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***From Ekphrasis to Short Story: Carme Riera's Dis(abling) of the Image in Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini and Epítelis tendríssims***  
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FROM EKPHRASIS TO SHORT STORY: CARME  
RIERA'S DIS(ABLING) OF THE IMAGE IN  
*UNA PRIMAVERA PER A DOMENICO GUARINI*  
AND *EPITELIS TENDRÍSSIMS*

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Humorously deviant in their approach to sexuality, the stories in *Epitelis tendríssims* (1982) are the most experimental in Carme Riera's work. Riera suggests these stories are a work in progress when she claims she has to rewrite the collection, "because there are possibilities in them that need to be developed" (Glenn, *Moveable Margins* 47).<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M. Glenn published two different interviews with Carme Riera with the same title, "Conversation with Carme Riera." For this reason, I refer to them separately by indicating, instead of the title, where they were published. These stories, therefore, accomplish what the male protagonist of "La novel·la experimental," published in *Contra l'amor en companyia i altres relats* (1991), describes as the objective of contemporary fiction: "subvertir l'ordre, dinamitar els fonaments" (101). The foundation these stories subvert are precisely those that define the genre of the short story, particularly the parameters that outline its presence. Riera's *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* (1981), published the year before *Epitelis tendríssims*, presents the model to be subverted when it exposes the conventional fashion of image design through an ekphrastic discourse on the "Primavera," a 1478 painting by Sandro Botticelli.<sup>2</sup>

Although in antiquity *ekphrasis* was a term used to refer to any kind of description in a written text, contemporary literary critics limit the term to a description of a visual work of art in a literary text, a verbal representation of a visual representation and a device which gives voice to a mute, frozen, and stilled visual object of art regarded as, James A. W. Heffernan points out in *Museum of Words*, "an image

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M. Glenn published two different interviews with Carme Riera with the same title, "Conversation with Carme Riera." For this reason, I refer to them separately by indicating, instead of the title, where they were published.

<sup>2</sup> Several articles have referred to this painting in Riera's *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* with similar conclusions as regards to its implications for a feminist discourse when they state the painting is a representation or doubling of the novel's protagonist. See Tsuchiya, Cotoner, and Ordoñez. Still, they have yet to identify the references to Botticelli's "Primavera" as an example of the genre of ekphrasis.

typically viewed as female" (108). W.J.T. Mitchell introduced this concept of ekphrasis as gendered in his 1992 article "Ekphrasis and the Other," and specifies further that ekphrasis is an invasion and interference of an external world. In this interference a site appears which resembles a "'black hole' in the verbal structure of a text, an interference entirely absent from the text, but shaping and affecting the text in fundamental ways."<sup>3</sup> This theory of the effect of the image as a "black hole," as a gravitational influence in a literary text, contributes to the concept of Freud and Lacan respectively of woman as castrated, defined as absence, as a negative imprisoned in the realm of the imaginary, of the image as female structured by male language. Mitchell's definition, however, perceives the image as dynamic, fluid, and active, as a threatening force that can affect the literary text with its absence and silence. This interference, Mitchell adds, is what defines ekphrasis as a genre that integrates a dialogical space between semiotic systems, between "rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts" (156). And indeed, Heffernan has surveyed the term historically to note the etymological origin of the term in the Greek *ek* and *phrazein* to signify, "telling in full" (191n), or "speaking out" (6). This meaning of ekphrasis has undoubtedly influenced its function as a genre which traditionally, since the Renaissance, has been defined by theorists and scholars as a genre which gives a mute visual object of art a voice in a literary text. Moreover, based on the attributed capacity to lend a voice to a mute object of art, Murray Krieger states in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* that ekphrasis is the desire of literature for "the pregnant moment" of visual art with its lack of temporal progress and continuity. Wendy Steiner reiterates this desire in *The Rhetoric of Color* as a nostalgia of literature for the spatiality divorced of time contained in visual works of art (42). But Heffernan rightfully disagrees with Krieger and Steiner in his observation that, even though women have been placed in a similar static void as the image, isolated from time and history by a patriarchal gaze that transforms their bodies into an aesthetic existence, ekphrasis reveals the potential dynamic nature of what is considered to be a mere static object: "ekphrasis is dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (5). When ekphrasis attempts to accomplish this task, Heffernan adds, it excites "both 'ekphrastic hope'—the desire for union—and the 'ekphrastic fear' of being silenced, petrified, and thus

