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Recommended Citation

Linker, Laura (2011) "'The End of Exile is the End of Being': The Enlightenment and the Death of the Femme Fatale in Angela Carter's 'The Lady of the House of Love'", *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 15 , Article 3. Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol15/iss1/3>

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Cover Page Footnote

Laura Linker is Assistant Professor of English at High Point University, where she teaches British literature, fairy tales, and women's and gender studies courses. She is the author of *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730* (Ashgate 2011). Her blog is lauraleighlinker.wordpress.com

**‘The End of Exile is the End of Being’: The
Enlightenment and the Death of the *Femme Fatale* in
Angela Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love”**

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In a recent article by Katherine Hagopian on Angela Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love,” Hagopian helpfully traces Carter’s allusion to a classical writer, Lucius Apuleis, in her reading of the patriarchal structure governing Carter’s text. While the female vampire’s death appears to endorse phallic values, as Hagopian argues, this article challenges that argument and instead locates Carter’s gothic tale within an earlier context of the Enlightenment, which occurred when the gothic first emerged as a literary mode in the eighteenth century. Peter Gay explains that during the eighteenth century, there was a “decline in mysticism” (6), and “the world...was being emptied of mystery” and superstition (27). While early gothic texts looked back to medieval models and featured virginal and passive heroines and sexualized *femme fatale* figures, Enlightenment philosophy often promoted feminist ideas, rejecting gender stereotypes that placed limits on human freedom. Carter examines these tensions in her gothic tale, which alludes to Voltaire and Enlightenment philosophers’ privileging of reason. She features a female vampire with characteristics of “virtue-in-distress” and dark eroticism, both a victim and killer.

The Lady must confront the destruction of her world and her mortality as she becomes human, literally embracing Enlightenment ideas in the arms of an attractive soldier, unaware that he will both set her free and kill her.

Carter's story interrogates the gothic mode of presenting women in texts in a patriarchal binary, and it charts a clear distinction between reason and superstition as it allegorizes the figure of the Lady, representing superstition, and her unknown British lover, a soldier representing reason and the Enlightenment. Ultimately, his values take over her world, ending it, and while she dies in the end, she is finally freed from the past that traps her into an existence she hates. The story represents the death not only of the Lady but also of the gothic modes of femininity that trap women.

Set just before the first world war, the story recounts the decline of superstition through the Lady's death as she transforms from the "beautiful queen of vampires" (93) to a human through an erotic interlude with the British soldier. By depicting the death of a well-known figure in gothic literature, the *femme fatale*, Carter examines the tensions driving the literary mode that popularized the vampire. Her tale suggests that the vampire persists only so long as superstition does; when that superstition is overcome by reason, the gothic form must—as a literary mode—confront its own mortality. The story thus considers new feminist possibilities in literature and endorses the Enlightenment's privileging of rational choice, which offers women more agency than the gothic typically allows.

Described both as virginal and also "rational" (97), the British soldier with a traveling regiment bicycles through the Carpathians and comes upon a Romanian chateau near a deserted village. The story's Lady, the "Queen of the Damned," is an unwilling vampire who nevertheless represents the gothic mansion where she

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lives; "She herself is a haunted house" (103). Perpetuating the crimes of her ancestors by wooing unsuspecting victims, the Lady kills them without causing them pain, an important way of defining what it means to be human in the text. Caught in "the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires" (97), the Lady reads the same fate on her well-worn Tarot deck over and over again, but the British soldier changes that reading and the pattern of her existence. The narrator associates him with rationality early in the narrative:

He has chosen the most rational mode of transport in the world for his trip round the Carpathians. To ride a bicycle is in itself some protection against superstitious fears, since the bicycle is the product of pure reason applied to motion. Geometry at the service of man! Give me two spheres and a straight line and I will show you how far I can take them. Voltaire himself might have invented the bicycle, since it contributes so much to man's welfare and nothing at all to his bane. Beneficial to the health, it emits no harmful fumes and permits only the most decorous speeds. How can a bicycle ever be an implement of harm? (97)

Though the bicycle was not invented until the nineteenth century, when the vampire became a popular, well-known literary figure, the narrator ties the invention to Voltaire, an eighteenth-century philosopher famous for rational thought and disbelief in superstition. Enlightenment thinkers sought to overcome the darkness of superstition with the light of reason, and Carter's story confronts both worlds.

