

## (DE)FIGURATING THE FEMININE: THE VENGEFUL WOMAN FIGURATION IN ANNE BANNERMAN'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the introduction of two poems by the barely-known Scottish poet Anne Bannerman, “The Mermaid” (1800) and “The Dark Ladie” (1802), as exponents of what we call the vengeful woman figuration, a recurrent representation in nineteenth-century Britain. These characters use violence as a tool for vengeance, which leads them, in a post-gender perspective, to desexualization. Thus, unsexed, they are able to get rid of a limiting and restrictive feminine towards a more dispersed, rhizomatic experience, which encompasses different feminines.

KEYWORDS: Vengeful woman; Anne Bannerman; Gothic; poetry.

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In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man.  
*Beyond Good and Evil, Friedrich Nietzsche.*

### INTRODUCTION

When we think about the types of representation of women in nineteenth-century British literature, it is unusual to have our thoughts immediately referred to vengeful women who, in their own right, also make up a large and rich field to explore. Most of the time we are led to imagine the muses that inspired the great poets to write the most beautiful love poems or we come across the figure of the Angel in the House, crystallized

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in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854), one that often launches women in a trajectory of passive domesticity and that, despite having been murdered by Virginia Woolf in the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> still haunts us nowadays. On the other hand, it would not be fair or at least correct to state that this type of representation, of the vengeful woman, is rare or appears only sporadically as a response to one or another moment of political tension. The truth is that these women have permeated our poetic imagination since the dawn of societies.

If we consider the Judeo-Christian tradition and the myth of Creation, Lilith would be the first vengeful woman we know of. Forced to leave Eden because she would not submit to her husband or to God, Martha Robles tells us in *Mujeres, mitos y diosas* (1966), she becomes the victim of divine wrath, and having rejected the only condition that would restore her to her old home, obedience to her husband and Creator, she suffers a sort of sterilisation: one hundred of her offspring would be murdered every day, to which she swore retaliation: she would murder all the new-borns she might encounter in her path. For Robles, "her shadow reappears from time to time, when the clamour for reciprocity infiltrates the discussion of rights and freedoms and every time a woman discovers the most hidden meaning of her creativity"<sup>3</sup> (2019 [1966], pos. 489). By way of example, and in order to move forward in time, we cite other names that maintain this same idea and expands Lilith's project of liberation: Medea, the Furies, Clytemnestra and Semiramis, Lady Macbeth, the witches, Charlotte Corday, Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft, Matilda (*The Monk*, 1796 – Matthew Lewis), the suffragettes, the hysterics, and the feminists. There are several women (real, fictional, mythical), created by the pens of both male and female authors, who reveal that what we currently understand as the fight of women for civil and political rights is actually a struggle that drags over time.

In this article, our objective is to introduce the figuration of the vengeful woman in the works of Scottish poet Anne Bannerman. Because it is an article, and keeping in mind the extension limit, we have chosen two of her poems, "The Mermaid" (1800) and "The Dark Ladie" (1802), both containing this type of figuration in their narratives. In

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2 "I now record the one act for which I take some credit to myself [...] I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me." (WOOLF, 1979, p. 59).

3 All translations in this article were made freely and by its authors. The excerpts, in their original languages, can be consulted from the list of references listed at the end of this paper.

addition, we believe it is necessary to rescue Bannerman from literary obscurity, since, like other women writers of her time, especially those who, like her, were involved with themes understood to be beyond what was considered morally applicable to the female pen, she seems to have disappeared from current literary circles, despite the positive impression she left on her contemporaries. Thus, we dedicate a few paragraphs to the introduction of what figuration means for this article, as well as the way in which the figuration of the vengeful woman is developed more specifically. Then, because she is a virtually unknown author, we briefly approach Bannerman's life and work to later delve into her literary production, focusing on the two poems listed above and on the issues that interest us.

## 1. THE VENGEFUL WOMAN FIGURATION

Aligned with the idea of (de)figuration of the female subject, that is, how it is figured and disfigured in a text, acquiring or losing characteristics of what is understood as feminine in a given historical moment in a movement of opening oneself to the other, we propose to look at this lyrical subject from the perspective of figuration set by Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti, in *Nomadic Subjects* (1994). Along with the author, we understand figuration as a style of thought that expresses a perspective of a subject that is not phallogocentric, that is, guided by male hegemony, but able to produce a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity – what we understand to be the case of the vengeful woman, our object of study. It is an individual, which Braidotti classifies as nomadic, that refers to a subject who has “relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity [and that] expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity” (BRAIDOTTI, 1994, p. 22). Therefore, an individual who figures and disfigures themselves, always accessible to the vulnerability of being open to the other. Following this line of thought, we conceive the idea of the vengeful woman, whether in poetry or prose, as a body that escapes the traps of a normative male hegemony and, thus, is a disturbing force of the social order that responds to such a system. As a result, she presents herself as a rhizomatic subject, without sex or gender, capable of finding other possibilities of existence.

