

**LADY INTO FOX (DAVID GARNETT, 1922):
UN-WEAVING A TAILOR-MADE GENDER
OR
RE-TAMING THE SHREW?**

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Abstract: *One day, while going for a walk with her husband, the young Mrs Tebrick turns into a fox. At first, they both try to keep things the way they were. The lady-fox dresses, drinks tea and plays cards with her husband until she breaks herself free of conventions and opts for a wild life in the forest which Mr Tebrick apparently accepts, claiming an unchanged marital love. One wonders though whether this metamorphosis sincerely unwinds the tailor-made gender Mrs Tebrick had to endorse in her marriage and whether Mr Tebrick's full freedom of speech honestly echoes an agonistic discourse revealing injustice, a courageous parrhesiastic protest against compulsory gendered structures, Parrhesia being, according to Foucault, a "transhistorical possibility we have" to speak up against the powerful. In other words: Is David Garnett critically re-gendering "The Shrew", un-weaving a tailor-made gender, or simply re-taming her anew for a XXth century readership?*

Keywords: *Gender, Melancholia, Metamorphosis, inner Nomadism, Subversiveness.*

"La bestialisation de l'homme et l'hominisation de l'animal"

Humanimalités, Michel Surya

1. Introduction

Lady into Fox is an epic poem telling, at first sight, the story of one single metamorphosis, the metamorphosis of a lady, Mrs. Tebrick, changing into a fox while going for a walk with her husband. At first, they both try to keep things the way they were until she breaks herself free of conventions and opts for a wild life in the forest which Mr. Tebrick apparently accepts, claiming an unchanged marital love until she dies, killed by hunters. The term of 'epic poem' has been deliberately chosen: 'epic' because it makes us think beyond our

human condition and “beyond any living memory” (Meyer 2005:2128). It therefore desorientates us and while being desorientated, we more easily and successfully interrogate the socially-sanctioned norm. ‘Poem’ because poems have an extraordinary subversive power, the power to move, disturb and transform us in the most beautiful way. Moreover, the poet, like the mystic, is – as Jérôme de Gramont said at a conference in France a few years ago, quoting Stanislas Breton (Colloque de Cerisy, 2011) – “l’ange des métamorphoses”, the angel of metamorphoses (Vercruysse 2016:15).

Lady into Fox seems indeed – at first read – to limit itself to one single metamorphosis BUT when re-reading it, one clearly sees that the characters undergo various types of metamorphoses: within species, genders, sexes, sexual and textual (re)orientations. They glide into reversals, into chiasmic inversions. And this falling into subversive schemata is worth analyzing for it de-colonizes a socially programmed perception and unties mental knots. All these elements offered by the text are like woven fabrics awaiting to be unwoven by alert readers. “To weave (*tramer, trameare*) is to make holes, to traverse, to work one-side-and-the-other of the warp” (Derrida 1982:28). Therefore, weaving and unweaving benefit from the porosity of the warp. *Poros* – in Greek – is the passage into, something the metamorphosis inevitably depends upon (Vercruysse 2016:15). Yet, in order to detach itself from the body it has moved into and to march over to something new, a soul has to be melancholic, for the power it needs to engage into a metamorphosis has to be generated by something strong, like the angst at the core of melancholia (Pigeaud 2008:249). Lycanthropy, when beings abandon their human condition and move into a wolfish state, is said to be the metamorphosis par excellence and thus the most extreme form of melancholy, the most intense inner voyage (Pigeaud 2008:249), a form of inner nomadism (Vercruysse 2016:73): «Le nomade, ce n’est pas forcément quelqu’un qui bouge: il y a des voyages sur place, des voyages en intensité... » (Deleuze 1973:174).

