. Quite the opposite can

be said about the tale of Sir Thopas, where the analogy with the child reinforces the protagonist's naiveté and his excessive enthusiasm for the quest. Chaucer's literary *jeu d'esprit* against medieval romance finds not so much an accomplice as a scapegoat in the "knyght auntrous" (VII, 909): through the exemplary parody of Sir Thopas's gullibility and uncritical loyalty to the Arthurian tradition, the tale mocks those 14th-century English poems which persist in representing a chivalric world by then old-fashioned. A substantial difference already emerges from the ways in which our two story(re)tellers tackle the relationship between the reality of their time and the fictional world of romance. If Sir Thopas's weakness is that of believing too much in the possibility of performing heroic deeds and of pursuing noble ideals in a bourgeois milieu, the British officer of "The Lady of the House of Love", the son of an industrialized world on the verge of the Great War, is affected by skepticism towards illusions, as the progression of the tales further clarifies.¹¹

As 20th-century analogues of the details with which Chaucer exhibits Sir Thopas's bourgeois extraction--his blatantly comic name, his attire and his taste for exotic spices--Carter's story provides the officer's bicycle--a technological surrogate for the knight's horse--and his commodification of time and space through tourism--a byproduct of modern capitalistic societies. It is upon this commercial and rationalized substratum that the two characters revive and revise the adventures of the hero in love. Chaucer literalizes the motif of the mysterious, desirable and inaccessible lady of medieval romances by merging it with the dream-vision theme of French oneiric poems: the object of Sir Thopas's "love longynge" (VII, 772)--the elf-queen he "dremed al this nyght" (VII, 787)--is by definition unattainable, since it is a figment of his delusory imagination. However, Chaucer's parody further plays with the dialectics of heroism and desire. Actually, the development of Sir Thopas's quest does not even outlast its first phase, the *agon* (Frye 192), in which the hero of romances struggles with the enemy. The encounter with "sire Olifaunt" (VII, 808), "a greet geaunt" (VII, 807) marks not so much the beginning of a sequence of glorious adventures as the endless deferral of them: the ritual of the "armynge" (VII, 846) before the challenge with the "perilous man of dede" (VII, 809) in fact fills in the space left empty by Sir Thopas's lack of courage.

Angela Carter's character, in this respect, behaves in a less predictable way and thus more deeply defamiliarizes the quest pattern. Instead of the "geaunt with hevedes three" (VII, 842) who hinders Chaucer's protagonist from attaining the object of his desire, the young officer of "The Lady of the House of Love" meets "an old woman who smile[s] eagerly, almost conciliatorily at him" (*Bloody* 98). As the key ring at her waist suggests, she literally opens the realm of romance to him: after bobbing a curtsy and beckoning him to follow her, the old woman unlocks the door of the mansion, where the officer finds supper and a bed ready for him. The magic of Carter's story paradoxically fulfills wishes before they are

actually expressed, but it does not create a *Pays de Coccagne*. If on the one hand there are no more material obstacles to the object of desire, on the other hand the officer's persisting cynicism remains the main threat to his romantic quest. Stepping unemotionally over the threshold of the castle, he does "not shiver in the blast of cold air" (*Bloody* 99), nor does he overcome "his own childish lack of enthusiasm" (*Bloody* 99) for the uncanny atmosphere of the place, although "he sharply reprimanded himself" (*Bloody* 99).

"[I]f one were sufficiently imaginative" (*Bloody* 98)--Carter comments--one could transfigure the landscape by seeing apparitions and envisioning secrets. This--we can add--would make the officer a new Sir Thopas, since it would restore precisely the promise of heroic enterprises, although only of temporary and hallucinatory ones. In fact, however, the protagonist of Carter's story dismisses even this extreme possibility, as can be inferred from other textual details. When Sir Thopas "priketh thurgh a fair forest" (VII, 754), Chaucer initially stirs in the reader the expectation of "many a wilde best" (VII, 755), even though he soon tames it with the reference to "bukke and hare" (VII, 756) in the following line. More radically, Carter transforms a dangerous wild animal into a merely decorative item: the lion that in many medieval romances offers the pretext for the knight's demonstration of courage is here aestheticized and reduced to "the lion's mouth" (*Bloody* 98) of a fountain where the officer can quench his thirst. There is nothing to fight for or to embellish through daydreaming fantasies in the House of Love. Significantly, the name of the mansion recalls the medieval motif of the allegorical house that Chaucer himself elaborates in *The House of Fame* to explore dream visions and the nature of love. Yet from its "sombre visage" (*Bloody* 98) to its "worm-eaten" (*Bloody* 100) and collapsing interior, its cobwebs, its "rotted away" (*Bloody* 101) carpet, the manor rather discards its literary antecedent, and becomes the objective correlative of the decay of romance. Whereas Sir Thopas "nolde slepen in noon hous" (VII, 910) and "drank water of the well" (VII, 915) in order to reproduce the efforts of the knight's quest, the officer does not need to struggle for anything. All the romance situations are generously lavished on him, but as he experiences them he cannot but acknowledge their degradation and shabbiness: they are as "tawdry" (*Bloody* 106), "thin and cheap" (*Bloody* 106) as the satin and the catafalque in the mansion's bedroom.

His encounter with the Lady of the House of Love is no exception to such general feeling: she turns out to be the appropriate "châtelaine of all this decay" (*Bloody* 101). The excitement that seemed to be aroused in the officer by "the most seductively caressing voice he had ever heard in his life" (*Bloody* 100) promptly peters out on facing "the hectic, unhealthy beauty of a consumptive" (*Bloody* 101). In her "dress fifty or sixty years out of fashion but once, obviously, intended for a wedding" (*Bloody* 100) the woman looks "like a shipwrecked bride" (*Bloody* 101) and occupies a middle ground that denies both the courtly code of adulterous love typical of medieval aristocracy and the institutionalization of sexuality

through the bourgeois ethos of marriage. Ultimately, the tarnished values of Carter's story also affect the protagonist's desire. Those very "wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson" (*Bloody* 101) that should convey feminine sensuality are disturbing and repellent to him. They do not even seem to belong to the body of a living woman: they are rather perceived as a self-contained mechanism grafted on an automaton. Therefore, while the Lady of the House of Love lets her real identity as Countess Nosferatu gradually emerge through a macabre ritual of seduction made of an announced "succession of mysteries" (*Bloody* 104), the officer reacts to his increasing "sense of strangeness" (*Bloody* 103) by clinging to his "fundamental disbelief in what he sees before him" (*Bloody* 103).

Significantly, Carter's story no longer grants the clear-cut separation that we find in "The Tale of Sir Thopas" between Chaucer's ironic lucidity and his character's fantasies. On the one hand Sir Thopas opposes no resistance to the spell of pure passion for the queen of his dreams, and merely wonders "What eyleth this love at me/ to bynde me so soore?" (VII, 785-86). On the other hand, it is thanks to a paradoxical sort of heroism born of a "lack of imagination" (*Bloody* 104)--and not of too much of it as in the case of Sir Thopas--that Carter's young man can avoid being ensnared by the plot that the Tarot card of "Les Amoureux" (*Bloody* 103) has woven for his future. This plot blends idealized love with blood and death, thus tainting romance with gothic tones: after a night of "embraces [and] kisses" (*Bloody* 105) with the Countess, he would be "stark and dead" (*Bloody* 105). The officer will be safe only by refusing "to shudder" (*Bloody* 106), either with fear or with lust; he will be protected from the pains of romance by being insensitive to its pleasures. In the Lady who is alluring him with the erotic promise of a strip-tease he only sees "a disordered girl" (*Bloody* 105) in need of the "innocent remedies of the nursery" (*Bloody* 106). Thus when the Lady cuts her thumb on her broken glasses and is fascinated by the sight of her own blood, the officer maternally kisses the wound. He himself is the "exorcism" (*Bloody* 106) which domesticates the female vampire by turning her into a human being. With the aid of medical science, he will "cure her of all these nightmares" (*Bloody* 107): in a Swiss clinic she can be treated "for nervous hysteria" (*Bloody* 107) while an eye specialist, a dentist and a manicurist will provide the finishing touch. It is sufficient to normalize all her eccentricities, and the vampire will become "the lovely girl she is" (*Bloody* 107).