Such figuration is not foreign to literature, especially the British one. Researcher Adriana Craciun, in *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003), makes a rich study of

the *femme fatale* in British Romanticism and begins her discussion by arguing that incarnations of fatal women as the seductress, the mermaid, the queen, and the muse “recur throughout the works of women writers, demonstrating that fatal women played an important role in the development of women’s poetic identities in the Romantic period” (p. 1). Craciun obviously shortens her lenses to focus on Romanticism, but we go a little further (or to the past) and affirm that, as demonstrated earlier, the vengeful woman figuration occupies the Western cultural imaginary since the myth of Creation. Its proliferation in Britain in the nineteenth century, which is the focus of this paper, seems to be explained, as Michel Foucault claims in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), by an interest in saying everything about sex, dominating it, exhausting it, as well as sanitizing it. Foucault argues that a never-ending number of institutions (medical, legal, educational) were created and instrumented with the aim of controlling sex and sexuality, which also contributed to an irresistible need to discuss those topics. As it is also noted by Toril Moi, in *What is a Woman?* (1999), in dialogue with Thomas Laqueur and his *Making Sex* (1990), the nineteenth century is a moment of universalization of sex in such a way that “woman become woman to her fingertips” (MOI, 1999, p. 12), permeating and saturating all aspects of social life. At this point of division between feminine and masculine (from labour to intellectual activities), “man and woman emerge as two different species” (MOI, 1999, p. 12). In a period that seeks to cement this fragmentation, the vengeful woman escapes normative codes as a category that does not respond to a static, crystallized binary game of domesticity and passivity as natural feminine attributes and becomes a possibility of a more airy, dispersed and free existence. And because “violence ‘unsexed’ women as far as Lady Macbeth” (CRACIUN, 2003, p. 9), we can also catch a glimpse of a post-gender perspective in these characters: when claiming characteristics attributed solely to men, Lady Macbeth transcends her sex and gender.

For this reason, when we think of the vengeful woman figuration we cannot lose sight of the fact that her body is constituted by elements of violence, as a result of her vengeance, but also by desexualization. As Craciun notes, when mentioning the Shakespearian character, that violence unsexes women since Lady Macbeth,<sup>4</sup> and if we comprehend, as society seems to do, violence as a male prerogative, then the woman who crosses the invisible limit between passivity and agency also trespasses the boundaries of

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<sup>4</sup> “Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here/ And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull/ Of direst cruelty” (*Macbeth*, I.5.38-41).

gender, becoming something that can no longer be characterised as typically feminine because she loses one of her most important traits. In this new state of affairs, she poses as a monstrous figure, outside of the law (of men), and assumes definitively her position as Other. Therefore, it is in the fissure of the bourgeois feminine subject that the vengeful woman infiltrates and gains strength. We propose that these characters be read as unsexed, based on the Poetics of the *unsex-me*, by Maria Conceição Monteiro (2020). According to the author, what this poetics sees is the unravelling of the ties that insist on sustaining categories of body, sex and sexuality, as well as the respective power relations between beings that are determined by these categories. We should also note that:

There is no metaphysical transcendence but of border, a transformation in being. The monster the female body embodies is not supernatural but an active force that, although sometimes metamorphizes into non-anthropomorphic figures, constitutes an unfolding of the self. I observe, then, that the transformation of the feminine into something else that needs to be desexualized is nothing more than the materialisation of what is not commonly associated with the feminine, and which is linked to desire and action. (MONTEIRO, 2020, p. 155)

There is not necessarily a physical change in the desexualized body, as if, by becoming monstrous, it must assume characteristics of a body that we indeed understand as monstrous, like the creature in *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818). Because the same body that responds to gender boundaries is also the one that surpasses them, it is dangerously ambiguous, awakening anxieties, whether within a bourgeois society, such as that of the early 1800s in which Bannerman writes, or in our own, still too Victorian – we have already mentioned Foucault – still embedded in the same dictates of sex and gender.

