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TABLE DES MATIÈRES

MARTINE HENNARD DUTHEIL DE LA ROCHÈRE
La magie des mots étrangers : lire, traduire et réécrire (chez) Angela Carter 11

NEIL FORSYTH
Memories of Angela Carter in Japan 29

MAYAKO MURAI
The Translation and Reception of Angela Carter's Work in Japan 39

ASHLEY RIGGS
Les trois réécritures du « Petit Chaperon rouge » d'Angela Carter en français : tours et détours 57

DORETTE FASOLETTI
« The Erl-King » au croisement des langues et des cultures : quand le Petit Chaperon rouge rencontre le Roi des Aulnes 81

ENRICO MONTI
(Re)Traduire les métaphores d'Angela Carter : les versions italiennes de *The Bloody Chamber* 111

VALERIA GERONTOPOULOS
Echoes of « The Sleeping Beauty » : The Translation and Reception of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* in Russia 137

ANNA KÉRCHY
The Translation and Reception of Angela Carter's Work in Hungary 159

Notes sur les auteurs 175

Publications du CTL 179

The Translation and Reception of Angela Carter's Work in Hungary

Anna Kérchy

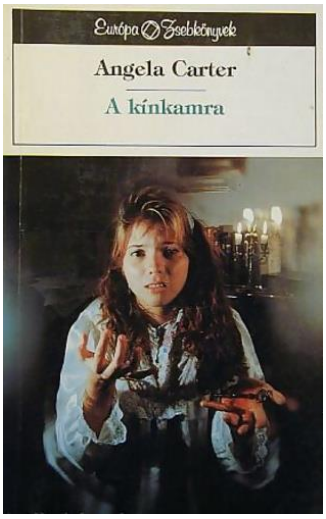
The first and for a long time the only text by Angela Carter available in Hungarian was her collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, translated by Endre Greskovits as *A kínkamra és más történetek* and published in 1993 by the prestigious publishing house Európa in a pocket book series of international bestsellers called Európa Zsebkönyvek. Unfortunately, Carter's seminal work in the « demythologizing business »[1] as a rebellious rewriter of fairy tales went largely unnoticed in Hungary for various reasons.

The Hungarian edition gave prospective readers both visually and verbally the false impression that the short stories belonged to the Gothic horror genre. The cover image (designed by László Pintér) showed a young girl with dishevelled hair, a terrified expression on her face, and blood-soiled hands desperately reaching out towards readers to offer them a key, trembling in the ghastly candlelight as her outlines fade out of focus into the dark background. The title of the Hungarian translation, *A kínkamra és más történetek* (<The Chamber of Pain and Other Stories>), implied fear as a major source of narrative pleasure. The blurb recommended the book for an adult readership who would be « held captive by the supernatural charm of the familiarly unfamiliar fictional universe guiding back to long-forgotten childhoods » after the loss of innocence[2].

This essay was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

[1] Carter, Angela, « Notes from the Front Line », in *Shaking a Leg. Collected Writings*, Penguin, New York, 1998, p. 38.

[2] In fact, Carter's erroneous classification as a horror fiction writer within the Hungarian canon of world literature started with Greskovits's translation of « The Company of Wolves » (« Farkasok társasága »), first published in a collection entitled *Égtájak. Öt Világrész Elbeszélései* (<Cardinal directions. Short stories from five continents>) (dir. László Gy. Horváth, Európa, Budapest, 1987), and categorized in the Hungarian National Library Data Base under the author's name « Stephen King *et al*. ». Although the contributors represented various literary genres and styles, they came to be unified under the aura of the famous master of horror fiction. It is to be noted that Greskovits translated *The Bloody Chamber* the same year as his Hungarian version of King's *Dolores*.



The cover of the Hungarian edition of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories.*
A kínkamra és más történetek, trans. Endre Greskovits, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1993.

Endre Greskovits – renowned for translating into Hungarian as many as ten Salman Rushdie novels as well as other significant postcolonial and postmodern authors ranging from Arundhati Roy and Hanif Kureishi to William Burroughs and Ambrose Bierce – stays remarkably truthful to the source text in so far as he consistently refuses the strategy of domestication to preserve the original plethora of international literary and cultural references instead. He also manages to reproduce the trademark Carterian, subtle, poetic oscillation between different stylistic registers without overwriting the narrative. Contrary to contemporary trends, Greskovits is happy to remain an « invisible translator »[3] rather than an inventor, yet even his simplest solutions, like word-for-word translations, do seem to work well.