<sup>3</sup> "Ekphrasis and the Other," was originally published in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91 (1992): 695-719. I quote from the reprint as chapter in Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, 158.

unmanned by the Medusan 'other'" (108). A threat in the seduction of the verbal Other, the image must therefore be kept silent and controlled in order to avoid the transgression of the image into the domain of narrative, an act that paradoxically contradicts the conventional objective of ekphrasis of giving voice to a mute object of art. But in reference to Keats's canonical example of ekphrasis, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Heffernan underlines the complexity of this mechanism of seduction by the image when he says that the poet "Rather than silencing the virgin artifact... longs to hear it speak, or more precisely to understand what its silence is saying," sensing in the image an inherent talent for speech. And in the anxiety to hear it speak, the poet threatens her with rape, which "for all its silencing brutality... can empower a woman's voice," or one might say, urge her to speak. To illustrate the dynamics of this relationship between the image's ability to silence the verbal by seduction (as in a written text as object in itself to be looked at and read in silence), and the verbal urge to make the image speak through rape (by disciplinary transgression), Heffernan refers to Metamorphoses's Philomena who, raped by Tereus, speaks for the first time when she denounces his brutality. Tereus must then react to the threat by cutting out her tongue, which does not silence her, since she "demonstrates by her weaving that nothing can silence her, that she has learned how to speak through her art" (111).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar present a similar concept of ekphrasis as a gendered genre in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Gilbert and Gubar refer implicitly to ekphrasis as "authored" when they remind the reader of women's recurrent fixity as an aesthetic object in patriarchal texts. Lacking female literary precursors which could serve as role models for a writing of difference, women writers, affirm Gilbert and Gubar, repeat the same structures which bind them into that silent space defined by the male author where, "as Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' suggests, he stills them, or—embedding them in the marble of his art—kills them" (14). Silenced and "killed into a 'perfect' image of herself," Gilbert and Gubar add, the female writer inevitably engages in a self-contemplation that "may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text" (15). As a consequence, they urge women to "kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art" in order to establish a true dynamic representation of herself (17).

Clara, the female protagonist/narrator of *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* experiences a similar process of self-discovery. This process begins when an artist, Guarini, struggles to capture the



essence of the ideal woman in an interplay of transactions between redrawing, repainting, and defacing Flora, the only goddess in Botticelli's "Primavera" who defiantly and seductively stares back at the spectator. In the weave of discourses of journalism, newspaper reporting, telephone conversations, letters, art history, and Clara's autobiographical retrospections, *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* confirms that Riera is well aware of the complexities inherent to the genre of ekphrasis. The most obvious and conventional ekphrastic discourse in this novel is the one by the Uffizi Gallery's art tour guide set off in italics from the text, describing, interpreting, and admiring explicitly the "Primavera." The conventional ekphrastic discourse on the painting, however, does not illuminate the potential of ekphrasis as a site for interference, resistance, and revolt in a literary text by the Medusan other. Two discourses theorize on these ekphrastic structures of resistance: Clara's memories of her sexual past, and her investigative report of Domenico Guarini's defacement of Botticelli's painting, the assignment for which the writer is sent to Florence by *La Nació*. In the journalistic reports interlaced with her own life story, Clara informs the reader that in answer to the police queries concerning the defacing of the painting, Guarini, a former art student, explains the act as a culmination of an obsession for Laura Martuari, a girl he sees for the first time in a tour at the Uffizi Gallery, and who he thinks is the embodiment of Botticelli's Flora: "adquirí l'absoluta convicció que, copiant el quadre amb tota la minuciositat, un dia o un altre, ella es faria present... Comentava sempre per tratar la figura de Flora. 'Això em portar... sort... i l'acosar... a mi'" (88-89). Soon she does appear, but only to overpower him sexually. Guarini must then kill Laura out of desire, he claims, to render her immortal, to still her, in order to worship her eternally: "La mort... li retornava amb estricta perdurabilitat Laura" (99-100). That is, as a passive figure denied the freedom to speak and act, except through his voice, and with a borrowed language, bringing into question the existence of a writing of difference, a subject Riera explored in her essay "Literatura femenina: Un lenguaje prestado?" Troubled by this potential for a dangerous autonomy, Guarini buries Laura under a laurel tree in a distortion of the myth of Daphne metamorphosed in order to escape the rape of Apollo. Yet, the potential for autonomy remains, and Guarini fails in his attempt, since after investigating the site the police only find her image as portrait sketches, but not the body. This absence of the body complicates the solution of the murder case and illustrates the dynamics and complexities of the symbiotic relationship between word and image, a complexity W.J.T. Mitchell observes ekphrasis must contend with in order to represent a visual object of art in a literary text:

