

Feminist Voices: Women's Short Fiction after 1945

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A normative definition of feminist writing would ignore the great diversity of feminist theorists and writers of fiction concerning the position of women as social beings, discursive subjects, or others beyond representation (Eagleton 1996). Neither patriarchal society and discourses nor feminist responses are monolithic. The pragmatic approach taken here looks at how texts negotiate women's positions in a critical way in various aesthetic forms rather than prescribing in an essentialist manner that a story is only feminist if it presents "woman" in a particular aesthetic form. According to a basic and inclusive, rather than exclusive, definition, feminist texts expose patriarchal discourses and practices that discriminate against and marginalize women, and privilege female characters, perspectives, actions, and discourses. In the light of the feminist canon and the given era, this selection of writers is limited to female authors of post-war publications, bracketing the fact that some male writers take up feminist issues. The following survey roughly groups writers according to the criteria of whether they produce mimetic or non-mimetic fiction, and the time of publication of their texts. The analyses cannot be exhaustive and only cover a few characteristic examples by each writer.

The writers considered fall into three groups, as follows. (1) Irish realism: The Irish authors Mary Beckett, Evelyn Conlon, Edna O'Brien, and Julia O'Faolain tend to write realist stories with occasional forays into satire, farce, and gothic tales. The feminist view of Irish women's private lives and perspectives provides a counterpart to the rich tradition of short stories by male Irish authors. Frequently, the stories are located in rural settings and bemoan women's isolation, exploitation, and repression at the hands of hypocritical men and in the name of stifling religion. (2) From mimetic to non-mimetic fiction: Doris Lessing writes in the tradition of mimetic realism; Fay Weldon in that of mimetic and non-mimetic fiction. Lessing explores the impact of exile, ethnicity, and class on the female psyche in racist southern Africa and in Great Britain in realist and symbolic stories. Fay Weldon exposes female complicity in and rivalry under patriarchy, but also reveals ways to change in realist, satirical, and gothic

stories. (3) Moderate postmodernism: Janice Galloway, Angela Carter, and A.S. Byatt can be called moderate postmodernists. Janice Galloway frequently offers disturbing female perspectives on Scottish lower-class life in fragmentary fiction. Angela Carter and Antonia S. Byatt rewrite patriarchal texts, experimenting with content and form in order to defamiliarize gendered norms. They often interlace references to real-world concepts with elements of fantasy, and employ inter-textual and meta-fictional strategies (Moosmüller 1993: 303, 318, 367).

Irish Realism

Mary Beckett (b. January 28, 1926, in Belfast, Northern Ireland)

Mary Beckett's stories, beginning with "The Excursion" (1980), which won a BBC contest in 1949, set the topic and the tone for much of Irish women's post-war realist fiction, because it portrays a woman's intense suffering from dependence, exploitation, and isolation, with her escapist dreams and her acts of resistance. The protagonist, Eleanor, who has been talked into a "sensible" marriage for financial reasons, finds herself stuck with a man who is as miserly with his words as with his affection and his money. She is reduced to being his servant and farmhand, albeit without pay. Thus, she cannot even go on an excursion to Dublin without asking him, like a child, for money and permission, which she avoids in order not to be humiliated by his denial. Instead, he joins the excursion, and her dreams of improving their relationship are now linked to his new experience instead of hers. When he comes home totally drunk, not having seen anything but a pub in Dublin, she gives vent to her pent-up frustration and gives him a murderous shove that almost lands him in the fire — simultaneously, an image of her duty to create a cozy home and of her burning rage. However, her single and limited act of rebellion will not dissolve their emotional and social paralysis.

A sense of missed opportunities, uselessness, emptiness, and waste also haunts Beckett's other female characters, who are often fettered to listless and unloving husbands. Many of these unhappy women are complicit in their repression, but a few muster the strength and courage to change their lives. In the story "Ruth," an illegitimate daughter leaves her community at her coming of age. The women gossip about her joyless character but also come to see that they enacted the misogynist social censure because they treated the illegitimate girl worse than a dog. In order to save her illegitimate and half-black baby from the orphanage, the eponymous protagonist of the story "Theresa" (1980) keeps her child, marries, and braves both her husband's and the community's racist ridicule.