Paradoxically, by resorting to psychoanalysis, medicine, and beauty-culture--new positivities that should substitute for the loss of magical content in modern society (*Political* 134)--the officer does not reinvent romance: he destroys it. "The end of exile is the end of being" (*Bloody* 107), Carter remarks: romance is killed as soon as the rationalized, secular world appropriates Otherness, although unwittingly, in the name of goodness and sanity. The officer finds symbolic appeasement at the price of immolating enchantment on the "sacrificial altar" (*Bloody* 104) of common sense--a twist that has pivotal implications

not only for narrative form but also for the representation of gender relationships. Actually, by turning the female vampire into a human being, the officer prevents her from sucking his blood, that is, from annihilating his humanity. The bridegroom, who in the Lady's plans was supposed to bleed on her "inverted marriage bed" (*Bloody* 105), does not succumb to the spell of a predatory woman, and with his lack of imagination he restores the clichés of female fragility and of male supremacy.

Therefore, so far it would seem that "The Lady of the House of Love" had come full circle without bringing about any development in its world or any growth in its protagonist's psyche. The story would then be a mere reenactment of Frye's fourth phase of romance, which aims at maintaining "the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience" (Frye 201). Carter, it is true, turns these two categories upside down--since she associates reason with prelapsarian bliss, and fantasy with degeneration--but she preserves their binary opposition, which she resolves precisely in favor of innocence...that is, of rationality. As if to offset the mysterious influence of "the cards of destiny" (*Bloody* 107) with which the lady-vampire wants to put his life *en jeu*, the officer clings to his bicycle, "the product of pure reason applied to motion" (*Bloody* 97), and joins his regiment. Ultimately, it is the horror of the war that occupies the vacant space of magic.

Yet Carter's story would not be postmodern enough without a further turning point that destabilizes the facile conclusions previously fostered. Not even with the last bicycle ride back to the real world is the officer at a safe distance from the bizarre occurrences of the enchanted mansion. Just when geographical displacement seems to substantiate the split between the logic of ordinariness and the code of a disturbing elsewhere, he discovers in his pocket the rose that the Lady of the House of Love had given him as a souvenir. As a synecdoche for the whole realm of romance that the officer has so far duly shunned with the aid of common sense, the rose--"withered" (*Bloody* 107) but far from dead--regains its original fragrance and contaminates the austere corridors of the barracks with a "corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour" (*Bloody* 108). "Vous serez ma proie" (*Bloody* 104), the Lady had proclaimed: these words, that the events in the castle had apparently invalidated, now reinstate their disquieting prophetic value. Indeed, the officer ultimately capitulates to the enthrallment of romance. He becomes its prey precisely by yielding to the very "rich, faintly corrupt sweetness" (*Bloody* 98) that he had previously rejected as the loathsome fruit of a perverted Garden of Love:

Too many roses bloomed on enormous thickets...bristling with thorns, and the flowers themselves were almost too luxuriant, their huge congregations of plush petals somehow obscene in their excess, their whorled, tightly budded cores outrageous in their implications (*Bloody* 98).

Well before the officer's sensuous intoxication in the garden of "obese roses" (*Bloody* 102), "love-longynge" (VII, 772) overwhelmed Sir Thopas in an equally suggestive *locus amoenus*, rich in "herbes

grete and smale" (VII, 760) and vibrating with the "sparhawk and the papejay" (VII, 767), the "thrustelcok" (VII, 769) and the "wodedowve" (VII, 770). However, while through such visionary infatuation Chaucer's gullible knight wants to transfigure the world according to his desire and is precisely ridiculed for this, Carter's officer tests the romance topos of the *locus amoenus* in order to exorcise its dangers, but he is not immune from them.

"The Lady of the House of Love" thus stages a quest in order to parody blind faith in rationality, yet simultaneously refuses to present romance as a consolatory alternative universe, as an innocent surrogate of ordinary reality. Facts and fancy overlap but not completely: a travel into the extratemporal dimension of a Romanian enchanted castle does not efface the painful actuality of World War I, that the final sentence of the story brings once more to the foreground despite the resurrection of the rose: "Next day the regiment embarked for France" (*Bloody* 108). Furthermore, if it is true that there is room for surprises even in the coherent and predictable life of the officer, the nature of such wonder can be far from reassuring. In the face of a barren world of common sense and rationality, "The Lady of the House of Love" fosters a kind of longing for the world of romance, yet ultimately it exhibits its disturbing duplicity, its tawdriness and vampiric deadliness. In Carter's hands, "the flour of roial chivalry" (VII, 901-2) that Sir Thopas in vain tried to pick becomes a "glowing, velvet, monstrous flower" (*Bloody* 108)--no longer a dream, not simply a nightmare, perhaps a bit real.

2. On the "wynges" of love toward deception

With respect to its blatant parodic disfiguration in "The Tale of Sir Thopas" and in "The Lady of the House of Love," romance seems to play a constructive role in Chaucer's "The Franklin's Tale" and in Carter's "The Kiss." Both stories open with an emphasis on their textual nature by situating themselves in relation to idealized literary worlds. However, they encourage and prolong illusions only to make our awakening more disturbing.

The Franklin explicitly acknowledges the authority of the Breton *lai* form, which he adopts for his narration. He thus creates the expectation of "delicate and delightful absurdity, hyperbole of pathos and sentiment, refinement rather than power" (Stevens 66) by extolling "the qualities of *gentillesse* and *franchyse*."¹² In the Prologue, his sense of inadequacy emerging from his excuses for his "rude speeche" (V, 718) and for his ignorance of the "colours of rethoryk" (V, 726) even reinforces the superiority of the romance model over the realistic paradigm: the Franklin strives to recollect the "diverse adventures" (V, 710) of the "olde gentil Britouns" (V, 709), although--despite his "good wyl" (V, 715)--he can offer only a simplified reproduction. With the beginning of the actual tale, moreover, the stylistic simplification at which the Prologue hints blends with a conceptual one:¹³ the love between Dorigen and Arveragus is

introduced as a happy, mutual and balanced relationship, a "wys accord" (V, 791) between a lady and a knight that harmonizes "lordshipe and servage" (V, 794), "maistrie" (V, 765) and "libertee" (V, 768), beyond any psychological, social or historical modification.

Carter's "The Kiss" resorts to the romance paradigm to promise an analogous reenchantment. The magic of the April air makes "an authentically fabulous city" (*Saints* 35) blossom from the squalid topography of the story, with its "bleak winters" (*Saints* 35) and its "sweating, foetid summers" (*Saints* 35) bringing "cholera, dysentery and mosquitoes" (*Saints* 35). Significantly, the narrator asks us to imagine this city by appealing to the naive creativity of "a child's colouring box" (*Saints* 35): like the "bare and pleyn" (V, 720) talking with which the Franklin depicts an equally plain and unproblematic human union, the "straightforward, geometric shapes" (*Saints* 35) traced by the crayons replace the intricacy and the ambiguity of the real world with a serene coexistence of nature and civilization. We are carried away to a city as "beautiful as an illusion" (*Saints* 36), where inhabitants appear "as extraordinary to the foreign eye as a unicorn" (*Saints* 36) and where "irises grow in the gutters" (*Saints* 36). Not merely space but also time functions "in direct contradiction to history" (*Saints* 36): if, paradoxically, the peasant women can overcome the dreamlike aura of the place only by pretending they do "not live in an imaginary city" (*Saints* 35), the lily-seller at the marketplace "scarcely seems to inhabit time" (*Saints* 36). The mystery surrounding her identity and her origin--"When she has sold her lilies, she will go back to the place where they are growing" (*Saints* 36)--suggests her fable-like nature, which is soon accentuated by her alleged role in the domain of storytelling: she "might vanish" (*Saints* 36) as fictional character "waiting for Scheherezahde to perceive a final dawn had come and, the last tale of all concluded, fall silent" (*Saints* 36).

It is within this frame of "glittering and innocent exoticism" (*Saints* 36) that the narration evokes the legendary figure of Tamburlaine and further entangles the lily-seller into textuality by insinuating a connection between her and Tamburlaine's wife. The connection becomes more evident at the end of the narrative, where Tamburlaine's wife steps out of her story and back into the frame: "After she ran away from him perhaps she made her living in the market. Perhaps she sold lilies there" (*Saints* 37). Not unlike the Franklin's *imperfect* rehearsal of the Breton lai, the objective correlative that kindles the romantic imagination in Carter's story is a *flawed* building: the mosque that Tamburlaine's wife had built to celebrate his return is now a heap of ruins. However, the disfiguration caused by time does not shake the original integrity of that remote world of romance, which, as in Chaucer's tale, is introduced precisely as a viable epistemological model for reality: in line with Dorigen's and Arveragus's idyll, Carter's story opens under the sign of love, which the title itself--"The Kiss"--brings to the foreground. Nevertheless, as soon as the premises of their respective plots have titillated us with the wonders of passion, Chaucer and Carter

adopt an illusion-breaking strategy which dissipates all traces of nostalgia for the idealized world of romance. Significantly, it is not simply a sense of belatedness that prevents them from identifying with such innocent, fantastic province. More radically, they want to challenge the very myth of a Golden Age, to demystify romance at its roots by calling into question the values upon which it is founded. We can follow such process by examining the way Chaucer and Carter employ and undermine two topoi of romance: the love triangle and the marvelous.

