


## Harpies in the House: Neo-Victorian Rewritings of Avian Femininities<sup>1</sup>

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**ENG Abstract:** This article examines avian metaphors in Neo-Victorian literature in relation to contemporary reconsiderations of nineteenth-century womanhood and its connection to animal discourse. Ornithological imagery and the female condition were closely linked in the nineteenth-century cultural imaginary, as clearly manifested in the period's literature and art. From the idealized image of the submissive wife caged within the Victorian household to the controversial use of feathers in feminine accessories, bird-like women perched on the margins between the domestic space and the outside world. Significantly, birdcage imagery has since been recovered by numerous feminist authors to denounce women's lack of freedom under patriarchal oppression. However, such analogies have often been rooted in a rejection of animality, rather than in a sense of solidarity between women and animals against androcentric domination. As this article intends to prove, Neo-Victorian works such as A. S. Byatt's *The Conjugal Angel* (1992) and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) offer subversive possibilities for the reinterpretation of avian imagery in ways that challenge the interlocking patriarchal and speciesist dynamics at the core of anthropocentric culture.

**Keywords:** Neo-Victorianism; birds; ecofeminism; animal studies.

## ES Harpías del hogar: reescrituras neo-victorianas de feminidades aviares

**ES Resumen:** Este artículo examina metáforas aviares en la literatura neo-victoriana, observando su vínculo con reconsideraciones contemporáneas de la feminidad decimonónica y su relación con discursos en torno a los animales. La simbología ornitológica y la condición de la mujer estaban estrechamente ligadas en la cultura decimonónica, tal y como demuestran la literatura y el arte de la época. Desde la imagen idealizada de la esposa sumisa, enjaulada en el hogar victoriano, hasta el controvertido uso de plumas en accesorios de moda, las feminidades aviares se posaban en los márgenes entre el espacio doméstico y el mundo exterior. Significativamente, la metáfora del pájaro enjaulado ha sido recuperada desde entonces por numerosas autoras feministas para denunciar la falta de libertad de las mujeres bajo la opresión patriarcal. Sin embargo, estas analogías a menudo se han basado en un rechazo a la animalidad, en lugar de en la solidaridad entre las mujeres y los animales frente a la dominación androcéntrica. Tal y como pretende demostrar este artículo, textos neo-victorianos como *The Conjugal Angel* (1992), de A. S. Byatt, y *Nights at the Circus* (1984), de Angela Carter, ofrecen posibilidades subversivas para la reinterpretación de iconografías aviares a modo de desafío ante la interconexión de dinámicas patriarcales y especistas en el centro de la cultura antropocéntrica.

**Palabras clave:** Neo-victorianismo; aves; ecofeminismo; estudios de los animales.

**Contents:** 1. Introduction; 2. Women and Birds in Victorian Culture; 3. Re-Signifying Avian Imagery: Women and Birds in Neo-Victorian Fiction, 3.1 Ghostly harpies in A. S. Byatt's *The Conjugal Angel*; 3.2. Migratory harpies in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*; 4. The End of Cages? Avian Epistemologies and Ecofeminist Historiographies

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## 1. Introduction

When the American feminist writer Sarah Orne Jewett published her poem “A Caged Bird” in 1887, she was drawing on a long and well-known tradition of analogies between women and imprisoned avifauna in nineteenth-century literature. Like numerous female authors before her, she pondered on avian perspectives to denounce her own limited condition while exploring issues of freedom and captivity, voice and silence, nature and man-made civilization. Feminist thinkers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Olive Schreiner and beyond have famously used the by-now clichéd symbol of the birdcage as an allegory for women’s oppression under patriarchal constraints (Wollstonecraft 1992, 132; Schreiner 1890, 229). Since the rise of Neo-Victorianism in the last decades of the twentieth century (Shiller 1997, 558),<sup>2</sup> avian femininities have soared across time and space to reappear in contemporary depictions of the Victorian past (Primorac 2011, 99). Yet despite the characteristically revisionist approach to history of the Neo-Victorian imagination (Shiller 1997, 558), many of the bird-women which have migrated to present-day texts merely contribute to the perpetuation of nineteenth-century ornithological imagery (Stevenson 2015, 73), rather than expanding and re-signifying associations between female characters and avifauna in more empowering ways.

As it shall be noted in the present study, numerous Neo-Victorian cultural products echo the rupture with avifauna expressed by prominent Victorian predecessors such as Jane Eyre, whose firm declaration “I am no bird” (Brontë 1992, 223) coincides with the early feminist rejection of animality as opposed to humanity, rational thought, and further attributes traditionally branded as masculine (Adams and Donovan 1995, 2). However, certain Neo-Victorian works do offer representations of female characters who willingly identify with undomesticated birds in their quest for freedom. This article therefore intends to examine such reinterpretations of Victorian avian iconography in the light of contemporary ecofeminist theories, observing how they invert potentially constrictive associations between women and caged birds. More specifically, this exploration will be carried out through a comparative analysis of birdlike female protagonists in two Neo-Victorian texts: Angela Carter’s prize-winning novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and A. S. Byatt’s novella *The Conjugal Angel* (1992).