We expect the soldier to die like all of the Lady's other victims. The narrator tells us that the Lady cannot help killing. Hunger overcomes her. But the narrator also describes a different kind of hunger, the Lady's longing for a different existence, which she achieves through the

soldier's reason and disbelief. His inability to see the Lady as a vampire renders her powerless to kill him. When she sees her cut finger, "her *own* blood" (106), representing new knowledge through the senses, she can no longer kill him. Confronting her mortality, the Lady stares with "awed fascination" (106) at her finger, while the soldier, unknowingly about to perform an "exorcism" (106), staunches her blood by sucking the wound. The soldier—now a bloodsucker—derives no immortal power from this, seeing his action rationally. He performs it to heal her wound more quickly.

The story sets the power of the imagination against disbelief in the world of superstition. The soldier is protected ironically by his own lack of imagination, which "gives heroism to the hero" (104). Superstition and imagination empower the vampire; however, the narrator likens the Lady to a prostitute, a powerless figure, with a "whore's mouth" (101). The allusion recalls Bram Stoker's Lucy in *Dracula* (1897), also a story about killing vampires. Sex kills Carter's Lady, the *femme fatale*, often expunged in early gothic narratives to effect closure, a return to the rational world of known, not supernatural, creatures.

The earliest gothic novelists often featured figures like Carter's Lady. Ann Radcliffe first popularized the gothic novel in the late eighteenth-century, and her novels present *femme fatale* figures linked to dark eroticism. These sexually suggestive characters represent social disruptions and erotic danger to the narrative worlds they inhabit. Consequently, they often die, and like the supernatural elements of Radcliffe's novels, their actions are explained away by the end through reason. Villains, goblins, *femme fatales*, and other gothic characters—all representative types of supernatural evil—are removed from the "good" world of the known.

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Carter draws on this gothic heritage, though she presents two competing worlds that cannot at first “see” the other. The rationalist, the soldier, believes that the Lady suffers physically and mentally but nevertheless “gingerly follows her hysterical imperiousness into the other room” (105) in his desire for the sex she offers. He searches for the “rational” answer to her seeming malady rather than allowing himself to be spooked by the gothic mansion or its deathly maiden. He cannot believe he has literally stepped into a haunted house of vampires, and his disbelief allows him to defeat them.

Despite the comparisons to reason, he does not always trust his eyes, particularly when they compete with what he knows to be true. Seeing is not always believing, and though the Lady’s ancestors’ eyes leer from the hall pictures, they do not dissuade the soldier’s desire to bed the Lady—nor does her presumably ill health. Once the Lady meets the soldier and *sees* what he represents, she recognizes what it means, her own death. When she removes her dark glasses, though she “fumbled the ritual” (105), she symbolically takes the darkness away from her eyes. She shivers, frightened because she predicts death through a well-known superstitious practice, reading the Tarot, which has become a ritual so often performed that the cards start to decompose. Her glasses fall and shatter, and the pieces of glass are what cause the wound in her finger. The sight of blood leads directly to her knowledge of death.

Though he believes the Lady is ill, the soldier appears unaware of her impending death. Ignorant throughout of his own role in her demise, the soldier continues to apply rational explanations to her strange post-coital madness:

Then he padded the boudoir, his mind busy with plans. We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye

specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares. (107)

The soldier reads her “symptoms” as a disease, a “malarial agitation of the bones” (105), still unwilling to concede that the supernatural exists despite the overwhelming evidence presented in her “macabre chamber” (105). He searches for reasons he can acknowledge to support his sensory experiences with the Lady: “he would have said, perhaps, that there *are* some things which, even if they are true, we should not believe possible” (104). Even the Lady’s alteration and disappearance after their sexual encounter cannot make him believe in the supernatural. He will not trust sensory experiences throughout the text when they conflict with what he knows to be true in the rational world, and he arrogantly believes he can cure her, making her into a beautiful, healthy, dark-haired girl. Her rotting Tarot cards “meant nothing to him” (105), and he replaces those cards depicting “a capering skeleton” (101) with ones of happier scenes of young lovers. The comparison sets dying superstitious practice against healthful biology, the urge to reproduce.