After painting married life with the nuances of medieval courtly love, "The Franklin's Tale" soon separates domesticity from the knight's lust for "worshipe and honour" in arms (V, 811). Actually, Arveragus's chivalric enterprises occupy just two lines of the tale, and remain peripheral throughout the plot (Burrow 117). Moreover, it is not accidental that the "General Prologue" defines the Franklin "a vavasour" (I, 360). By ascribing to the narrator of this tale the character traits and the role that vavasors played in Arthurian literature, Chaucer confirms precisely the marginal status of traditional romantic concerns in his work. Among the features of such a low feudal rank in romance episodes are old age, loose contacts with the royal court and a settled, sedentary life, in clear contrast with the young age, "mobility and nobility of the knight errant" (Percy 45). With "his berd" (I, 332) as white "as is the dayesye" (I, 332) and his household in a "contree" (I, 340) the Franklin fits this stereotype. Furthermore, a parallel is thus established between Chaucer's vavasour and the female protagonist of his tale: both the Franklin and Dorigen belong to the domain of the household rather than to the world of heroic actions. Hence, they share a subordinate position vis-à-vis the centrality of the knight (Crane 244).

Actually, the power that Dorigen exerts on Arveragus as an arbiter of gentility and of virtue throughout his courtship is only temporary. With marriage she loses the elevated status that characterizes romance heroines as objects of male devotion. Arveragus's absence even deprives Dorigen of her own identity. She is not able either to define herself as an autonomous being or to interact with society until her husband is back: "Desir of his presence hire so destreyneth/ That al this wyde world she sette at noght" (V, 820-1). However, it is significant that the romantic topos of the love triangle does not serve as an escape from the yoke of married life. On the contrary, it is exploited as a strategy to restore precisely the routine of the conjugal union and to decree the superiority of the marriage covenant over courtly love. On discovering Aurelius's secret passion for her, Dorigen at first drastically rejects even the hypothesis of betraying her husband, but then, as if blunt seriousness were not convincing enough, she resorts to a hyperbolic request, "an impossible" (V, 1009), which in her mind should definitely crush her lover's hopes: she will yield to Aurelius if "endelong Britayne" (V, 992) he manages to "remoeve all the rokkes, stoon by stoon,/That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon" (V, 993-4), namely, if he eliminates the obstacles that may endanger Arveragus's return. Ultimately, Dorigen adopts the romance motif of the love trial with the aim

of simply denying its feasibility: "For wel I woot that it shal never bityde./ Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slyde" (V, 1001-2). However, she remains prisoner of her own rash promise, since she is now confronted with the following dilemma: either the rocks do not disappear--which saves her from adultery but simultaneously does not eliminate the threat to her husband's life--or Aurelius succeeds in his enterprise, thus granting Arveragus a safe return home but only to make him face her wife's infidelity. As we will see below, the clerk of Orleans offers a way out of such an impasse through an equally paradoxical kind of magic, which problematizes the serene intermingling of mystery and rationality accepted by romance.

The female protagonist of Carter's story cannot avoid Dorigen's contradictory ethos. In "The Kiss", too, the love triangle is initially introduced in the service of the marriage union, in the attempt to reconcile the code of an institutionalized relationship with the "gospel of leisure and pleasure" (Stevens 51) typical of courtly love. Tamburlaine's wife resorts to the architect's aid in order to complete the mosque, since the accomplishment of the building would be her surprise for her husband's return. However, she has to pay a price for this favor: "One kiss, one single kiss" (*Saints* 36). As in Chaucer's tale, the woman is at a crossroads: in order to give Tamburlaine a tangible demonstration of her affection, she has to yield to the architect. Her immediate reaction is a defense of her marriage through a use of rhetoric that figuratively reproduces Dorigen's apostrophe to Aurelius: "What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf/ For to go love another mannes wyf,/ That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?" (V, 1003-5). Indeed Tamburlaine's wife tries to outwit the architect and to divert his desire towards someone else, by showing him how different appearances conceal an identical nature: "Each of these eggs looks different to the rest but they all taste the same. So you may kiss any one of my serving women that you like but you must leave me alone." (*Saints* 37). Nevertheless, the impulse to preserve the husband-wife bond to the detriment of adultery is based upon two opposite logics in the two stories: the law of the supernatural and the marvelous in the case of Dorigen, and the cause-and-effect principle in the case of Tamburlaine's wife. Precisely such a gap reveals the distinct message that each episode conveys about the role of romance.

Dorigen exorcises the specter of unfaithfulness by asking her would-be lover to accomplish a deed that both of them consider nothing less than miraculous, hence unachievable. The supernatural and the marvelous are consciously introduced as mere literary topoi, with no actual effect upon the lives of Chaucer's characters, as the evolution of the plot confirms. It is significant that Arveragus "is comen hoom" (V, 1089) while Aurelius is still "Dispreyed in [...] torment and [...] thoght" (V, 1084), that is, Dorigen's husband is safely back despite the peril of the rocks, and long before Aurelius is even aware of the existence of the clerk of Orléans. Furthermore--and this is the most intriguing detail of the story--the clerk can merely *pretend* to get rid of the rocks "by [...] an apparence or jogelrye" (V, 1265). His power,

which consists of "japes and [...] wrecchedness/ of [...] a supersticious cursednesse" (V, 1271-2), makes him a craftsman of ephemeral illusions. The fact that, thanks to the clerk's "magik" (V, 1295), it "semed that alle the rokkes were awaye" (V, 1296) only "for a wyke or tweye" (V, 1295) decrees the extinction of that medieval wonderland of knights and fairies where enchantments were a component of everyday life. Chaucer repudiates precisely those irrational and mysterious situations in which romance characters surrender to superhuman forces. He retrieves supernatural events from an earlier literary tradition and reduces them to the special effects that the magician displays in front of Aurelius and his brothers: "Forestes, parkes ful of wilde deer" (V, 1190), "Thise fauconer upon a fair ryver" (V, 1196), "knyghtes justyng in a playn (V, 1198), a whole Arthurian repertory that can materialize and evaporate by simply clapping hands within the walls of a study.

Significantly, Chaucer's attack on the improbable and the occult is here even more decisive than in "The Squire's Tale." Actually, in the latter the "strange knyght" (V, 89) distrusts the marvelous by giving king Cambyuskan a flying "steede of bras" (V, 115) with specific mechanical properties: their explanation, however, remains a secret shared only by the two characters. "The Franklin's Tale," on its part, condemns even this residue of mystery as a source of dangerous lies: precisely because their nature is beyond everybody's grasp--"I ne kan no termes of astrologye" (V, 1266), says the Franklin--the clerk's scientific readings lead only to "swiche illusiouns and swiche meschaunces" (V, 1292) as the fallacious disappearance of those material obstacles. Taken as a metaphor, such an image suggests the aesthetic and moral concerns of the tale. Indeed, we can still see the artificially benign vision of romance as an ideal for Chaucer only if we treat it like the fantasy of temporarily invisible yet existing rocks--only if we choose to overlook the complexity of his world. Similarly, the merely delusive intervention of the marvelous casts a polemical shadow on the wish fulfilling mechanism. In order to have dreams and desires easily realized as in romances, Chaucer's characters should reinstate the private dimension of romance adventures, that is, ignore the moral concerns required by a social context. This is precisely what emerges from the last sequence of the clerk's deceptive show, where Dorigen appears in a dance "[o]n which...[Aurelius] daunced, as hym thoughte" (V, 1201). Under the impulse of his desire Aurelius projects himself into the hallucinatory scene but significantly excludes all the impediments of real life--Arveragus, the rocks, the social consequences of his transgression (Kolve 190-91).