2.1 Translating the human body into animality

In *Lady into Fox*, Silvia Tebrick turns into a fox, not into a wolf, but the fox is, like the wolf, an animal of the dog family. What matters above all is that her human body is translated into animality and that this translation is pre-announced and reinforced by an identity and a social-status crash, a brutal descent. Indeed the Lady mentioned on the cover rapidly becomes Mrs. Tebrick, Mr. Tebrick’s wife, then Miss Silvia, then Silvia, then his wife, then his vixen. No more name, just a “his”, no matter whether wife or vixen, thus stressing a complete loss of autonomy. Before the metamorphosis takes place, we are even told that her maiden name was... FOX! This of course, being her father’s name, points out to a pre-marital Canon led, later on

in the text, by another male authority figure: her uncle, a cleric called Canon Fox. What is interesting is that this translation into animality remains – at first – unfinished, reversible, porous, and therefore highly melancholic. As a matter of fact, Mr. Tebrick tries very hard to bring his vixen back to being a woman (Garnett 2013:39). He even shoots his dog, a fox-terrier, thus indirectly killing the fox in her. And for a while the already transfigured Mrs. Tebrick preserves her manners and to have manners is – etymologically speaking – to have a hand, *manus*, and to have a hand is to have at least one human attribute. At the same time, the metamorphosis threatens to cast its spell on Mr. Tebrick too who is “entirely unmanned” – that is deprived of his male attributes – by his wife’s transformation (Garnett 2013:30). After having drunk rather heavily, he even behaves in a “beastly” way (Garnett 2013:36) and, moreover, Mrs. Tebrick wonders whether she could get him to be like a beast or to act like one, whether it might be easier to change him rather than change herself back into a woman (Garnett 2013:39). Animality and “humanity” encroach upon one another, at least in the first third of the novel.

2.2 Twisting socially-ordained codes

When calling the inter-gender transfiguration, or gender subversiveness, to our mind, we see that *Lady into Fox* does twist gender-specific socially-ordained codes. The first one to be affected by this anamorphic device is the dress code. Right after her metamorphosis, Silvia Tebrick insists on wearing her usual clothes: “She came forth dragging her dressing-gown, into which she had somehow struggled” (Garnett 2013:8). Then she grows “reluctant to let [her husband] wash and brush” and dress her (Garnett 2013:28) and he starts calling her “a bad wild fox”, asking her if she is not “ashamed” of her conduct. She then “begins tearing off her clothes, and at last by biting got off her little jacket and taking it in her mouth stuffed it into a hole in the ice where he could not get it. She ran hither and thither [as] a stark naked vixen” (Garnett 2013:34). Her progressive abandoning of the social dress codes forged for women results into her being naked. As long as she was dressed, she barely left the house so that we had a dressed fox indoors. As soon as she gets rid of her clothes, she starts leaving the house so that we have a naked fox outside. A fox is, of course, normally naked and lives outside. Yet, at that point, her husband still sees her as his (human) wife and socially-sanctioned roles usually repress nakedness when it features outside the private sphere. As soon as one steps out, one has to be dressed, women even more so. This means that, in Garnett’s text, the woman camouflages herself as a fox to transgress the gender-specific codes. “Camouflaged as a fox” [my phrasing] insinuates that she might actually not be a proper fox. As a matter of fact, her old nanny, Mrs.

Cork, who comes back into the house to take care of her, does hint at a possible disguise when saying to Mr. Tebrick: “whatever she looks like, you should trust her the same as ever. If you do she’ll do her best to be a good wife to you, if you don’t I shouldn’t wonder if she did turn into a proper fox” (Garnett 2013:38). Mrs. Cork is an in-between character, a lucid seer opening eyes, uncorking the Doings and the Undoings of the people she is closely related to.