In several stories, conflicts between Protestants and Catholics threaten women's lives. In "A Belfast Woman" (1980), the Catholic Mrs Harrison looks back on a life of persecution and repeated evictions. As extremist Protestants want to drive her out of her home again, the elderly Mrs Harrison takes her private stance of resistance: she

refuses to leave but also refuses to endorse retaliation by the IRA. Beckett's short-story sequence *A Literary Woman* (1990) changes the setting from lower-middle class in Northern Ireland to middle-class Dublin. Her topics, however, remain the same. Beckett's realistic fiction delves again into women's frustration and alienation, but rarely explores attractive options for women beyond marriage, a fact that limits her criticism of patriarchal society.

Edna O'Brien (h. 1930 in Tuamgraney, Ireland)

Edna O'Brien explores her main topic of female desire in depth, which has given rise to praise, but also to criticism for transgressing norms of decency (Hosmer 2006: 274). O'Brien's women face a social and a psychological conundrum. The author asserts the sexual needs of women within and outside marriage, in the face of the repressive and hypocritical society that is patriarchal and Catholic Ireland. O'Brien maintains that, in contrast to the frequently cited oedipal complex, silence prevails about the daughter's desire for her mother, which can never be fulfilled (Hosmer 2006: 274). Her frequent choice of girls as narrators, witnesses, and protagonists in search of love is of psychological and aesthetic interest because of the drastic difference between the girls' romantic dreams and social reality, rendered with great sensitivity through the double perspectives of the experiencing and the narrating self.

The title story of the collection *A Scandalous Woman* (1974) is told by the ally and confidante of the beautiful Eily. Eily is caught in the act with her lover, who turns away from her when she is pregnant. They are forced to marry in order to make her "an honest woman." Her best friend, the witness and narrator, does not dare to stand by her under harsh social pressure. She registers with a shock that Eily, who gives birth to three children, goes mad under the strain of abuse, and seems to have been brainwashed because she reveals no memory of her painful past. O'Brien's female witness grippingly registers the girls' anxiety under an oppressive atmosphere, and the daring if futile attempt to escape it. The narrator's conclusion mounts a devastating criticism of Ireland: "I thought that ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women" (O'Brien 1984: 265).

The story "A Rose in the Heart of New York" (1978) belies the romantic associations of its title because it begins with a stark and naturalistic description of a woman giving birth to a daughter in impoverished circumstances. Mother and daughter develop a symbiotic relationship: "Her cup was full. Her mother was the cup { . . . } a gigantic sponge, a habitation in which she longed to sink and disappear forever and ever" (389). The daughter despairs when she is sent to a convent school, where a "nun became her new idol" (389), who is then replaced by her husband in a hasty marriage that fails, because she is unable to cope with the separation from her mother. She is haunted by strange dreams, such as "a bowl with her mother's menstrual cloth soaking in it and her sacrilegious idea that if lit it could resemble the heart of Christ" (393). The story focuses on the daughter's illegitimate desire for communion with her

mother. The daughter, who feels abandoned, is haunted by a wish to kill her mother. After her mother's natural death, the daughter finds an envelope with money but no letter. The mother's death and her silence reassert that the daughter's desire can never be fulfilled. The representation of female desire, in an almost naturalist style with disturbing symbolic images, could have served Julia Kristeva as a case study for disruptive feminist writing and goes far beyond O'Brien's predominantly realist prose.