Before he can remove the Lady from the decaying gothic castle, however, she dies, looking “far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human” (107). When the soldier is ordered to leave by the crone taking care of the Lady, he returns to the bicycle, the symbol of his rationality. Later, he attempts to revive the Lady by placing her decaying rose--one of Nosferatu’s roses--into a vase of water. A symbol of the Lady, the now dying rose revives, emitting a pungent fragrance. His room is redolent of the roses, and a “monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity,

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their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour" (108) remains. If it affects him, however, we do not know. The rose is presumably discarded or forgotten the next day when he leaves Romania and the realm of the supernatural behind for France and war. What is left of the Lady's body, then, is only her symbol, the rose. Having died, she has entered into a different realm. The soldier's attempt to save the flower yield only a fragrance associated with Nosferatu, the name for a famous depiction of Dracula in a film yet to be produced.

The Lady's death is foreshadowed in the earliest exchange between the soldier and the Lady's keeper:

The old lady unlocked the door, which swung back on melodramatically creaking hinges, and fussily took charge of his bicycle, in spite of his protests. He felt a certain involuntary sinking of the heart to see his beautiful two-wheeled symbol of rationality vanish into the dark entrails of the mansion. (99)

The soldier can feel but cannot "see" the supernatural, not perceiving the darkness outside of the erotic, curious attraction he feels for the Lady. He relies on rational explanations, implicitly disavowing times when he "should" experience fear. Such moments recur throughout the tale, when he is aware of supernatural elements he then disavows, believing them merely dark and gloomy, nothing more. He refuses to experience horror in the way that eighteenth-century gothic characters or their readers often did.

Following Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), an important philosophical foundation for gothic theories of emotion, eighteenth-century gothic readers allowed themselves to experience terror and horror, what Burke describes as the pleasure of sublime experience: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any

delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful..." (36-7) The soldier experiences erotic delight, a kind of sexual "sublime." Burke, whose definition of the sublime is often described in highly erotic language, what Adam Philips calls "erotic empiricism" (xi), argues that "*pain and danger...*are the most powerful of all the passions" (36), and though the soldier does not appear to experience either pain or danger, the gothic context and presence of the Lady communicate this darkness. The soldier feels passion without the burden (or delight) of terror, a power that Burke defines as one that "effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning" (53). At no point does the soldier lose his rational capacity, even in the most extreme circumstance of the Lady's death and disappearance.

The soldier is not entirely immune to gothic affect. He fulfills Burke's definition of curiosity:

The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind, is Curiosity. By curiosity, I mean whatever desire we have for, or whatever pleasure we take in novelty...curiosity blends itself more or less with all our passions (29).

As the soldier first enters the dark castle, he experiences both curiosity and a sense of the uncanny, a feeling attached to gothic experience, where the beholder experiences a vague sense of the supernatural atmosphere. Before the soldier's sense of the uncanny can become terror, however, the feelings are explained and thereby subverted in the text. Not to be dissuaded, the soldier moves through the castle, and "A fundamental disbelief in what he sees before him sustains him" (103).

The soldier's reason separates him from the other creatures of the story, including the Lady, described

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throughout the tale as a bird needing a new song. Though the soldier nearly succumbs at one point to the feelings that approach terror and the Burkean sublime, as “the dark portals of the fatal castle, now fully overcame him” (103), he recovers equanimity. It seems the narrator intrudes in the text to pull him back from the brink of sublime terror: “Had he been a cat, he would have bounced backwards from her hands on four fear-stiffened legs, but he is not a cat: he is a hero” (103). Cats consume birds, as the soldier sexually consumes the Lady, almost literally “swallowed” up in the text when she disappears, leaving behind her symbol of lost virginity, a dying rose plucked from between her thighs. Though she has known many men and killed them, she has not known them sexually. The experience of ecstasy, in earlier periods called a “mini-death” through the belief that ecstasy literally eroded one’s life-force, kills her.