The verbal and nonverbal codes should also be taken into consideration. Women are often assigned to two main vocal categories: “the good silent woman” on the one hand and “the bad vocal shrew” on the other (Berry 1999:10). Mrs. Tebrick is a “good silent woman” once she has become a fox as if her metamorphosis were a way to prove the uselessness of human logos. It is interesting nevertheless to note that she cries out loudly twice: first when she turns into a fox (Garnett 2013:5) and secondly when she is killed as a vixen (Garnett 2013:90). In other words, Mrs. Tebrick’s screaming voice frames the narrative even if it is not entirely clear whether THE voice, on the day of the killing, was hers or Mr. Tebrick’s (Garnett 2013:90). However, the fact that the metamorphosis and the killing both take place on a hunting day unveils a most significant clue when brought back into the context of two interesting theories: the first one, elaborated by Carlo Ginzburg in the eighties, links the hunt to the origin of writing (Vercruysse 2016:278). The prints left by animals and hunters might have given birth to the first signs of the first alphabet (Ginzburg 1980:14). This theory was later abandoned and replaced by another one linking the hunt, to the origin of language. According to it, the prey always cries out loud to warn its fellow animals within the forest community (Jousset 2007:39). Both theories attest to the existence of a written and oral proto-form of language. On the first and last day of her metamorphosis, Mrs. Tebrick might have used it to warn the women community. If her being a fox or a vixen automatically puts human language on hold, her wordlessness does not impede the manifestation of her impatience. She turns into an anti-Griselda par excellence, exuberantly disobeying her husband as soon and as often as she can as if she had to compensate for the lack of words. Doing so, she ignores the rules assigned to the female-gender. She even goes as far as “un-gendering” them and herself. She solely expresses herself by “looks and signs” (Garnett 2013:14) and stares “as if she spoke” (Garnett 2013:5). The gaze aborts dialogues and stifles the rhetoric of morality of the male counterpart. Most of all, it reintroduces an equal and simultaneous level of communication as two people can gaze at one another at the same time, without obstructing comprehension, whereas they cannot speak to one another simultaneously if they want to be understood. Besides, the more Mrs. Tebrick withdraws into mutism and indulges into intense scopic contact, the more Mr. Tebrick goes vocal. He weeps, shouts, and speaks as though HE was becoming the vocal shrew, thus

deconstructing the classical *topos* of women as chatterers. There would be several other examples galvanizing the twisting of gender-specific socially-ordained codes: for instance, how the Lady Fox substitutes her eating, sleeping, playing, reading, praying habits with wild outside activities. In due time, we shall come back to one former habit which in a further stage of the story is unsuccessfully but meaningfully reintroduced.

2.3 Re-orientating sex and text

Let us now turn to sexual mutations and subdued sexual (re)orientations. As already mentioned, Mr. Tebrick seems to have been unmanned by his wife's metamorphosis, as though he had suddenly and violently been robbed of his maleness. One might even go as far as to assert that he turned female before reverting to his biological masculinity since he and his wife are said, at one point, not be of "opposite sexes" (Garnett 2013:54). They look like malleable and interchangeable organic substances, reminding us of the permutable entities within Hermaphrodites. But the most stunning sexual mutation is the one Mrs. Tebrick undergoes: a woman turns into a fox, a male animal, then into a vixen, a female animal, then again into a fox, then once more into a vixen. Sexual identities are unstable, unfixed. One keeps switching between biological attributes and what was assigned at birth is suddenly extended in adulthood.

As far as sexual orientation is concerned, we hear at one point – a one-off instance – about Mrs. Tebrick's possible homosexuality. Her uncle Canon Fox, THE cleric Canon Fox, confesses to Mr. Tebrick that he had always said to himself that "*the queer girl* [my emphasis], his niece, must have married him because he was the first man she had met" (Garnett 2013:76). Yet, this statement might rather serve to reveal Garnett's own bisexuality. He did attach importance to letting readers know about it. Otherwise he would not have officially asked his second wife to do the engravings and he would not have dedicated the story to Duncan Grant, his lover at the time. He also seemed very much inclined to exhibit his own life within the text, occasionally inserting autobiographical elements, openly using the 'I' form and his real identity: "...[someone] told me that David Garnett was dead and died of being bitten by a cat after he had tormented it" (Garnett 2013:42). It might well be the case that while doing so, he simply applied a coat of self-consciousness to his writing, reflecting on the artificiality of the fiction/life divide. If this does fall within the remit of pure speculation, the collision of autobiographical and fictional elements does clearly send the reader off the beaten track, distracting him/her, making him/her think differently and this indirectly serves the cause of subversiveness, a subversiveness Garnett's text is very keen to implement when regularly offering detour readings through a number of narratological twists. If most of the subordinate