Julia O'Faolain (b. June 6, 1932, in London)

Julia O'Faolain was educated at a convent school in Ireland and has lived for long periods in Italy, France, and the United States. For Lorna Rooks-Hughes, both Edna O'Brien's and Julia O'Faolain's feminist criticism is limited: "although both authors are critical of the power of the Church and patriarchy, their fiction reinstalls the family as an inevitable and defining cultural structure within which women are effectively controlled" (1996: 86). O'Faolain shows sympathy for deviant women, but they are dislocated if they do not accept the identities of wife and mother (Rooks-Hughes 1996: 89). Her foregrounding of, and explicit descriptions of, sexual encounters have met with several critics' censure, whereas others have appreciated the shifting perspectives in her stories (Clandfield 2006: 290, 293). It is true that many, if not most, of her female characters are driven by passion, albeit in the double meaning of sexual desire and suffering. O'Faolain's ambiguous depiction of sexuality invites reflection rather than voyeurism, because her realism is often inflected by irony and a tendency towards the grotesque, farce, and satire.

O'Faolain's monologues by women strongly convey feelings of alienation, isolation, and despair in predominantly realist narratives, which prefer the ordering retrospect to recording the present disturbance in an aesthetic of disruption. The title story of O'Faolain's second collection of short stories, *Man in the Cellar* (1974), unravels her female character's typical double bond: "I was riveted by a resentful passion to one man. I resented his violence, also his having filled my mind with trivia, interrupted my independent life and drawn me into the game of playing house" (28). Since she can no longer bear the abuse and violence from her sadistic Italian husband, the protagonist chains him to a bed in the cellar. The story is written in the form of her letters to Carlo's mother asking her to release him, and to her husband, explaining her position. Her experience is fraught with irony. Having shackled her husband, she does not feel free at all because she has to take more care of him than before. In symbolic terms, the cellar represents her womb, and the chains the umbilical chord and the marriage that bind her to her husband as the potential mother she refuses to become. The story "Oh My Monsters!" (1982) can be read as a companion piece to "Man in the Cellar," because it also presents a woman's reflections on a relationship of love and hate. The story, however, has a different ending. The thirty-five-year-old Anne-Marie, who lives a fast life of pleasure, decides to return to her "monster," the schizoid Sam, rather than to her "normal" sister and the "Furies" of convention. In addition, her monstrous body threatens to overwhelm her: "Mentally I'm wound

around, head between my own legs, eyes and brains swaddled in a monotonous cuntscape" (64). She escapes into dreams: "When I'm woken up I panic" (64). The escape from "normality" does not liberate her from the patriarchal world, but promises indulgence at the price of being punished by her insane lover.

The title story of *Daughters of Passion* (1982) is told from the perspective of Madge, who is on hunger strike in prison. Her reflections waver between associative thoughts of her present suffering from hunger and thirst and a—psychologically less convincing because more coherent—retrospect. Hers is a story about three female Catholic Irish friends, who get "involved" with the IRA. The orphan Madge, who loses her faith and her lover, tries to keep out of politics but assassinates a British Detective Inspector, who threatens to frame her political friend Dizzy and her friend Rosheen's husband, the victimized but abusive Sean. In prison, she is pushed by an IRA agent to claim political status, but drifts, instead, into a vision of her ex-lover, a dream that reveals her personal rather than political motivation. However, the story does not speak out against female political agency, but rather for a more complex consideration of women, politics, and violence.

Evelyn Gonion (b. November 5, 1952, in Rockcorry, Ireland)

Evelyn Conlon is more optimistic than Edna O'Brien and Julia O'Faolain about women's skills to manage their lives, to circumvent conventions if need be, and to develop new perspectives. She counters the silencing of ordinary women's experience in male fiction and history, and "explores everyday life in contemporary Ireland" (Nordin 2006: 56), its minor gratifications, and its discontent. She treats women's plight with both compassion and a sense of humor.