Of this unsexed body, what interests us is precisely the transformation the female body undergoes when, by desexualizing itself, it materialises into something that is linked to *desire* and *action*, elements that do not seem to occupy the semantic field when it comes to describing what is feminine. The vengeful woman, thus, possessing a monstrous body because she rebels against the limits imposed on her sex/gender, opens herself up to other experiences, even if they are stained by violence, but which, in a way, we will see with the Mermaid (“The Mermaid”), she assumes what is hers, be it considered positive or negative.

## 2. BRIEF COMMENTARY ON ANNE BANNERMAN'S LIFE AND WORK

Because she is virtually unknown in current literary circles, we thought it would be interesting to briefly pause and comment on Anna Bannerman's life and work so that this article can also function as an introductory tool for anyone interested in seeking more information about the Scottish poet. Like another British author barely known nowadays, Charlotte Dacre (1771/2-1825),<sup>5</sup> Bannerman situated her works in the same tradition as Matthew Lewis (1775-1818), Gothic author known for the sensual and transgressive content of his novel and play, so that, of course, her critical reception would not be so different from that of Dacre's, who was also influenced by Lewis's sexual excesses and blasphemies. However, there is a difference between these two women authors. According to Craciun (2003, p. 156), Bannerman's poetic texts, unlike those of Dacre's novels, seem more invested in Lewis's and Ann Radcliffe's (1764-1823) characteristic Gothic ambiguity and obscurity, as well as in the supernatural, which "help account for Dacre's publishing success as a novelist, and Bannerman's commercial failure as a poet". That is to say that the society of Bannerman's time, highly invested in novels of sexual adventures such as those of Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), Lewis and Dacre, did not share the same enthusiasm towards the aesthetic aspects of the Gothic infiltrated in Bannerman's poetry, which seems to explain the disinterest and lack of editorial success of her poetry.

Even her date of birth is a mystery, and researchers who have tried to shed light on the subject, Craciun and Katie Lister,<sup>6</sup> for example, have different answers to the same questions. As shown by the efforts of Lister's and Matthew Heilman's (2017) researches, based on Craciun's (2003, p. 272) statement that Bannerman would have been born in 1765, we adopt the date suggested by the first two, that would be some year around the 1780s, as correspondence between friends and critical texts of the time imply.

Her lack of commercial success, however, did not reflect on the critical reception of her work. Her first volume of poetry, *Poems* (1800), was dedicated to the influential

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5 English author of some volumes of poetry and Gothic romances. More in line with the writing of Marquis de Sade and Matthew Lewis, her work, at the time, was dismissed as scandalous and unfit for a woman's pen, despite the success of her most celebrated work, *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806). Among the recurring themes of her works are demonic lovers, death, passion, and transgressive and vengeful women.

6 In "Femmes fatales and Fatal Females: Anne Bannerman's *The Prophecy of Merlin*", in *The Survival Myth* (2010).

researcher Robert Anderson, important figure in the Scottish literary milieu at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Robert even boosted Bannerman's initial literary career by publishing her first poems, under the pseudonym Augusta, in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, "Sonnet V" and "Sonnet VII", that reappeared in her first volume of poetry. *Poems* was well-received critically and contains a series of extended poems, original odes and sonnets, as well as two sonnet sequences based on Petrarch and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), by Goethe.

Bannerman's second volume of poetry, the Gothic ballads of *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802), published anonymously, on the other hand, did not receive as much critical praise, but both volumes were revised, gathered and republished in only one, alongside a few original poems, in *Poems, A New Edition* (1807), dedicated to Lady Charlotte Rawdon,<sup>7</sup> in an attempt, at Anderson's suggestion, of earning money and supporting herself as a professional writer (HEILMAN, 2017, p. viii). About *Tales*, Sir Walter Scott, in 1830, made the following comment in "Essays on Imitations of the Ancient Ballads":

Miss Anne Bannerman likewise should not be forgotten, whose *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* appeared about 1802. They were perhaps too mystical and too abrupt; yet if it be the purpose of this kind of ballad poetry powerfully to excite the imagination, without pretending to satisfy it, few persons have succeeded better than this gifted lady, whose volume is peculiarly fit to be read in a lonely house by a decaying lamp. (n.p.)<sup>8</sup>

Those three volumes of poetry, in addition to a large number of poems published in periodicals, encompass Bannerman's literary production. With the unsuccessful attempt of republishing her poetry, the impoverished Bannerman was forced to find other means of livelihood and became a governess. Her poetry, despite being forgotten, is rich in themes relevant to its time and also poses challenges to critical

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7 Lady Charlotte Adelaide Constantia Rawdon (1769-1834), daughter of Sir John Rawdon, first Earl of Moira. She was acquainted with Walter Scott and Maria Edgeworth.

