

Labelling the Other: Deconstructing Gendered Monstrosity in Contemporary Feminist Cautionary Tales

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Introduction

This paper focuses on contemporary cautionary tales influenced by feminism, eco-criticism, and their combined form – ecofeminism. The research centres on the gendered aspect of representation, with special attention to the portrayal of femininity. The genre’s predecessors – traditional cautionary tales and folk tales – were constructed to serve as a “barometer defining social values, behavioural norms, gender roles” (Ortiz and Rucki 99), helping people (mainly children) to “learn about . . . social and cultural heritage and build *cultural capital*” (Smith qtd. in Ortiz and Rucki 99) and, to socialise them by “modeling gender-specific identities and behaviors” (Haase qtd. in Ortiz and Rucki 99). Therefore, cautionary tales warn against certain issues, such as the open embracement of female sexuality, which was considered to be improper before. Therefore, traditional forms are limiting and confining women to the “feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade” expected by societal norms (Russo 53). In this respect, they are typically marginalising and moralising towards women, as their female characters appear either as innocent, angelic figures or, when they transgress the expected norms, as monstrous, while for males, promiscuity and beastliness were considered normal. Mary Russo puts it “[a]lthough the models, of course, change, there is a way in which radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility, and the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested cultural politics for women” (54), which is why counterexamples, including (eco)feminist contemporary narratives are relevant and important.

Modern (eco)feminist narratives tell stories from a female point of view (often written by a female author) to challenge and reflect on the traditional monstrous view of women, and even caution their readers to avoid systemic prejudices and expectations. In other words, these tales retain the traditional purpose of cautionary tales, the formula of warning readers against undesired behaviours, while revising the content of the cautionary messages from a feminist-ecocritical perspective. The revised narratives analysed in this paper – namely, Christina Rossetti’s poem titled “Goblin Market” (1862), Sarah Hall’s short story titled “Mrs Fox” (2013), and Samantha Hunt’s short story titled “Beast” (2017) – use various methods to distance themselves from traditional messages. For example, they highlight female monstrosity and bestiality, usually in connection with sexuality, while withholding judgement towards their female protagonists; their male characters are not necessarily monstrous, but are depicted as cultural and/or social freaks, serving as criticism of patriarchal structures; the zoomorphised, animalistic characters are portrayed in an accepting, carnivalesque environment which also

includes grotesque elements such as the excess of food, sex, et cetera. Furthermore, the carnival provides a setting where otherness is endorsed, where the fluidity of forms, acts, and gender identities is a part of normality. The latter aspect resonates with eco-criticism, which inherently aims to blur the hierarchical boundaries between different beings and genders, and since the mentioned works operate with a feminist value system, they could be understood as feminist eco-criticism, or, in short, ecofeminist narratives. Therefore, I argue that these works challenge the moralising aspects of traditional cautionary tales by refusing to limit their human, nonhuman animal, or hybrid characters to gender(ed) norms or the dichotomy of the normal and the abnormal/monstrous. Instead, they allow the so-called ‘others’ to transgress and blur boundaries without building on the “pedagogy of fear” (Shaijan 8). To emphasise, these tales do continue to caution their readers. However, unlike the traditional narratives, they warn against complying with norms and oppressions concerning femininity and animality rather than disregarding them.

The History of Monstrous Females

Monstrosity and its surrounding myths are epistemically rooted in our cultures. The monsters, and – particularly relevant to this paper – the monstrous females of cautionary tales can be traced back to antiquity: the ancient Greeks and Romans perceived the female body negatively, as the ‘other’ to their male counterparts. For example, the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) argued that female bodies were inferior for several reasons, including their “lack of heat” (Aristotle 459) and their lack of “seed” (Aristotle 77), which made their bodily fluids “semen’s inferior” (Coleman n.pag.). In his book titled *Generation of Animals*, he provides an in-depth explanation of why he believed women are mutilated, malformed, congenitally disabled, deformed males:

[t]he perfecting of female embryos is inferior to that of male ones, - since their uterus is inferior in condition. . . . [T]he female takes longer to develop than the male does; though once birth has taken place everything reaches its perfection sooner in females than in males – e.g., puberty, maturity, old-age – because females are weaker and colder in their nature; and we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature. (Aristotle 459, 461)

Meanwhile, Aristotle's contemporary, Hippocrates (460-370 BC) complemented his ideas by adding, that the female body, thanks for their lack of heat, "retains more fluid and moisture" (Hippocrates qtd. in Coleman n.pag.), which provided a ground for subsequent perceptions of monstrous females and their uncontainable bodily fluids.

Furthermore, Coleman notes that Aristotle and Hippocrates agreed on the fact that girls started their periods in their early teens, which determined twelve as the legal age for marriage, which made young women "their husband's property" (n.pag.). This practice contributed to the creation of a social structure where not only their bodies, but women themselves were considered inferior. As Coleman notes, this "created a dynamic that put young women in a powerless position" (n.pag.). Thus, this hierarchical dynamic was based on the negative assumptions about the uncontainability of the female body. A few centuries after the Greeks, the Roman Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) wrote his extensive work *Natural History*, in which he describes female bodies as undergoing "cursed bodily processes that . . . alter[ed] their entire state of being" (Coleman n.pag.). He further claimed that women's bodies posed "a threat not only to nature, but to those at the top of the social hierarchy" (Coleman n.pag.), which again reflects the enduring perception of female bodies as unstable, dangerous, and capable of disrupting social constructs such as the patriarchy.