Cats are often associated with dark sexuality, and the narrator tells us that the soldier “is not a cat, he is a hero,” but the soldier symbolically functions as a cat by pouncing sexually on the Lady as a bird of prey, an important distinction later in the story from the lark, a bird symbolizing the day and light. He consumes her darkness, replacing it with light. Described literally as the “light” of reason, the soldier has light eyes and hair, often physical attributes associated with traditional female beauty and the *blazon* tradition in poetry where young virgins have blue eyes and blond hair that cause men to fall in love with them:

...in his youth and strength and blond beauty, in the invisible, even unacknowledged pentacle of his virginity, the young man stepped over the threshold of Nosferatu’s castle and did not shiver in the blast of cold air, as from the mouth of a grave, that

emanated from the lightless, cavernous interior.
(99)

The Lady falls in love with him and the lightness he represents. Her experience of love brings light and death, which is not darkness but a new existence. Unaware of the magic of the pentacle, a five-pointed star that historically acts as a talisman, the soldier does not know about magic. Though “he will learn to shudder in the trenches...this girl cannot make him shudder” (104). Shivering out of fear is an important characteristic of the gothic experience, as it communicates feelings of Burkean terror or (in extreme form) horror. But only human cruelty through war will cause the soldier to fear. The cold air does not raise the hair on his arm or back; the castle’s gloom cannot penetrate his reason. He “does not yet know what there is to be afraid of” (104) and is therefore immune from curses. Liberated from superstition, he does not see potential danger in “the mouth of a grave, that emanated from the lightless, cavernous interior” that is the Lady’s inner self, the dark vaginal cavity he will penetrate and dominate. This space is not gothic doom to him but sexual promise.

His lack of faith in evil was a cornerstone of Enlightenment thought. Voltaire particularly saw human evil as the result of superstitious belief; eradicating those beliefs, he hoped, would lead to less cruelty, less evil, which he ties to the social, not spiritual, realm. As Gay argues, “The evils man is inclined to commit only man is capable of preventing or curing” (172). To Enlightenment thinkers, supernatural evil cannot harm mankind. Voltaire and the Enlightenment *philosophes* believed in an intrinsic goodness inside mankind and the infinite capability of humanity to bring good to the world. This form of Enlightenment “goodness” saves the soldier, invited into otherworldly evil but unwilling to embrace it. The ancestors pictorially represented on

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the wall in the story acknowledge this truth: "All the silver tears fall from the wall with a flimsy tinkle. Her painted ancestors turn away their eyes and grind their fangs" (106). Refusing to see the death of superstition that gives them being and power, they close off their sight, the rational evidence of their demise, and return to their supernatural realm, emotional rage, and violent supernaturalism--what has kept them immortal. They have been responsible for making the Lady and the curse. As a "haunted house," the Lady carries them with her, and "her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes" (103). They also watch her actions: "The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions" (103). Her death will mean their death.

Part of the story's devouring of itself as a gothic form is its overturning of several of traditional gendered tropes. The soldier is the virgin; the "victim," or Lady, is not virtue-in-distress, the traditional gothic heroine, but a blend of the villain and a victim. Her unwilling evil makes her a kind of altered model of the gothic heroine. What is in distress, however, is the gothic form itself. The immortal vampire must face mortality; the form confronts its own demise when faced with the rational character of the soldier, whose death the Lady believes imminent: "this head will fall back, its eyes roll upwards in a spasm you will mistake for that of love and not of death, poor bicyclist" (105). She does not yet know that the death she has read in the Tarot prediction is hers.

The Lady experiences astonishment at the horror of her demise and its relationship to the dark form that crafts her being: "I will vanish in the morning light; I was only an invention of darkness" (107). Burke defines astonishment as a state where "motions are suspended, with some degree of horror...the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (53). She has not believed in her own

death, and that perpetuates her life-in-death state. Once she acknowledges the possibility of her mortality, she dies to her existence, losing her corporeal form as she vanishes into sound rather than sight—a birdsong—fleeing into the light of day.

