Pode o pássaro cantar apenas a música que conhece?: Gênero como performatividade imposta em *Vampirella*, de Angela Carter

Can the bird sing only the song it knows?: Gender as imposed performativity in Angela Carter's *Vampirella*

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Resumo: A peça de rádio *Vampirella*, escrita por Angela Carter em 1976, relata o encontro de uma condessa vampira com um herói. O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar como Carter trabalha em seu texto a ideia de gênero como uma performatividade imposta e baseada em um sistema opressivo. Para isso, usaremos as teorias da autora expressas em seu ensaio *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978), as concepções de gênero como sistema performativo de Butler (2019) e ideais derivados do feminismo marxista. Analisando as obras do Marquês de Sade, Carter encontra duas possibilidades para as mulheres: a virgem Justine que sente em toda relação um abuso e a profana Juliette que transforma sua sexualidade em tortura, mas nunca satisfaz a si mesma. Concluiremos que Carter promulga uma ideia de que o sistema sexo-gênero estabelece paradigmas sexuais embasados fundamentalmente em uma opressão que impede a construção recíproca do desejo e que a melhor forma de subversão deste sistema é o amor verdadeiro. A Condessa apresentada em *Vampirella* é uma herdeira de paradigmas existenciais criados seus antepassados, mas o afeto que recebe pela primeira vez do herói possibilita que sua existência como tal seja, enfim, terminada, de modo que ela pode ser finalmente livre.

Palavras-chave: Teoria queer. Performatividade. Farmacopornografia. Feminismo marxista. Angela Carter.

Abstract: Written in 1976, Angela Carter's radio play *Vampirella* narrates the encounter between a vampire countess and a hero. The objective of this article is to demonstrate how Carter works in her text with the idea of gender as an imposed performativity which is based off of an oppressive system. In order to do so, we will use the author's theories expressed in her essay *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978), Butler's concepts of gender as a performative system (2019), and ideas derived from Marxist feminism. In analyzing Marquis de Sade's works, Carter unfolds two possibilities for women: the virgin Justine to whom every relation is an abuse and the profane Juliette who transforms her own sexuality into torture, but is never able to satisfy herself. We will come to the conclusion that Carter consolidates an idea that the sex-gender system establishes sexual paradigms fundamentally based off of an oppressive relation which prevents the reciprocal development of desire and that the best way to subvert this system is through true love. *Vampirella*'s Countess is an heir of existentialist paradigms created by her male ancestors, but the affection she receives for the first time from the hero finally allows the end of her existence as such, in a way that she may, at last, be free.

Keywords: Queer theory. Performativity. Pharmacopornography. Marxist feminism. Angela Carter.

Introduction

"Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song..." (Carter, 1997, p. 3). The Countess dwelling on this question marks the first line of *Vampirella*, a radio

play written by Angela Carter in 1976 which depicts the encounter between a Countess and a Hero – a boy who is travelling through Europe in his bycycle. The objective of this article is to demonstrate how *Vampirella* expresses ideas of gender as an imposed system of performativity, making use of texts from the queer theory alongside Carter's essay *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* to defend such thesis. We, furthermore, intend on answering the Countess' wander through arguments provided by Carter in the aforementioned essay: the reciprocal desire, true love, is fundamental in subverting the system and, therefore, making it possible for the bird to sing a different song.

The twentieth century marked the rising of many discussions related to gender studies that ranged from conceptualizations of gender as non-biological sociocultural constructions to ideas that question the phrase "woman" itself. Feminist debates tried to understand and criticize the patriarchy – a system of political, social, cultural, economic, religious, and sexual power, organization, and representation that is built upon the presumed superiority of masculinity of femininity. For this article, two axis of the gender studies will be emphasized: the queer theory debates on gender as a performative system, especially through the works of Judith Butler and Paul Preciado, and the Marxist Feminism's arguments of sexes as systems of class, which is deeply connected to Carter's approach to Feminism and also echoes in the lesbian critique of Monique Wittig.

The final two decades of the century watched the uprising of principles later on known as queer theory, a system of discussions which had come to destabilize prior concepts related to the "sex-gender system", concept developed by Teresa de Lauretis to refer to "the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the conceptual and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes" (Lauretis, 1987, p. 5). Amongst what was deconstructed was the separation between sex and gender, which related the prior to biology and the latter to historical and sociocultural paradigms. Through these lenses, sex would be anatomic whilst gender would be the way the sociocultural environment read such anatomy.