Another century later (2nd c. AD), Aretaeus claimed that wombs are "prone to 'wandering'" (Flemming 211), causing various mental and physical illnesses. Rebecca Flemming adds that when Galen, Aretaeus's contemporary, who also believed in the so-called 'women problem', discusses that "the female animal whose testicles have been excised," is similar "to the castrated male" (324). This notion resonates with Sigmund Freud's *The Sexual Enlightenment of Children*, where he claims that "[t]he woman's genitalia, seen subsequently and regarded as mutilated" leads to what he calls the "castration complex" (32), which "is the deepest unconscious root . . . for the sense of superiority over women" (76).

Galen's contemporary, Soranus, a physician who disagreed with Aretaeus's theory talked of the womb's "hysterical suffocation" (Gilman et al. 36), which was described by Celsus, a Roman thinker, as an "unnamed but violent illness that comes from the womb" (Gilman et al. 36) or a "violent malady" (Flemming 175) – views that yet again framed women as inherently sick, uncontainable beings. These ideas persisted into the next millennia; for example, Avicenna, an Uzbek philosopher and physician, sought solutions for the suffocation and movement of the womb. In the twelfth century, came the *Trotula*, a significant text on women's medicine. This book also perpetuated the idea of women's "bodily inferiority," attributing it to their "coldness and humidity" (Bajorek 9), which provided a justification for

why men shall “rule the weaker, that is the woman” (Bajorek 9), reflecting how physiological theories of uncontainability reinforced hierarchical gender relations. These ideas created a connection between hysteria, women’s physiology, and illnesses, which served to undermine and mystify women, therefore “othering” them in patriarchal societies. The behaviour of women was further judged through various (folk) beliefs. On the one hand, theories such as the “maternal theory” in folklore – understood by Oswald Spengler as a “blood feeling” – suggested that the mother’s mental state, thoughts, visions, and imprints could influence the development of her foetus (*The Decline of the West* vol. 2), avoiding joint responsibility for the abnormalities forming on the embryo. On the other hand, hysteria, often seen as a woman’s transformative act into a state of illness, has remained a persistent trope throughout history.

In the Victorian era, menstruating women were often perceived as monstrous and were labelled with hysterical symptoms. In her book titled *Men, Women, and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder*, Joan Busfield explains how people in this period believed that the “differences between men and women were a product of nature not culture” and that “[p]art of being a woman was a tendency to problems of the nerves” (149). She also adds that the Victorians thought “women rather than being in control of themselves were under the control of their biology” (149). These ideas, much like those from ancient times, were connected to the study of bodily fluids. Men, believed to have limited fluids, were thought to be more capable of preserving physical energy that could be transformed into mental energy through willpower, while women were perceived as having unlimited fluids, which supposedly limited their mental and physical capabilities, rendering them weaker and more prone to repression (Busfield 151-2). Busfield concludes that this perspective reveals an obvious biological bias, which she attributes to science ignoring cultural factors (and *vice versa*), and neglecting the fact that there are no evidential direct links between reproductive biology and specific mental states. The Victorians also often marked menstruation as the primary source of female “problems”: described as a *katharsis*-like event since ancient times, it was imagined to serve as a purge where the female body eliminates excess waste and – in Victorian understanding – harmful fluids. The perception of the female body’s uncontainability persisted from the Middle Ages, as seen in works like Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, to modern times, and the ideas of female excess and their need to purge were connected to the concept of the carnival, a time of “inversion of power structures and order . . . [that also] provides images of excess, degradation [and lack]” (Goody, 152).

Carnavalesque, and the Female grotesque

The time of uncontainable fluids, bodies, forms, feasts, excess, gender identities, and inverted structures – the carnival, a time of release and relief – has been present for a long time. As Mikhail Bakhtin describes in his book *Rabelais and His World*, the “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). Others add that the carnival is “opposed to official culture” (Pomorska x), while also being a “very real power struggle” (Holquist xxi). Alex Goody adds that, for Bakhtin, the carnivalesque setting – the “festivities, spectacles and rituals . . . offer a hybridised, excessive, defiling and exuberant inversion of power structures and order” (152) – centres on the “grotesque body [human and social],” which provides images of “procreation, excess, degradation, consumption, expulsion, death [and] abundance” (152), it is “is cosmic and universal” (Bakhtin 318), and, therefore uncontained.

So, while the carnival marks a ritualistic time, where transgression is celebrated and accepted, the grotesque originally has negative connotations, where transgression appears as something fearful. As Bakhtin highlights, in most cases “grotesque images which have either weakened or entirely lost their positive pole, their link with the universal and one world” (48). This is why Goody further notes that for Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque has a “negative aspect, . . . an expression of alienation” (152).

Kayser also observed that during the carnival, “the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid” (Kayser qtd. in Goody 152). Similarly, at the heart of the grotesque is the disappearance of structures, which Goody refers to as “the movement of becoming” (154), and Bakhtin describes as “change,” “renewal” (10), and “the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being” (52). This suggests an unfinished, fluid, and unregulated body, which carries constant transgression within itself and stands in contrast with “the classical body,” which “presents a closing off, a limiting, an individual body from which all protrusions and transgressions which launch a mutation, a new body or new set of corporeal connections are eliminated” (Goody 154). Similarly, to the grotesque, in Bakhtinian terms, the carnival is “hostile to all that [is] immortalised and complete” (Bakhtin 10), but while the latter celebrates acts of breaking out of the contained body, the grotesque embodies such transgressions as something dreadful and threatening.