8 The comment appears in the fourth edition of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, that traces stories and accomplishments of Scottish poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Available at Walter Scott Digital Archive, Edinburgh University Library: <http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/works/poetry/apology/contents.html>

trends established in relation to the Gothic, since Bannerman infiltrates her poems, not her novels, with Gothicisms. Besides that, as Craciun calls our attention to in the book we have mentioned earlier, the Scottish poet also challenges gender issues in women's writing in British Romanticism. Aside from the vengeful *femme fatale* in her poetry, Bannerman also uses melancholy in her sonnets to emphasize the limited choices women had throughout history, as well as to criticise the Catholic church, the chivalric code, and marriage (notably, in the poems "The Nun" and "The Murcian Cavalier"). She did not shy away from involvement with more politically poignant themes, such as her critical commentary on Britain's connection to the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815), focusing on the war's effects on the lives of widows, mothers and veterans (HEILMAN, 2017, p. v). Besides her lyrical work, Bannerman was also translator of French and Italian, having worked with texts by Francesco Petrarca, Antonio Allamanni, and Jean-Baptiste Rousseau.

As mentioned earlier, Bannerman was caught in a difficult economic situation, especially after her mother's demise in 1803, which interrupted her income. Anderson, in a letter to Thomas Percy, describes his concern in relation to "poor Miss Bannerman" and her financial issues:

Her health is at all times so uncertain and so ill-prepared to stand such a shock as it has been exposed to, that my fears are great; but when to her uncertain health I add [...] her total inability, from health and inclination, to pursue the ordinary means by which those of her sex are usually enabled to secure a livelihood, – her entire want of relations, for I do not know that she ever saw one who is entitled to that name, – I will acknowledge that my fears rise to painful height. (ANDERSON, [1988], p. 140)

The ordinary means by which those of her sex were able to secure a livelihood, it seems to us to be Anderson's suggestion, would be through marriage, something Bannerman avoided throughout her life, having died, in 1829, still single.

### 3. THE VENGEFUL WOMAN FIGURATION IN "THE MERMAID" AND "THE DARK LADIE"

When we think about the vengeful woman figuration we must keep in mind some aspects. That is to say, besides the possible and eventual differences between one character and the other, there are similarities that link them, we have seen, to a long list of women



who place themselves outside the binary gender game. It is our goal here, both as a general effort to historicise the vengeful woman figuration as well as to expand her list of characters in literature, to demonstrate that the same century that produced the Angel in the House was haunted by her unfolding, her darker sister, the Demon in the House.

In the poem “The Mermaid”, published in Bannerman’s first volume of poetry, *Poems*, the author makes the effort of introducing it with a Danish legend published in the *Rambler*, number 187 (December, 1751) that tells the story of “Ajut and Anningait”. Anningait is a woman whose beloved, having undertaken a sea voyage, has not returned home, so she sets out across the seas in search of him. Developing her poetic imagination, Bannerman takes us to one of the few first-person poems of that collection in which she introduces us to a mermaid. And precisely because she is a mermaid, a mythical figure, Bannerman’s character is immediately included in the list of monstrous feminines, but, as we will see over the next paragraphs, her retaliation earns her a place alongside the vengeful women.

Craciun (2003, p. 176) describes the narrative voice of “The Mermaid” as “both feminine and fatal”. We are initially introduced to a chaotic, turbulent nature that seems to reflect the Mermaid’s internal state. Images of “death-fraught whirlwinds”, “troubled waves”, “impenetrable clouds” with a “desolating force” (1-10) dominate the first stanza, in which the narrative voice, describing the state of affairs, says that “My solitary watch I keep” (7). It is from this extremely Gothic image of a violent and Burkean sublime that we are introduced to a female character whose strength is motivated by vengeance.

We soon discover that the reason for such turmoil lies “Within [the] caves” (12), her beloved, a lost love that she laments eternally: “And day and night alike shall fail,/ Ere slumber lock my streaming eyes” (13-14). Back to the *Rambler’s* legend, unlike Annigait, who scours the seas in search of her beloved, the Mermaid actually wants to cause absolute destruction and suffering in others. Having lost a loved one was the trigger for choosing to retire to a remote place (“Mine was the choice, in this terrific form,/ To brave the icy urge, to shiver in the storm”, 19-20), but there is also where she can fulfil her revenge. Contrary to what can be expected (or imposed) from the behaviour of a widow, to withdraw into herself, the Mermaid seeks to project herself into a world of chaos, a world dominated by storms, to become Circe, a sorceress, and to attract men only to reveal them for what they really are: potentially weak.

