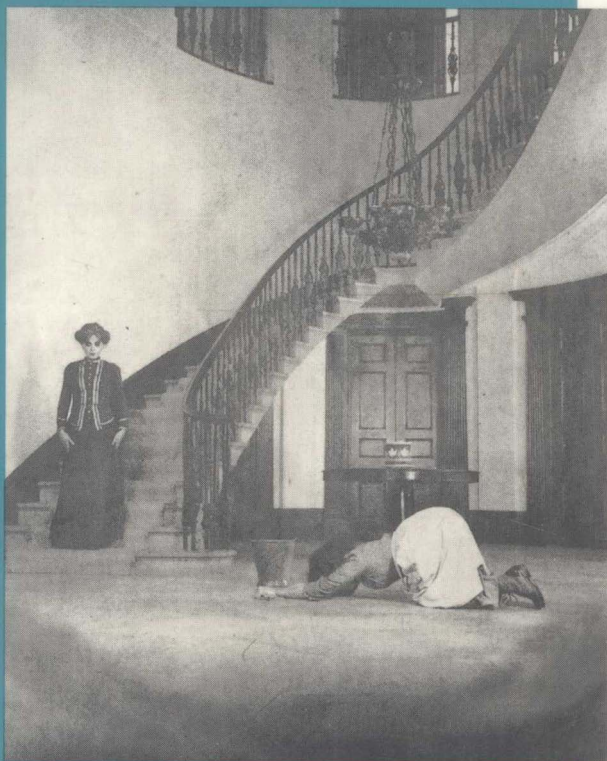


Anne Koenen

Visions of Doom, Plots of Power

*The Fantastic in
Anglo-American
Women's Literature*



Leipziger Schriften zur Kultur-,
Literatur-, Sprach- und
Übersetzungswissenschaft

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**The Fantastic in Anglo-American
Women's Literature**

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For my parents

Katharina and Erich Koenen

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I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was told as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as women wear it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.

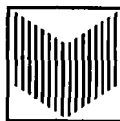
Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

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INTRODUCTION

Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always knew, made of cardboard. [...] As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them.

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)

Female vampires prowl the streets at night, spreading terror; suburban housewives have tender affairs with monsters and happily leave the earth on alien spaceships; ostensibly occupied with needlework, grandmothers and spinsters work to overthrow a dystopian patriarchy by creating a woman's language.¹

These briefly sketched plots reveal the potential of the fantastic as an escape from the restrictions of realism, imposed by the laws of probability and verisimilitude which Joanna Russ satirized as a choice between marriage, madness, and death for the female protagonist. I demonstrate that, beyond fantasy's potential for more versatile plots, a special affinity exists between women's writing and fantasy as a literary mode. In contrast to realism, the fantastic purposely and consciously violates verisimilitude and describes realities which have been excluded from hegemonic constructions of reality as non-existent, as impossibilities in a supposedly natural order. Like the fantastic, the experiences and literary representations of women - white women and, to an even larger extent, women of color - have been silenced in white patriarchal discourses.² Fantasy exposes the constructedness of "their world" and subverts totalizing interpretations in the juxtaposition with the articulation of the repressed.

The Greek term "phantastikos" means "that which is presented to the mind, made visible, visionary, unreal."³ In the debate about definition and function of the fantastic, two of these aspects constantly recur: the status of fantasy as the "unreal," defined in opposition to a reality whose ontological status is understood to be problematic; and its function to "make visible" the individually and/or socially repressed, as psychoanalysis demonstrates; theorists of the fantastic emphasize its transgressive potential, its violation of not only natural laws, but socially constructed "grammars" of the real. Fantasy in the context of this work does not signify a genre, but a literary mode,⁴ an aesthetic category that permeates literature; the fantastic in the (post)modern text is no longer contained in separate genres like science fiction, but mixes freely with realism.⁵ I am especially interested in those

"mainstream" texts usually not perceived as fantastic where fantasy disrupts a mimetic narrative and disturbs its course, as in the works of authors like Marilynne Robinson, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and Toni Morrison; Toni Morrison's work is representative of contemporary writings by women of color in taking recourse to cultural traditions to incorporate the fantastic. The scope of this study includes writers from the US, Canada, and Great Britain, acknowledging the fact that the commonalities between the "feminine fantastics" outweigh cultural differences⁶ that are more pronounced in comparison to the male tradition of the respective countries.⁷

My study intends to fill a gap in contemporary literary criticism: theories of the fantastic consistently either ignore women's contributions or subsume them under norms developed on the basis of white men's literature; feminist literary criticism, on the other hand, either privileges the realist text or, in the case of French critics, the experimental text, with the fantastic relegated to footnotes. Recent publications on feminist utopias or science fiction concentrate on genre rather than mode; the fantastic elements in "mainstream" women's literature, however, are persistently overlooked.