Judith Butler's studies demonstrated how problematic the understanding of gender as a cultural read of a biological sex was, as it affirmed a sexual ontology which is, in fact, created by the culture itself. That means that there is nothing in the anatomy that,

by itself, would lead into a cultural understanding that could determine ways to experience gender; that is to say: there is nothing in femaleness directly related to femininity. In fact, it is the representative and self-representative system itself which produces as one of its effects the idea of a prediscursive sex. Thus, we can understand how anatomical sex does not precede the way gender is read in society, but rather derives from it. That is to say "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 2010, p. 34). Gender is but a system of representation and performativity.

Butler states that gender performativity is different from gender performance: whereas the latter concerns a conscient choice – which often questions the representational system on purpose, such as the drag queens and kings –, the prior is an unconscious process of interpellation "whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary (Lauretis, 1987, p. 12). The self-representation of gender as an interpellation is an idea postulated by Teresa de Lauretis in order to demonstrate how paradigms which are external to the subjects are appropriated in processes of subjectivation marked by fear of abjection; after all, "discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler, 1988, p. 522).

Another epistemological segment that begins to be questioned is the concept of "woman" itself. Monique Wittig's lesbian theory (1992/2022), for example, affirmed that lesbians were not women, as "woman" only exists as a social construct in relation to – and in a submissive role in relation to – the man. Thus, and as supported by Adrienne Rich (1980/2003), part of the Feminist struggle should involve the destruction of the notion of "womanhood" itself, which would be patriarchic by definition, as the identitary claims would derive from paradigms set by the same system it longs to destroy.

These ideals are in consonance with what is known as Marxist feminism, which understands the relations between genders as relations of class, in such a way that the masculine is always superior to the feminine in a patriarchal structure. As the parameters to sex/gender precede the subjects, their concepts as classes are perceived

even in manners that extrapolate the subjectivation: the industry work is more important than the domestic one; strength is more important than care; the Sun is more important than the Moon (it is important to notice how there is nothing of ontologically masculine in the industry, the strength and the Sun, but the system is responsible for creating such relations). Therefore, sex-gender is created before the subjects which, immerged in sociocultural paradigms ruled by it, see themselves forced to perform their existences in determined ways through a process of interpellation that simultaneously causes and is derived by a fear of abjection. Marxist feminist had a major influence in the works of Angela Carter, as will be demonstrated in this article.

A pharmacopornographic take on the Sadeian woman

Angela Carter (1940-1992) was a British author whose oeuvre is deeply marked by a surrealist aesthetic and by discussions on gender. Although she has become mostly well-known for her narrative literature – especially her short-stories –, the author has produced many dramatic works, which were compiled into the posthumous anthology *The Curious Room: collected dramatic works* (1997). She began her literary work in the 1960's, period during which she studied at the University of Bristol and came in contact with texts written by Hume, Descartes and Freud which would highly influence her own writing. In her first works, she focused on poetry and short-stories – her first published story was *The Man Who Loved a Double Bass* (1962). Her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, would be published in 1966.

In 1978, Carter publishes her self-declared polemic essay *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, in which she analyzes the works of Marquis de Sade with emphasis on two characters: Justine and Juliette. Sade's texts were filled with a kind of sexuality deeply rooted in violence, containing explicit scenes of murder, torture, rape, and coprophilia, for example.

Carter's focus on Justine and Juliette is in how opposing the way the characters are created seems: Justine is the holy virgin and Juliette is the torturing whore; Justine is the victim, Juliette is the executioner. In her analysis, Carter echoes the idea of sex-gender as a system of classes, in which Justine occupies the role of the woman and

Juliette tries to take over the role of the man. However, Juliette never succeeds completely in taking over such role.

Paul Preciado (2008/2013) argues that, since the 1950's, culture has entered a pharmacopornographic era. Extrapolating Butler's theories on gender performativity, Preciado argues that , although Butler was not wrong in affirming that gender is socially constructed through a series of performative acts, these acts have reached the cellular level (pharmaco) and are deeply rooted in pornographic representations (pornographic) – thus, the pornographic is intrinsically related to the interpellation proposed by Lauretis.