The Mermaid begins the third stanza by announcing “Yes! I am chang’d. – My heart, my soul,/ Retain no more their former glow” (21-22). What the Mermaid seems to have abdicated, by claiming to be changed, “heart” and “soul”, is a feminine that

incarcerates her in a behaviour of passivity, domesticity and immanence: if mourning for losing her lover should be paralysing, she uses it as a catalyst for anger and hatred and transforms it into vengeance. Her mission, in that chaotic place, was “To lure the sailor to his doom” (26), which she does as follows: “I pour the syren-song of woe;/ As, faint and worn with toil, he lays down to die” (29-30). Mermaids and nymphs in Greek mythology are known for their power to enthrall men with their singing, usually causing shipwrecks, so that Bannerman’s Mermaid, assuming this characteristic, joins the list of vengeful women that we have detailed earlier in this article. Therefore, she becomes a monstrous, ambiguous and potentially dangerous figure who embodies seduction and destruction in the same body, a body that desires (even if it is death) and acts in accordance with that passion.

For Heilman (2017, p. xcii), the fact that the Mermaid lures men to their death has to do with a “temporary and misguided satisfaction knowing that others will grieve just as she has done”. He also states that the character is jealous and, therefore, wants to cause pain to other women. We understand that Heilman is short-sighted to see that, in fact, what the Mermaid desires, above all suffering she may cause, is absolute destruction. Men are just a consequence of a desire that “On the sad earth, and in the stormy sea,/ all, all shall shudd’ring own your potent agency” (59-60). It turns out, as one would expect when it comes to a vengeful woman, that the potent agency the Mermaid claims actually comes from a place of annihilation. The destruction of a structure that causes her pain, be it psychic pain of loss, as it is hers, or, we will see with the Dark Ladie, a pain of having been imprisoned and forbidden to live freely.

It is in the fourth and fifth stanzas that we discover the pleasure the Mermaid feels in causing the death of the sailors, especially when she sees them succumb to their fear of dying: “I lend new fury to the blast;/ I mark each hardy cheek grow pale,/ And the proud sons of courage fail;” (36-38). Her vengeance, which comes riding the waves, finally brings the sounds of death (46-50). It is when she “scatter[s] death” (61) that, the Mermaid tells us, “My soul, within this icy sea,/ Fulfils her fearful destiny” (65-66) and, thus, she concludes:

Thro’ time’s long ages I shall wait  
To lead the victim to their fate.  
With callous heart, to hidden rocks decoy,  
And lure, in seraph-strains, unpitying, to destroy.  
(67-70)

Her mission is, we have seen, to lure men to her chaotic island where she leads them to their death. The picture, though turbulent, is static: the Mermaid will remain there through the long ages of time following the same calling. In her analysis of the poem, Craciun tells us that “The Mermaid” is a supernatural ode sung by a mermaid-poet whose “very existence as poet figure challenges any assumption that the demonic or Satanic poet is consistently male, and that mermaids are simply object of male fear and desire” (2003, p. 177). Bannerman, by creating this character, seems to respond to the calling of the vengeful woman and also destabilises statements that are made in relation to the role of this type of figuration in literature as merely hypersexualized. She shows us a mermaid who, at the height of her “potent agency”, chooses to create chaos and to avenge herself, be it against the seas, men or the Universe, for having lost something that belonged to her. Instead of being trapped in a state of pity, she, in turn, engages in absolute destruction.

The other poem we have selected to analyse in this article, “The Dark Ladie”, was published in Bannerman’s second volume of poetry, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802). Before we dive into the poem, it is interesting to note that it is a response to “Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie”, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Coleridge is a renowned Romantic poet, and his “Introduction” appeared for the first time in 1799 in *The Morning Post*, and was republished in 1800 in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, one month before the publication of Bannerman’s poem-response, that itself includes a footnote directing the reader to Coleridge’s poem. “Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie” was revised and published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), when it surfaces with the simplified title “Love”.

In “Introduction”, the narrator tells the story of the “cruel wrongs” that “Befel the Dark Ladie” (15-16) in an attempt of, by the end and using a didactic of lived experience, seduce his virginal beloved Genevieve. According to Craciun (2003, p. 164), “Coleridge’s poem uses the Belle Dame as valuable pawn in a masculine economy [...] in order to seduce his virginal beloved, also a figure of male fantasy”. What he eventually fulfils, the narrative voices tells us: “I calm’d her fears, and she was calm,/ And told her love with virgin pride,/ And so I won my Genevieve,/ My bright and beauteous bride” (117-120). The Romantic poet apparently wrote “The Ballad of the Dark Ladie” in 1798 (it was published only in 1834), the story that narrates what the “Introduction” precedes. It portrays the traditional ballad narrative of a woman betrayed by a knight to whom she gave “what I can ne’er recall” (30), and which ends with her fantasy of a wedding that will never happen.