The book is organized into two parts: part I establishes the theoretical, historical, and cultural background for a reading of the fantastic in contemporary women's literature. Like Rosemary Jackson in her *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion*, I am not only interested in the "poetics," but also the "politics" of fantasy as mode.⁸ My intention here is to develop a frame of reference that allows to realize how women's literature challenges our notions of a fantastic in which white men's literature has been taken as normative. Although the fantastic as a mode permeates literatures of different cultures and periods, its specific manifestations are placed in specific historical contexts and must be read accordingly; the fantastic, although striving to subvert the "real," cannot ever be absolutely free of the real; otherwise, it would be unintelligible literature. Thus, social categories like gender and race have to be considered in theories of the fantastic.

After the opening chapter that reads Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a fundamental statement about the potential of the fantastic for women's writing, as a feminine mode, the chapter on theory delineates the (male) norm, while pursuing my guiding question developed in the Rhys-reading and revising the established theories by considering gender and race. In insisting on social position and perspective as relevant categories, I critique the problematic, because universalizing, positing of one "consensus-reality" as a foil for the fantastic; corresponding with that infusion of the fantastic with social dynamics is the refutation of theories that construct the fantastic as an individual, no longer communal discourse in contemporary literature.

The chapters on white women's literary history and minority women's literatures⁹ provide some of the answers to the approaches delineated in my revision of established theory and identify common elements and basic features by concentrating on exemplary texts and authors, Edith Wharton's ghost stories and Toni Morrison's novels, with references to related texts.

Part II then reads a wide variety of contemporary women's texts with the interest to identify what features, if any, they have in common, and what these shared features might mean for the function of the fantastic in women's literature, what conclusions one can draw from common usages. By focusing on specific and particular forms of the fantastic, namely utopian and dystopian narratives, tales of metamorphoses, and texts of "Alien(N)ation," the first three chapters demonstrate how women's use of the fantastic sets its own standards that differ from men's, while the chapter on alienation and the home deals with a manifestation of the fantastic unique to women's literature, for reasons that are obvious: women writers here react to women's identification with the home/family. These texts of "Alien(N)ation" also provide concrete examples of the interplay between social grammar, literary conventions, and narrative mode - individual quests for an identity beyond the confines of society, subject of a multitude of realist texts in men's literature, necessitate the fantastic in women's literature. These readings show the fantastic in women's literature as a mode used to articulate a desire for control, to write plots of power, particularly evident in the tales of metamorphosis, where, in dramatic contrast to the motif's use in men's literature where it signifies extreme alienation and a loss of control, change is interpreted as an access to power that in turn is seen as a source of identity. Fantasy opens up a space for the articulation of female desire without being impeded by the demands for a plausible social context that would reinscribe the marginalization of women.

In analyzing "women writers" and their use of the fantastic, I do not understand "woman" as an exclusive category based on supposedly essential and natural elements; I refer to female authors who write out of an awareness of the mechanics of sexual politics and the cultural construction of "woman."¹⁰ "Femininity" and "woman" are cultural fictions,¹¹ after all, not unchangeable categories of truth, in spite of cultural efforts to naturalize these fictions. I am aware of the danger inherent in having to invoke terms like "feminine" and "masculine" in the discussion of literatures that mostly strive to deconstruct gender; of the dangers of having to create a counter-hegemonic discourse with "the master's tools," as Audre Lorde calls it, and of being caught in a "reverse discourse."¹² After all, as Ruth Bleier mourns, "patriarchal consciousness is our conceptual prison,"¹³ we can neither tran-

scend binary thinking nor speak from an Archimedian point "outside." Since I am interested in the dynamics of hegemonic power rather than biology, it should be apparent that many of the points I make about the potential of fantasy as a mode for women writers applies to minority writers or writers of the so-called "Third World" as well, who also write from a marginalized place,¹⁴ although the functions and specific manifestations of that mode would probably differ, as the analysis of the literatures of women of color suggests. And finally: the fictions of white women and women of color¹⁵ are discussed - with some exceptions, Octavia Butler's work for example¹⁶ - in separate chapters, because the use of the fantastic in the work of women of color has to be understood on the background of a cultural legacy of the integration of the fantastic and the real and has its own implications.

In my readings of fantastic texts, I draw on a variety of critical methods, among them theories of the fantastic and various psychoanalytic theories like Freud's contributions to "phantasy" and feminist Object Relations Theory,¹⁷ sometimes supported by references to social and biographical context. This eclectic approach reflects my conviction that there is not one infallible approach for all texts and that one single interpretative frame of reference would not have done justice to the wide variety of the manifestations and functions of the fantastic in women's literature where the texts respond differently to theory.

Notes

- 1 These are the plots of fictions discussed later in the book; while the vampire plot is obviously widespread, the other examples are Rachel Ingalls' *Mrs. Caliban*, and Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*.
- 2 By "patriarchy" I understand "the multiple cultural and socioeconomic systems that institutionalize and hence perpetuate exclusively male hegemonic power." Carolyn J. Allen, "Feminist Criticism and Postmodernism" in Joseph Natoli, ed., *Tracing Literary Theory* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 297.
- 3 These encyclopedic definitions are given in Lance Olsen, *Ellipse of Uncertainty. An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy* (New York et al.: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 14; Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion* (London/New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 13.
- 4 Frederic Jameson defines a mode as a "particular type of discourse [...], a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed." quoted in Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 7.
- 5 See Paul Coates, *The Realist Fantasy. Fiction and Reality since Clarissa* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983), p. 8: "One working condition of a modernist text would be

that it mixes styles with the aim of subverting both realism and fantasy"; see p. 1. For the postmodern text, see Lance Olsen, *Ellipse of Uncertainty*.