As hinted above, contrary to Chaucer's "impossible" (V, 1009), Carter resolves the dispute between the faithful wife and her insidious lover in rational terms. Tamburlaine's wife, who is "not only very beautiful and very virtuous but also very clever" (*Saints* 36), uses her wit and her rhetorical skills in order to resist the architect's harassment. However, he retaliates with the same strategy by retorting the message of the parable of the eggs against the woman herself: a vodka and a water bowl "both look alike but each

tastes quite different (...). And it is the same with "love" (*Saints* 37). A new Dorigen, Carter's female protagonist thus remains caught in the trap of *logos*--the male domain *par excellence*, which she has illegally invaded when trying to rival with the opposite sex. Yet, unlike "The Franklin's Tale," no magician's art reconciles the architect's appetite with the lady's commitment to integrity, any more than no "franchise and...gentillesse" (V, 1524) allows the woman to overcome the deadlock. The kiss on the architect's mouth accomplishes the rash promise that Tamburlaine's wife is obliged to make and keep all at once. Unwilling to embellish the potentially romantic topos of the love triangle with the utopian hues of courtly sentiment, and simultaneously skeptical about reciprocal love in marriage, Carter uses cynicism to unmask all the squalor underlying man-woman relationships. The plot does not question romance by thwarting desires. It rather satisfies them easily--too easily, as in "The Lady of the House of Love"--thus showing the uselessness of wish fulfillment in the absence of freedom, and its destructiveness whenever in the service of power. Actually, just as the disappearance of the rocks has no influence upon Arveragus's trip home, the surprise of the completed mosque--the reason why the woman yielded to the architect--plays no role in the scene of Tamburlaine's return. It is violence that dominates the encounter between husband and wife: a taste of vodka on the woman's lips is automatically taken as a confession of betrayal, which Tamburlaine finally extorts from her by beating her "with a knout" (*Saints* 37).

However, precisely when the realistic tones of the story have dissolved the dreamlike atmosphere of the "authentically fabulous city" (*Saints* 35) by bringing to the foreground the suffering and oppression involved in sexual relations, Carter once again violates our expectations by introducing the marvelous. In the light of a comparison with Chaucer it is significant that here we are not confronted with the *illusion* of the marvelous, as provided by the clerk of Orléans's sleight of hand. Rather, we are puzzled by an example of pure marvelous, an event which--as in the best romance tradition--is unexplainable according to the law of cause-and-effect that has so far prevailed in Carter's story: when the architect heard Tamburlaine's executioners approaching, "he grew wings and flew away to Persia" (*Saints* 37). In the light of our genealogy of self-conscious magical narratives, what is the gist of Carter's move? Is it one step back with respect to Chaucer's speculative revision of romance? By no means. "The Kiss" exploits supernatural prodigies but subverts their redeeming function. Actually, far from reinstating innocence in Carter's fictional world, the mystery of the wings is in the service of the rogue's rescue, which leaves the woman as the only scapegoat of the love triangle, an even weaker and more deceived character, although not a blameless one. With the architect's flight away from a realistic and morally binding situation, Carter's romance may well "revive our sense of our own omnipotence" (Beer 3), yet it does not grant us the cathartic epilogue which should distribute rewards and punishments through a clear-cut distinction between heroes and villains.¹⁴

"The Franklin's Tale" itself has a great deal to say about the moral scope of romance conventions in the lives of its protagonists. The initial courtly belief that should grant sovereignty in marriage--"Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye./ Whan maistrie cometh, the God of Love anon/ Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!" (V, 764-6)--in fact collapses under the violence of Arveragus's threat to Dorigen when he forces her to submit to Aurelius: "I now forbede, up peyne of deeth,/ That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,/ To no wight telle thou of this aventure" (V, 1481-3). Dorigen, on her part, is guilty of flirting with her rash promise, even though she does not want to behave like a romance heroine but only to be Arveragus's "humble trewe wyf" (V, 758). As for Aurelius, his fault lies in the stubbornness with which he pursues the fantasy of a liaison with Dorigen, despite his awareness of her unromantic nature (Hamel 327). Ultimately, the obstacles that in a chivalric-courtly situation would stimulate desire and strengthen the love bond have become dangerous interferences leading to the degeneration of marital happiness. Therefore, on the one hand Aurelius finally behaves like those noble characters of medieval romances who release their adversary from a binding vow; on the other hand, however, such demonstration of compassion has above all the flavour of a compromise. It accommodates events but does not efface all signs of clash between a literary code of ideal behavior and the deviation from it that actual life entails. As we have seen, Arveragus's search for adventure and honor is incompatible with Dorigen's cult of domesticity; Aurelius manipulates Dorigen before surrendering to *gentillesse*; and, last but not least, he needs to pay a fee for a touch of marvelous in an increasingly utilitarian and bourgeois society. All things considered, to ride on horseback does not automatically make one a knight. In the light of the traditional romance ethos, Chaucer's implicit answer to the franklin's *demande d'amour* is that no character in the tale is really "fre" (V, 1622), although the expectation of a happy ending is met.

As is probably clear by now, Carter accepts Chaucer's transmutation of romance and pushes it forward, towards a higher conceptual complexity. "The Franklin's Tale" expresses a dialectical truth (Kolve 193): throughout the plot it tests romantic illusions against human realities, but it finally provides reconciliation by mediating between these two well-defined poles. "The Kiss" goes beyond such either/or logic. A repulsive referentiality shades off into wonderland as mysteriously as the "throbbing blue of Islam transforms itself to green while you look at it" (*Saints* 35). Yet even the candor and purity of the lilies at the imaginary marketplace conceal "flowers like blown bubbles of blood" (*Saints* 36): the beauty and innocence of Carter's Samarkand "dazzle like an optical illusion" (*Saints* 35) which in fact disguises the violence of "Tamburlaine, the scourge of Asia" (*Saints* 35). Indeed, here Carter strategically exploits intertextuality so that all the violence concealed below the surface of romance can explode. The phrase "Tamburlaine, the scourge of Asia" obviously summons the protagonist of Christopher Marlowe's play,

which--well before Carter's "The Kiss"--defines Tamburlaine not only as the scourge of Asia but also as the "scourge of the world", "Scourge of Jove", "scourge of God" (*Tamburlaine* 105; 136; 64). Along with the reference to Marlowe, Carter's story inherits all the horrible deeds of his Tamburlaine, among which the massacre of the virgins and his insensitivity toward his wife Zenocrate. Further evidence of Carter's intentional allusions to the cruelty of Marlowe's character is offered by her observations in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she compares the life of Sade's Juliette to "the reign of Tamburlaine the Great, an arithmetical progression of atrocities" (*Sadeian* 80).

"The Kiss" tells a story of defamiliarization and hybridization. It romanticizes reality only to mar romance with the stigmas of evil, to denounce its hypocrisy and intrinsic corruption, ultimately, to destroy the myth of a happy ending as an escape from the dismal tones of everyday life. Carter refuses to tell us exactly what happens to Tamburlaine's wife after being beaten, but any prospected outcome is bleak: "After she ran away from him perhaps she made her living in the market. Perhaps she sold lilies there" (*Saints* 37). With this hypothetical turning point, the woman's painful vicissitudes pierce through her verisimilar love story as well as through the idealized life in the "glittering and innocent" (*Saints* 36) city. These two mutually exclusive worlds thus blend into each other, being contaminated by the same all-encompassing desolation.

In "The Kiss" the "either/or" logic of "The Franklin's Tale" has become "both/and"; Chaucer's final compromise between poetic fable and truth has turned into undecidability. "What is a world?", Angela Carter implicitly asks in her works. Chaucer does not get so far as to pose such a question. His tale ends with interpretive openness, yet still within the order of his own world. Chaucer always aims at a critical appraisal of a reality which, although no longer so simple as the cosmos of romance, is knowable by definition, and can be described through a specific set of parameters. Therefore, the dominant in "The Franklin's Tale" is epistemological.¹⁵ "The Kiss," on the other hand, precisely by shaking even such reference points, raises ontological concerns. What is romance? What is realism? What is reality? The ambiguous and impenetrable world of Carter's fiction stands in the way of the reader's heuristic quest with all its richness and thickness but without an answer.

3. Lions, wives and lies

My analysis has emphasized the distinction between romance and referentiality on Chaucer's side, and the inseparability of the two on Carter's side. Such a difference in the formal and aesthetic strategies that Chaucer and Carter adopt in their uses of romance can help us delineate the two authors' respective attitudes towards the cultural and social values of their times. Among the *Canterbury Tales*, the episode of the Wife of Bath is particularly effective for the purpose of this essay. Chaucer here links the prologue and

the tale through a continuity of issues--marriage, desire, beauty and violence in an early modern world in which human relationships are already commodified. However, he fosters two remarkably different conclusions depending on the realistic tones of the Wife's first-person speech or on the romantic atmosphere of her fable. Uncanny echoes of the Chaucerian Alisoun of Bath can be found in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride", two stories in which Angela Carter--like the author of *The Canterbury Tales*--revises the beauty-and-the-beast archetype in order to uncover the patriarchal ideology it perpetrates with its representation of women as instrumental to male desire. Nevertheless, although our two authors build their anecdotes upon the same truth about the female status, the quantum leap from Chaucer to Carter endows romance with far more disturbing implications. The marvelous sneaks even into the most polemical portions of "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride", and simultaneously a de-idealizing strategy chokes illusions. Carter accepts and rejects the reality pact at her whim, but ultimately she ends both stories with skepticism--with the woman's metamorphosis into an animal, that is, with a female identity in the likeness of man. Neither fact nor fancy offers a privileged, external position from which the submissive role imposed upon women can be overturned.