Her story "Telling" has a writers' workshop for women as its setting. A great male Irish writer tells the participants the true story of how a husband abuses and kills his wife who wants to leave him, taking their children with her. The writer offers them the subject matter as raw material because he does not need it, leaving the women smoldering with rage in "a kind of communal choking smothering their voices" (21). The story exemplifies the condescending dismissal by patriarchal institutions and individuals of women's suffering as a topic for serious male fiction, although it is deemed still useful to fledgling women writers for the subject of an exercise. The story "Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour, or And Also, Susan" (2000) explains why women's experience is relegated to the margins by male discourses. The first-person narrator realizes that public events that make the news and become history have nothing to do with her private existence, but rather leave her with "the aching embarrassment of being no one from nowhere" (47). She turns to books for solace but becomes so enraged about their image of women that her emotions gush out of her in a long monologue to her friend Susan: "What they didn't say about us is bad enough until you find out what they did say; yet, bad as that is, there is nothing worse than what they didn't say" (48). She points out that they omit, for example, female desire and agency; the process of giving birth to babies or aborting them. Conlon writes books

about ordinary women, being aware that they cannot be pinned down because "the state of us, it varies so much there is no possibility of describing it" (53).

Conlon's story "Park-going Days" (2000) presents such lower-class women, for whom a simple day of sunshine and gossiping in the park is "a great day," as they remark time and again, just because nothing happens to them and their many children. They take the usual disappointments of being married to their husbands as part of their lot. However, such marginalized ordinary women form the substance of society: "Kathleen sighed. Bridie put her varicose veins on the wheel of the pram. These - the fat, the veins, the sighs—were the shapes of the backbone of the country" (198). Conlon's humor and her reassessment of the importance of ordinary lives could be mistaken as an effort to make light of women's experience and to endorse passivity and resignation, but she also gives examples of women who resist the limitations imposed upon them.

From Mimetic to Non-Mimetic Fiction

Doris Lessing (b. October 22, 1919, Kermanshah, Persia)

Lessing covers a wide range of female characters from various backgrounds in her stories, characters whose experience reveals more similarities than differences. Even if Lessing overtly condemns imperialism in southern Africa, where she mostly grew up, she sometimes reproduces colonial values, such as the dichotomy between African nature and patriarchal white culture (Hanson 1986: 113). Hanson argues that, according to the artist's own distinction, Lessing's style in the African stories is often masculine, highly selective, and abstract, dealing with "the typical rather than the particular event or perception" (1986: 110), as opposed to the indirect female style, "which is concrete, sensuous, and predominantly metaphorical" (1986: 108). Rick Oehling states that her characters "are exiled from the land, from each other, from themselves" (2001: 244); men appropriate the land, and women are alienated by it (Hanson 1986: 111). White women's isolation is multiplied because the problems of gender are compounded by differences of race, class, generation, culture, and the lack of social contact due to the scattering of farms over the vast territory.

In the story "Winter in July" (2003), after years of restless wandering, the competent and versatile Julia meets two half-brothers in South Africa, with whom she lives as if they were siblings. She marries the non-possessive and tolerant Tom, while being more attracted to the quick-witted younger brother, Kenneth. The strong, ageing woman experiences an identity crisis when her husband is absent for three years in the war and Kenneth marries. She realizes that, while her marriage had given her peace and freedom from material concerns, she is "still floating rootlessly, without support; she belonged nowhere" (2003: 230). After having dismissed the option of becoming a mother, the forty-year-old woman asks herself who she is, feeling that she still is a stranger and "a critical ghost" in Africa. Her exile on the arid continent

becomes an allegory of women who have the potential to succeed in life, but are alienated by the hard, competitive world dominated by indifferent men. Julia's sensible marriage, her confusing, submerged "no-man's-land of feeling" (237), her inklings of evil and her flirtation with nihilism and death prefigure the story "To Room Nineteen" (Lessing 2002a): Julia's life could have resembled Susan Rawlings's fate if Julia had had children. Susan, the protagonist of "To Room Nineteen," is privileged because she has married a well-off husband, has nice children and a big house. Soon, the relationship between the insensitive husband and his wife disintegrates. She has given up her job in order to become a perfect mother and housewife, but she feels trapped in family life and tries to be "reasonable," repressing her frustration and her rage about his affairs. Visions of evil haunt her, possibly because of feelings of guilt, repressed jealousy, and aggression, disturbing her sense of sanity and reality. She retreats first into a room of her own in the house, then into an anonymous hotel room in order to feel free, and finally she commits suicide. The story takes the form of an intrusive and omniscient third-person narration, which wavers between detached observation and empathy, then often drifts into the technique of dual voice as if sharing the character's experience. The reason, order, and meaning provided by society no longer make sense to the woman protagonist and erase her as a person. Her suicide is an act of despair but one that establishes her as an agent, ultimately liberating her from patriarchal society.