Goody summarises Bakhtin’s idea of change between states and bodies as follows:

In its realisation of only previously implicit connections between corporeal sites, the grotesque body is a plane of becoming. Such a plane of becoming can, as Bakhtin discusses . . . be reterritorialised – as a marker of otherness, a transgressive pleasure which confirms the power status of the subject who chooses to experience it – but the previous act of deterritorialisation, the mutation of the constants of the organism and subjectification has launched, however transiently, a line of flight out of normalcy and exposed the subject as an epiphenomenon arising from chance confluences (the arresting of the kineticism of desire and the arbitrary attributions of power and domination). (154)

However, in the Bakhtinian sense, the experiences of the grotesque body support current power structures for its fear of transgression, in the Deleuzian understanding of “deterritorialization” transgression means destructuralisation, since the normal subject connects to the abnormal body, which starts a transformation.

In her book titled *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo attempts to reinterpret the grotesque based on the concept’s inherent possibility of embracing rather than vilifying change and fluidity. Specifically, in connection to the gendered aspect of the concept, Russo finds that

Bakhtin’s model of the bodily grotesque . . . leaves a static and universalistic notion of the feminine securely in place. In theories of the grotesque, the etymological starting point that links the grotesque with the grotto-esque, or cave, proceeds quite swiftly to the further identification of the grotto with the womb, and with woman-as-mother. This move – which I have argued previously, in relation to Bakhtin’s dramatic use of the image of the “female, pregnant hag” as the deepest expression of the grotesque – is certainly regressive in both the psychic and the political register. (29)

Russo also argues that the body, as a “prototype for society” and a “reinforcement of social structure, hierarchy and order,” is central to understanding the fear of “temporary loss of boundaries” (58), which McClintock calls an “acute paranoia and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety” (24) about deterritorialization. The female grotesque is therefore relevant, because it can “redefine social frames” (Russo 58) and can potentially

disrupt systems of domination where the “strategy of violent containment” (McClintock 24) would be no longer effective.

Because of the grotesque’s capability to redefine social frames, patriarchal systems have sought to contain women in specific ways. For example, women were made to believe that, while men “exposed themselves” deliberately, it was dangerous for women to make a “spectacle out of oneself” (Russo 53). Another method of containment involved promoting “radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility, while performing femininity” (Russo 53). As Russo explains, “[t]he discourse of the carnivalesque . . . has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system” (54). Similarly to the grotesque, the carnivalesque thus holds the possibility of disrupting existing gender dynamics – a possibility that such feminist thinkers as Russo have incorporated into their reconstructions of the idea of the female grotesque.

Reflecting on previous conceptualisations of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, Russo argues that the predominant, Bakhtinian “structural view of carnival as essentially conservative is both strengthened and enlarged by historical analysis, which tends, of course, to be the political history of domination” (54). She criticises Bakhtin for failing to “acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped” (63). Russo adds that popular myths and imaginations reinforce the perception of the female body as an abject – what Kristeva describes as “the jettisoned object [that] is radically excluded and draws [her] toward the place where meaning collapses . . . on the edge of non-existence and hallucination” (qtd. in Russo 64). She uses the example of the birthing body, which represents a “moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual” (qtd. in Russo 64), a concept she (after Stallybrass and White) calls “displaced abjection” (qtd. in Russo 64). To rewrite the negative myths of the female grotesque body, Russo highlights that it might also “be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty, or to realign the mechanism of desire” (65).

Metamorphoses and Becomings

At the time of the carnival, as previous theorists have noted, change – transformation, metamorphosis, or, “becoming” – is inevitable. The state of being and not being a cohesive entity at the same time, what Deleuze and Guattari call “absolute deterritorializations” (3),

carries the fact that metamorphosis “means the simultaneous birth and disintegration of the subject” (“egyszerre jelentheti a szubjektum születését és annak szétbomlását”; my trans.; Bényei 37). In his discussion of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* Bényei highlights the characters of Sufyan and Chamcha, who discuss two interpretations of the metamorphosis, or the “mutability of the essence of the self” (Rushdie 276), one belonging to Lucretius and the other to Ovid. As Chamcha describes, Lucretius thinks, that “[w]hatever by its changing... breaks out of its limitations, ...[and] by doing so brings immediate death to its old self” (276), while Ovid contrasts him by saying, that although the morphed self “is stamped with new designs and changes shape and seems not still the same, [y]et [it]is indeed the same, even so our souls” (Rushdie 276-77).