A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can “cite,” but never “sight” their objects. (152)

And it is in this sense of “citing” that in *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* the body does appear to denounce Guarini’s deceit and fictional account of the real events that lead to the defacement of the painting when Laura herself eventually comes forward, speaks up, and confesses to a conspiracy that had to be carried out by her at the Uffizi Gallery as an initiation rite into crime, an act Guarini prevented by diverting attention to the slashing of the painting. A news report read by Clara at her departure from Florence reveals the conspiracy and dispels the romantic notion of Guarini’s defacing as an act of love, a notion she tried to establish in her journalistic reports. Discovering eventually her mistaken and romantic interpretation of the Uffizi event, Clara cannot help but recognize the resemblance between her and Flora’s fictional existence as an aesthetic object constructed by patriarchal notions of femaleness. This parallel between the painting and Clara is explicit in the pregnancy not yet revealed to her married lover, Enric, and the pregnancy the Botticelli painting suggests: “La seva figura al quadre que tenim davant resulta sospitosa: entre el plec de la roba es nota un ventre voluminós” (137). Another parallel between Botticelli’s painting and Clara is that in the myth Chloris was transformed into Flora after being raped by Zephyr. Clara as well remembers a sexual transgression as a young girl in a movie theater when she notices herself as a double or mirror image of the women cast in myth in Botticelli’s painting. She then realizes the representation of women as myth, and her image becomes transfixed, decomposed into fragments that disclose the sham behind the illusion: “Tremola la teva pròpia imatge —totes les versions de tu mateixa, totes les possibilitats del teu ésser, totes les màscares—, desapareix, es recompon, calidoscòpica, al fons d’aquest mirall anomenat *La primavera*” (180). When Clara discovers the instability of the image long held to be true, the stage is then set for a deconstruction of a female representation based on the male model an art historian friend had often pointed out to Clara:

és d’evidenciar, a través de la pintura, la manipulació a què ha estat sotmesa la dona. Fins i tot en els casos en els quals els pintors han de retratar una heroïna, ho fan remarcant, amb to desfeminitzador, els trets que l’apropen a l’home i que són, justament, els que li donen qualitat heroica. (60)

Botticelli’s painting, therefore, becomes a specular image for the self-discovery and exploration of an identity. At the end of the novel

Clara decides to accept this challenge and pursues her independence from the subjection and influence imposed on her by constructions of patriarchal design.