However, there is still a distinctively Hungarian interpretation of Carter's tales in translation that results from linguistic and cultural connotations recognized and activated by readers who share the same background knowledge shaping their horizon of expectations. I will mention just a few examples here. The setting of the title story, « The Bloody Chamber », is the Castle of Murder, as the blind piano tuner informs the unfortunate bride: « I thought all these were old wives' tales, chattering of fools, spooks to scare bad children into good behaviour! Yet how could you know, a stranger, that the old name for this place is the Castle of Murder? »[4]. Carter's decadent Breton castle thus nods at Perrault's French tale of *La Barbe bleue* as well as at the German *Das Mordschloss*, a variation on the Bluebeard story collected

[3] Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator's Invisibility*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
[4] Carter, Angela, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Gollancz, London, 1979, p. 33.

in the first edition of the Grimms' *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*. This is conveyed in Hungarian as « Gyilkosvár » (<the Castle of Murder/er>), which clearly deviates from the usual designation of a noble residence in classic fairy tales traditionally called « kastély » (palace, a grand, lavishly ornate, ambitious private settlement in place of a military stronghold fortified against attack with thick walls, battlements, towers). Instead, it evokes an intertext activated by the musical references infiltrating Carter's fiction, which draw attention to the circulation and reception of the tale in European culture : *A kékszakállú herceg vára* (<The Blue-Bearded Duke's Castle>), known in English as *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, a one-act opera composed by Béla Bartók in 1911 with the libretto written by Béla Balázs, inspired by the historical figure of Gilles de Rais and the monstrous protagonist of Perrault's tale, and reimagined as a Hungarian folk ballad antihero. In Bartók's ballad opera cum mystery play the castle is an allegorical representation of the troubled male soul where the secret chambers – including a torture chamber, an armoury, a treasury, a secret garden, a bright empire, a lake of tears, and a final seventh room housing his former wives who look after all the other rooms and whom Judit joins crowned « silent Queen of the Night » as a result of her inquisitiveness – symbolize the pains inflicted on « poor Bluebeard » by the intimate encounter with, and the erotic appeal of women who all disappoint him and doom him to solitude.[5] The opera's psychological dimension – foregrounded in the prologue in prose performed by a bard from ancient times chanting about « the stage outside and inside » and thematized by the disharmonic music, the uncertain tonalities, and the night themes at the beginning and the end which mediate psychic struggles – is both echoed and considerably challenged by Carter's take on the same theme. Bartók és Balázs's understanding attitude towards masculine aggression as a compensatory mechanism coupled with a rather disturbing victim blaming[6] is sharply contrasted by Carter's feminist rewrite that takes sides with the more « women-

[5] After Balázs wrote the libretto he first invited Kodály to set his text to music, however, eventually this story of passion and betrayal came to entice the imagination of Bartók, who felt tormented by lovesickness just at that time as his amorous advances and marriage proposal have been rejected by violinist Stefi Geyer. Bartók dedicated his first violin concerto to Stefi and on their breakup sent the only manuscript to her as a farewell gift she never performed and kept locked away among her papers up until the end of her life when she sold them to cover her medical expenses.

[6] As Carl S. Leafstedt points out, a universal truth to Balázs, Bartók, and their circle is that « the total knowledge of a man's soul by a woman is possible but only at the cost of their mutual love (and her life or freedom). » Judit's courage lies in her awareness and disregard of the dangers lurking ahead, her acceptance of the possibility of her becoming a victim, as her words after the opening of fifth door attest, evoking the Hungarian folk tale hero's familiar formula when facing the Unknown: « Életemre, halálomra » or « Egy életem, egy halálom » (< Be it my life or death, Bluebeard/ Open the last two doors. >) Leafstedt, Carl S., *Inside Bluebeard's Castle : Music and Drama in Béla Bartók's Opera,* Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p.48.

friendly » Grimm folktales instead of misogynist classic versions[7] to celebrate sisterly solidarity, mother-daughter bonds, and female empowerment by revolt, revenge, and epistemic curiosity.

A less explicit but equally significant Hungarian twin-text of *The Bloody Chamber* is a set of dark and disturbing fantasies for adults known as *Mesék, amelyek rosszul végződnek* (<Tales with Unhappy Endings>) authored in 1908 by Géza Csáth (né József Brenner), a Vojvodina Hungarian writer, musicologist, and psychiatrist famed for founding his creative art on the study of madness, including his own, as well as his troubled life, his opium addiction, uxoricide and eventual suicide. After the first English edition of Csáth's quirky tales (*The Magician's Garden and Other Stories*, 1980) in 1983, Penguin reprinted the collection as *Opium & Other Stories* with a preface by Angela Carter who praised Csáth's « extraordinary, uneasy mixture of sentimentality, sadism, and sexual repression »[8]. Csáth and Carter have a lot in common : both are iconoclasts, fabulist provocateurs, who systematically confuse the hallucinatory nightmarish with the fantastic fairy-tale like, and make protagonists meet their curious destiny on the mundane road they took to avoid it.