Supporting Ovid’s idea, Margaret Hynes offers a feminist (re)reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “lines of flight” and “deterritorialization” – forms of metamorphosis that destabilise “the molar phallogocentric tradition” (6). In particular, Hynes describes “becoming” as a shift from “the rigid molar assemblages of ‘human’ and ‘reason’ towards rhizomatic movements . . . and reterritorializations” (7). In this context, women and animals have been similarly “linked to the body, the Earth, and the chaos that accompanies these” and “[t]his association between women and the chaotic material body has formerly been harnessed as a tool of oppression—materiality that must be bound within form” (7). However, Hynes suggests that it may be reclaimed to create “freeing line[s] of flight” that allow diverse becomings while preserving a core essence of self. As Hynes highlights, “[t]hese becomings testify to the ecofeminist conception of the importance of all beings and ways of existing and destabilize the oppressive binary-machines of the State” (7). She calls these transformative processes “fluid experimentations” (9), which help “understand the need to recognize and respect difference, in the domains of the sexual and species, but also in an infinity of molecular forms” (13). As I will demonstrate, the female characters in the analysed poem and short stories perform such “fluid experimentations” (9) between different species and sexual domains, thereby using the possibility of the female grotesque to blur the boundaries between rigid gender norms and species categories.

“Goblin Market” as a Victorian Predecessor of (Eco)feminist Cautionary Tales

Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” can be interpreted as a precursor to feminist cautionary tales. Although it was written in 1862, Rossetti shifted the traditional moral focus by cautioning against prejudices rather than condemning what was considered at the time as transgressive

female behaviour. The poem tells the story of two maidens, Lizzie and Laura, who encounter goblins when walking near the “brookside rushes” each night (GM line 33). These goblins are depicted as monstrous, male gendered “ugly fair[ies. . . who] have the ability to shape shift [into] whatever . . . animal best reflects [their] beastlike nature” (Shaijan 7). One night, Laura takes up their offer of “orchard fruits” (GM line 3), meaning sexual intercourse, which makes her transgress, and then leaves her wanting more. But the goblins’ cry is only heard by virgin women and the longing makes her sick – which marks her transformation – thus her sister, Lizzie has to go and negotiate with the goblins. She manages to do so only through sexual abuse and harassment – which marks her own transformation. Fortunately, the “squeez’d...goblin pulp and goblin dew” (GM lines 469-70) Lizzie obtains cures Laura, allowing both sisters to have “tender lives” (GM line 547) thereafter.

This narrative, while retaining traditional elements such as (seemingly) cautioning against expressing female sexuality, in fact exempts its protagonists from moral judgement and frees them from the restrictive expectations of the Victorian era by allowing them to undergo sexual transformation and experimentation, ultimately granting them a “tender life.” Through metaphors of monstrous, animal-like mythical creatures and women depicted as both angelic and bestial, Rossetti offers a veiled feminist criticism of the unequal gender norms of the era when women “lived under a tremendous pressure in complying with the social and moral expectations . . . of being chaste, pure and modest” (Watt qtd. in Einarsen 17), while male sexual transgression was accepted. In the poem, both girls are occasionally depicted as bestial or their behaviour is described through animalistic actions. When they are metaphorically morphed into nonhuman forms, Rossetti uses images associated with tenderness and positive values, such as “two pigeons in one nest / [f]olded in each other’s wings” (GM line 184) or “two blossoms on one stem” (GM line 188) or “flakes of new-fall’n snow” (GM line 189). In contrast, during Laura’s period of sickness, she experiences a “sore ache” (GM line 261) in her heart and exhibits monstrous behaviour, sitting up with “passionate yearning, / [when she] gnash’d her teeth for baulk’d desire, and wept” (GM lines 266-7). These shifts between tenderness and monstrosity highlight the tenuous interplay between social expectations and female desire.

Alongside its depiction of monstrous bodies, the poem evokes carnivalesque images, which support the argument that Rossetti implicitly cautions against complying with the era’s expectations and in fact calls for freely experiencing and experimenting with female sexuality. For example, the girls’ presence in “certain public spheres [like the goblin market, is] . . . already transgressive” (Laudrie qtd. in Russo 60) and “quintessentially dangerous” (Turner qtd. in Russo 60), resembling the atmosphere of the carnival. Their spatial placement is similarly

transgressive since they inhabit the liminal space between the safety of domesticity and the uncontained wilderness. The time of transgression is also significant, marked by twilight in the poem, when “the haunts of goblin men” (line 145) occur. Therefore, by contrasting the girls’ depictions with monstrous goblinism and ultimately granting them a redemptive outcome, the poem blurs the Victorian dichotomy between angelic and evil women, creating a non-traditional narrative that challenges the prescribed gender norms of the era.

Sarah Hall’s “Mrs Fox”: An Ecofeminist Contemporary Cautionary Tale

Sarah Hall’s short story “Mrs Fox” is a contemporary cautionary tale that rewrites traditions through an ecofeminist lens. The story follows a couple who, at first glance, appear to live a happy life. The husband seems to be deeply in love with his wife, Sophia, and their relationship is highly sensual, though it “often appears more like an obsession on his part than a mutual companionship” (Ditter 187). They live in the English countryside, on the metaphorical borderland between civilization and nature, much like Rossetti’s characters. One day, Sophia feels sick, so the couple decides to take a walk. Sophia’s sickness is gradually revealed to be the “disease of being human” (Hall 13), and, as I argue, the parallel oppression that affects women, animals, and nature; as a metamorphic solution to the established power dynamics, the story offers a metamorphosis during which the wife transforms into a fox – a process which creates challenges and radical changes in the husband’s life, in his relation to femininity and nature.