Probably the best known character in Chaucer's collection of tales, the Wife of Bath has been attributed all kinds of labels, from that of radical feminist *ante litteram* to that of mere pawn in the grips of male power. I believe the most significant way of dealing with this episode of *The Canterbury Tales* is to consider both extremes, that is, to concentrate on the interaction of these two antithetical portraits. I thus propose a combined reading of the prologue and the tale according to which the tale temporarily sublimates the issues tackled in the prologue,¹⁶ yet without encouraging withdrawal from actuality.

Alisoun opens her speech by highlighting the gap between a ponderous legacy of texts on matrimony and her lived experience "of wo that is in mariage" (III, 3). She wants to proclaim *her* truth about feminine will and desire--a truth ignored by antifeminist written "auctoritee" (III, 1)--and she achieves her goal by mimicking the stereotype of the married woman. Throughout the prologue the Wife stages the parts she had to perform in life. It is precisely in the parody of herself that she lays bare the violence and the exploitation of which her category is the target. The account of her five marriages are based on a series of stock situations and models of feminine behaviour which she appropriates from masculine representation of women and reenacts with critical distance, either by pushing them to the limit or by turning them upside down.

From the static locus where men inscribe the prowess of their virility, the female body becomes an active, insatiable desiring machine. After an invective against "virginitee" (III, 82) and monogamy, Alisoun even welcomes the prospect of a sixth husband. She challenges the morality of restraint by showing that--far from disciplining sexuality--lack and prohibition in fact intensify lust: "Wayte what

thyng we may nat lightly have,/ Thereafter wol we crie al day and crave./ Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we" (III, 517-9). Thus, in contrast with the ineptitude of her first three husbands--whom she in vain "a-nyght made...swynke" (III, 202)--the Wife boasts an appetite which knows "no discrecioun" (III, 622) and which requires no discrimination in the choice of a partner: "Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;/ I took no kep, so that he liked me" (III, 624-5). In line with the mercantile logic of her time, the Wife treats sexual relationships as economic transactions in which, however, she wants to be also the dealer, not only the commodity endowed with exchange value. Paradoxically, it is from Christ that Alisoun draws the justification for a utilitarian ethics, according to which profit must compensate for the expenditure of human capital involved in feelings and intercourses: Christ "[b]ad nat every wight he sholde go sell/ Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore" (III, 108-9), but he rather spoke only "to hem that wolde lyve parfityl" (III, 111). Happy not to partake of those holy few, the Wife manipulates the alliance between matrimony and patrimony to her advantage in order to enjoy the "fruyt of mariage" (III, 114), picking the best of her husbands' "nether purs and...cheste" (III, 44b). A good entrepreneur in a society for which "al is for to selle" (III, 414), Alisoun thus reads the Scriptures as an account book which records men's sexual "dette" (III, 130) and "paiement" (III, 131) to their wives. However, this wife who allegedly has the power upon her husband's "propre body" (III, 159) so as to render him her "dettour and [her] thral" (III, 155) is by no means left untouched by the economy of possession and traffic in which she now participates as a manager. In fact Alisoun herself is on the market, as precisely *the* object of exchange around which patriarchal society and culture are organized.¹⁷ In her own words, she locates wives on almost the same level as animals and objects on sale, with the only difference that--unlike what happens for "hors, and houndes" (III, 285), "[b]acyns, lavours" (III, 287), "pottes, clothes, and array" (III, 289)--women undergo "noon assay" (III, 290) before being purchased through the marriage contract. If women cannot be appreciated otherwise than in economic terms, it becomes crucial for them to know and master the laws of the market, so that they can increase at least the only kind of value they can still aspire to--the pecuniary one. Not accidentally, Alisoun calls attention to the fact that scarcity renders any merchandise precious, a mechanism that women--by making virtue of necessity--slyly exploit for their own promotion: "With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;/ Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,/ And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys;/ This knoweth every womman that is wys." (III, 521-4).

The double bind that ties the Wife of Bath to the misogynist cultural system she contests renders her transgression something different from an unconditional celebration of excess for its own sake. Alisoun soon reveals that if she were more docile she would be annihilated: "Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt" (III, 389); hence she has to be constantly vigilant, and remind men with her domineering manner that they are not masters of "[her] body and of [her] good" (III, 314). Following this

very first-come-first-served logic, as if trying to ward off her husband's oppression, Alisoun aggresses him by retorting against him the crystallized identities in which men have imprisoned women. Before her husband judges her according to clichés, the Wife takes hold of them and lavishes them all on him in one long tirade: female vanity, falsity, jealousy, fickleness, seductiveness, debauchery. She thus accuses her potential accuser: as a man, he should feel guilty of having created stifling female images and of persisting in using them as the only guidelines in his relationship with Alisoun. This is the "wo that is in mariage" (II, 303): the Wife of Bath's "tribulacion" (III, 156) lies in the necessity of using "the whippe" (III, 175) to offset male violence, of bestowing sexual favors on the best bidder as if her "*bele chose*" (III, 447) were on sale. She would renounce "sleighte [and] force" (III, 405), together with the ethos of trade and profit, if she could get love in some other way. Therefore, her desire is not so much intrinsically insatiable as temporarily unfulfilled: it will find closure as soon as Alisoun finds affection and tolerance in a mutually respectful marital relationship, one which--unlike her union with Jankyn--does not attain reciprocity at the price of blows and offenses, nor at the price of the woman's renunciation to "lond and fee" (III, 630) in favor of her husband. Despite the happily-ever-after conclusion of the prologue, not even the fifth marriage is consolatory enough to efface the permanent injuries inflicted upon the Wife. Indeed, also the way in which Chaucer introduces the Wife of Bath in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* suggests that the violence Alisoun received from Jankyn has left a deeper mark on her than the harmony they have conquered later in their married life. Actually, her permanent deafness appears as her distinctive feature: "A good WIF was ther OF biside BATHE,/ But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe" ("General Prologue" 445-6).

It is precisely in the *Tale* she narrates that Alisoun fully articulates and ultimately satisfies her wish: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love" (III, 1038-9).¹⁸ The romance of the knight and the old hag thus seems to liberate from everyday reality through representation, through an individual fantasy. In and by itself, such a polarization could be interpreted--in the light of Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*--as Chaucer's attempt to rechannel the Wife's subversive impulses in the kingdom of enchantment, so as to grant her symbolic appeasement and to retrain her for an unchangeable social and cultural order. Alisoun, in other words, would be free of merely *imagining* a different reality, but would simultaneously subject her dream to repression by acknowledging the absolute and eternal nature of her world. Yet, in my view, the blunt return to the fabliau register through the harshness of Alisoun's final curse against unyielding husbands reinstates the question of male power of exclusion, and, along with it, the urgency of a yet-to-come solution for women. Significantly, in the Prologue the Wife warns her audience that in her tale she will "speke after [her] fantasye" (III, 190): whereas she means to "seye sooth" (III, 195) about her married life, her "entente" (III, 192) as a storyteller

"nys but for to pleye" (III, 192). In proposing a romance which tackles the very issues she has to face in everyday life, Alisoun is perfectly conscious of the gap between fancy and fact, and furthermore reveals that the utopian, sentimental simplicity of the former is no longer adequate to the explanation of the latter. Thus, the Wife resorts to romance as to a rhetorical strategy which may still be aesthetically effective to illustrate her problems and her wishes; however, she also knows that the answer must be found neither in fairy magic nor in any other prodigy of the unexplained marvelous, but rather back in the realm of "[e]xperience" (III, 1).