clauses do start with “as if”, “if”, “even if” or “had he known that...”, thus rendering the narrative plainly hypothetical and always subject to conditions and changes, they also occasionally switch to causality or restriction, redundantly using other conjunctions like “for” or “though”/ “although”, in order to bring one back to a more rational and realistic track. Therefore, the text constantly redraws its semantic path, oscillating between what is and what might be and warning us not to rely on appearances. Like Mr. Tebrick who is “torn between two thoughts, neither of which did he completely believe” (Garnett 2013:66), we should remain sceptical while reading.

2.4 Altering and freeing the vision

It is now time to come back to one of the former habitual activities of Mrs. Tebrick which is unsuccessfully but meaningfully reintroduced twenty pages before the end: namely looking through a stereoscope. A stereoscope is “a device for viewing a (stereoscopic) pair of separate images, depicting left-eye and right-eye views of the same scene, as a single three-dimensional image” (Collins 1989:1275). In other words, two different views of one single scene are brought together in order to give birth to a new third dimension. Looking through the stereoscope was apparently something Mr. and Mrs. Tebrick used to do together before the metamorphosis. Once transformed, the Fox-Lady leads her husband to a very animal-like cabinet, a “tortoiseshell” cabinet, where the stereoscope is kept, and after having released it from its cabinet detention, Mr. Tebrick adjusts it to her vision (Garnett 2013:33). Weeks or months later, he brings it to the forest where she lives with her foxy family and she immediately rejects it, “she would not look through it”, (Garnett 2013:71). If we now reflect on this series of happenings and recapitulate the scenes, we realise that we first have the two of them looking through the stereoscope simultaneously, indoors, then the freshly mutated Mrs. Tebrick on her own, also indoors, then Mr. Tebrick manouvering the equipment on his own, this time outside the house, in the forest. Therefore, instead of having first – let us say – the left-eye of one single person viewing one scene, then the right-eye of the same person viewing the very same scene and finally both eyes doing it together, reunited in one single three-dimensional image, we have here, first, two pairs of eyes, then one pair, then another pair, which means that instead of adding eyes, one subtracts eyes and that the stereoscope is, thus, a device working both ways, irrespective of the number of eyes looking through it. It can therefore be seen as a metaphor for visual togetherness as well as for visual autonomy. If the stereoscope had had no message to deliver, it would not have recurred so often in the story. And it does recur several times both as a word and as an engraving.