Considering its simultaneous treatment of the issues facing women and nature, Hall’s story embodies an ecofeminist perspective, since it replaces “humans . . . as the optimum locus for understanding the social” (Hartigan 7), thus moving away from anthropocentrism through Sophia’s metamorphosis, where her story of performing a process of becoming-woman – meaning a full social construction of a female – turns into a narrative of becoming-animal, which cautions against the repression of our innate desires for freedom and the need to break free from rigid structures, gender and species categories. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “[t]o become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, . . . to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux” (13). As Goody adds, becoming-animal “is not about the singular experience of a subject ‘having’ but a movement across the threshold of the organism

into pure intensity” (162), which is here embodied in the movements and behaviours of Sophia turned into a vixen. The short story’s depiction of crossing “molar assemblages” (Hynes 7) closely parallels the fluid, boundary-transgressing grotesque body of the carnival.

Hall’s story is filled with carnivalesque elements that foreshadow Sophia’s metamorphosis. From the outset, the husband treats Sophia as a desirable object of obsession, which is detectable from the first few paragraphs: “All day at work he looks forward to seeing her . . . He imagines her robe falling off . . . Her form, her essence, a scent of corrupted rose . . . Her waist and hips in the blue skirt; he watches her move” (Hall 7). The fact that the wife is subjected to the husband’s male gaze reflects patriarchal values that position women as objects to be looked at, and defines Sophia’s role as a culturally constructed, female-gendered being. However, Sophia is associated with a corrupted rose, with a “mystery he wants to solve every night” (7), a person who bites and speaks in a voice not her own (7-8), who “dreams subterranean dreams, of forests, dark corridors and burrows, roots and earth” (8). These associations allow the reader to distance her character from the husband’s restrictive perception and they suggest a fluidity, a closer connection and greater balance with nature than her husband, which is one of the reasons why he states that she is “part unknowable” to him (8). Therefore, as Julia Ditter observes, Sophia represents “female bodily identities that become undone and resist being fixed by a patriarchal framework” (189), aligning her with Russo’s concept of the *female grotesque* body. Evoking Giorgio Agamben’s ideas discussed in *The Open: Man and Animal*, that living beings are often excluded from the moral community for being “corrupt in their whole and their parts” (19), Sophia uses this “corruption” as a means to break free. The spatial placement of the characters’ home on the edge of wilderness and civilization mirrors the uncontainability of Sophia’s soul and body, further emphasising her potential for transgression.

The boundary-breaking powers of the female character are viscerally demonstrated in the part of the story that narrates Sophia’s transformation – a process which, from the human, and conspicuously male perspective, appears to be a terrible sickness that already threatens the existing dynamics of their marital life at the first appearance of the wife’s symptoms. “One morning he wakes to find his wife vomiting into the toilet. She is kneeling, retching, but nothing is coming up. . . . Her protruding bones, the wide-open mouth, a clicking sound in her gullet: the scene is disconcerting”, then the next day, “[w]hen he wakes, she is already up, in the bathroom. There is the sound of running water, and under its flow another sound, the low cry of someone expressing injury, a burn, or a cut, a cry like a bird, but wider of throat. Once, twice, he hears it” (9-10). Both instances evoke a monstrous, animalistic imagery and align with the

concept of the grotesque pregnant body, as discussed in Kristeva's analysis of Russo's *The Female Grotesque*. Both highlight the uncontainability and the transgressive nature of Sophia's body, which resists fixed boundaries, social norms, and threatens with disrupting the existing power relations between the husband and the wife.

Since the husband believes Sophia to be sick – a view which suggests that from the perspective of the human and that of the male gaze, female bodily transformations are perceived as something abnormal – they take walk in the hope that the woman will get better, passing “through a gateway onto scrubland” (10), thus entering the physical and metaphoric realm of wilderness, a space of uncontrollable entities, movements, and transformations. Here, Sophia begins “trying to walk away . . . the malaise . . . begins to walk strangely on the tips of her toes, her knees bent, her heels lifted . . . leans forward and in a keen, awkward position begins to run . . . on all fours, lower to earth . . . becoming smaller . . . the red of her hair . . . falling, the red or her fur and her body loosening . . . behind her a sudden, brazen object, white tipped” (11). These lines vividly describe her metamorphosis into a vixen. In light of the husband's previously established obsessive, objectifying attitude and his feeling of being threatened by the signs of animalistic transformation, her becoming-animal is framed as being purged “of the disease of being human” (13) and of being a woman, which “suggests that humanity, rather than animality” and confinement, rather than transformation “is an illness that needs to be cured,” thereby inverts traditional hierarchies between man and woman, humanity and animality (Ditter 194). Through Sophia's metamorphosis, Hall's story thus also negotiates a “post-anthropomorphic approach towards (animal) alterity” (Ditter 195). As Ditter argues, drawing on Luce Irigaray, Sophia's transformation helps “regarding epistemological borders as liminal spaces rather than fixed demarcation lines” and “shifts the focus away from the perception of the border as an instrument of exclusion towards seeing it as a space of communication” (196). From an ecocritical perspective, the narrative emphasises that “we need to think *with* animals instead of *about* them” (201), advocating a relational rather than hierarchical approach to human-animal interactions, which parallels the story's call for a greater balance in the relations between men and women.