The two main characters in Alisoun's *Tale* are actually too stylized and too idealized to offer a wishful and viable alternative to the marriage relationships depicted in the Prologue. Although the Wife pursues the very "parfit joye" (III, 1258) that gladdens the knight's and the old hag's lives, the values that sustain such harmony belong to an irretrievable feudal past, that she evokes with a great deal of irony and without nostalgia. Confronted with the obligation of marrying a "foul, and oold, and poore" (III, 1063) woman, the knight clings to his class-based notion of gentility: one of his "nacioun" (III, 1068) cannot choose a wife "of so lough a kynde" (III, 1101). The hag, on her part, replies to her companion's anachronistic ethics with an equally abstract view of "gentillesse" (III, 1118) as moral worth which derives neither from "old richesse" (III, 1118) nor from "oure place" (III, 1164), but rather from "bountee" (III, 1160) and "grace" (III, 1163): in her view, one becomes noble by beginning to "lyven vertuously and weyve synne" (III, 1176). She thus embodies the ethereal and submissive figure advocated as a model of femininity in medieval conduct books (Carruthers 213)--a product of what Georges Duby defines as rigorously male Middle Ages, yet already at odds with the reality of medieval marriages, and all the more unfeasible for the practical bourgeois wife. The dismissal of "possessioun" (III, 1147) in the hag's sermon cannot but widen the gap between feudal past and proto-capitalist present: whereas for the female protagonist of romance "Whoso that halt hym payd of his poverte" (III, 1185) is "riche" (III, 1186), in the society of Alisoun of Bath a loathly lady cannot be loved as a "fair" (III, 1241), "good and trewe" (III, 1243) wife without first securing her own economic independence. Paradoxically, the tale itself points to the limits of its own sentimental idealization. Magic and *gentillesse* may well have promoted the knight's reformation, but they have not at all uprooted rape: with the shift from "fayeryes" (III, 872) to "dayeryes" (III, 871), the elf (or the knight) who in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (III, 857) assaulted women is simply replaced by another "incubus" (III, 880)--the "lymytour" (III, 874).

If with her question "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (III, 692) the Wife of Bath calls attention to the arbitrariness of male representation of women, it is unquestionable that the *Tale* she tells does not denounce "of men moore wikkednesse" (III, 695) than "clerkes han withinne hire oratories" (III, 694), but rather stages an idyll which once again honors male pleasure. With its stereotypical and

normative portrayal of women, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* appears as ideological as Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (III, 685). Alisoun's female letter can really challenge the glosses of patriarchal hermeneutics (Dinshaw 113-31) only if the tale interacts with the prologue: in this way, Chaucer's romance functions not simply as a regressive fantasy but, more subtly, as a demystification of regressive fantasies. Alisoun looks for the man of her dreams not in the ranks of reformed knights¹⁹ but rather in her social and historical *milieu*, among "Housbondes meeke, yonge,...fressh abedde" (III, 1259) and not "nygardes of dispence" (III, 1263), that is, still within the domain of masculine "auctoritee" (III, 1) but with room for feminine will and choice. Nevertheless, the potential female sovereignty that Alisoun celebrates with her rebellious transvestism is not sanctioned by the social hierarchy (Crane *Gender* 130-31): it has to be seized.

I would be tempted to assert that Angela Carter had clearly in mind all the motifs and the ironic twists of this Chaucerian episode. The surprising textual affinities with Alisoun's life and story invite us to read "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" as Carter's postmodern replies to, respectively, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, which she distorts so as to deprive Chaucer's *Weltanschauung* of its glimpse of hope. Unlike the fairy-tale of the old hag, Carter's romance never puts reason to sleep: it never departs from the inhibitions and preoccupations of everyday life to absorb us into an otherwise unattainable experience. At the same time, Carter's reality effects do not mean to shelter her story from the truth that lies in fables. As a feminist anatomist of a culture made of a tangle of imagination and reality, Carter travels to fantasy land not in search of "consolatory nonsenses" (as myths and archetypes are defined in *The Sadeian Woman*) (5; 106) but rather--as in the idyll of Mr and Mrs Lyon--in search of evidence of the archetypal objectification of women. Furthermore, unlike Alisoun of Bath's confessional prologue in support of the female voice, the girl's magical metamorphosis into a beast in "The Tiger's Bride" despite her initial first-person denunciation of female oppression reveals that the ideology of male power embodied in myths and tales is well rooted and systematically exploited even in an apparently rational and commonsensical context. Neither in the timeless and placeless world of romance nor in history and institutions can women find a place as protagonists of their own actions and desires.

The opening of "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" reproduces the enchanted atmosphere in which Alisoun sets her *Tale*. Carter's landscape--just as Chaucer's "land fulfild of fayerye" (III, 859) dancing in "many a grene mede" (III, 861)--has a dreamlike quality: the snow has "a light of its own" (*Bloody* 41), the same "unearthly, reflected pallor" (*Bloody* 41) envelopes the falling flakes as well as the girl's skin, so that "you would have thought she, too was made all of snow" (*Bloody* 41). However, the mystery and openness of the Wife of Bath's Arthurian romance soon dissolve with Carter's subsequent simile: the

snowy country road the girl sees is "white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin" (*Bloody* 41). A girl's destiny is marriage--an everlasting, universal truth that is inscribed not only into culture but even into nature. It is significant that the reference to marriage in Carter's story occupies the same position as rape in Chaucer's tale: they both produce the first blunt tear in the fabric of illusions. Where, however, the hag works against female "oppressioun" (III, 889) by knotting once again the threads of an idyll, the girl's subsequent adventures reinforce the image of marriage as a metaphorical rape.

"What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (III, 905) in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon"? Nothing more than "one white, perfect rose" (*Bloody* 44), Carter answers--that is, a non-utilitarian, non-practical object, hence the perfect expression of self-reflexive, *autonomous* desire. The development of the story reveals precisely that such autonomous female desire cannot eschew masculine jurisdiction. Actually, the father figure who at first tries to fulfill the girl's wish soon surrenders his daughter to a Beast who symbolically rapes her by snatching her photograph, and who then appropriates her also physically by making her promise she will live with him. Carter alerts us against thinking that the girl "had no will of her own" (*Bloody* 45); in fact, it is her "sense of obligation" (*Bloody* 45) towards paternal authority that induces her to stay and smile to the Beast, "because her father wanted her to do so" (*Bloody* 45). The girl's imposed passivity thus quickly dismisses the possibility of that female "maistrie" (III, 1236) which the old hag barter with beauty and honesty. But "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" offers an even bleaker point of view about the connection of love and "possessioun" (III, 147) that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* deliberately ignores when it sentimentally celebrates "Glad poverte" (III, 1183). Not only is the girl's liaison with the Beast fully entangled with economic concerns; more sadly, she is not even the beneficiary of the deal. The female body and feelings given as a pledge to a man favor the profit of another man: "her visit to the Beast must be, on some magically reciprocal scale, the price of her father's good fortune" (*Bloody* 45). The unexplainable prodigy that in Alisoun's romance can turn an old hag into an attractive, good, and loyal woman is here unmasked by the author as the power of money in disguise--a discovery that in Chaucer, as we have seen, is made possible only if the Wife's comic prologue interacts with the idealizing aura of the tale. Precisely the cynicism that makes Carter suspicious about "the black and white ethical world" (*Sadeian* 82) of fables leads her to contaminate the mysteries of her fairyland with the brutal principles of practical reality, while simultaneously she allures us into believing that we--like the female protagonist of the story--are entering "a place of privilege" (*Bloody* 42) where "the natural laws of the world [are] held in suspension" (*Bloody* 47).

With sovereignty over her husband, the Chaucerian hag loses her ugliness and acquires all the quintessential features of the ideal woman. With submissiveness, the girl in Carter's story loses personality and discernment, but paradoxically this is how she can be accepted by and accept patriarchy in her turn. In

other words, this is how she can begin to see "no longer a lion in her arms but a man" (*Bloody* 51). Therefore, Carter's final, ironic response to the Chaucerian question about women's desire is that both tales and human institutions represent women as wishing to yield to men: they can get happiness in exchange for their individual will. The girl's efforts to overcome the sense of "bewildering difference" (*Bloody* 45) between the lion and herself conceal the necessity for women to suppress their own specificity, to relinquish their own identity and adopt the one that men choose for them. Only with her nominal metamorphosis into the patronymic "Mrs Lyon" through marriage can the girl find Beauty in a Beast. Significantly, whereas Chaucer's knight is "certeyn...deed" (III, 1005-6) if he does not acknowledge the existence and the nature of female longing, Carter's lion blackmails the girl with his impending death if she does not satisfy his appetite. Therefore, the knight's reformation from rapist to perfect husband in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* has become for Carter the woman's reformation from the master of her own desires to the object of male desire. With its unexciting and predictable happy ending--"Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden; the old spaniel drowzes on the grass, in a drift of fallen petals" (*Bloody* 51)--"The Courtship of Mr Lyon" confirms that the truth of the female protagonist lies in the only label chosen by the girl to designate her own status. She remains "Miss Lamb" (*Bloody* 45), the "spotless, sacrificial" (*Bloody* 45) victim of a legalized system of violence against women that has replaced the knight's rape--a deed which, as Chaucer tells us, was frequent in feudal times but was at least declared illegal and condemned by "cours of lawe" (III, 892).