2.5 Revisiting maternity

We now come to a nightmarish dream Mr. Tebrick had ten pages before the end. This oniric event throws a new light on the plot. He dreamt that his wife was confessing “to him some crime which she had committed, but he did not catch the broken words, nor did he wish to hear them, for he was dulled by his sorrow [...] At last they sat down, and he spoke, saying: ‘I know they are not my children, but I shall not use them barbarously because of that. You are still my wife. I swear to you they shall never be neglected. I will pay for their education...’” (Garnett 2013:79-80). In this dream, Mrs. Tebrick speaks – as a woman, not as a fox, “in her own proper shape” (Garnett 2013:79) – in order to confess a so-called ‘crime’. We guess, after having read Mr. Tebrick’s version of the dream, that this ‘crime’ could have simply been an extra-marital love affair with another man resulting into a “multiple pregnancy” [my phrasing]. In his daytime reality, Mr. Tebrick reproaches the Fox-Lady to have “prostitute[d] herself to a beast” (Garnett 2013:69), meaning a male fox, and to have given birth to five cubs which he actually treats kindly as though they were his own children. We then wonder whether Mrs. Tebrick was not really telling him this very story when they went for a walk right before she turned into a fox and whether the into-fox transformation could not be seen as a spell thrown by an outraged husband on his adulterous wife. Once “reduced” [my phrasing] to animality, she would have no choice but to expiate her betrayal and assume – on her own – the maternity resulting from it. We however come to the conclusion, no matter how tempting this decrypting key might be, that it did not occur that way because if it had, Mrs. Tebrick would have been pregnant at the time of the metamorphosis, would have given birth to her cubs most probably indoors and would have been unable to free herself from her husband’s domination. But she does succeed in fleeing and only then does she meet a male fox and has cubs. It clearly is a choice made by her. SHE punishes her husband, not the other way round. The nightmarish dream Mr. Tebrick had is nothing but wishful thinking on his part. He would have liked to remain in control and be able to punish her.

Maternity would actually deserve to be more closely investigated. Yet, in order not to evade too much from the issues dealt with in this article, we shall limit ourselves to two remarks. First, maternity is a conscious or unconscious attempt to immortalise oneself. In other words a survival process. The German verb, “sich fortpflanzen”, literally “to plant oneself away”, meaning “to procreate”, would be more than appropriate here for, having had five cubs – which, mysteriously disappear before the hunters appear – is the best way, for the Lady-into-Fox, to plant her wild self away and survive within the forest community. The survival of the cubs, and

indirectly her own survival, had actually been proleptically announced by the term “new earth”, referring to the place where she lives with her cubs. It is not just earth, but new earth as though a kind of utopian new planet or paradise had been constructed to attend to the immortality of the wild animal in her, “they came to another earth”, “after a week or ten days at the new earth” (Garnett 2013:83-85). Secondly, there might be “analogies between mental creation and bodily fecundity” as it was pointed out in ancient times, although “such rhetorical appropriations do [did] not entail the exaltation of femalness and are [were] a clear sign of male authors trying to harness their anxieties about a secret female knowledge” (Dascăl 2013:147). If one cannot but agree with the last part of this statement, one cannot ignore the fact that positive words, spoken and heard, no matter how they were really meant at the time, are always fertile semantic seeds likely to evolve into bigger drops likely to merge into wider oceans serving the woman’s cause at one point or another. Every time positiveness is being planted into a soil, it nurtures it, no matter how time-consuming it might be for subversiveness to emerge and grow. So if maternity in *Lady into Fox* could be seen as a metaphor for mental creation, it would symbolise a female mental strength breaking off the chains of imposed constructs. Adulterous sexuality and maternity would definitely un-chain Mrs. Tebrick’s (re-)taming and sharpen her emancipation before she regains her human shape and “voice”. All this shows that no matter how hard Mr. Tebrick tries to re-tame the woman he might consider to be a shrew, he is bound to fail.

3. Conclusion

Let us conclude with a ‘miracle’, a term used on page 2 to announce the into-fox mutation. A miracle, “something from outside our world altogether” (Garnett 2013:2), is an epiphanic spectacularity illuminating and engendering an unprecedented vision. It makes one see the invisible. Thanks to her miraculous metamorphosis, Mrs. Tebrick might have been blessed with prophetic signs telling her that she would have been even more tightly harnessed by too strict a marital taming had she not mutated into a fox. In other words, she anticipated her gender imprisonment and escaped a male-prescribed destiny, albeit temporarily. If it were so, animality would be nothing but a “non-cloistered form of monasticism” (Dascăl 2007:104, referring to the Beguines) – or inner nomadism – where Mrs Tebrick would enjoy peace of mind, freedom and innocence, cut-off from a male-defined and -dominated way of life, like thousands of women mystics before her.

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