The story appears to overturn the fairy tale “The Briar Rose” by the Brothers Grimm. Rosamund, the “sleeping beauty,” is cursed by a jealous witch who casts a spell on her to die by pricking her finger. The curse is ameliorated, the sentence lessened to Rosamund and the castle sleeping for one hundred years. Rosamund is eventually saved by a wandering prince, who finds her and the briar-covered castle and climbs inside. He kisses her awake, lifting the curse. Carter’s story appears to reverse Grimms’ version—the kiss in her story is a sexual encounter that leaves the Lady physically dead. Far from “saving” her, in any mortal sense, the soldier makes her a victim. In this way, the soldier and Lady seem the same. Both murder unwillingly—she kills victims brought to her out of hunger, while he unknowingly kills her in his sexual hunger and morbid curiosity. Once she pricks her fingers on the glass, she sleeps with the soldier and then dies to her long, undead existence.

We might see the Lady’s death quite differently. It is a freeing experience, whereby the soldier “would like to take her into his arms and protect her from the ancestors who leer down from the walls” (105). The “end of exile” is the end of a kind of being only, created through a curse from her ancestors. The death to her “old” self turns out to be the death of her nothingness and dark void. Only pain gives her a “real” mortal being. When she pricks her finger, “she cries out, sharp, real” (106). She cannot see herself in the mirror, and the soldier, symbol of Enlightenment rationality, frees her from this awful existence, first making her a live, sexual

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body in the bed, then killing that body to free its spirit. Her exile in the castle and her body together are composed of nothing but gendered stereotypes. Now symbolically represented by a new bird, the “larksong” (106), that awakens the soldier with day, she can escape these stereotypes. Both are freed from darkness and the bed of death:

He got to his feet, coaxed the lark on to his wrist and took it to the window. At first, it exhibited the reluctance for the sky of a long-caged thing, but, when he tossed it up on to the currents of the air, it spread its wings and was up and away into the clear blue bowl of the heavens; he watched its trajectory with a lift of joy in his heart. (106-7)

The soldier—like the prince in “The Briar Rose”—saves her if we see her death to the curse as a means of saving her spirit, a self that cannot get free. Before their encounter, the Lady describes the house’s total silence, its vacuity of sound: “The lark, its chorus done, had long ago fallen silent; no sound but the chink of silver on china” (102). Her china has roses on it, and Carter collapses the Lady with the material object.

In the eighteenth century, women were often compared to china, their reputations and bodies fragile like porcelain. Once broken, they were considered lost. The Lady’s body has similarly become a shell, and the erotic implications of the gendered meanings of “china” in Carter’s text—recalling the eighteenth-century euphemism for sex in “china” and the vogue for owning Chinese objects, *chinoiserie*—emerge in the story as hollow constructions of the Lady, who serves food on cracked china. She is only defined by the beautiful, antique decay of her cracked body-shell, a signifier of a self that has long ago departed, if it ever existed. She is the “cracked mirror [that] does not reflect a presence” (93), only reflecting what she consumes. The elements

of hospitality are served to guests about to become food. She is a vessel of that food and has been watched by “eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors” (93). They curse her to damnation.

The soldier replaces her depression with joy, and she soars away from her cage. Though he is unaware of his own role in “saving” her from an existence as a miserable, undead being in the castle, where she is doomed to wander around voiceless, the soldier helps her to achieve a new being. Unlike earlier versions of the Sleeping Beauty tale, she does not become his wife. He does not take her away physically—except as her symbol, the rose. Instead, she is a spirit now, entirely transformed. It is what she always already was in the text, a voice that is unheard (except to the soldier, who hears the lark’s song as he approaches her closed door) until she can be released from the curse. Like a changed Ovidian character in *The Metamorphoses*, she is remade, though she flies towards freedom rather than away from a predatory male.