Bannerman responds to this picture with her sister-poem, “The Dark Ladie”. However, instead of introducing us to a simply victimised woman deceived by a knight, she puts forward, in a suspenseful atmosphere, an imposing woman who punishes the men around her. The poem begins mentioning the knights who returned from the Holy Land, which historically places the text in a medieval period of Christian Crusades and attributes to the Ladie, as we will see more deeply in the following pages, the status of a foreigner, an outsider. In this poem, Bannerman creates yet another dialogue with previous texts, this time with *The Faerie Queenie* (1590), by Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), when she names the leader of these knights Sir Guyon, who in the Spenserian poem embodies Temperance. For Heilman (2017, p. 116), “Bannerman’s choice of Sir Guyon for the poem is especially ironic since the Dark Ladie reveals the knight to be irresponsible and indulgent rather than virtuous or restrained”. Reunited in the castle for a banquet, the “straining eyes” of Sir Guyon strike fear in the guests, who remain “breathless” (14; 17) waiting for his movements. However, the leader is interrupted by a figure that, despite being extremely silent, is capable of causing even more terror in the spectators.

“A Ladie, clad in ghastly white,/ And veiled to the feet” (25-26) appears. This ghostly apparition does not speak during her entrance, nor during the banquet, but was somehow the centre of attention: “every knight, in chill amaze/ Survey’d her one by one” (29-30). The scene is described as follows:

For thro’ the foldings of her veil,  
Her long black veil that swept the ground,  
A light was seen to dart from her eyes  
That mortal never own’d.  
(31-34)

The Ladie, voiceless, becomes an ambiguously supernatural figure, perhaps even a spectre. With the long veil that confuses her materiality and with laser-like eyes that shed light on her offenders, above all Sir Guyon, her captor, she seems to be, in fact, a ghost, haunting the knights in the castle. However, as is characteristic not only of the Gothic but of monstrous figures, despite being frightening, she does not fail to inspire a fearful admiration, a dangerous curiosity, as she leads the spectator to the imminent threat of seeing oneself in her presence, since the

knights, unable to gather their gaze, remain there, sustaining hers: “Still kept them mute with awe!” (42).

The action of vengeance in the poem begins when the *Ladie*, firm in her silence (perhaps because she does not speak the foreign language?) gets up from the table during the banquet when the clock strikes midnight. She fills her glass with wine and, as if in a toast, raises it to her guests:

And to the alarmed guests she turn'd,  
No breath was heard, no voice, no sound,  
And in a tone, so deadly deep,  
She pledg'd them all around,  
That in their hearts, and thro' their limbs,  
No pulses could be found.  
(51-56)

Silence is a hallmark in the poem, a lack of sound, a “tone, so deadly deep”, that is actually ravishing. The men, completely shocked by the sight of that woman in mourning and wrapped in a black veil, lose consciousness and when they finally recover, find her no longer in sight. What follows is the *Dark Ladie's* revenge. For Craciun (2003, p. 165), “Bannerman's *Dark Ladie* imprisons her captor and a succession of men like him in the very castle in which he sought to imprison her, by compelling these knights to repeat the tale of her seduction and destruction”. Like the *Mermaid*, the *Dark Ladie* is *Circe*, powerful in a castle, bewitching men and making them pay the price for the crimes committed against her. In her poem, right after the toast, they are sent to their rooms but they cannot fall asleep since they are haunted by terrible dreams involving the frightening figure of the woman under the veil. The next day, they retell the stories of the once “brave” *Sir Guyon* whom they say grows fearful, turns pale and shudders as he passes in front of a cross (85; 87-88), or saw his face become “livid clay” (93) at hearing the name of Christ. We see, therefore, the passage from the honourable and courageous man to the weak, frightened and haunted man that we are familiar with under the influence of the *Dark Ladie*.

It is also interesting and important to observe that we only know the *Dark Ladie* through the stories that are told about her, which, according to Craciun, is part of her vengeance: she compels these knights to tell the story of how she was seduced and

destroyed by a man whose only wish was to fulfil his desires. Unlike the Mermaid, who is introduced in a first-person poem, everything we know about this veiled woman is mediated by third parties, by men who, fearing the very figure of the Dark Ladie, most likely fantasise the stories about her origins. Thus, we discover through one of the servants of the castle that she haunts Sir Guyon since he brought her to the castle, on a “hazy night” (109):

“But, sometimes, thro’ her curtain’d tower,  
A strange uncolour’d light was seen,  
And something, of unearthly hue,  
Still passed on between:

“And then aloof its clasped hands  
Were wrung, and tossed to and fro!  
And sounds came forth, dull, deep, and wild,  
And O! how deadly slow!