The disruptive forces of Sophia's transformation are evident in the reaction of the husband, who cannot comprehend the events. Once he convinces himself that the vixen is, in fact, Sophia, he carries her home – a moment in which, as Hall describes, the husband “bears her like a sacrifice, a forest pieta” (12). This assumes a position where the husband, who embodies patriarchal and anthropocentric norms, understands the event of the transformation as a sacrifice, a loss rather than recognising Sophia's desires, her “lines of flight” toward a more

sustainable existence. At home, reintegrating Sophia into the household prove difficult. The husband becomes anxious to solve the ‘vixen problem,’ and “returns home with medical texts” (15), which reveals a masculine coping mechanism, a reliance on science when encountering an event that cannot be controlled through available means. However, his efforts are futile, since the wife’s metamorphosis is not a problem to be solved but a means of Sophia’s liberation, a solution in itself.

Demonstrating the positive effects of the woman’s liberating transformation, after Sophia’s behavioural changes, roles are handled fluidly in the narrative, and while the vixen is pictured in the domestic sphere, gender roles are often reversed. For example, Hall reconstructs the male-gendered trope of the hunter as Sophia’s “eyes flicker after birds in the garden. Even trapped behind glass, she calculates. The metrics of the hunt” (16), and while capturing a pigeon, she “comes down hard on the helpless flurrying thing” (17). Such acts establish the female character as the predator and subvert the male-gaze into a female or a nonhuman gaze. Conversely, the husband assumes traits traditionally associated with female-gendered victimhood that “he feels . . . strongly” (18), experiencing anger and shame at his loss of dominance: “That she could ever, even before this, be his pet” (17). His “unnatural longing” for intercourse, which cannot be satisfied, evokes Freud’s discussion of Galen’s castrated male, which he likens to the mutated genitalia of a woman (32). To end their struggles, he finally lets the vixen free, feeling “disgusted and ashamed at her animal behaviours, which he perceives as abject and radically other” (Ditter 197). Through the transformation of the woman and the changes it generates in her relationship with her husband, the narrative subverts traditional gender roles as well as the usual dynamics between humans and animals, offering an ecofeminist critique that deconstructs normative social structures and also challenges anthropocentric perspectives.

After the vixen leaves, the husband experiences emotional and physical struggles, which signal the disruption of his former world: his “dreams are anguished, involving machinery and dogs, his own brutality and blood” (17), “He tries to forget. He tries to masturbate. He thinks of others, of partial, depersonalized images, obscenities; he concentrates, but release will not come. Instead, he weeps” (18). These moments reflect his inner turmoil and inability to reconcile what he still considers to be his loss. His eventual solution is to be “comfortable inside one’s sadness . . . This will too, pass. All things tend towards . . . mutability. It is in such mindful moments, when everything is both held and released, that revelation comes” (19). This revelation leads him to cross the human-animal boundary by seeking out the vixen in the nearby forest. On his way, he notices “the spermy smell of blossom” (19), an interesting association of

nature with masculinity since flowers are usually hermaphroditic, carrying the characteristics of both genders, which suppose changes in the husband's perception towards gender-fluidity. When he finds her, he initially believes that "the wilderness has finally untamed her, she is afraid, about to run. But she turns, and pauses. Another step. A backward glance" (19). This suggests that instead of becoming fully animal, which would give him a reason to avoid her, her gaze reassures him of her "essence of self" (Rushdie 276), supporting Ovid's idea, while also replacing subordination with an equal encounter. As John Berger describes "[t]he eyes of an animal when they consider man are attentive and wary . . . [the animal] does not reserve a special look for man" (5) and the "lack of common language, [between human and animal], its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man" (6), making complete connection impossible. In the story, this means that even though Sophia's essence might not have disappeared, their previous relationship is not maintainable.

When paying vixen-Sophia another visit, the husband discovers that his wife's symptoms were of metamorphosis and pregnancy as well. She gave birth, her "belly is pinkish and swollen" (Hall 20), and from her den, four cubs emerge (20), who are technically his babies. Suddenly, "[a] great inspirational feeling lets loose in him. He has sweeping masculine thoughts. He understands his duty. He swears silent oaths to himself and to her: that he will guard this secret protectorate. That he will forego all else. He will, if it comes to it, lie down in front of the diggers before they level this shrine . . . his head is full of gold" (20). These thoughts demonstrate that his mentality and his masculine identity are changeable as they no longer rely on hierarchy, systemic constructions, or gendered assumptions, but adapts to a more fluid role that involves a reciprocal, balanced relationship between both human and animal and man and woman.

To conclude, Sophia's becoming-animal and the husband's change of perspective highlight "the palimpsestuous nature of borders," – which reflects back on the loss of boundaries at the time of the carnival – emphasising how "the topographic, temporal and symbolic layers . . . influence how we perceive the relationship between the human and the non-human worlds" as well as the relationship between men and women (Ditter 201). The narrative encourages a "liminal way of seeing" (Rosello and Wolfe qtd. in Ditter 202) and "form[ing] companionships based on liminal intimacy" (Ditter 202) – themes which align with the ideas promoted by ecocriticism, including the interconnectedness of humans and nature, while also reflecting the ecofeminist call for the reestablishment of (b)order(s) and the acceptance of female otherness – which evokes Russo's positive treatment of the changing *female grotesque* body. Thus, for its reinterpretations of borders, gender roles and social structures, Hall's

narrative is a cautionary tale, warning us against the inflexible treatment of these seemingly set boundaries.