Lessing's collected stories (2002a, b) castigate male chauvinism ("One off the Shortlist"), hypocrisy, and violence ("Mrs. Fortescue"). They also offer models of female independence and self-reliance ("Our Friend Judith"), liberation from heterosexual relationships by female bonding in a realist story ("The Other Woman"), or a fabulist one, in which a woman literally hands her transformed heart to another woman, rather than "losing" it again to one of the men she is attracted to ("How I Finally Lost My Heart").

Fay Weldon (b. September 22, 1931, in Alvechurch, England)

Fay Weldon is as concerned with moral issues in relationships as Lessing, but is less pessimistic concerning women's ability to cope. Weldon, who does not belittle women's suffering, has a satiric vein that ridicules men's and women's shortcomings alike. She depicts the absurd twists and turns of her characters' lives, but often ends her stories on a conciliatory or even optimistic note. Weldon deals with all sorts of social and sexual forms of private relationships and their psychological impact in mimetic and non-mimetic stories.

Instead of enjoying her leisure time, the "Weekend" (1981) adds to a plain house-wife's chores. Her burden is compounded by providing for her husband's recently divorced friend and his new attractive girlfriend, who serves as a humiliating counter-model and a warning that a lover might replace her as well, if she cannot fulfill her husband's expectations. His voice dominates her submissive and tortured mind. A nervous breakdown is the result of the enormous pressure she experiences. The story

"In the Great War" (Weldon 1985) suggests an alternative solution to female competition for men. In the beginning, a daughter called Enid takes her plain mother's abandonment as a warning and strives to be a winner by displacing a professor's wife. In turn, Enid is abandoned and gives birth to a daughter. However, she is reconciled to and supported by her stepdaughters; she studies and enters a professional career. In recent stories Weldon (1995, 1998) deplores the return to ruthless competition in a post-feminist and individualist era that spurns her feminist ideal of women's solidarity.

In order to depict women's repressed psychological injuries and coping strategies, Weldon resorts to gothic stories, which deal with the subconscious and the return of the repressed, and to monologic narratives that externalize inner conflicts. Ghosts appear as manifestations of women's fears, sufferings, and desires in cyclical plots. The title story of Weldon's first collection, *Watching Me, Watching You* (1981), is about the third wife of a man who has replaced his previous spouses with younger ones. Two ghosts haunt the story, one in the shape of a feminist omniscient and intrusive narrator, the other as the shadow of a hanging woman, the spirit of a previous tenant, who was betrayed by her husband and committed suicide. The young wife manages to break the spell by separating herself from her husband and establishing a bond of solidarity with her two divorced predecessors. Weldon places female insight, agency, and solidarity against victimization by replacement or escaping by suicide. Weldon's monologic narrations form something like female talking cures in the professional setting of psychotherapy or in the confessions imposed upon others in chance encounters. In the narrative "A Gentle Tonic Effect" (1991), an amoral and competitive employee suffers from nightmares, which express her guilt for the neglect of her son and her promotion of a harmful pharmaceutical product, which causes birth defects. The story "Down the Clinical Disco" (Weldon 1991) criticizes the patriarchal imposition of what can be called "heterosexist" norms. A woman, who has been treated for sexual deviance in a mental institute, tells a stranger that the enforcement of offensive heterosexual practices erased her capacity to engage in loving relationships.

