Journal of Literature and Art Studies, October 2026, Vol. 16, No. 10, 810-813
doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2026.10.002

Angela Carter's Metamorphic Narrative in the Context of the Body Politic

YUAN Chenxi
Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Angela Carter's series of rewrites of *Little Red Riding Hood* takes the body as its central field, reorganization gendered power relations through narrative strategies such as bodily metamorphosis. From *The Werewolf, in the Company of Wolves* to *Wolf Alice*, the bodies of the female protagonists in the three works show a progressive trend of "human, developing beastly tendency, completing human bestialization". Based on Foucault's theory of body politics, this paper analyzes how the three short stories rewrite the traditional fairy tales through body deformation, and reveal Carter's critique of patriarchal body politics and her literary practice of constructing a new type of body ethics.

Keywords: Angela Carter, body politics, morphing narrative

Introduction

As a common theme in literature, "metamorphosis" is able to provide a unique perspective on the human condition, which is conducive to breaking away from habitual stereotypes and opening up a space for exploring the nature of existence and the boundaries of identity. Angela Carter's narrative collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* utilizes this theme and reflects deeply on gender relations, power discourse, identity, and desire.

The plot in Carter's fairy tale mainly presents the metamorphosis of the body. Therefore, Carter uses the "transgressive body" to reproduce the "crisis of classification" of Western rational civilization, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the state of life by erasing the intrinsic boundaries of biological categories and spheres (Zhang, 2022, p. 45).

According to Foucault's theory of the body politic, the body is not only an organism in the biological sense, but also a field of social discipline and power operation (Foucault, 1977, p. 29). Through bodily metamorphosis, Carter shapes the body as a weapon of resistance to the discourse of power in response to the crisis of Western rational civilization. Although the three stories in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, are not explicitly framed as a trilogy, they are as such in order to think of them as necessarily linked, "as inextricably intertextualized trilogies" (Lau, 2008, p. 78). The metamorphosis breaks down the traditional categorization

YUAN Chenxi, Current Master's Student, Department of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China.

systems of species, gender, and race, and explores how metamorphosis can be a micro-strategy of resistance to macro power structures.

The Utilization of Disciplinary Power

In *Werewolf*, the Little Red Riding Hood is still characterized as a human woman. Unlike the original story, she "knew the forest too well to be afraid" and was "physically strong" (Carter, 1990, p. 87). The girl's robust physicality and lucid cognition as a human female without the metamorphosis process constitute a form of "transgression". Her action of "holding her father's knife and cutting off the wolf's paw with a vicious swing" (Carter, 1990, p. 87) suggests an active use of tools of violence. This breaks the inevitable association of the female body with weakness and passivity.

Furthermore, she utilizes her intelligence to identify her grandmother, who has turned into a wolf, as a "witch", and attracts the villagers to expel and kill the "wolf grandmother". Foucault suggests that modern society disciplines the individual through "visibility". Those bodily features that do not conform to the dominant norms are labeled as "abnormal" and become objects of exclusion from power. When Grandma is executed by the villagers as a "witch", her body becomes evidence of moral depravity for public judgment. Therefore, the Little Red Riding Hood transforms the collective violence of the villagers into a means of realizing her own will.

However, the image of the werewolf, as a symbol for breaking the boundary between human nature and animal nature, conforms to the characteristics of "being in an uncertain state between humans and animals" and "having a dual identity of both victim and predator" (Reid, 2014, p. 13). In the end, this boundary is broken by Little Red Riding Hood, because after calling on the villagers to execute her grandmother, she naturally inherits her grandmother's position and "lives in her grandmother's house and lives well" (Carter, 1990, p. 87). She absorbs "animalism" under a new mechanism of control. By occupying her grandmother's house, the girl actually becomes the new guardian of this ambiguous space between humans and animals.

The little girl has not transformed into a wolf totally, but her act of replacing her wolf grandmother has conveyed an implicit tendency.

Reconstruction of the Logic of Discipline

The Little Red Riding Hood in *In the Company of Wolves* inherits the usual bravery and resourcefulness of the girl in *Werewolf*, but on the basis of releasing her desires and snatching the subject, she shows an obvious tendency of bestialization and deformation. In the girl's uninhibited imagination, "she would let his intimidating head rest against her thigh, jump the lice out of his fur for him, and perhaps put them in her mouth and eat them as he asked, completing a savage wedding" (Carter, 1990, p. 94). This simulation of the expression of intimacy or desire breaks through the barrier between human beings and beasts, and releases the repressed primitive life force in human society.