Despite the fact that the Neo-Victorian repurposing of avian tropes has received a certain amount of critical attention, studies often focus on how the birdcage metaphor tends to reinforce nineteenth-century gender stereotypes, instead of subverting them, as Antonija Primorac indicates (2011, 40). Likewise, Anna Stevenson draws attention to how ornithological symbolism is frequently introduced for the sake of purely aesthetic purposes in Neo-Victorianism, so as to “eroticize the helpless woman” without “challenging the subordination of women and animals” (2015, 77). In contrast, as it shall be discussed, Carter’s and Byatt’s stories involve women whose avian traits allow them to live outside the norm of Victorian femininity, blurring interspecies boundaries to exist on the margins of patriarchal civilization. For this reason, these two works call for a side-by-side reading in the context of the reshaping of nineteenth-century ornithological imagery to make space for subaltern subjectivities in contemporary texts. Such an approach shall shed light on the ways in which the avian female characters in question are exposed to multiple intersections between diverse androcentric forces of domination through which they are simultaneously excluded and allowed to survive on their own animalized terms, as if proudly stating “I am a bird”.

## 2. Women and Birds in Victorian Culture

Typified by porous temporal boundaries (Shiller 1997, 544), Neo-Victorian fiction usually presents echoes of the multiple socio-cultural transformations which marked the nineteenth century (Kucich and Sadoff 2000, 10), a period characterized by great shifts in ecological consciousness that would forever alter our perception of other-than-human creatures (Denenholz and Danahay 2007, 3). As a reaction to industrial pollution, massive species annihilation, and, most notably, the redefinition of interspecies relations due to Charles Darwin’s influential *Origin of Species* (1859), the Victorians expressed increasing preoccupations concerning animal perspectives (Adkins and Parkins 2018, 2). This changing relationship with the environment was reflected not only in the rise of early conservation movements for the protection of the botanical and zoological realms (Murphy 2019, 23), but also in artistic representations of animals, plants, and other forms of non-human life (Denenholz and Danahay 2007, 2).

As noted by numerous scholars, birds were among the most depicted creatures in nineteenth-century culture, where they often adopted social and political dimensions (Danahay 2007, 109). Avian tropes were especially recurrent regarding the period’s debates around the ‘Woman Question’ (Primorac 2018, 97), appearing in contrasting responses to the emerging notion of female independence and presence in the public sphere (Shefer 1990, 447). Birds could be found, for instance, in pictorial attempts to naturalize the domestic enclosure as women’s supposedly proper space by presenting connections between caged avifauna and the submissive ideal of the ‘angel in the house’ (Danahay 2007, 99). Beyond constituting a clear perpetuation of the separate spheres of Victorian life (Donald 2020, 44), this reduction of women to the category of pets reflected cultural dichotomies associating women and nature as allegedly inferior to men not only in the male-dominated microcosm of the Victorian household (Moine 2015, 26), but also in broader androcentric structures that were deeply ingrained in nineteenth-century thought (Adams and Donovan 1995, 3). In this sense, animalized representations of femininity were influenced by women’s condition as property within

<sup>2</sup> A term coined by Dana Shiller in 1997, Neo-Victorianism refers to contemporary works of fiction set in the nineteenth century that “revise specific Victorian precursors”, “imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters”, or “imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions” (558).

their husbands' possession (Murphy 2019, 5), as well as by gendered stereotypes such as their alleged "preponderance of intuition" and "instinctive feelings", which, in contrast to the traditionally masculine attributes of reason and temperance (Furieux 2016, 216), were believed to make women more akin to animals (Donald 2020, 44).

Likewise, the nineteenth-century press also played on animal imagery to discuss women's proper place in the world, producing mutually exclusive illustrations like Arthur C. H. Luxmoore's "Sympathy, The Passing Tribute of a Sigh" (1873) and its monstrous opposite, Edward Linley Swanbourne's "A Bird of Prey" (1892). The first picture, published in *The Illustrated London News*, shows a young girl tenderly embracing a wounded bird, thus corresponding to the nurturing and selfless angel (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 26); whereas the second one, issued in *Punch* magazine, shows her fully othered doppelgänger, a pitiless harpy preying on an innocent kingfisher, presenting the supposedly unnatural reversal of women's role as caregivers for all living creatures (Boase 2018, 57). These contrasting images not only show the extent to which women were linked to avifauna in the nineteenth-century imagination, but also reflect both ends of the dichotomy sustaining constructions of femininity at the time: the domestic saint and the non-normative New Woman, often branded as *femme fatale* (Hedgecock 2008, 174). In agreement with María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia and Begoña Lasa-Álvarez, similarly animalized depictions of New Women often intended to dehumanize them by presenting their transgressive aspirations as allegedly unnatural tendencies which threatened the balance of the separate spheres (2021, 93). However, as we shall see, Neo-Victorian writing offers redemptive reinterpretations of these hybrid avian women, recovering the disruptive attributes of the harpy in emancipatory ways.