Samantha Hunt's "Beast": Another Ecofeminist Contemporary Cautionary Tale

Samantha Hunt's short story "Beast" is another contemporary ecofeminist narrative that rewrites traditions by replacing prejudices with acceptance towards animals, animality, and female sexuality, while also reconstructing the social as we know it. The story has a female protagonist who is also the narrator. She lives quietly in a countryside cottage with her husband and enjoys reading, which is a key element of the story, since her readings and stories foreshadow future events. As in the girls in the Victorian context of "Goblin Market" and many women in our patriarchal societies today, she feels the need to repress her sexuality and carries the guilt of cheating, unable to admit her sexual desires to her partner. Her act of infidelity serves as a catalyst for transformation, and she turns into a deer, her metamorphosis becoming a powerful tool for understanding her sexuality and her relationships with others, society, and nature.

As the other two narratives, this story also contains elements of the carnivalesque, where boundaries become undone, and multiple markers foreshadow transgression. The protagonist, like Sophia, undergoes a process of becoming-woman and then becoming-animal. Similarly to the other stories, the instance of becoming cautions against the repression of desires, while it also highlights ecofeminist values through the creation of liminal spaces which dissolve the boundaries between humanity and "others," challenging anthropocentric points of view. The story opens with the narrator's tale titled "Good Guy Gets the Chicks," a wordplay suggesting multiple interpretations. While it might initially evoke the idea of a man attracting many women, in the reality portrayed by the story, it is about a good person called Archibald Lepore, who helps his twin sister with her student loans by working multiple jobs, including one at a chicken factory. The play on this homonym shows that Hunt uses ambiguity as a tool to make her readers rethink their understanding of language and its conveyed meanings and values, and it highlights the fact that "language . . . cannot escape from gender" (Holt 51). While reading this story, the narrator lays in bed, "her boobs fall[ing] off to either side as if they are already asleep" (1), which evokes the grotesque imagery of the uncontrollable female body. Shortly after, the narrator notices a tick on her stomach, a "tiny black dot with legs" (3), which is her "third . . . this week" (3). She asks her husband to remove the tick, but he mentions a mailer

about “Lyme Tick Awareness,” which warns that “[t]he sickness is carried in their saliva” (3). The presence of the tick and its saliva thus reinforce the grotesque imagery, symbolising the transgression of bodily boundaries and the spread of sickness through saliva – a bodily fluid often associated with carnivalesque consumption and sexuality.

The narrator also mentions that they live in “a place crawling with deer and mice and ticks” (3), which situates the couple, similarly to the characters in Hall’s story, on a boundary between nature and civilisation, a space rendered liminal through the presence and uncontrollable movements of animals. Later, the narrator reflects on how she met her husband, whom she deeply loved (4), but then she laments that she is not brand-new anymore for they have been “married for almost eleven years” (4). This loss of novelty suggests that their relationship lacks the initial spark, which might be a reason for the woman’s unfaithfulness and arising transformation.

After reflecting on her marriage, the narrator also recalls her relationship with her sister and late brother, who hanged himself, then she asks her husband if he is familiar with “*The Pajama Game*” (5), a musical exploring nightlife, criminality, and adultery, yet again evoking carnivalistic themes. She explains her fear of a song from the musical because in her interpretation it is about dying, which leads the husband to think she is thinking about her own death. However, she states that she “used to say bizarre things even before [her] brother died” (6), rejecting the notion that “suicide is contagious” (6) and hinting at her unique perspective on life: that she does not think death is a necessary part of metamorphosis. This idea opposes what Rushdie mentioned of Lucretius, since the protagonist does not think that breaking out of limitations “brings immediate death” to the old self (276).

As night falls, signalling the time of transgression, the narrator is unable to sleep and senses that “it’s coming” (6), referring to her metamorphosis: her “hands and feet harden into small gloves, the fingers and toes swallowed up by bone . . . [she loses her] opposable thumbs. Next the fur, brown speckled with some white . . . [her] neck sickens and grows . . . feel[s her] tail. . . . [her] face pulls into a tight, hard nose” (7). On another night, the transformation happens again, “panting [her] hooves on [their] bed” (8). Although the reader does not know the cause of her transformations yet, these events can be understood in Bruce Clarke’s terms, who argues that “images of bodily metamorphosis . . . [are] symbols of psychological development” (25), while “the trope of metamorphosis can represent both base and noble forms of intellectual and moral conduct” (26). Based on Clark, the protagonist’s transformation marks a psychological change, namely that she does not want to conform to social norms anymore. This story, similarly to “Mrs Fox”, supports Ovid’s idea, since the protagonist maintains the “essence of

[her]self” (276) throughout the transformation scenes, which is visible via her conscious commentaries of the events.

Her transformation is further contextualized by her stories. In one, she recalls a man named Pete from her childhood, who kept a wild deer as a pet. Pete named the deer after his daughter, Jennifer, and rumours spread about his inappropriate relationships with both the deer and his daughter. Despite the disturbing nature of these rumours, the narrator finds something romantic in the way Pete named the deer after his daughter, “even if it was messed up” (9), explaining her inner beast (as a deer), while she also reveals her desire for nature by liking Pete’s extensive knowledge about “woods and nature” (8). This reflects how her (and Pete’s) repressed desires are intertwined with the grotesque and animalistic.