Described throughout the text as a bird, with “the fangs and talons of a beast of prey” (104), the Lady becomes a floating signifier, perhaps art and song and life. Even the soldier notices her avian qualities: “He was struck, once again, by the birdlike, predatory claws which tipped her marvellous hands” (103). When she serves the soldier tea, “her fingernails struck carillons from the antique china” (102); these sounds are replaced by birdsong when the soldier frees her. The Lady answers her own question, repeated at intervals in the text, “ ‘Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?’ ” (93). The soldier, though unknowingly, has been the cat in the garden all along. He consumes the bird of prey’s body and sets to singing the Lady’s soul, freed from its cage. The curse is broken, and she is no longer voiceless in a silent world she

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depicts for the soldier—a dead village and a house with a mute keeper. The Lady courts her own demise. She becomes fearful when she reads love and death in the Tarot deck. But she eventually recognizes that the soldier will end the curse when she embraces him. It is her first conscious choice, the choice to live, not a cracked shell used by others, but as a spirit with a voice.

The foremost Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, defined the “Age of Reason” by arguing that mankind is not a machine, as Descartes had imagined, but a free agent, capable of free thought. All along, the Lady has done what others have expected her to do. She is burdened by the past and her exile; she acts in the way that her ancestors and keeper (and the gothic reader) expect her to act. By following the pattern she has always known, she loses herself. The red lips of her mouth and vagina are the same, and she speaks only from the place where others have come before. It is “the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires, for whom all is as it has always been and will be, whose cards always fall in the same pattern” (97) that renders her voiceless. Her ancestors use her cracked, shell-body to feed their need for immortality. She wears her mother’s dress, a symbol of the past and women’s voiceless-ness. Her mother is absent in the text, another “nothingness” tied to feminine identity. By choosing the soldier, the nonbeliever, the Lady chooses to be something, even if the choice means a new existence, a new being without a body. She is pure spirit.

In his famous essay, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), Kant wrote that,

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage

to use one's own mind without another's guidance. *Dare to know! (Sapere aude.)* "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment. (trans. Smith)

The first step for the Lady is self-knowledge, which brings pain: "How can she bear the pain of becoming human?" (106). It is this very pain, however, that sets her free from the evil guidance that curses her with lack of knowledge. Knowledge of mortality frees her, but it also kills her body, aged in its humanity. Pain, Carter suggests, is how we know ourselves. It is how we are human.

Perhaps the most intriguing question that Carter raises in her story is—why overturn these traditions? Why propose the death of the *femme fatale*, the queen of vampires? Each of the stories in the collection *The Bloody Chamber* deals in some way with themes of women and "nothingness," made "nothing" through the masculine abuse of powerless feminine figures. To make a space for more feminist figures, such as the avenging mother who kills Bluebeard in the first and most famous of Carter's stories, "The Bloody Chamber," the author often transforms the most insecure of heroines, those who have not often chosen their fates and lack agency, into new characters. They die, sometimes literally, to a world that will not let them choose their destinies. These figures represent stereotypes about women that have been perpetuated in gothic literature. Through their transformations, Carter makes room for new kinds of heroines in her texts, ones able to determine their fates.

While "The Lady of the House of Love" does not propose alternative feminine types to the *femme fatale*, it does communicate the idea that we should stop creating narratives about women who lack choice over their lives. Carter suggests it is time for new, feminist myths, new identities for women who do not appear as "shipwrecked

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bride[s]" (101) and unwilling victims. As Gay points out, Voltaire and other Enlightenment *philosophes* "were at home with intelligent women" (33). Their philosophies made a new world for them. All of the major Enlightenment philosophers—David Hume and Diderot, among others, found the oppression of women disgusting, "an evil consequence of male dominance" (Gay 34). The soldier is no philosopher, but his character works within the realm of reason. He brings with him, however naively, a new world to the Lady and reason to the realm of superstition. The Lady cannot speak for herself so long as she is tied to superstition. Carter suggests that the *femme fatale* should die; as a type, it has fed upon women's bodies long enough. Women who are fully conscious, free of "fatal" identities, can rely more on their wits than their bodies. They leave behind them traditions that see "woman" as a silent voice, a faceless "nothing" in the mirror.

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