As stated above, gendered animal discourse took a different turn when early feminist writers reappropriated avian imagery as a tool of resistance against patriarchal oppression, using birdcage symbolism to protest against the relegation of women to the supposedly inferior zoological realm (Adams and Donovan 1995, 2). Perhaps one of the best remembered uses of this trope is Wollstonecraft's critique of female education in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which defines the female body as a socially constructed "gilt cage" in which the domesticated mind roams, seeking to "adore its prison" (1992, 132). Similar allusions to avian captivity appear in works such as Anna Letitia Barbauld's poem "Epitaph on a Goldfinch" (1826), which denounces the "infringement" of the silenced creature's "native and inalienable rights" (1826, 184). By the Victorian era, the caged bird had been consolidated into a critique of women's clipped wings in nineteenth-century society, appearing in canonical works like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), where the heroine is "happy, happy at least in [her] own way" (Brontë 1992, 5) while reading about avifauna to escape from her oppressive surroundings (Vicente 2014, 77).

However, despite the revolutionary nature of the abovementioned symbols, such works eventually reproduced the same anthropocentric constructs which lay at the core of nineteenth-century discourses concerning animals and femininity. Instead of calling into question binary oppositions conceiving women and nature as allegedly inferior to men and male-defined culture (Adams and Donovan 1995, 3), early feminist birdcage imagery constituted a clear denial of animality, rather than an expression of interspecies solidarity. As documented by Manuela Rossini, "having been dehumanized for ages by being equated with animals", women "felt the urge to also be admitted to the club of humanity as equally rational beings", thus condoning the "hierarchically-structured dichotomy nature-culture" (Rossini 2014, 116-118). Until the late twentieth century (Lorenzo-Modia and Lasa-Álvarez 2021, 96), most feminist currents have rejected the woman-nature connection to pursue equality in patriarchal civilizations, attempting to prove that women are "like men and unlike animals" (Adams and Donovan 1995, 2, original emphasis). In the latest decades, however, ecofeminist scholars have suggested more holistic approaches, challenging what Rosemary Radford Ruether calls "the male ideology of transcendent dualism" as the root of the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (Ruether 1975, 195). It is in this light that I wish to examine Byatt's and Carter's all-encompassing bird-women, who, far from resembling the demonized monster in Linley Swanbourne's caricature, spread their wings beyond nineteenth-century understandings of gender and of our interactions with other-than-human life.

### 3. Re-Signifying Avian Imagery: Women and Birds in Neo-Victorian Fiction

In line with its tendency to scrutinize marginalized perspectives in obscured corners of the past (Shiller 1997, 541), Neo-Victorianism offers diverse examples of birdlike women and avian hybrids which reflect on nineteenth-century animal tropes. Despite the demeaning connotations often attributed to the animalization of women (Dunayer 1995, 11), Marian Scholtmeijer points out how their voluntary identification with other-than-human beings can become a vehicle to recognize and denounce the oppression of both in defiance of cultural authority (1995, 233). Therefore, taking into account the prominence of ethically engaged narratives foregrounding the points of view of women and other oppressed individuals in Neo-Victorian fiction (Kohlke 2008, 13), birds, often symbolizing the subaltern (Neimneh 2020, 7), constitute suitable tools to explore figures that have been left out of the grand narratives of Western culture (Shiller 1997, 541).

Despite this revisionist gesture to recover marginalized voices (Kaplan 2007, 155), avian imagery in Neo-Victorianism is not always as subversive as a contemporary reader might expect. As documented by Stevenson (2015, 73) and Primorac (2018, 99), cultural products such as *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) or *Sweeney Todd* (2007) recycle birdcage imagery to represent female captivity. However, this incorporation of nineteenth-century tropes fails to "effectively condemn or interrogate the Victorian gender order" (Stevenson 2015, 73), reducing its potential to a mere emulation of the same anthropocentric dynamics which underpinned avian femininities in the past. Yet, *The Conjugal Angel* and *Nights at the Circus* manage to grant new meanings to avian imagery outside the birdcage, haunted by a Darwinian echo which, fulfilling another typically Neo-Victorian

trait (Kohlke 2008, 4), negotiates the fluid borders between self and other, animals and humans, the present and the past.

### 3.1. Ghostly harpies in A. S. Byatt's *The Conjugal Angel*

Published within her acclaimed work *Angels & Insects* (1992), Byatt's novella *The Conjugal Angel* tells the story of two spiritualist mediums, Liliás Papagay and Sophy Sheekhy, who conduct séances to help participants get in touch with their deceased loved ones. Both women are attributed avian traits throughout the narrative, thus emphasizing their liminal positions on the margins of Victorian social norms. Owls, ravens, nightingales, and other species soar through the text, mirroring nineteenth-century literary conventions (Gannon 2009, 29), and denoting the author's "pleasure ... in making up real fictive birds and connecting them with images already active in the field of the language the fiction draws on" (Byatt 2000, 108).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Byatt's story deliberately recycles Victorian avian imagery, repurposing it through occultist circles centered on a poem by Alfred Tennyson,<sup>4</sup> a writer prone to ornithological symbolism whose "considerably greater ... knowledge of birds and their ways" signals towards its relevance in the text (Watkins 1903, 9). Several spiritualist meetings structure the narrative, unveiling the un verbalized concerns of the characters gathered around the séance table. Besides including rich intertextual allusions to avifauna linked to the Bible, John Keats, William Wordsworth, and Edgar Allan Poe, Byatt presents animalized depictions of the séance sitters, thus manifesting the interspecies continuity triggered by the period's Darwinian ideas (Kontou 2009, 134). In particular, the marginal condition of the female protagonists is made apparent through their avian femininities, especially in relation to the subversive role of the spiritualist medium in nineteenth-century culture.