To say that the sex-gender system has reached cellular levels is to say that, although the anatomy does not precede concepts of gender, these have a real effect on anatomic levels: femininity is also measured by big breasts and masculinity is also measured by big erections. According to Preciado, the development of implants after the Second World War also had an effect on sex/gender: if an arm lost by soldier can be replaced, then an ineffective penis also can. And beyond the effectiveness of the use, sex/gender got to be enhanced: perfectly working breasts and penises could be enhanced, made bigger, made thicker, made harder. Sex/gender could now be produced on an anatomic level. Silicon could make women more women and Viagra could make men more men.

This does not deny the performative theory, but adds to it. It is true that there is no ontology in maleness and femaleness that leads into manhood and womanhood. However, the other way around seems to happen: culturally created concepts of masculinity and femininity move back into the body and reach anatomic level, demanding that those bodies adept themselves to systems of sex/gender up to a cellular level, and there are "pharmacons" that can help: trans people may take hormones to make their gender, women may put on silicon to be better women, men may take Viagra to be "man enough" to hold an erection.

Going back to Carter, the author states that Justine "has committed only one crime and that was an involuntary one; she was born a woman, and, for that, she is ceaselessly punished" (Carter, 2001, p. 39): her womanhood, her being "born a woman" causes her to suffer under a patriarchic power. This could be read as an affirmation to the existence of some sort of ontological femaleness. Nevertheless, when taking into consideration the

aforementioned arguments postulated by Preciado, it may be noticed that there is an inversion in the process: her being born a woman does not precede the culture that reads her as such, it is rather an effect of it. That is to say that the way patriarchy creates the woman as both submissive and being born with a vagina precedes Justine's birth, and from the communion of this made-up femaleness and her existence on an anatomical level derives the oppression she shall permanently suffer.

On the opposing side, Juliette turns herself and her sexuality into procedures of torture, taking over what would be the male role. Conscious of how the system works, Juliette makes herself active in the sexual encounters (as opposed to Justine's passivity), and sees her victims as mere objects. She is, therefore, "a woman who acts according to the precepts and also the practice of a man's world and so she does not suffer. Instead she causes suffering" (ibid., p. 79).

However, Juliette – just like Justine – comes to no real sexual pleasure. Even if she takes on the male behavior, there is something in her – an anatomic level – that is still read as female, and "if her life is also, as is Justine's life, a pilgrimage towards death – for even Juliette must die – in a world governed by god, the king and the law, the trifold masculine symbolism of authority, then Juliette knows better than her sister how useless it is to rebel against fate" (ibid., p. 80). In this way, Carter demonstrates how, to Sade's literature, it is impossible for the woman to find sexual pleasure: whether she is pure and therefore constantly raped or whether she tries to take on the male role, there is something on her that is read as female and, thus, likely to be killed.

Alongside the pharmaceutical industry, the second half of the twentieth century also watched a big development of pornographic filmmaking. Preciado argues that the way these sexual representations reach the culture are also determinant to how men and women are understood in a social level: the man penetrates, active voice; the woman is penetrated, passive voice. As heterosexual as this may sound, Preciado states that these roles are not only related to man-woman relations: in gay pornography, there is the penetrating top and the penetrated bottom. Sex is represented in heterosexual terms, be it between a man and a woman or not. It is also vital to notice another inversion postulated here: it is not the fact that one is a woman that means that one is penetrated; rather, it is the fact that one is penetrated that means that they are a woman. Pornography is also a representational system of power.

These ideas are very similar to what Carter postulated in her essay. In a moment in which the feminist movement was firmly against pornography, Carter argues that it is not ontologically problematic, but that the issue was that it represented men as desiring beings and women as desired objects. This objectification stops women from being allowed to exist sexually as a human being. According to her, "to be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed" (ibid., p. 76-77).

Sexuality is, from this perspective, split into two arguments devoid of life: a desired hole and a desiring dildo. This prescribes a sexual system external to human nature and which makes it impossible for people to experience mutual desire and/or pleasure. It is precisely this class difference represented by desiring being and desired object that Carter sees as a most fundamental impediment to feminine emancipation:

> Sexuality, in this estranged form, becomes a denial of a basis of mutuality, of the acknowledgement of equal rights to exist in the world, from which any durable form of human intercourse can spring. Sexuality, stripped of the idea of free Exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty (ibid., p. 141).