Riera represented succinctly this same path of discovery of *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* in "Contra l'amor en companyia," published in a collection of stories with the same title. Here, Coral Flora, a writer who invokes Botticelli's goddess by her compound name, also discovers in front of a mirror, her independence in the sexuality always imagined in her erotic poems but never experienced in her marriage: "Enamorada de si mateixa, en pau amb el món, descobrí la felicitat de l'onanisme, que practicà fins a la mort" (74). Mirrors, however, are not as common in Riera's work as one might expect in a writer who frequently submits to duplicity and specularity in her narrative and who published a novel with the title *Jocs de Miralls*.<sup>4</sup> Instead, mirrors are often replaced by other refractive devices, as is Botticelli's painting and what Kathleen McNerney describes as "the eyes of the beloved, or those in a painting; the body of the same-sex lover, a person's two lovers of the opposite sex... and repeatedly, the sea" (27-28). In *Epitelis tendríssims* this exploration is surreptitiously encoded in the blurring of boundaries that prevents a static definition of the short story, revealing thus its true nature as a dynamic structure, as a work in progress that resists static and limiting definitions within a false image.

"As you like, darling," the second story in *Epitelis tendríssims*, confirms this instability of genre definition when it explores the precarious relationship between word and image implied in the genre of ekphrasis. The ambiguity starts when the protagonist Aina Maria Sureda hears a seductive voice through the crossed lines of a hotel room telephone, eavesdrops on the conversation, and is seduced and fascinated by a male voice saying in English "As you like, darling." In this instance, Riera presents the other side of the mirror in a reversal of ekphrasis where Sureda is aware of her existence as image and looks for the voice she wants to appropriate through sexual transgression. Lacking a visual component, and incited by desire, the voice flows again from a shower head transformed in drops of water trickling down her ear as if from an ancient fountain source that substitutes for the telephone receiver as a means of communication of an unknown secret: "Al bany l'aigua gelada em feu reaccionar. Vaig acostar-me la dutxa a l'orella, ben mirat s'assemblava molt a un auricular... 'As you like, darling'... Tremolava dessota els esquitxos que s'endinsaven orifici avall" (21). Sureda, who claims in the introductory story "Pròleg" to be

4 For a comprehensive in-depth analysis of the variety of refractory images in Riera's work exemplified in *Joc de miralls*, see Pérez.



the writer of *Epitelis tendríssims*, longs for the voice's corresponding image as a means by which to bring forth its visual presence: "necessitava construir la seva imatge. No hi havia dubte que aquella veu que m'embadalia sortia d'uns llavis suculents, carnosos" (21). When she fails to cast the voice from those lips into an image, Sureda sees the ineffectiveness of the enterprise: "De seguida vaig adonar-me que la figura que estava component era totalment fictícia" (22). Thus, she realizes the failure of words to "cite" or "sight" the image. Even when she appropriates the power to speak by imagining a love affair with the voice, Sureda is unable to bring forth the image of the perfect seductive voice with the foreign accented English of elmut van Ballen, a Dutch radio broadcaster. The end of the story presents Sureda with Helmut in her hotel room, and the wording of the text suggests a cathartic fantasy more than a real embodiment or presence. Ambiguous in the difficulty to distinguish between fantasy and reality, the end represents the eternal irreconcilable duality between word and image. And in order to delineate the complexity of that dualism, *Epitelis tendríssims* presents an uncertain space of genre identification. Wallace Stevens presents a parallel to this approach in "Anecdote of a Jar." In this poem, Stevens replaces the conventional object of ekphrasis, a sublime work of art found typically in art museums, for an ordinary refuse which litters the landscape experienced by the writer to present what Mitchell considers is, "an allegory and a critique of its own generic identity" and "a parody of the classical ekphrastic object... testing the limits of the genre, offering us a blank space where we expect a picture, a cipher in the place of a striking figure, a piece of refuse or litter where we look for art" (166). The stories in *Epitelis tendríssims* also offer a blank space where we look for a short story but instead find other genres as well in a transgression that prevents generic identity and confuses the boundaries that define them.