Although, as Tatiana Kontou points out, male members of the spiritualist circle are also described in avian terms (2009, 135), such depictions do not convey the same meanings. For instance, Mr Hawke, named after a bird of prey, is a predatory man whose failed attempts to seduce one of the mediums mirror his vain efforts to control the séance space. His presence in the room embodies patriarchal attitudes towards Victorian Spiritualism, a movement founded and led by women (Braude 1989, 84): he perceives mediums as passive vessels for the transmission of ghostly messages, fails to consider female perspectives, and constantly imposes his anthropocentric interpretations of supernatural events (Kontou 2009, 135). Most interestingly, his clear discomfort towards female agency is manifested in his mistrust regarding the close relationship between Emily Jesse, the hostess, and her pet raven: "I *detest* that bird", he complains, "I think its presence is most inappropriate on such occasions" (Byatt 1994, 240, original emphasis). Like her avian companion, Mrs Jesse herself has "raven hair" (Byatt 1994, 223), "bird-hands and a bird-sharp look, and a surprisingly deep resonant voice" that she uses to defend "birds of ill omen" (Byatt 1994, 210) and challenge male attempts to gain power over the séance (Byatt 1994, 197). As Mr Hawke's declaration reflects, female characters in *The Conjugal Angel* undermine the androcentric hierarchies which he strives to perpetuate, since they establish a transgressive interspecies kinship to elude the constrictive norms of Victorian womanhood, which configures them as "a house-angel, a small child and a pet lamb" (Byatt 1994, 251).

Likewise, Liliás and Sophy blur borders through their affinity with avifauna, using their supernatural powers to host other-than-human subjectivities. As spiritualist mediums, they embody fluid boundaries not just between life and death (Kontou 2009, 5), but also between the opposing extremes of Victorian femininity. By allegedly channeling the souls of the deceased, occultist women lingered among the private and public spheres of nineteenth-century society, following ghostly instructions to engage in political activism, literary creation, sexual transgression (Tromp 2006, 10), and other forms of non-normative behaviour (Owen 1990, 216). In addition, through trance speaking, mediums were able to perform diverse identities, simultaneously encapsulating the much-feared New Woman and the angelic messenger who, without leaving the domestic setting of the séance room, offered her mind and body as supernatural vessels (Hedgecock 2008, 174).

Mediums therefore operated from a liminal position in diverse ways (Owen 9), one which allowed them to disrupt the binary oppositions of dominant culture in order to make space for the other, the repressed, the ghostly (Kucich 2014, 11). In this sense, the medium's phantasmal dialogue entailed a voluntary identification with muted and erased subjects in nineteenth-century society (Grimes 2016, 87), one that addressed women's own invisibility and which granted agency to other-than-human voices (Heholt 2021, 117). Furthermore, according to scholars like Marie-Louise Kohlke (2008, 9), the recovery of similar spiritualist tropes in Neo-Victorian fiction configures the medium as a transtemporal storyteller whose ability to host the voices of the dead mirrors the contemporary novelist's attempt to verbalize perspectives that have been suppressed by mainstream historical discourses (Shiller 1997, 541). Therefore, in line with this redemptive goal to bear "retrospective testimony to past injustices" (Kohlke 2008, 6), Liliás and Sophy use their mediumistic skills not just to translate untold stories, but also to symbolically dismantle power structures to which both women and animals have been subjected for centuries.

As hybrid beings caught between normative and monstrous femininities, their ambiguous status is manifested through their identification with avifauna and their ability to understand subaltern narratives. Liliás

<sup>3</sup> Byatt's interest in avifauna is also manifested, for instance, in her *Bird Hand Book* (2001), a collection of ornithological photographs accompanied by literary reflections.

<sup>4</sup> The elegiac poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1833), written for his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, is the focus of the story. The mediums are summoned by Tennyson's sister, who was once betrothed to Hallam, to contact the spirit of the deceased poetic subject.

Papagay, for example, has a parrot-like surname and, accordingly,<sup>5</sup> wears hats of “darkly gleaming plumage, jet-black, emerald-shot, iridescent dragonfly blue on ultramarine, plump shoulders of headless wings with jaunty tail-feathers” (Byatt 1994, 188), which Kontou interprets as an allusion to the intersection of human and animal worlds (2009, 134). Although the feather accessories suggested in this image may place this character closer to Linley Swanbourne’s murderous harpy,<sup>6</sup> the animalized medium has a welcoming “warm heart, like a comfortable brown thrush in a soft nest” (Byatt 1994, 282), open to hosting and retelling stories of “other lifetimes, other chains of cause and effect” (Byatt 1994, 192). In the polyphonic heteroglossia of the séance, she acts as “a great weaver of narratives” (Byatt 1994, 192), inviting invisible speakers to intertwine with her accounts through what Marlene Tromp denominates the “disruptive storytelling” of spirit possession and automatic writing (2006, 10).