“He quak’d to tell!... But, never more,  
In quiet sleep, he rested long;  
For still, on his alarmed ear,  
    That rousing echo rung!  
(129-136)

We do not know for sure, as we know with the Mermaid, what reasons lay behind the Dark Ladie’s vengeance, so that, just as the knights conjecture, we must gather the puzzle pieces left by Bannerman in order to guess the origins of this character. Hence her supernatural aspect is so marked: unlike the Mermaid, who is supernatural par excellence, the Dark Ladie makes an effort to subscribe to a Gothic arsenal because her simple condition as a woman, although familiar to the Gothic, would not place her on that level. It is necessary to make her a ghostly, frightening figure, devourer of men, a sorceress. What feeds and is also fed by her status as an outsider: covered by a black veil, brought from the Holy Land during the Crusades, this character seems to belong, in fact, to another religion and to be racialised as Muslim – here the title of the poem also takes on another meaning and may refer, therefore, to the possible non-

white complexion of the Ladie. In this context, her craving for vengeance can be more than a simple personal retaliation, but also her desire to pay back the attacks suffered by her country and her culture. As a consequence, she is, Craciun argues, an impossibility, “a feminine, exoticized object that not only resists and foregrounds her objectification through her multiple veils, but returns it by reducing the (male colonial) subjects of the gaze to the silent and immobile objects” (2003, p. 167).

Through the knights and servant, we learn that Sir Guyon’s attempts to see her under the veil have all failed: “Till once! but O! that glaring eye,/ It dried the life-blood, working here!/  
And when he turn’d to look again,/ The Ladie was not near!” (121-124). Seeing her under the veil, in addition to causing Sir Guyon’s curse, forever bereaved and bound to the castle, also withered his life-blood, his freedom – the very crime he had committed against her: “It glar’d for ever on his sight,/ That fixed eye, so wildly keen!/  
Till life became a heavy load ;/  
And long had heavy been” (137-140). From the fabulous stories invented and retold about the Dark Ladie, we know that she might have left a home, husband and child behind; however, as it is not possible to say with certainty, we do not know if she did it by choice or by force when she is kidnapped by Sir Guyon – the latter, however, seems more likely if we read her in the category of the vengeful woman, so that her retaliation, of course, comes in response to a crime first committed (the abduction, among others).

Bannerman’s poem ends with several unanswered questions, including “how”, “where”, “why”, “whence”, leaving us, as contemporary critics pointed out, hostages of our imagination. Rather than giving us answers and containing her stories in themselves, Bannerman opens the world up to our poetic imagination and allows us to reflect on the motives that lie behind the Dark Ladie’s revenge, as well as her future days. Regarding her vengeance, we must note that its merit is not found in chasing men around the castle or drowning them, but eternally tormenting them in the same agonising repetition she is stuck in. Her act of revenge, however, displaces her from the part of victim, the violated figure, and slots her in a situation of causing fear, of being the violator, the one who attacks and succeeds, at the height of her “potent agency”, at exercising the sovereignty of her dignity.

When it comes to desexualization, both these monstrous lyrical female subjects flirt with features that are commonly associated with male characters. Their violence and subsequent vengeance reflect that *desire* and *action* connected to the desexualized woman, aspects uncommon when we discuss women’s wants and needs. Because they transcend not only the semantic field but the psychic one as well of what is considered to define a woman, they rebel against the limitations imposed on their class and revel in

a more free, unrestricted, and rizhomatic experience of an enlarged feminine, and thus can live and explore a more positive encounter with their selves.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Vengeful women, common in the Western imagination, as we have already seen, do not act out of simple spite but always in response to a crime first committed against them, either directly, as is the case of the Dark Ladie, or more indirectly, as with the Mermaid. It is the English philosopher and essayist Sir Francis Bacon who tells us, back in the sixteenth century, in “On Revenge” (*Essays*, 1597), that “revenge is a type of wild justice” and he adds that despite being reprehensible “the type more tolerable of revenge is those of errors that escape the law” (2005, p. 35). Therefore, revenging oneself, even if censurable, is acceptable when the offender, the one who first committed the crime, escapes the reach of justice. Taking the law into one’s own hands, practicing that kind of wild justice, is sometimes the only way to get payback. How could the Mermaid get justice against a force that killed her beloved, a force we do not know about? Or how could the Dark Ladie, a racialised other who has an extremely significant silence, be compensated by a man who possibly kidnapped her and imprisoned her in a distant, foreign land? Vengeance, in these cases, becomes the only way to act against an oppressive force that knows no opposition, except that marked, throughout history and in an insistent and consistent way, by women.