- 6 Differences that do exist in the utopian genre, for example.
- 7 The same similarities are true for the genre utopia; see "Vorwort" in Hartmut Heuermann and Berndt-Peter Lange, eds., *Die Utopie in der angloamerikanischen Literatur* (Düsseldorf: Bagel, 1984), p. 8.
- 8 See Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 6; see also Gisela Ecker, "The Politics of Fantasy in Recent American Women's Novels," *Englisch Amerikanische Studien*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (September 1984): 503-509, with its programmatic title.
- 9 That chapter concentrates on African American literature and Toni Morrison's novels because I think it is essential that white feminist critics judge minority women's literature in the context of their own cultural and literary traditions, not only in the context of a "women's literature" for which actually white women's literature has set the standards. Since I am more familiar with African American literary tradition than other literatures, I have focused on black women writers, while offering comparisons with other minority women's literatures.
- 10 Thus, writers like Shirley Jackson who have extensively used the fantastic, but with no guiding interest in gender-implications, are not within the range of my study. - The term "feminist" which might have offered itself instead of "woman" is problematic because many writers, especially women of color, reject this label (Alice Walker has coined "womanist" instead, for example.) See Rosalind Coward, "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 225-240. For a discussion of the reaction the term "feminist fiction" elicits in critics and writers, see Alix Kates Shulman, "The Taint" in Philomena Mariani, ed., *Critical Fictions. The Politics of Imaginative Writing* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), p. 177-185. Her short and preliminary list of "feminist writers" overlaps to a large extent with the writers discussed here, namely Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Ursula K. Le Guin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Alice Walker, and Fay Weldon. -- Similarly, African American writers are defined by some critics as those writing out of an understanding of and interest in African American culture and in racism. See Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" in Mari Evans, ed., *Black Women Writers* (London/Sidney: Pluto Press, 1984, 1983¹), p. 339-345.
- 11 I am aware that "race" equally is a social construct. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- 12 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown MA: Persephone Press, 1981), p. 98-106; p. 99. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 101. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, p. 78-106; p. 82, for the analysis of a similar problem in the discourse about "race", namely the "manichean allegory - a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object. The power

relations underlying this model set in motion such strong currents that even a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it and who may indeed be highly critical of imperialist exploitation is drawn into its vortex." The binary oppositions enumerated by JanMohamed have been used identically to describe gender-difference, if "white and black" is substituted by "man and woman."

- 13 Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984), p. 199.
- 14 In that approach, I am close to poststructuralist interpretations of gender: "This contention produces, as a site of political attention and engagement, a 'space' rather than a sex: the margin, the repressed, the absence, the unconscious, the irrational, the feminine - in all cases the negative or powerless instance." In that approach, the subject of feminism "is a structural position - variously occupied by the feminine, the body, the Other." Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" in Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 149-166; p. 159/160.
- 15 Another problem arises here: I am aware that the qualifiers in "minority woman" or "woman of color" should demand that I use "white women" consistently. I have only specified "women" as "white women," though, where the context might have been misleading; I do not mean to appropriate a universal status of "white women." The chapters on theory, minority women's literature and utopian literature by white women deal with this problem. For a discussion of these terms, see Mary Childers and Bell Hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class" in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York/London: Routledge, 1990), p. 60-81; p. 67. - I use the terms "minority women" and "women of color," the first term, because in sociological usage, it implies a category of power, and the second because it has emerged as the preferred term in writings by women of color, although they have not dismissed "minority women."
- 16 See the chapters on dystopian novels and metamorphoses, and the discussion of science fiction and African American literature in the chapter on dystopias. See Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 12, who acknowledges the problematic nature of the term "feminist," "given the pluralistic nature of feminist ideology and its diverse political and cultural manifestations."
- 17 I use Object Relations Theory to explain differences in the manifestations of the fantastic in men's and women's literature, for example in the gendered differences in the protagonists' experience of metamorphosis, and not to suggest any conclusions with regard to style or language, as Judith Kegan Gardiner does in "On Female Identity" in Elizabeth Abel, ed., *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 177-192; p. 185. For a critique of Object Relations Theory as a tool in feminist literary criticism see Nina Baym, "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory" in Shari Benstock, ed., *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 53, and Renate Hof, "Writing Women into (Literary) History: Toward a Poetics of Gender?" in Günter H. Lenz, Hartmut Keil and Sabine Bröck-Sallah, eds., *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag/St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 211-224; p. 217, who points out that those characteristics derived from Object Relations Theory to

describe "feminine" style (like "open, fluid, non-linear, fragmented, and polysemic language") equally apply to "predominantly male, so-called 'postmodern' authors." I agree with Hof that - in the context of deconstructing biological and essentialist notions of gender - we have to abandon "the search for a uniquely female language, or rather the notion of a female aesthetics". (p. 217).