Similarly, Sophy uses her mediumistic abilities to include other-than-human points of view in her mystical experiences. As an example, when using her psychic skills to scrutiny the essence of the other characters, she provides zoomorphic descriptions of the séance sitters: she sees Mr Hawke as a laughable lap dog, Captain Jesse, Emily’s husband, as “a great white plumed creature”, “with powerful wings and a fierce beak”, and Lilius with a “head all crowned with the feathers of peacocks and lyrebirds and whitest ostriches” (Byatt 1994, 223). Sophy also blurs interspecies borders during her trance states and out-of-body journeys, since she experiences visions of diverse animals, including “flocks of birds and clouds of butterflies” (Byatt 1994, 221), as well as hybrid creatures that elude human categorization (Byatt 1994, 222). As a spiritualist woman, it is her role to make space for those erased “faces and histories”, as “she was required – from both sides it seemed – to mediate between these and those others who neither saw nor heard them” (Byatt 1994, 222). Therefore, in addition to addressing the Darwinian phantom hovering over this Neo-Victorian text (Kontou 2009, 134), mediumship contributes to the visibilization of liminal entities ignored by androcentric discourse, thus establishing networks of solidarity between non-normative women and other-than-human beings that hold a similarly vulnerable position on the margins of nineteenth-century culture.

Furthermore, Sophy’s capacity to transcend interspecies barriers and other physical boundaries echoes ideas found in spiritualist texts such as Catherine Crowe’s *Spiritualism and the Age We Live In* (1859), where the author argues that both mediums and animals possess an enhanced sensibility to perceive what is invisible to human eyes (1859, 132). According to Victorian spiritualists like Crowe, Anna Kingsford (Rudacille 2000, 33-34), or Annie Besant (Besant 1913, 14), mediumship allowed women to feel the “terrible vibrations” of the oppression of animals (Besant 1913, 15),<sup>7</sup> bridging the human-animal divide through their psychic abilities to internalize their un verbalized experiences. “Perhaps if we knew all”, pondered Crowe, “we should not be so heedless of these suffering creatures, who are certainly endowed with faculties, of some sort, that we are unable to comprehend” (1859, 132). Accordingly, in Byatt’s text, Sophy blends her consciousness with a flock of doves, expanding her esoteric intuition to listen to their intelligible language, which is described in the fluid style of automatic writing:

Behind her the room was full of rustling, as though it was packed with birds. It was fatigue rushing in her ears, it was white wings she would see if she turned to look. She saw in her mind’s eye doves with golden eyes, doves all over, doves preening themselves on the bedhead and the windowsill. She saw their little pink feet, so vulnerable, so naked, so scratchy, strutting and curling, open and shut. She began to hear their liquid voices bubbling among the rustling (Byatt 1994, 283).

Her respect for avian semiotics despite her inability to translate it fulfills what Rachel Hollander interprets as narrative hospitality towards encounters with otherness in certain nineteenth-century texts, a gesture defined by its respect towards difference, instead of simply translating the experience of the other in terms of the self (2013, 3). In other words, through her identification with non-human epistemologies, hosting birds “talking to each other in their different garglings comforting, irritable, puffed out, smoothed” (Byatt 1994, 283), Sophy’s mediumship disrupts interspecies distinctions to welcome the invisibilized presence of animals. In an extension of this “plurality of the same and the other” (Hollander 2013, 11), the clairvoyant herself is repeatedly depicted as pigeon-like (Byatt 1994, 219, 282), wearing a “dove-coloured wool with a white collar” which connects her to avian messengers who, like herself (Byatt 1994, 188), are mobile and transfer information across borders (Sax 2021, 111).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this holistic empathy towards other creatures is sustained by similar attitudes in Victorian spiritualist discourse, according to which the source of all inequalities was rooted in earthly distinctions between classes, genders, ethnicities (Nelson 2013, 34), and species (Leadbeater 1913, 35). As Robert Nelson explains, this belief inspired the spiritualist community’s involvement in diverse reformist campaigns (2013, 34), including animal welfare activism (Gregory 2007, 141), most often led by women (Adams and Donovan 1995, 5). Taking into account how female spiritualists spoke for animals and other subaltern subjects, both in the séance room and in public (Owen 1990, 7), this aspect of the Occult revival

<sup>5</sup> Papagayos are brightly colored parrots whose hues resemble the feathers on Mrs Papagay’s hats (Elliott, Sargatal, and Del Hoyo 2010, 370).

<sup>6</sup> This caricature was published in response to feather fashion, a trend which was causing the annual annihilation of millions of birds (Boase 2018, 8).

<sup>7</sup> As documented by Ann Braude, women were thought to be more receptive towards the spiritual plane than men, and were therefore considered better communicators for ghostly messages (1989, 94).

<sup>8</sup> Sophy’s connection to the Columbidae bird family might also be read as an allusion to the passenger pigeon, one of the first bird species to become extinct due to human actions in the nineteenth century (Sax 2021, 357). This would make these ghostly birds a symbol of the erasure of biodiversity, acknowledged and addressed through mediumship.

shows the extent to which certain elements of the nineteenth-century past have been recovered to provide subversive representations of interspecies encounters in Neo-Victorian texts.