According to Foucault, human society achieves control over the body by stigmatizing "wild desire" as an object to be disciplined. Carter's Little Red Riding Hood, on the other hand, transforms the "savagery" rejected by civilization into a means of rebuilding power relations through the actions of "eating lice" and "sleeping between the paws of gentle wolves" relations (Carter, 1990, p. 94). Through this deformed narrative, Carter

triggers a reflection on female desire. "In traditional male texts, sex, as a taboo, is an effective means for the male-centered theorist to maintain his authoritative position in gender relations, embodying the power relations under the patriarchal social order" (Wang & Huang, 2009, p. 92). And the move of advocating the breaking of sexual taboos and boldly exposing the attempts of classical male texts to suppress women' subjective consciousness. When the girl "tore off his shirt and threw it into the fire" (Carter, 1990, p. 94), actively guiding the wolf into physical contact, the power relations changed. The acceptance of her ego's wolfish desires and her autonomous expression of her female body's eroticism make her choices initiatives stemming from her body's instincts.

Meanwhile, in Carter's stories, there are situations where werewolves can turn into humans or humans can turn into wolves. Little Red Riding Hood becomes her own "wolf", taking away the wolf's power. "Carter uses women's sexual desire to deceive the wolf. This can prove that women's writing refers more to their body language or describes the body" (Nouri & Mohammadi, 2015, p. 102). In traditional patriarchal narratives, women's bodies are often seen as fragile, in need of protection or objects of desire. But Carter subverts this. Through the girl's active use of her own sexual charm to "tame" the wolf, she transforms the female body from an object of gaze and discipline to a subject with great power and agency.

Therefore, Little Red Riding Hood sleeps with the wolf, completing the transformation in the spiritual sense, showing a certain animalistic tendency, symbolically "turning" from a girl into a wolf.

The Escape From the Discipline System

At the narrative level, the animalistic tendency in *In the Company of Wolves* contrasts with the physical transformation of *Wolf Alice*. The former realizes spiritual liberation through the symbolic "becoming a wolf", while the latter completes physical escape through the physical "becoming a wolf".

As a human girl, Alice was raised by wolves. Although she has the appearance of a human, her behavior is closer to that of a wolf. She eventually chose to complete her return to her wolf nature after realizing her "human consciousness".

Foucault's statement that "social norms, institutions, knowledge, and discourses construct individual identities, maintain social order, and consolidate power structures by disciplining the body" is verified in *Wolf Alice*. Alice is always in an in-between state of "neither wolf nor woman". She is portrayed by the wolves as "crawling on her hands and knees", "her nose is sharper at night than our eyes are in the daytime", "naked and wild" (Carter, 1990, p. 96). These behaviors are in sharp contradiction with her human body, making her a stranger than civilization can accept. Therefore, the first task of the social powers is to "categorize" and "correct" her.

The nuns began by spatially removing her from her familiar surroundings by taking her from the wilderness into a closed convent space. They forced her to change her body posture, and taught her to identify her own plate in order to establish the concept of individual ownership, forcing her to wear a dress to cover her body. In the communal life of the convent, her behavior and physical state were under constant observation and evaluation. The purpose of this discipline is to transform Alice's "wild" body into a "tamed body" that conforms to social norms.

Alice's handing over to the werewolf duke means that she is transferred from the power field of a "purely human civilization" to a power field that is between man and beast. In the convent, dressing is an obligatory disciplinary act. At the castle, it becomes her autonomous choice. The act of dressing is one of the signs that she begins to integrate her "human" consciousness with her body. At the same time, by observing and interacting with herself in the mirror, she begins to relate her body to the concept of "self". She begins to develop a sense of "who I am". Therefore, the identity of Alice is slowly being formed through bodily practices, rather than being defined by external power.

Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" suggests that individuals construct their self-consciousness through mirror identity, but Alice's act of "recognizing herself in the mirror" is not a sign of a "human self", but rather an identification with a "wolf-like being". She ultimately chooses to lick and comfort the wounded werewolf Duke in the manner of a wolf, and thus her body accomplishes the establishment of subjectivity by detaching itself from humanity and embracing bestiality. This demonstrates the complete bankruptcy of the dominant social power in defining and disciplining her body.

Conclusion

From "utilizing the power of disciplinary power" in *Werewolf*, "reconstructing the logic of regulation" in *In the Company of Wolves*, to "the escaping from discipline System" in *Wolf Alice*, Angela Carter has broken through the "civilized" regulation of women's bodies by embracing the "non-human" bodily experience through her metamorphic narratives of wolf and human. In these works, women were able to conspire with the heterogeneous groups that had been excluded and banished by the rationality of the enlightenment (Chen, 2021, p. 10). The female body becomes a subject of power with an autonomous will. Metamorphosis is no longer a curse of terror, but a means of liberation that breaks through gender boundaries. Therefore, Carter celebrates the nature and the rationality of the body, revealing how "bestiality" inspires women's life potential and their subconscious true selves.

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