The erotic charge of Carter's tales also resonates with the bawdy Transylvanian (*székely*) folk tales' titillating intent, save for the feminist subtext that not only lacks a precedent in Hungarian folklore tradition but also falls short of the appropriate analytical frame at the time of the publication of the *Kínkamra* volume, given that the early 1990s marked only the gradual awakening of feminist thought in Hungarian academic scholarship and popular culture shaped public consciousness alike[9]. It is difficult to trace Carter's influence on Hungarian literature, even though a recent current of fairy tales by contemporary women writers treat the theme of love and desire from a boldly revisionary, poetically melancholic, playfully postmodernist, and a libertarian yet sensitive feminist perspective reminiscent of her work. Fundamentally subverting the idealized happily-ever-after plotline, intimate interpersonal relations are loaded with feelings of rage, loss and isolation resulting from the inherent metamorphic quality of human identity in stories which have been

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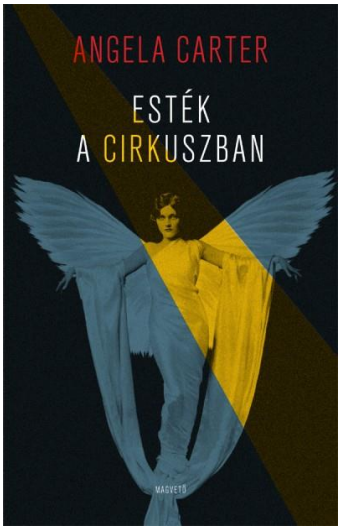
[7] See « Looking Through the Keyhole of Culture, or the Moral Function of Curiosity: From <La Barble bleu> to <Bluebeard > and <The Bloody Chamber> in Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Martine, *Reading, Translating, Rewriting : Angela Carter's Translational Poetics*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2013, pp. 109-157.

[8] Csáth, Géza, *Opium & Other Stories* (*Writing from the Other Europe* series), preface by Angela Carter, Penguin, London, 1983.

[9] Susanna Clapp's insightful memoir inspired by postcards sent to her by her friend Carter includes a card belatedly sent from Hungary and featuring five dolls which hold exciting gender ideological implications teased out by Clapp as follows: the dolls' « bodies are too rigid to be saucy and too adult to be petted; they are showcases of femininity, made-up versions of the sex that makes itself up » (Clapp, Susanna, *A Card from Angela Carter*, Bloomsbury, London, 2012, p. 13).

canonized as new Hungarian children's literature despite their adult contents, such as folklorist, fairy-tale-therapist Ildikó Boldizsár's[10] *Boszorkányos mesék* (<Witchy tales>), Petra Finy's *Szívmadár* (<Heartbird>), or Zsuzsa Tamás's *Macska Királylány* (<Cat Princess>), decorated by the marvellous illustrations of Katalin Szegedi, Blanka Radnóti, and Kinga Rófusz respectively.

Finally, in 2012 another Carter translation came to delight the Hungarian reading public : *Nights at the Circus* was adapted as « Esték a cirkuszban » (<Evenings at the Circus>)[11] by Tamás Bényei, an outstanding professor of English literature thoroughly familiar with Carter's work as a scholar, critic, teacher and translator alike.



The cover of the Hungarian edition of *Nights at the Circus.*
Esték a cirkuszban, trans. Tamás Bényei, Magvető, Budapest, 2011

Although the sublime sylph figure on the cover of the Hungarian edition failed to capture the protagonist winged giantess aerialist Fevvers' ambiguity fusing the ethereal and the vulgar, the translation managed to fulfil the challenging task of finding a Hungarian equivalent for Fevvers' polyphonic voice, a carnivalesque mixture of different discursive registers ranging from Cockney rhyming slang to tongue-in-cheek high cultural refinement. In finding this

[10] Ildikó Boldizsár is most well known for her bibliotherapeutical method called « Metamorphoses Fairy-tale Therapy » that uses the ritualistic powers of ancient folk wisdom encapsulated in the enduring form of the fairy tale for preventive and regenerative psychotherapeutic purposes ranging from healing storytelling sessions at children's hospitals to training in emotional intelligence, self-awareness and crisis-management for adults in need. See my review in *Marvels & Tales. Journal of Fairy Tale Studies*, 28.1, Spring 2014, p. 199-203.