The mediums' jeopardizing of the cultural binaries of the *scala naturae* becomes even more apparent when set in contrast against Mr Hawke's anthropocentric cosmology, which reproduces the "male ideology of transcendent dualism" (Ruether 1975, 195). In his efforts to impose his leadership on the occultist circle, this character enforces a much more hierarchical view of nature and seems eager to mention the allegedly superior position of "the Grand Man" in the Chain of Being (Byatt 1994, 208). He justifies his views through dichotomies that not only omit the silenced perspectives embraced by Liliias and Sophy, but which also perpetuate the abovementioned ideology of the separate spheres: "truth and understanding and thought are male", he reminds the sitters, "but good, will and affection are female" (Byatt 1994, 242). In this sense, Mr Hawke functions as a caricature of gendered assumptions regarding women's "instinctive feelings" in nineteenth-century culture (Donald 2020, 44), which, as it has previously been stated, banned them from public life while simultaneously configuring them as inferior due to their affinity with creatures lacking the male-defined concept of reason (Moine 2015, 26).

Besides resurrecting similar conflicts between occultist women and male scientists in the nineteenth century (Owen 1990, 148), such tensions between inclusive and androcentric readings of the séance raise significant questions concerning which forces have held the power to interpret the voices of the deceased in a more general sense. As Dana Shiller indicates, Neo-Victorianism responds to the challenge posed by the historiographical crisis of the late twentieth century due to its potential for recapturing the past "in ways that ... do honor to the dead and silenced" (1997, 546). In agreement with the abovementioned definition of the trance medium as an otherworldly historian who visibilizes minoritized accounts of the past (Kontou 2009, 6), the Neo-Victorian séance becomes a symbol of the historical narrative itself, in which women and other-than-human beings have remained mostly invisible. Byatt's interspecies Spiritualism therefore becomes a tool to acknowledge and vindicate their ghostly presence in subversive reinterpretations of the past, recovering suppressed subjectivities through mediumistic conversations with indescribable creatures that elude human language. If, according to Hilary Grimes, the medium's hosting of silenced voices implies a realization of shared victimhood under interconnected oppressions (2016, 95), the power struggle around the necromantic table entails an ecofeminist critique of interlocking patriarchal and speciesist forces that have failed to grant voice to female and non-human perspectives in historical accounts.

Anticipating comparable patterns in Byatt's later novel *A Whistling Woman* (2002), where hybrid bird-women are cast out of their country for refusing to adhere to its rules, spiritualist mediums in *The Conjugal Angel* embrace their avian femininities to voluntarily perch on the periphery of patriarchal civilization, escaping its binary definitions of womanhood and animality to coexist with otherness. The fact that Mr Hawke feels threatened by the presence of the raven in the séance room confirms the relevance of avifauna in this quest for interspecies harmony, which, in line with non-hierarchical representations of nature in the Victorian Occult revival (Oppenheim 1985, 44), configures women as ambassadors for animal voices. Therefore, in contrast to constricting connotations ascribed to associations between avifauna and femininity in nineteenth-century literature, Liliias and Sophy present more expansive identifications with birds which allow them to question the artificiality of interspecies borders within their polyvalent bodies.

### 3.2. Migratory harpies in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

Just like the spiritualist mediums in *The Conjugal Angel* function as sites of "multiplicity and contradiction" that jeopardize androcentric boundaries (Kucich 2014, 11), so does the avian protagonist of Carter's *Nights at the Circus* differ from nineteenth-century ruptures with animality. Sophie Fevvers is a half-swan hybrid who uses her wings to survive in a late-Victorian underworld of freak shows, brothels, and the travelling circus. Several of her attributes situate her between the house angel and the demonized harpy, starting with her physical shape: despite her winged back, she is far from the ideal of domesticated femininity, which is parodied throughout the novel by her excessive appetites, largeness, sensuality, confidence, and unconventional habits, for which she is as subversive as the New Woman (Carter 1994, 43). Similarly, the birdcage motif is reversed by means of numerous allusions to this image (Carter 1994, 12), which ironically emphasize the character's freedom, for she is decidedly *uncaged*. We learn her life story through her Scheherazade-like narration of her biography to the American journalist Jack Walser during what seems like several nights. Soon after, he joins the circus to follow her as she tours through Europe, in a desperate attempt to decipher her real nature: "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter 1994, 3).

Fulfilling the Neo-Victorian intention of scrutinizing past abnormalities (Kohlke 2008, 6), Walser's desire to discover whether Fevvers is human or bird parallels the masculine desire to control unruly nature in nineteenth-century thought (Moine 2015, 26). Like Mr Hawke in Byatt's text, he needs her to adjust to his dual classification of reality, thus mirroring the period's androcentric quest to capture, dominate, and dissect non-human otherness (Murphy 2019, 5). The bird-woman's ability to elude this patriarchal conquest of difference suggests a rewriting of comparable narrative patterns found in the Victorian fairy-tale revival, which brimmed with stories of captive mermaids, selkies (Silver 2000, 97), and swan-maidens (Silver 2000, 102), all discovered by men attempting to penetrate their mysteries. In line with associations between women and other-than-human creatures (Adams and Donovan 1995, 3), these interspecies hybrids reveal turn-of-the-century preoccupations regarding female sexuality, which, as Brenda Hammack notes, resulted in musings about whether woman was "human, or an animal" (2008, 886). Such anxieties, triggered by the emancipatory

rise of the New Woman (Hedgecock 2008, 174), were linked to the categorization of non-normative femininities as “unnatural, subhuman beings” (Hammack 2008, 885), which is clearly expressed in Carter’s novel.