It is precisely this essentialized opposition between feminine meekness and masculine strength that the opening of "The Tiger's Bride" seems to denounce. Here Carter lets her own Alisoun of Bath speak of all the woe that accompanies sexual relationships. As in the case of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, a female first-person confession here breaks the spell of the newly-acquired harmony in the romance of Mr and Mrs Lyon: "ah! you think you've come to the blessed plot where the lion lies down with the lamb" (*Bloody* 51). The female protagonist is no longer so naive as in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon:" she now filters her sentimentality and her imaginary excitement through the "furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly" (*Bloody* 52). She herself produces the metanarrative interference with which Carter in the previous story kept us at a distance from the idealization of marriage.

Actually, with the same lucidity with which the Chaucerian Alisoun claims that no man is the master "of [her] body and of [her] good" (III, 314), the girl admits her father lost her "to the Beast at cards" (*Bloody* 51). For a moment, the girl seems to rival with Alisoun of Bath for entrepreneurial skills: "my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment" (*Bloody* 56). However, when she meditates on her status she realizes that--unlike the Wife of Bath--she will never be able to decide whether and how "to selle [her] *bele chose*" (III, 447): her experience has taught her that

women are nothing more than men's "ransom" (*Bloody* 54). Just as her mother has been "bartered for her dowry" (*Bloody* 52), she too has been "bought and sold, passed from hand to hand" (*Bloody* 63). The capitalistic philosophy of her father teaches that "if you have enough money, anything is possible" (*Bloody* 62), yet the magic of such a formula is ineffective whenever applied to the female world. Far from being the queen of the marriage-mart as in Chaucer's Prologue, Carter's woman is a mere commodity. Far from representing passion made flesh like Alisoun's body, she incarnates the "cold, white meat of contract" (*Bloody* 66): she is inert and lifeless, just as she has to be according to the laws of "the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence" (*Bloody* 66). And when she thinks she can jump outside the exploitative circle of exchange and utility maximization by finding a shelter within the disinterested realm of feelings, the specter of objectification still haunts her. In fact--not unlike the profit-oriented nature of sexual relationships--the *voyeurism* of the Beast, whose only desire is "to see the lady unclothed" (*Bloody* 58), denies the woman's humanity, and simply treats her as a catalyst for male narcissism. In any case, even if Carter's female protagonist made an effort to wrap such squalid moments of intimacy up with bliss, the inflexible rules of the marketplace would soon break the spell: after being on display, she would "be returned to her father undamaged with bankers' orders for the sum which he lost to [her] master at cards and also a number of fine presents such as furs, jewels and horses" (*Bloody* 58).

"The lamb must learn to run with the tigers" (*Bloody* 64): in the light of Chaucer's Prologue, this statement by Carter's female protagonist might sound like an invitation to women to use "sleighte [and] force" (III, 405), as the Wife of Bath successfully does--that is, to resort to typical strategies of male power to avoid being overpowered by men. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the tale suggests a more debasing interpretation of such a moral, one which reinforces female acquiescence instead of overcoming it. As "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" has shown, when Carter's female lamb runs with the tigers, she agrees to give up her selfhood and her ability to choose. From "the los of al mankynde" (III, 720) she can thus be redeemed to the tigers' eyes and be flattered as "a woman of honour" (*Bloody* 59). In worse conditions than the battered and deafened Alisoun, she must be immolated on the beast's "carnivorous bed of bone" (*Bloody* 67)--thus also literally performing the part of Miss Lamb, "white, shaking [and] raw" (*Bloody* 67) like the scapegoat of tribal sacrifices. The woman as *pharmakos*--ready to execute *herself* to be reborn as *his* self--is the way to "a peaceable kingdom" (*Bloody* 67) in which male "appetite" (*Bloody* 67) does not entail female "extinction" (*Bloody* 67). Carter's protagonist ultimately expels her accursed share through a metamorphosis, this time a physical (therefore real?) one: the beast's tongue rips off, layer after layer, the girl's skin--that very skin through which she hoped she could gain her independence--and bares a "beautiful fur" (*Bloody* 67).²⁰ Thus there is still surprise in store for us. Wonder finally shakes the

disenchanted and delegitimized magic kingdom of "The Tiger's Bride:" it springs from the all-but-comforting touch of a postmodern fairy who renders women's nursery "fear of devourment" (*Bloody* 67) nothing less than "flesh and sinews" (*Bloody* 67). This final brush of unexplained marvelous repaints not only "the leon" (III, 692) of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* but also the Mr and Mrs. Lyon of Carter's previous romance.

4. Conclusion: Can dreams come true?

The stories I have chosen from Chaucer's and Carter's archives by no means exhaust the variety of situations and issues tackled by the two authors. However, they are particularly appropriate to illustrate how romance affects the representation of reality when we switch from the early sparks of modernity to its last embers. In *The Canterbury Tales* romance is taken as the expression of a stylized, simplified view of the world which has become inadequate to contain Chaucer's heterogeneous society and its new values: reason over emotion, science over the marvelous, the power of money over heroism in battle. On the level of form, as well, romance narratives contradict the cause-and-effect perspective required by Chaucer's proto-realistic description: their most typical device--interlace--abandons one knightly adventure and juxtaposes it to another one without establishing any evident reciprocal link (Vinaver 68). Chaucer, who on the whole wants to save something of the optimistic *Weltanschauung* of romance, also understands the need for adapting to the spirit of his time, and hence reduces romance to one of the many interacting components of a secularized and reified context.

At the other extreme of our chronological sequence, Angela Carter recuperates romance in order to tell us that reason itself is no longer sufficient to the depiction of reality. However, her revisionary operation does not go back toward higher simplicity: it rather entrusts to romance in order to stage the intricacy of desire, of sexuality, of our psyche--of all that the censorship of reason and of power does not allow to surface. Where Chaucer presents romance as a subset of reason, Carter makes reason shrink to an appendix of romance; where in *The Canterbury Tales* the reality principle includes the pleasure principle, in Carter's stories the pleasure principle spreads so much as to envelope the reality principle. With her fiction Carter has taken us a long way from "the suspicion that the romance world is essentially a lie (...) because it is not equivalent to the actual world and not realizable within it" (Beer 32): she actually reveals that this very lie is to be found in the reality of realism, and that it is precisely romance which tells the most hidden truth. With a final twist, in any case, Carter prevents her fictional world from becoming a magic land where wishes are fulfilled and anxieties exorcised. Significantly, she *does not* offer a locus of freedom from the reality principle. If, on the one hand, she urges us to flee from realism because it has been telling us stories, on the other hand the embrace of romances is no cozy shelter, either. Beyond good

and evil, beyond any possible sublimation or symbolic appeasement, we plunge into the unconscious still burdened with our common sense, and we reemerge bringing back disquieting and irrational elements that deconstruct everyday, allegedly "real", life. The structural endlessness for which Chaucer indicts Arthurian romance returns in Carter's postmodern fiction in the form of a conceptual openness. Precisely the deferred reconciliation of irreconcilable but paradoxically intertwined orders of reality makes Carter's romance rigorously "inescapable".²¹

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NOTES

1. Two significant works about the interrelation of romance and postmodern/poststructuralist theory are P. Parker's *Inescapable Romance* and D. Elam's *Romancing the Postmodern*. Elam further elaborates on the romance-postmodern connection by taking postmodern romance as the privileged woman's genre, feminism being the political question *par excellence* posed by romance. For my part, I would like to take a wider stance on the self-excessive nature of romance, one which sees the politics of female fantasy as one possible form of postmodern discourse. For instance, in my view, magical realism is an equally effective instance of postmodern romance, without being necessarily in the service of an exclusively female or feminist agenda. Unquestionably, if we endorse a less biologically-gendered conception of female discourse and think of the latter as a mode, the two positions can be reconciled.

2. The reference to the more "traditional" notion of romance as a literary genre opposed to realism is not incompatible with the notion of romance as a postmodern discourse. As I will try to show throughout this paper, it is interesting to see how the very *topoi* of romance as a narrative of the extraordinary can substantiate the more sophisticated view of romance as self-excessive discourse.

3. Given the very broad range of narrative traditions encompassed by "medieval romance"--such as saints' lives, knightly adventures, fabliaux, and dream visions--and the purpose of this paper, I would like to narrow down my discussion of romance in Chaucer to tales that show the intrusion of bourgeois values into a usually aristocratic genre. Indeed, as J.A. Burrow observes ("*Canterbury Tales*" 109), among the various kinds of romance narratives, chivalric material is what makes Chaucer particularly uncomfortable.