Moderate Postmodernism

Janice Galloway (b. 1956 in Saltcoats, Scotland)

Janice Galloway is more experimental and less traditional a writer than Lessing and Weldon. She often records the disturbing inner processes of her female protagonists in fragments that transcend the boundaries of realism, verging on the grotesque and the surreal (McGlynn 2001: 7-10). Galloway's collection *Blood* (1991) provides a frame of two stories about shy girls' embarrassing bodily experience of their first menstruation and molestation. Galloway also presents robust responses to male abuse. A little girl proves not to be afraid of "Fearless" (Galloway 1991), a small but aggressive derelict, who stares and shouts obscenities at her mother. She stares back and

kicks him. While she is told off by her anxious mother, the experience proves to be seminal for her defiant attitude towards aggressive men.

Galloway both draws on and debunks traditional tales. In the sketch "It Was" (1991), an elderly woman has lost her bearings and finds a little face in the dirt, which suddenly turns into her old uncle George. He takes her for a cup of tea but does not know that he is dead. Probably, the kind uncle is a figment of her imagination fed by her loneliness. In "Fair Ellen and the Wanderer Returned" (1991), the wanderer's romantic expectations are disappointed since the woman, who indeed had been waiting for years, finally married, and even if she were widowed, would prefer to be free now.

The collection *Blood* contains several dramatic scenes, which are numbered but disconnected from each other and apparently chosen at random. These dramatic pieces have a defamiliarizing effect on three levels: (1) they frustrate the reader's expectation of a coherent narrative and create an awareness of the art of representation; (2) the scenes with stage directions and explicit authorial comments on characters and the spectators' responses reveal theatrical conventions and prevent the readers' identification with the characters; (3) the scenes depict the performative and theatrical quality of life. We become witnesses of fragments of offensive male gossip in "Scenes from the Life No. 29*. Dianne," the stretching of time in an old woman's solitary existence in "No. 26," or twenty-four hours in the life of a single everyman as a strange pantomime in "Scenes from the Life No. 27: Living In."

Galloway's second collection, *Where You Find It* (1996) also "re-creates her characters' fragmented impressions and moments of realisation, suggesting the elusiveness of love, human warmth, and happiness" (Sanchez Calle 2006: 83). This is a darker collection than her first. The new volume often explores deviant desire and destructive relationships. In the ironically titled story "Valentine," a woman submits to being the sexual object of a callous control freak, a substitute for love, which is formally "celebrated" on Valentine's Day without any corresponding emotion on his side. At the hairdresser's, a female customer is "Waiting for Marylin," a sexy hair stylist whom she desires, but she angrily realizes that Marylin is engaged. In the stories "Bisex" and "Not Flu," a woman struggles with her boyfriend's homosexual contacts and their dire consequences. The monologue "Someone Had To" displays a sadistic father's rising anger about his six-year-old stepdaughter's passive resistance: "STAND UP KIMBERLY curling in a corner NOT EVEN TRYING TO STAND UP just watching while I shook her, I lifted her up put the cigarette onto the skin of the wrist it was MEANT TO BE A LESSON all she needed to was say she was sorry to STOP not knowing when to STOP" (1996: 138). Of course, he himself does not know when to stop and reacts with a shocking incremental repetition of violence.

Angela Carter (h. 1940 in Eastbourne, England
d. February 16, 1992. in London)

Angela Carter also offers sex and violence as key topics, but prefers fantasy and historical fiction to realism and a depiction of contemporary life. Carter won fame by

her retelling of tales with gothic elements. Critics are divided over the question whether she repeats traditional tales and reaffirms gendered norms or rather revises them in a defamiliarizing and feminist way (Benson 2001: 33-7). However, by retelling tales and foregrounding their gendered and sexual dimension, Carter exposes their ideology (Benson 2001: 43-4). She reiterates female desire with a difference in an ambivalent way, which invites both identification with the voyeuristic spectacle of sado-masochism and reflection on its gendered bias and function.