This is Carter's biggest critique to the Sadeian literature: in spite of the author having indeed shed some light over female sexuality – which was virtually ignored in the period during which he lived (1740-1814) –, he did not allow women to have pleasure like men did. Therefore, Sade was not able to reach the great subversion he set out to, due to the fact that it would destroy the patriarchal system which posits him in the role of god and king, of man. He needed to postulate sexuality as a crime because the reciprocal desire would ruin a class system that gives him social power. Thus, the libertine's pleasure would derive from the violence of his sexuality rather than from the sex itself:

> if submission is mutual, then aggression is mutual. Such a partner might prove to the libertine that sexuality is an aspect of being, rather than a crime against being; but the libertine doesn't, after all, want to know that. If the evidence of Sade's ingrained puritanism is that he believes sex in itself to be a crime, and associates its expression with violent crime, the libertine's entire pleasure is the cerebral, not the sensual one, of knowing he is engaging in forbidden activity. [...] The knowledge that sexuality is criminal preserves him from the onslaught of love. If he were not a criminal, he would be forced to abdicate from his

> position as the lord of creation, made in the image of God; his criminality is his excuse, the source of his pride, and of his denial of love. (ibid., p. 146-147).

Overall, Angela Carter states that "woman" and "man" are classes rather than ontological subjects marked by a precultural essence. This "essence" is, in fact, an effect of the system which conceptualizes ideas of maleness and femaleness and *then* projects them onto certain anatomies. Patriarchy is not anatomic, but structural: it does not derive from anatomy; the anatomy is affected by it.

In addition, the author argues that the solution is not to take over the power, hand it over to women. Carter states that "the hangman is god, the king and the law itself; the hangman is the representative of a patriarchal order which is unjust not because such an order specifically oppresses women but because it is oppressive in itself" (ibid., p. 99). Therefore, there is no way for patriarchy to be destroyed if the superior class is to be turned into some sort of "superwoman". God (the king and law) must die, but also "the goddess is dead" (ibid., p. 110).

In conclusion, patriarchy does oppress women – and creates them from a determined perspective –, but the way out is not to replace one sex/gender for another. The best way to destroy it is to develop the possibility of sex as free exchange alongside the mutuality of desire. It is necessary to subvert the pharmacopornographic representation of the sex-gender system. If the pornographic representation can overcome its set paradigms of men as desiring beings versus women as desired objects and make the possibility of true love real, then patriarchy may eventually come to an end and, alongside it, the determined and imposed classes known as "man" and "woman" may fade away as well.

The death of Countess Juliette

One year after her polemic essay (that is, in 1979), Carter publishes *The Bloody Chamber*, a short-story anthology that rereads folk and fairy tales from an aesthetics close feminist horror and which was later known as her masterpiece. The seventh short-story, *The Lady of the House of Love*, was originally published in 1975 and marked the beginning of her dramatic work, as Carter turned the story into a radio play she

named *Vampirella* in 1976, performed by the first time on BBC Radio 3 on July 20th 1976, directed by Glyn Dearman.

The intention of this article is to demonstrate how the Countess in the play represents an ambiguous woman: one that is a symbol created by an inherited tradition but that uses violence as a mode of existence to survive. From the first words the Countess says, it is possible to notice the determinism to her existence, as she wonders: "can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song..." (id., 1997, p. 3).

This, nevertheless, marks not only a set way to be, a set song to sing, but also the thought that another possible path may exist. At that moment, however, the Countess is still obliged to follow the behavior she has inherited from her male tradition. When mentioning her ancestors, she states: "I am compelled to the repetition of their crimes; that is my life. I exist only as a compulsion, a compulsion..." (ibid., p. 3). That is how the Countess is presented: a mere compulsion obliged to follow the parameters set by her ancestors as she wonders if there would be another possibility to her existence.

This definition is very similar to the aforementioned concepts of gender and relations presented by Butler, Preciado, and Carter herself. Echoing the idea that gender is not a choice but rather a compulsory repetition of symbolic acts – "femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (Butler, 1993, p. 232) –, the Countess not only understand that her gendered existence precedes her as a single subject – "my destination chose me before I was born. I exist only as a compulsion to it" (Carter, 1997, p. 16) –, but also that she is doomed to it, despite not wanting these parameters for her own life: when wondering about herself as a vampire who must kill to eat and survive, she affirms: "I am condemned to solitude and dark. I do not mean to hurt you, I do not want to cause you pain. But I am both beauty and the beast, locked up in the fleshly castle of exile and anguish, I cannot help but seek assuage in you my melancholy…" (ibid., p. 15).