Riera's favorite story in *Epitelis tendríssims* is "Una mica de fred per a Wanda" (Glenn, *Catalan Review* 46). And rightly so, since it is the most successfully erotic, dangerous in its sexuality, and humorously deviant when the protagonist Wanda prefers sexual fulfillment dancing in front of an air-conditioning vent. It is for this reason the Viscount of Bonfoullat detests air-conditioners, an aversion he confesses when he arrives at the resort hotel in Lluç-Alcari, setting for the stories:

El motiu que decidí el vescomte de Bonfoullat a escollir l'hotel de Lluç-Alcari per a passar les vacances fou el mateix pel qual el rebutjaven alguns possibles clients: la manca d'aire condicionat... El fred artificial li semblava la cosa més nefasta del món, generadora de refredats, pulmonies i altres desgràcies molt pitjors. (63)



These tragedies began when the viscount wanted his father's mistress, Wanda, who they eventually agreed to share. Wanda, however, only liked sex during cool weather, and living in the south of France the heat presented time constraints for their plans. As a solution the son installs an air-conditioning system in Wanda's house. This only solved their problems temporarily when the father soon developed pneumonia and died. Guilt then prevents the son from enjoying Wanda when he becomes impotent. As a consequence, he develops an instinctive repulsion towards machines. Worse yet, when Wanda tried to cure his impotence by dancing nude under a veil in front of a vent of the air-conditioning system, she immediately developed the overpowering strange erotic preference for the machine, rejecting the now uncontrollable erections of the aristocrat. Sadly, this deviant relationship has its consequences. He ends up in a hospital, and Wanda, after months of practicing her newly found intense pleasure, dies naked holding on to the only and last vent still working. Humor undermines the impact of the tragedy, thus preventing erotic fulfillment when the story fails to deliver in a climax what the titillating narrative promises the reader. Yet, humorous though the end may be in its macabre implications, Wanda's death accomplishes two goals: it disables patriarchal expectations of female sexuality, and at the same time, it prevents static definitions of the erotic short story. The story offers instead, Riera claims, a "type of eroticism which is the insinuation of desire, more than of its realization" (quoted by McNerney, 12). In reference to Riera's short novel *Qüestió d'amor propi*, Brad Epps notes this definition as the classic distinction between eroticism and pornography in a play of light and shadow where pornographic texts aggressively direct "exhibition, illuminating all nooks and crevices" against "eroticism's indirect suggestion, heightening mystery, and desire, in the promise and deferral of illumination" (125). "Una mica de fred per a Wanda" delays illumination much further than expected when its deviant humorous eroticism diverts the reader beyond its original path.

*Epítelis tendríssims*' indifferent critical reception by critics who fail to value its contributions for a definition of the erotic tale is clear evidence that this story, as well as the others, accomplishes effectively and efficiently a (dis)abling of the erotic short story. In an interview with Kathleen M. Glenn, Riera explains that, "they didn't like it one bit. They said that it was my poorest work, that it was a shame that I had written it. My other books were translated immediately, but not a single publisher has shown an interest in translating this one" (*Catalan Review* 207). And in an interview with Geraldine Cleary Nichols, Riera facetiously protests: "Estoy rabiosa, porque la crítica ha dicho: 'Ah, muy bien, pero no es erótico'" (194). A story in *Contra*

*l'amor en companyia* confirms that this reaction from the critics was actually Riera's objective when it denies explicitly its ontological definition in the title "Això no és un conte."