It is therefore crucial to think of these women in terms of their revenge, as the figuration’s name implies, but also in terms of their violence and, of course, their monstrosity. Woman has long been associated with the monstrous, dehumanised to the extent that she differentiates herself from what is considered the prototypical, universal human: man. Therefore, in order to tie the idea of the amalgamation between vengeance, monstrosity and woman, we bring Monteiro’s thoughts on these aspects:

If women were always considered evil or monstrous, sexual predators or, considering all those features, morbid figures, it is high time these characteristics are appropriated to their benefit, as power: vengeance and transformation. Vengeance in the sense of looking for what belongs to them, ripping it out of the world. How many women are, up to today, killed for being afraid, whereas the main character and the resurrected women [in *Mulheres Empilhadas* (PATRICIA MELO, 2019)] here are the ones provoking fear, a vengeance that does not aim at repetition, but, instead, above all, at taking hold of power and negating fear. (MONTEIRO, 2021, p. 14-15)



This type of morbid figure, besides being recurrent in Gothic poetics, is also frequently present in Anne Bannerman's poems. Perhaps this is the reason, along with her proto-feminist, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements, which pushed her towards literary obscurity. Her poems, not always exactly closed in on themselves, are still marked, according to Craciun (2003, p. 180) by "poets/destroyers [as] social figures [who] are fundamentally asocial at the same time, because of the ease with which they sweep away the innocent and the guilty alike". In both poems analysed here there is no social order to which one can return to at the end, but always chaos or torment, the turbulence of a world that harms women and therefore has to deal with the consequences of their actions.

In this key, it is interesting to observe how Bannerman embodies the figuration of the vengeful woman, which, in the nineteenth century, also gains strength in the novel, as is the case with Victoria di Loredani (*Zofloya, or the Moor*, Charlotte Dacre, 1806), Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*, William M. Thackeray, 1848) and Lady Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862), for example. If that century is infested with this type of figuration it is not because it was concerned with the liberation of the female body but, on the contrary, it is a response to a desire of controlling sex, especially when one keeps in mind the advances that the fight for women's civil and political rights were pleading at the time. What texts like Bannerman's show us is that the same forces that produced conduct manuals for women and the Angel in the House, like a return current, also cause the effect of being responsible for generating a feminine that, taken over by the "potent agency" of the Mermaid, is marked by vengeance, violence and desexualization as a measure of liberation.

## (DES)FIGURANDO O FEMININO: A FIGURAÇÃO DA MULHER VINGATIVA NA POESIA DE ANNE BANNERMAN

### RESUMO

Este artigo detém-se na apresentação de dois poemas da obscurecida poeta escocesa Anne Bannerman, "The Mermaid" (1800) e "The Dark Ladie" (1802), como expoentes do que chamamos de figuração da mulher vingativa, representação recorrente nos anos oitocentos britânicos. Tratam-se de personagens que usam a violência como ferramenta de vingança, o que as leva, numa perspectiva pós-gênero, à dessexualização. Assim, *unsexed*, são capazes de

livrarem-se de um feminino limitante e restritivo em direção a uma experiência mais dispersa, rizomática, capaz de englobar os diferentes femininos existentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mulher vingativa. Anne Bannerman. Gótico. Poesia.

(DES)FIGURANDO LO FEMENINO: LA FIGURACIÓN DE LA MUJER VENGATIVA EN LA POESÍA DE ANNE BANNERMAN

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en la presentación de dos poemas de la oscura poeta escocesa Anne Bannerman, “The Mermaid” (1800) y “The Dark Ladie” (1802), como exponentes de lo que llamamos la figuración de la mujer vengativa, una representación recurrente en los años ochocientos británicos. Se tratan de personajes que utilizan la violencia como herramienta de venganza, lo que las lleva, en una perspectiva posgénero, a la desexualización. Así, *unsexed*, son capaces de deshacerse de un femenino limitante y restrictivo hacia una experiencia rizomática más dispersa, que abarca diferentes femininos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Mujer vengativa. Anne Bannerman. Gótico. Poesía.

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Submetido em 12 de setembro de 2023

Aprovado em 02 de dezembro de 2023

Publicado em 28 de janeiro de 2024

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