Reinforcing her connection to transgressive beastliness, the narrator’s unfaithful night is described in visceral detail: “he (Erich) started biting my neck and chest like he was lost in some fever, like he was going to eat me with his lips that were thick and filled with blood” (10). This imagery recalls the Kristevan concept of abject bodies overflowing with uncontainable fluids, and aligns the narrator’s body with sickness and transgression. She later admits, “All my head can think about is what I’ve done and all my body wants is to do it again” (11), which demonstrates the pull of her desires, those “lines of flight” or “lines of becoming” that disrupt the boundaries of the “proper,” self-contained woman. Erich’s statement, “I’d fuck you to death” (11), suggest how death-drive (*Thanatos*) is a recurring element in her transformation. Later Erich sends her a message in which he shares his desire for her “roast beef pussy” (13), which – similarly to the exchange of fluids through the tick – places her body on the bounds of (grotesque) human and the nonhuman.

Although the narrator’s transformation begins as a result of repressed sexuality, resembling the narrative formulas of traditional cautionary tales, the protagonist ultimately finds acceptance, which renders Hunt’s short story into a feminist narrative that calls for rather than warns against embracing one’s sexual desires. Symbolically conveying this message, at the end of the narrative, both the narrator and her husband turn into deer. As the protagonist wakes one night, “[t]here is a deer in [her] bedroom, one besides [her]” (16) – her husband. This shared metamorphosis allows both characters to embrace their sexuality, and as the female deer steps forward, closer to the other deer gathering outside, she feels the “warmth of that many living things . . . their plainness rising up to swallow [her]” (17), and she sees that everyone else has turned into deer. The wife and the husband step forward into this “stream of beasts” (17), which highlights how they turn something that “was once an oppressive association into something liberatory” (Hynes 10). While analysing Deleuze and Guattari,

Hynes points out, that in “multiplicitous groups. . . the loss of the individual is. . . apparent” (12), which shows how once dominated beings turn into a complex mass of liberated beasts.

By transforming an entire community into deer, Hunt creates a narrative that criticises anthropocentrism through an ecofeminist lens, contributing to reconstruct existing societal structures and hierarchies, both between men and women as well as nature and civilisation. By doing so, Hunt encourages us “to recognize that sociality, in its origins and elaborations, begins with nonhumans. We’re late to the game of culture, and it’s time to catch up in our thinking about the social” (Hartigan 6). Ultimately, Hunt’s story invites readers to question social norms and expectations about female sexuality and to also “think anew about nonhumans, where it’s not so much a question of getting *beyond the human* as it is pondering what lies *between us and them*” (10) – spaces that need no boundaries.

Conclusion

As I tried to demonstrate, the analysed works strongly support the ideas of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Val Plumwood states that “[t]he Cartesian separation of the human from the non-human established an epistemological border that is structured by a colonising dynamic, criticised as anthropocentric by both animal studies and ecocriticism” (qtd. in Ditter 188). However, viewing “epistemological borders as liminal spaces rather than fixed demarcation lines shift[s] the focus away from the perception of the border as an instrument of exclusion towards seeing it as a space of communication” (196), pointing at the fact that “Man or *Anthro*” (Hartigan 7) coexists with nonhuman lifeforms through “unspeaking companionship[s]...[that are more] equal” (Berger 6), which undermines the notions of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. Although, as Hartigan adds, “human thought has yet to escape its fundamental dependence on nonhuman life-forms... [and from] select[ing] life-forms totemically” (8), we all know that “the idea of the ‘human’ is under attack by liquid modern realities, losing its categorial integrity” (Schmeik 75). Reflecting such insights, the analysed works contribute to creating a less ego-centric and more eco-centric discourse.

Ecofeminism combines ecocriticism and feminism, highlighting the parallels between the oppression of nature, nonhumans, and women. As Plumwood argues, “[t]he category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature,” including the categories of femininity or indigeneity (Plumwood qtd. in Ditter 188-9). The relationship between nature

and women, however, can also be viewed positively, as a potential source of questioning existing power dynamics. As Douglas Vakoch states, “[a]ccording to cultural ecofeminism, there is an innate connection between women and nature. By positing an inherent tendency of women to be attuned to nature—to care for it, to recognize their interrelationship with it—cultural ecofeminists recognize the value of actions and characteristics typically de-valued by the dominant (patriarchal) culture” (4). Vakoch also adds that “the central claim of ecofeminism [is] that there is a connection between environmental degradation and the subordination of women”, which is why “identifying and fostering liberatory narratives” (11), like Rossetti’s, Hall’s, and Hunt’s stories are crucial.

In conclusion, this paper examined ecofeminist cautionary narratives that challenge the moralising aspects of traditional cautionary tales by liberating their hybrid characters from gender norms and social structures, letting the so-called ‘others’ transgress and create “line of flight” through their metamorphoses – all this without building on the “pedagogy of fear” (Shaijan 8). While nonhumans and women were previously confined to the category of the monstrous due to their transgressive characteristics, these works use elements of the carnivalesque, Russo’s concept of the feminine grotesque, and metamorphoses as tools to free their female protagonists from structural judgement. Rossetti’s poem, as a nineteenth-century precursor of the genre, overwrites Victorian values by letting her protagonists create a “tender life” even after their transgression, thereby normalising female sexuality. Meanwhile, Hall’s and Hunt’s respective short stories construct narratives enacting metamorphoses and processes of becoming-animal to envision a life for their female protagonists which is uncontrolled by patriarchy and to also call for more balanced relations between humans and animals, humanity and animality, civilisation and nature. They both recognise that traditional values need to become undone and the millennia-long systemic repression of interspecies relationships and female sexuality need to be addressed.

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