As underlined by Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia, Walser’s obsessive interest in labelling Fevvers “within the parameters of reality” as “freak or fraud” is also connected to her ambiguous sexuality (2008, 229). She presents herself as a virgin, yet her fleshly behaviour challenges both the expectations of the male characters in the story and the readers’ preconceived notions on Victorian femininity. Instead of a self-effacing angel, we find a wild creature who takes pleasure in her anatomy:

Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk. As she raised her arms, Walser, confronted by stubbled, thickly powdered armpits, felt faint; God! she could easily crush him to death in her huge arms ... A seismic erotic disturbance convulsed him (Carter 1994, 57).

Further allusions to her untamed nature include similar images of other-than-human exuberance, like the “wild and maenad air” she adopts when her “half hundredweight of hair” overflows around her (Carter 1994, 89), in remembrance of other unruly manes symbolizing rampant appetites in *fin-de-siècle* literature (Ofek 2009, 33). According to Jill Matus, the animalization of women’s supposedly unstable sexuality was used to “manipulate distinctions between nature and culture” in the nineteenth century, as well as to justify the control of individuals perceived as a threat to the establishment (1995, 48-49). Therefore, Fevvers’ multifaceted in-betweenness is understood as an unpredictable danger to androcentric hierarchies, for which she falls prey to similar processes of othering throughout her life, during which she avoids numerous male attempts to capture and classify her. The first cage she inhabits is a London brothel, where she claims to have been hatched from an egg at the moment of her birth (Carter 1994, 3). Much like the séance room in spiritualist culture (Owen 1990, 21), the brothel constitutes a female-centered liminal space on the periphery of respectable Victorian society. In this marginal institution, the protagonist is raised by matriarchal characters who allow her to remain outside the patriarchal order, because “not only has she multiple harlot mothers but also remains untouched by a father figure or system” due to her unusual conception (Biscaia 2008, 225).

Despite the empowering potential of this alternative kinship, Fevvers is soon exposed to the male gaze when she is asked to pose as a *tableau vivant* for customers to admire her chimerical figure. Her hybrid status is fully objectified when the brothel is turned into a freak show, where her interspecies ambivalence is commercialized like an exotic animal. This exhibition becomes another form of androcentric control that resembles nineteenth-century displays of phenomenal specimens as popular entertainment (Tomaiuolo 2017, 296), which allegedly included mermaids and other “freaks of nature” (Sax 2013, 184). In this context, Fevvers’ harpy-like monstrosity is exploited to satisfy the same curiosity which led many Victorian men to shoot birds in order to keep them in taxidermy collections (Moss 2004, 48), since it uncovers dynamics of subjugation comparable to those behind the period’s zoo-keeping and museums of natural history (Denenholz and Danahay 2007, 5). Fulfilling Satine’s wishes to escape a similar confinement in *Moulin Rouge!* (Stevenson 2015, 75), the bird-woman learns to use her wings by watching migratory birds that foretell her future transnational mobility as a circus artist:

[W]e saw the storks, the cranes and the flamingoes ... For the cranes cross continents, do they not; they winter in Africa and summer on the Baltic! I vowed I’d learn to swoop and soar, to emulate the albatross and glide with delighted glee ... I saw my future as criss-crossing the globe for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes (Carter 1994, 45).

However, her desire for liberation is intercepted when the brothel owner offers her to an eccentric gentleman who fetishizes her to project his zoophilic fantasies, configuring her as the “angel of many names” (Carter 1994, 85) “who is neither one thing nor the other” (Carter 1994, 87). Once again, Fevvers is “bought and sold by those who collect unique and exotic objects” (Gass 1994, 73), and who wish to domesticate her into fitting their man-made classifications. Her rebellion against captivity emulates Victorian ornithological imagery, as she “fluttered like [a] cornered bird”, a “thrashing bundle of fright and feathers” (Carter 1994, 83), a reminder of how Jane Eyre also struggles “like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation” to break free from patriarchal constraints (Brontë 1992, 223). Yet, unlike her nineteenth-century predecessors, who echo Wollstonecraft’s critique of the female body as a “gilt cage” (1992, 132), Fevvers manages to escape her captor not by rejecting her avian traits, but by embracing her animalized anatomy as “the abode of limitless freedom” (Carter 1994, 45). In this sense, Carter’s text overcomes the Victorian fear of animality, which, as Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan argue, was connected to what Elizabeth Spelman defines as *somatophobia*, that is, a hostility towards bodily functions (1995, 11). This “equating of women and animals with one another and with the despised body” was, as stated above, at the core of Western philosophy, whose emphasis on reason, “mind, spirit, or control” places man at the center (Spelman 1982, 341). In Carter’s novel, this masculine denial of the human-animal connection is subverted and mocked through Fevvers, whose mere existence challenges nineteenth-century anxieties concerning porous interspecies boundaries.