Carter plays upon variations of the story of Beauty and the Beast, in plots full of sex and violence and with surprising turns of plot. In "The Loves of Lady Purple" (1974), the Beauty is the Beast. A puppet master performs a play about an oriental whore, who allegedly turned into a puppet because she was only driven by desire. The puppet master's kiss inadvertently revives the lifesize puppet. She sucks his breath and blood, burns his theater, and leaves for the nearest brothel. The fact that she is a mute puppet, who is animated by her master's "articulating fingers" and his voice, reveals her status as a figment of his imagination and as his other. His reduction of her to an expression of his own desire and fear turns against him when she becomes alive as a man-eating vampire. She frees herself from the strings that attached her to him without escaping her prefigured role. Thus, the story both enacts and takes issue with the patriarchal and orientalist script of the other, because the ending reveals the lure and the danger of reverse colonization by the oriental in the shape of a prostitute that offers risky pleasures for Western male consumption.

In "The Bloody Chamber" (1979), Carter rewrites the tale of Bluebeard with sensationalist scenes of sado-masochism, but reveals "that 'complicated economic, social, and psychological forces contribute to the objectification, fetishization, and violation of women'" (Robin Ann Sheets, qtd in Benson 2001: 39). A young poor piano-player from Paris makes an excellent marriage by marrying the richest man of France, a Marquis. He, however, sadistically "deflowers" her and orders her not to visit his secret chamber while he is away. She discovers the victims of his sadistic murders in the secret, locked torture chamber. The young woman's mother saves her from execution for her transgression. The story enacts and revises gendered scripts. The semi-orphaned teenager at first seems to follow the script of romance, but it turns out that she has consciously sold herself to the Marquis in order to escape poverty. However, she resents his treatment of her as if she were a prostitute. She musters courage and defies him after having had a glimpse of both her own strange desire and his perversion. She survives with female instead of male help, and forms something like a patchwork family with her mother and a blind piano-tuner, who cannot subject her to the possessive male gaze. Carter's self-reflexive voyeurism is an effective strategy for confronting male and female readers with the desires and terror of the misogynist text.

Carter combines the legends of the werewolf with the tale of Little Red-Riding Hood in "The Company of the Wolves" (1979). She transforms Little Red-Riding Hood into a curious and fearless adolescent girl, who sleeps with the werewolf instead of being devoured by the predator. It is remarkable that she has sex with the animal

male in the bed where he has just killed her grandmother, an act that recklessly discards any traditional female role model.

Carter's historical meta-fiction similarly rewrites representations of deviant and marginalized historical characters. Jeanne Duval is the "Black Venus" (1985), whom Baudelaire "saves" from a brothel, only to take her as his mistress and as inspiration for his poetry. Carter shows the erotic and melancholic relationship of two alienated souls. Upon the poet's death, the elderly black woman goes to the West Indies and runs a brothel, which infects bourgeois men with the decadent poet's venereal disease. The process of contagion can be taken as an ironic form of a subversive, bodily revenge of the repressed on a hypocritical, racist, and sexist society. Even if Carter stresses that the black woman has a mind and soul of her own that is beyond the male gaze and grasp, she can only survive by performing a role within the patriarchal economy of desire.

A.S. Byatt (h. August 24, 1936, in Sheffield, England)

A.S. Byatt shares Carter's interest in the body and in inter-textuality, but also attaches importance to inter-mediality. Byatt began her career as an academic and became a full-time writer of fiction in 1983. Her poetic language abounds with aptly chosen words, memorable phrases, precisely rendered sense perceptions, and pertinent metaphors. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner succinctly characterizes the complexity of her fiction: "The solid, visible, tangible world constantly points to realms that are the province of fantasy—hesitation, uncertainty, and ambivalence—and the province of experiment as far as narrative strategies are concerned" (2006: 43). Byatt's self-reflexive fiction focuses on the gendered construction of reality, the rewriting of tales, and the functions of visual art.