[11] Erin Morgenstern's 2011 fantasy novel *The Night Circus* was published in Hungarian as « Éjszakai Cirkusz » (<The Night Circus>) (Budapest: Libri, 2012) in the same year as Carter's novel, therefore the choice of the word *evenings* instead of *nights* might have been a decision on the part of the publisher to avoid the confusion of the two titles.

voice, Bényei claims to have gained inspiration from modernist authors Ferenc Molnár and Ernő Szép's tragically burlesque fairground trickster figures as well as from the Hungarian translation of G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion* whose heroine, a bedraggled flower girl Eliza Doolittle, originates from a social milieu and performs a self-stylization similar to Fevvers'[12]. Bényei's rendering of the novel's very first sentence, comprising the tall-tale teller Cockney Venus' in-medias-res exclamation, neatly reflects the skilful combination of ribaldry, roguishness, glamour, and *double entendre* that attributes the unique charm to Fevvers' « female grotesque »[13] voice. The original « Lor'love you, sir ! » reads in Hungarian as « Az Isten szerelmére, ne izéljen már az úr ! »[14] meaning « For the love of God, don't *do this stuff*, Mister ! » However, the slang expletive verb *izél*, ie. « do stuff », holds an impressive array of possible connotations. It is an « empty phrase » often used to euphemistically replace taboo words (related to copulation, defecation, or other unnameable acts), a discursive erasure or an ironic self-silencing that might equally signal politeness, forgetfulness, dissatisfaction, surprise or teasing on the part of the speaker and can also refer to irritation caused by the cognitive confusion of the listener. So Fevvers' cry might just as well denote « Don't be so silly/slow witted! », « Don't mess/argue with me ! », « Don't misunderstand me ! », « Don't waste my time ! », or « Don't fuck (with) me ! », in a line cunningly con/fusing the sacred (« love of God ») and the profane (« do stuff ») to fatally arouse the curiosity of her perplexed interviewer, Walser, who eventually has no other choice but join her on those nights at the circus. I believe that this minor instance of creative transformation perfectly illustrates both Walter Benjamin's claim about how the original « text bears in itself all possible translations and gets richer with each additional reading-rewriting »[15] and Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère's insistence upon « the agency of the translator as mediator and re-creator »[16].

Since Carter is not an easy read in Hungarian either, no wonder in-depth discussions of her work have mostly taken place so far in university literature courses and academic scholarship that undertook to explore various aspects of her fictional writing such as feminist

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[12] Szalóki, Zsuzsanna, « A mágikus realizmus találkozása a cirkusszal » (<When magic realism meets the circus. Tamás Bényei interviewed by Eszter Ureczky>), in *Kulter.hu*, (consulted 26.03.2012.) : http://kulter.hu/2012/03/a-magikus-realizmus-talalkozasa-a-cirkusszal/.

[13] Russo, Mary, *The Female Grotesque* : *Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Routledge, New York, 1994.

[14] The full sentence reads as « "Lor'love you, sir!" Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. » in Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 7. « Az Isten szerelmére, ne izéljen már az úr! – Fevvers hangja olyan öblösen zengett, mint egy lecsapódó kukafedél. » in Carter, Angela, *Esték a cirkuszban*, trans. Tamás Bényei, Magvető, Budapest, 2011, p. 7.

[15] Benjamin, Walter, « The Task of the Translator » trans. Harry Zohn, in *The Translation Studies Reader* (dir. Lawrence Venuti), Routledge, London, 2005, p. 17.

[16] Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Martine, *Reading, Translating*, *Rewriting : Angela Carter's Translational Poetics*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2013, p. 3-4.

revision, the narrative poetics of postmodern metafiction[17], magical realism[18], autobiografiction and identity politics[19], cultural criticism and deconstruction[20]. Carter's enthusiastic travel to Hungary went nearly unrecorded: on the back of a postcard representing a row of old-fashioned dolls sent to Susanna Clapp in the summer of 1989, Carter wrote in blue-biro : « Budapest is *bliss*, *bliss*, *bliss*. So much so that I never got to post any letters ». She subsequently added in black ink : « I found this among my souvenirs & thought I'd post it off, anyway. »[21] A decade later, an initial important impetus of Hungarian Carter studies was provided by her biographer Lorna Sage's 1997 visit to the University of Debrecen, and the plenary lecture she gave on « The Legacy and Impact of Angela Carter » at the 4th conference of the European Society for the Study of English (*ESSE*). Recently a renewed interest in Carter's work seems to have been sparked by the translation of her novel, as numerous Hungarian online forums, literary polls[22] and critiques attest.

János Kass, (1927) « Judit és a herceg » *A kékszakállú herceg vára sorozat*. (<Judit and the Duke from *The Blue-Bearded Duke's Castle* Series>)

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[18] Bényei Tamás, *Apokrif Iratok. Mágikus realista regényekről* (<Apocryphal Writings. On Magic Realist Novels>), Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 1997.
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[20] Sándor, Bea, « *Privilégium és átok ». Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter és a kultúrakritika.* (<« Privilege and Curse. » Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, and Cultural Criticism>) Anonymus, Budapest, 2009.
[21] Clapp, Susanna, *A Card from Angela Carter*, Bloomsbury, London, 2012, p. 12.
[22] *Esték a cirkuszban* was ranked fifth on the 2011 world literature top list of the popular Hungarian weekly political, cultural journal *Magyar Narancs*.

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