Furthermore, Mrs. Beane – a woman responsible for taking care of the girl who moved into the castle after running away from Scotland, where her husband had been executed for necrophagy –, when speaking to the Countess, affirms: "you are the way you are, a necessary creature of nature, and that's the end of it" (ibid., p. 16). This line postulates Mrs. Beane alongside the Countess' ancestors and the regime of power they

represent: the bird cannot learn another song because it is their nature. The idea that the existence is defined by nature echoes the principle of immutability: if she is naturally as such, no change is possible.

This discourse may be analyzed through queer lenses. As Butler (1993, p. 2) states, gender is a "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names"; that is, the idea that gender – or, in the case of *Vampirella*, the Countess' existence as a vampire – is natural (and, thus, unquestionable) is, in fact, an effect of the sex-gender system. That means that the power that creates and regulates gendered experiences – represented by the Countess' ancestors and Mrs. Beane in the play – has as one of its results the direct association between sex/gender and nature.

The critique goes even further, as the Countess' father wonders if she has any existence at all beyond the male inheritance: "does my beautiful daughter sense her father's posthumous presence or is she indeed a portion of myself…" (ibid., p. 9). It is, therefore, clear how this woman, this Countess, is but the repetition of traditional male parameters at the same time as she sees herself bound to certain modes of behavior which she may not like.

In addition, Carter demonstrates how this symbolic existence is presented as utterly beautiful. Part of the way the sex-gender system creates the idea of an immutable sex differentiation is through the illusion that these paradigms are beneficial to all involved. That is the reason why the Countess must be beautiful – after all, beauty is a characteristic associated to women, as Carter herself presents in her opera libretto *Orlando, or the Enigma of the Sexes*: "I consider woman as a beautiful, romantic animal" (ibid., p. 173).

However, as the Countess is so much a woman that she is but the inheritance of male parameters, her beauty is too great to be truly admired: "her beauty was so excessive it seemed like a kind of deformity. […] Her beauty was like a dress too good to be worn, but, poor girl, it was the only one she had" (ibid., p. 10). The fact is that "her beauty is a symptom of her disorder" and "there was about her not one of those touching little imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfection of the human condition" (ibid., p. 11). Her existence, as perfectly feminine as it may seem, is too unreal.

To Carter, it is impossible for the perfect woman to exist. When every prescription is followed, she becomes so beautiful to the male gaze, she loses all her humanity and

becomes but a symbol devoid of true beauty. This impossibility of existence of the perfect one not only echoes the aforementioned need to destroy the myth of the superwoman proposed by Carter, but it is also present in her novel *The Passion of New Eve*, which she wrote during the first half of the 1970's (same period in which she worked on *The Lady of the House of Love* and *Vampirella*) and published in 1977. In the novel, there is the figure of Tristessa, an actress who is the epitome of womanhood, but turns out to have a penis: she had turned herself into the utmost object of her desire. In this way, Carter postulates that the perfect woman does not exist beyond the male gaze.

Furthering her analysis of womanhood as but male desire, there is a conversation between a group of men in *Vampirella* in which a necrophagous character echoes Carter's main statement on *The Sadeian Woman* and makes it explicit that what the patriarchy wants is an object rather than a person: "husbands, let me recommend the last word in conjugal bliss – a corpse. The perfect wife" (ibid., p. 24). When narrating the case of Henri Blot – a real man who had been arrested for necrophilia –, it is stated that the psychiatrics had come to the conclusion that there was no sign of madness in him; the sentence "no evidence of insanity" (ibid., p. 25) is repeated three times, showcasing how to see a dead woman as a possible source of pleasure is a continuous symptom in the patriarchal society: "the shadow of the fatal Count falls across every marriage bed…" (ibid., p. 25). Thus, it is possible to notice Angela Carter's take on womanhood as a masturbatory social construct derived from the patriarchy, as the author would later state in *The Sadeian Woman:*

> In herself, this lovely ghost, this zombie, or woman who has never been completely born a woman, only as a debased cultural idea of a woman, is appreciated only her for decorative value. Final condition of the imaginary prostitute: men would rather have slept with her than sleep with her. She is most arousing as a memory or as a masturbatory fantasy. If she perceives herself as something else, the contradictions of her situation will destroy her (id., 2001, p. 70).