"Sugar," the title story of her first collection of stories (1988), provides an insight into Byatt's feminist analysis of verbal representation as fabrication. A female writer tries to find her identity and origin by reconstructing the history of her family. Her memory is as full of scattered impressions and gaps as the reports she receives. The truth is inaccessible because experience itself is already a "storied event, already lived over and over, in imagination and hope, in the invented future." Byatt's story takes its cue from a poem by Goethe, which deploys and undermines the gendered binary system, because it suggests the combination of serious male control and humorous female fabulation, defying the search for original meaning and identity. Quoting Goethe, Byatt foregrounds inter-textuality and renounces any claim to the alleged originality of male authorship, as her first-person narrator does. In Kristevan terms, patriarchal discourse thwarts the representation of women's desire and identity. It is highly symbolic that the narrator's father was a judge, who was interested in evidence and truth, and who denies his wife's claim to truth. Ironically, his daughter has to take recourse to her mother's unreliable tales and myths, which are characterized by a digressive, cyclical structure, and by fabrication; these subvert the masculine power game of linear "truth and consequences." The unreliable female narrator combines

her father's and her mother's fragments and episodes in a complex feminist "confection," marked by uncertainty, process, and possibility, rather than by coherence and truth.

Byatt rewrites tales as Carter does, negotiating generic and gendered conventions. "The Story of the Eldest Princess" (Byatt 1994a) is a meta-fictional tale about a princess, who knows about, and feels trapped in, stories of failure, but who, nevertheless, leaves the path of her given quest in order to pursue one of her own. She passes tests and arrives at the house of an old wise woman, who praises her thus: "You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one. And the special wisdom to recognize that you are under a curse" (66). The oldest princess becomes the wise woman's companion, while her younger sister fulfills the quest and rules the country. Women are successful in various ways: the old, wise and single woman establishes a private space of her own; the oldest princess rewrites gendered scripts and retreats from the heterosexual order; and the youngest princess masters the conventions and rises to a powerful position in the public sphere. The story about the princess is a good example of Byatt's rejection of those traditional tales which imprison female characters in "stories of stopped energies" and "strangling, willed oblivion" (Byatt 1994a: 121).

"The Chinese Lobster" (Byatt 1994b) deals with the gendered production of and response to visual art. A young, anorexic, and depressed art student, who hides her body in "hideous" clothes, spreads faeces on reproductions of Matisse's paintings of women. Her own body is part of her counter-art, a protest against the masculine cult of the voluptuous but mute female body. In opposition to Matisse's depiction of women, she deflects the male gaze from her outward appearance and directs it to what in Kristeva's term could be called the abject. The artist accuses the Distinguished Visiting Professor, who advocates the aestheticist separation of life and art and rejects her work, of sexual harassment. The Dean of Women's Studies, who suffers from her ageing body and depression, understands his aestheticist stance but also feels for the feminist student, whose art is "meant to disgust and desecrate." The academic dandy's aggressive reaction can be explained by the fact that he can cope neither with the criticism of the sexist aesthetics he shares, nor with the (Kristevan) abject as a reminder of the repressed m/other and his own corporeality.

The feminist appropriation of realism is more overtly political than the experimentalist subversion of it. Realist stories invite readers to identify themselves with specific types of patriarchal practice and with forms of women's resistance in their society. However, experimental feminist fiction also takes issue with linear and logocentric patriarchal discourses as inadequate ways of constructing female experience. In both realist and experimental fiction, the (dialogic) female monologue, in the shape of a letter, asymmetric oral communication, or the recording of mental processes, provides a pertinent form for women's central experience of being "alone together" in alienating relationships. The experimental use of fantasy externalizes women's fears and desires, which realist fiction often relegates to women's muted inner lives. Intertextual and self-reflexive fiction defamiliarizes and inverts gendered and generic

conventions that are usually taken for granted. In spite of the devastating criticism of repressive male-dominated relationships, the stories under discussion only provide a few examples of women moving beyond the heterosexual matrix. Some stories offer models of self-reliant single women and female solidarity, but most of the feminist British writers of short fiction would not go as far as Jeanette Winterson's story "The Poetics of Sex" (in *The World and Other Places* (1999)), which endorses lesbianism and satirizes heterosexual prejudice in the shape of rather narrow-minded questions in an interview about lesbian experience.

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