It is not until she flies away to the circus that she can eventually fulfill the complete embodiment of opposites that characterizes her hybridity. As another liminal space marked by geographical and social mobility, the circus allows Fevvers to inhabit her avian attributes to conflate the supposedly opposing extremes of Victorian femininity (Hedgecock 2008, 175). In the same way in which spiritualist mediums embraced

otherness by floating between the separate spheres and adopting diverse identities, the vagrant trapeze artist can remain “married to the wind” and fully identify with her avian side (Carter 1994, 35). Paralleling the visibilization of subaltern subjects in the séance, the circus is home to differently abled and racialized characters, queer sexualities, and otherwise othered individuals on the fringes of mainstream historical discourse. In both places, reality is questioned and social norms are temporarily suspended. Since the rules of the outside world no longer apply, the mediums and the harpy can safely inhabit their unstable bodies within “marginal institutions” to negotiate “elements that threaten to disrupt the orderly and legitimate exercise of power” (Gass 1994, 73). Once again, the avian female character functions as a gateway into suppressed perspectives, since Fevvers’ story involves additional accounts of discrimination, poverty, illness, and abuse that complete her polyphonic narrative from diverse points of view. Like the mediumistic act of verbalizing untold histories, her autobiography complies with the Neo-Victorian recovery of obscured aspects in nineteenth-century culture (Kucich and Sadoff 2000, 11).

At the same time, Fevvers’ life lingers between fiction and reality, since she is continuously labelled as an unreliable narrator who crafts an ambivalent tale about herself for the sake of fame and survival: “The bigger the humbug, the better the public likes it” (Carter 1994, 171). Like Liliás Papagay and Sophy Sheekhy, she is a “weaver of narratives” (Byatt 1994, 192), and, like Victorian spiritualist mediums, she performs between memory and fantasy (Kontou 2009, 5), a gesture which mirrors the contemporary reader’s limited access to the nineteenth-century past (Kohlke 2008, 9).<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, this in-betweenness makes space for muted subjectivities in the Neo-Victorian text, as the protagonist expands her wings to rise above androcentric dualism. Her disruption of binary oppositions resembles the mediumistic transcendence beyond interspecies barriers, since Fevvers’ femininity is elevated “to dimensions above dichotomies” (Biscaia 2008, 224).

Her ambiguity therefore becomes a source of power that destabilizes the bases of Victorian culture, as her existence challenges the fragile barriers between the normative and the abject, domesticity and wildness, the monstrous and the socially acceptable. She is simultaneously a New Woman and sarcastically angelic, disrupting assumptions of innocence and delicacy configured by her swan genealogy (Sax 2021, 7). Likewise, she does not occupy the private sphere, nor exactly the public one, as she remains within the mobile borders of the travelling circus. She is also well-read and educated despite being “Cockney sparrow ... by birth” (Carter 1994, 45), and threatens sexual roles to such an extent that Walser once wonders: “Is she really a man?” (Carter 1994, 37). All these transgressions are made possible by her interspecies hybridity, which is the main vehicle for the novel’s deconstruction of the birdcage metaphor to escape “simplistic imaginings of Victorian womanhood” (Stevenson 2015, 84). Instead, Fevvers uses her avian femininity to thrive as the “Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species” (Carter 1994, 92). Her role as a “reconciler of ... opposites” through “the mediation of [her] ambivalent body” highlights even more her affinity with the animalized mediums in Byatt’s text (Carter 1994, 92), as these characters all function as ambassadors for other-than-human voices.

#### 4. The End of Cages? Avian Epistemologies and Ecofeminist Historiography

Although numerous readings of nineteenth-century avian imagery have shown that women’s writing was more likely to evoke “images of caged birds, protected and controlled” (Marchbanks 2006, 119), Neo-Victorianism offers fruitful possibilities to reinterpret these tropes in order to generate subversive images that challenge the historical subordination of women and animals. As discussed in this article, contemporary representations of the nineteenth century do not always perpetuate the androcentric hierarchies of birdcage symbolism (Stevenson 2015, 73), but can propose empowering explorations of the human-animal divide that take into account other forms of oppression, as observed in Byatt’s and Carter’s works. Through their positive identification with ornithological allegories, these Neo-Victorian texts redefine interspecies frontiers, reflecting the evolution of ecofeminist theories that shed light on the interlocking functioning of patriarchal and speciesist power dynamics (Adams and Donovan 1995, 3).

In diverse ways, *The Conjugal Angel* and *Nights at the Circus* present female characters that are reconciled with avifauna in a celebration of animalized femininities that redeems them from the pejorative connotations often attributed to women and nature in the nineteenth century. By the end of Carter’s novel, Fevvers presents herself as a New Woman for the New Century (Carter 1994, 334), a hopeful time when “the caged bird should want to see the end of cages” (Carter 1994, 41). Taking into consideration the potential of Neo-Victorianism to reveal contemporary concerns (Kucich and Sadoff 2000, 11), these feminist rewritings of the Victorian past also allow readers to reflect on which metaphorical cages are still present today in the form of prevailing sexist and speciesist stereotypes (Dunayer 1995, 231), as well as in the long-lasting impact of androcentric structures on the exploitation of nature and the loss of biodiversity. Moreover, Byatt’s post-Darwinian Spiritualism and Carter’s mockery of the birdcage expose how anthropocentric assumptions about non-human life have long intersected with our understanding of gender, generating animalized caricatures of non-normative attitudes. In response, Neo-Victorianism interrogates such configurations by presenting female characters who are neither passive angels nor monstrous harpies, preferring to soar above similarly man-made distinctions.

<sup>9</sup> As noted by Cora Kaplan, truth is often elusive in the Neo-Victorian novel, bulging with unreliable narrators and undisclosed secrets that express the fragmentary character of the retrievable past (Kaplan 2007, 159), which “flickers depending on personal or communal agendas” (Kohlke 2008, 9).



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