4. In this respect, Chaucer's use of romance answers to a more articulated logic than the one emerging, for instance, from the critical appraisals of Auerbach (*Mimesis* 138-39), Beer (*Romance* 2-3), and Finlayson ("Definitions" 58-9)--who all tend to see romance as devoid of any practical purposes.

5. A passage from the "Wife of Bath's Tale"--with which I will be dealing in the third section--explicitly shows Chaucer's disenchantment towards the feudal past. After extolling the knight's reformation thanks to magic and *gentillesse*, the tale points at the limits of its own sentimental idealization: both the prosaic present time of "dayeryes" (III, 871) and the allegedly idyllic past of "fayeryes" (III, 872) are afflicted by rape. The "lymytour" (III, 874) assaults women in Alisoun's world just as the elf (or the knight) did in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (III, 857).

6. In relation to the role of romance in contemporary literature, a reference to Jonathan Goldberg's post-structuralist revision of Jameson can be useful (*Endlesse Worke* 76-77, note 1). In a note dealing with magical narratives, Goldberg summarizes Jameson's interpretation of romance as a confrontation with Otherness which is resolved with the recognition of the Other as a mirror, that is, with a reconciliation of differences into sameness. Goldberg, on his part, sees romance's confrontation with Otherness as an occasion to raise "the question of differences, not as solutions, but as problematic, and as generative of further narration." This is precisely the agenda of postmodern literature.

7. *The Faerie Queene* of course represents an equally decisive step in the revisionary tradition of romance. In Book IV, Canto II (32-34), Spenser explicitly declares his intention to revive and prolong Chaucer's literary enterprise: since "Wicked Time" has "quite defaste" the monumental work of "*Chaucer*, well of English vndefyled", and "robd the world of threasure endlesse deare," Spenser thus invokes the spirit of his predecessor:

"Then pardon, O most sacred happie spirit,
That I thy labours lost may thus reuiue,
And steale from thee the meede of
thy due merit,
That none durst euer whilest thou wast aliue,
And being dead in vaine yet many striue:
Ne dare I like,
but through infusion sweete/
Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me suruiue,
I follow here the footing of thy feete,
That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete." (*The Faerie Queene* 587).

In fact, however, the effect of Spenser's revisionary operation in the steps of Chaucer is far more "medieval" than his predecessor's. On the one hand it is true that, with respect to Chaucer, Spenser further removes romance from accommodation and closure. Spenser can thus inspire post-structuralist readings such as that of J. Goldberg and become "the poet of deferred endings" (*Endlesse Worke* 10). On the other hand, the princes, the queens, the knights, the Muses and the Gods in *The Faerie Queene* reconstruct the aristocratic and idealized world of old romances. Therefore, Chaucer not only occupies a more "originary" position than Spenser in our lines of magical narratives, but is also more critical towards the values that romance conveys.

8. I believe an investigation of the influence of Chaucer and medieval romance on Carter can offer new and useful hints towards a more complete picture of a contemporary writer whose culture was surprisingly rich.

9. In an interview with A. Katsavos, Angela Carter reveals the feminist politics of form underlying this sentence. She took it from a movie version of a story by Dostoyevsky, in which the passive female protagonist--a metonymy for women and women writers in general--posits the need for women to speak and act without paying lip service to the ideology of male culture (Katsavos 16).

10. These qualities are also explicitly mentioned in the course of the tale: "he was chaste and no lecher" (VII, 745); "the child seyde" (VII, 817); "child Thopas" (VII, 830). As Susan Crane observes, Sir Thopas's femininity and the parodic tones of the narration suggest that, despite the extollment of masculinity in romance, male characters in fact undergo "crossgendering". In this way, romance leaves room for intimacy between two genders initially defined in opposition to each other (Crane, *Gender and Romance* 193-94). Significantly, as I will soon show, Carter indicts precisely male fear of crossgendering, which leads the officer of "The Lady of the House of Love" to destroy romance situations.

11. On the other hand, see Wilson ("SLIP PAGE" 108) for an interpretation of Carter's protagonist as substantially innocent.

12. These are the main qualities that John Stevens attributes to the Breton lai, while emphasizing its close relation to romance (See Stevens 66). Joanne Rice confirms such link between lai and romance by describing the former as a variety of brief romance characterized by "simplicity, idealism, and concern with love and the supernatural" (See *Riverside Chaucer*, Notes: 895).

13. It is precisely this conceptual simplicity in characterization that reinstates romance. See for instance Beer 10.

14. *Heroes and Villains* is precisely the title of an earlier novel by A. Carter in which the seemingly neat division between a "good", rational civilization and "bad" primitive tribes falls apart. The female protagonist of this post-apocalyptic romance blurs the contrast between heroic Professors and contemptible Barbarians by choosing the jungle. Marianne--a Professor's daughter--ultimately becomes the bride of a tribe's leader. However, with her exotic adventure she experiences anything but the noble savage's benign innocence. More subtly, Carter produces a further crack in the heroes/villains dialectics by introducing a third group of "non-connoted" characters--significantly designated as "the Out People" and described as mutilated and marginalized creatures. They effectively stand for a residual, radical Otherness that hinders the reconstitution or the overturning of the binary opposition.

15. I adopt the distinction proposed by B. McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* between an epistemological dominant, typical of modernist fiction, and an ontological dominant characterizing postmodernist fiction. The latter does not merely try to interpret the world that it projects; it rather foregrounds questions on the status of the literary text when the boundary between world and words is violated.

16. As I concentrate on the ideological significance entailed by the structure of the Wife of Bath episode, I intentionally overlook the debate about the Wife's characterization engaging contemporary critics. Even if we accept to treat Alisoun as an allegory, as a fictional figure without psychological depth rather than as the verisimilar protagonist of the prologue and maker of the tale, the interaction between the prologue and the tale, that is, between the concrete details of a fabliau and the idealizing stance of romance does not lose its effectiveness for the representation of the social position of women. For an interpretation of the Wife of Bath as allegorical and fictional see for instance Disbrow 59-71; Fleming 151-61.

17. At once the embodiment and the severe judge of the woman-on-the-market figure, Alisoun anticipates the *leitmotif* in the thought of the French feminist Luce Irigaray. It is worth calling attention to such a parallel not so much in the attempt to superimpose a 20th-century frame of mind upon a literary creation which belongs to the late Middle Ages, but rather as evidence of the persistence of a number of questions about the female status in Western culture and in its representation. Irigaray's essay "Women on the Market" (*This Sex* 170-91) raises precisely the issues hinted at in Alisoun's speech: women's exchange value in patriarchal society, the need for women to be scarce commodities so as to

be desirable, the exclusively male control of the market. Also the Wife of Bath's discourse on polygamy is surprisingly attuned with Irigaray's standpoint. In open contrast with anthropologists like Levy-Strauss, who takes male polygamous tendency as absolutely natural, Irigaray discloses the exploitative logic at its foundation. The consumption and circulation of the female body has created Western society and culture. In positing a role reversal, with a woman as entrepreneur and a plurality of men as objects of her desire, Alisoun already problematizes such cultural norms. On the other hand, we cannot expect the Wife of Bath to propose a 20th-century alternative organizing principle. Actually, where Chaucer's Prologue still contemplates the possibility of love between husband and wife, for Irigaray the end of male transactions is offered by a female economy of abundance, an alternative kind of commerce that women maintain among themselves.

18. I accept the interpretation of these lines given by G. Richman ("Rape and Desire"), who rejects the more frequent gloss: "Women desire to have sovereignty/ As well over their husband as [*over*] *their love[r]*" and proposes "As well over their husband as *their [husband's] love*." I believe the latter gloss is far more faithful to the development and conclusion of a tale in which the pivotal issue is precisely the tension between sovereignty and love.

19. L. Fradenburg, on the other hand, sustains that the knight *is* the man of Alisoun's dreams--dreams which she fulfills within the private and interiorized dimension of a fantasy.

20. Indeed, by taking on a bestial look, the woman goes beyond the binary opposition between the traditional monolithic categories of male and female identity, and may be seen to replace an ideological construction of the feminine *subject* with a notion of femininity as multiple and protean *subjectivity*. Yet transvestism makes her like the male figure of the story, in a way which is anything but deliberate: her choice rather seems the lesser evil in the face of patriarchy's violent threat.

21. For the notion of romance as deferral of presence and truth, and for its implications in terms of Derrida's and Barthes's theories, see Parker, *Inescapable Romance*.