In sequence, there will be the encounter between the Countess and the Hero. In consonance to what Carter would later present in her essay, the Countess affirms: "love, true love, could free me from this treadmill, this dreadful wheel of destiny" (id., 1997, p. 4). It is, at this point, important to recall that, to the author, true love is related to a reciprocal relation that moves past ideas of desiring subject versus desired object and

that these relations are fundamental to the destruction of the unbalanced and oppressive patriarchic system.

Eventually, the Hero comes to the village riding his bicycle – a symbol of geometry and rationality: "to ride a bicycle is in itself some protection against superstitious fears since the bicycle is the product of pure reason applied to motion" (ibid., p. 5) –, which will be left behind when the Countess' servants come for him. When he arrives at the castle, clothes have already been picked up for him as if he was expected: the arrival of the male victim has happened before. This is important as it echoes the idea that man and woman are classes that are not necessarily connected to the sex/gender: as the Countess has inherited all that is male, as she turns her sexuality into torture – for she has men in her castle to drink their blood and kill them –, that is, as she is some sort of Juliette, the other class may be represented by a male figure. In this relation, the Countess is the man who does not want to be so and the Hero is the woman who does not know to be so.

When the Hero and the Countess are together, a cat scratches him, what causes the vampire to fly towards him and suck his blood, unable to stop herself from it. Mrs. Beane warns him that he will no longer flee the castle – it is not the first time a boy is victim of this. In spite of what is expected, the Hero does not allow himself to be seduced by the Countess. Relying on his rationality, he wonders why Mrs. Beane has never cut the Countess' nails as though it could not be related to supernatural factors and also thinks about bringing her to doctors so that they could help her with an illness that forbids her of seeing bright lights and forces her to live at nighttime and dentist who could study how sharp her teeth was.

Finally, the Hero holds the Countess, in a sign of care, which is the first time she ever feels warmth. They fall asleep together, but, when he wakes up, he is holding "only a white lace negligée a little soiled from blood, as it might be from a woman's menses" (ibid., p. 31). When he finds the Countess' dead body, he discovers her uglier, toothless, more human. The love has destroyed the patriarchic paradigms and, thus, her existence and her perfection. She is no longer a woman. Now, she is human.

The Countess' death echoes the idea that true love could demolish a patriarchic system, as Carter would later affirm in *The Sadeian Woman*. In fact, when the Count notices his daughter start to fade away, he wonders "is a millennium of beastliness to

expire upon a kiss?" (ibid., p. 30). According to Carter, yes; true love – as the concept of mutuality of desire – could serve as a weapon against a millennial system. Accordingly, the Countess herself says: "I always knew that love, true love would kill me" (ibid., p. 30). After all, her existence was but conceptional, and this concept – or this *myth*, as Carter would most likely name it – can and should be destroyed: "I existed only… as a symbolic formula. I was a woman, young and beautiful" (ibid., p. 35).

Conclusion

Sex (which is the same thing as gender) is not derived from anatomy, but it exists rather as solely a sociocultural construct. The associations between sex/gender and anatomy are the effect of what Teresa de Lauretis called "sex-gender system", that is, a system that precedes the subjects and then allocates them under determined paradigms. These existential paradigms exert power over the subjects, as gendered existences (or, rather, gender acts) that are seen as in discordance to such parameters create abject subjects.

It is, thus, clear that this performativity gender precedes the empiric subjects and is imposed upon them through systems of power that surround human existence. In Angela Carter's *Vampirella*, these concepts are turned into a metaphor concerning the Countess' existence as a vampire: she is doomed to live in a way she does not want to because she has inherited her male ancestors' paradigms, but she lives on wondering if the bird could sing a different song.

According to Carter, yes, it can. In her essay *The Sadeian Woman* she would later theorize what was already apparent in *Vampirella*: true love – which she understands as the possibility of mutual desire and of relations that are not based on unbalanced classes of "man" and "woman" – could subvert this system and make other forms of existence possible. Gendered existences based on oppressive and unbalanced terms may be real and seem natural, but "there are some things that, even if they are true, we must no believe them" (Carter, 1997, p. 30).

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