Published in 1991, the story refers ten years back to *Epitelis tendríssims* when the female protagonist admits to her audience the same preference for machines Wanda was compelled to acknowledge: "Es clar que vaig nixer amb una gran disposició afectiva per qualsevol tipus de màquina i amb certs poders de seducció, ja que no sobre els homes, sí sobre els aparells" (165). Death, however, will come in this story to the author instead of the lover when the writer fears her computer will take over the task of writing short stories in a synthetical absorption of all the stories fed into it by all the writers of the world. This fear for the loss of an autonomous identity as an author is explicit when she reads the first lines of a story in progress that plagiarizes the introduction of "Una mica de fred per a Wanda" with a variation in gender: "El motiu pel qual la comtessa Sanpieri va escollir l'Hotel de Lluc-Alcari per passar-hi l'estiu..." (167). Riera's revision of "Això no és un conte" in her own Castilian translation of the story is more detailed in reference to "Una mica de fred per a Wanda" when she completes the ellipsis of the Catalan version: "El motivo por el cual la condesa Serpieri escogió el hotel de Lluc-Alcari era el mismo por el que solían rehusarlo casi todos los posibles clientes, la falta de aire acondicionado" (149). But whether "Això no és un conte" follows its model or not remains unknown since while editing the story in the computer, lines from works by well-known male writers, José María Merino, Torrente Ballester, Borges, Pere Calders, and others, already distort her authorial identity in a text the fictional writer claims she translated herself into Castilian. Riera also said that "Una mica de fred per a Wanda" is one of only two stories in *Epitelis tendríssims* she translated into Castilian (Glenn, *Moveable Margins* 46). Fact and fiction become, therefore, intimately blurred and entangled between these two stories from two different collections. Riera confirms this duplicity as characteristic of her fiction when she speaks about her double life as a university professor in Barcelona and as a writer of fiction: "I often think that writers are privileged beings in that we have the opportunity to invent characters, to split ourselves in two, to live other lives... I write and I teach. I have to lead a double life, almost schizophrenic existence" (Glenn, *Moveable Margins* 42-43).

This double existence as teacher and writer appears fictionalized in *Epitelis tendríssims* in the story "La senyoreta Àngels Ruscadell investiga la terrible mort de Marianna Servera." The protagonist is a professor of history at the University of Barcelona working on the subject of the Inquisition. Riera as well researched the subject of the

Inquisition and the persecution of Jews in her native island of Mallorca. Her most ambitious novel *Dins els darrer blau* (1994) is the result of that investigation.<sup>5</sup> In "La senyoreta Àngels Ruscadell investiga la terrible mort de Marianna Servera," the protagonist, however, finds that her research of a 17th-century woman burned after a witch trial is stalled by the lewd deceit of a dirty old man who denies her access to important manuscripts. He lures Àngels by promising her those texts which he does not possess, replacing them with an erotic account of the events that led to Marianna Servera's death after going mad in solitary confinement. When she discovers the deceit, Àngels escapes and finds out that it is the old man who is mad and who "només té llibres de dones, de donotes..." (110).

Biographical references, therefore, unavoidably affect the fictional text with a hint of authorial presence, even though another story in *Epitelis tendríssims*, "Uns textos inèdits i eròtics de Victoria Rossetta," which doubles as an academic article on Victoria Rossetta's poems, exposes the biographical approach to the interpretation of texts as ineffective as well as absurd. Humorously following a conventional biographical method of literary criticism, the critic-narrator identifies the subject of Rossetta's erotic poems as a chauffeur when the word "parking" appears in the poems: "Per què els pàrquings?... Si Rossetta escriu pàrquings és perquè el mot té a veure molt de prop amb el seu estimat. Caldria, doncs, deduir del text que es tracta d'un xofer. Què més natural que buscar-lo als pàrquings?" (58). By reaching this conclusion, the story trivializes the method, and moreover, in its satire of an article of literary criticism, it fails to illuminate the poems by Victoria Rossetta which present metaphorical images of plant sexuality. Mocking simultaneously biographical analysis and academic writing, the story confuses the reader unacquainted with Riera's work as to the legitimacy of "Uns textos inèdits i eròtics de Victoria Rossetta" as a fictional short story.

Another story in *Epitelis tendríssims* which exhibits the same dis(abling) mechanism centered on humor is "Estimat Thomas." After titillating the reader with hints of illegal, perverse, and forbidden sex, the end reveals that the passionate love letters that structure the story are written by a girl from a hotel room to her dog left in a kennel while the family is on vacation in Mallorca. The mechanism of seduction in this story is very similar to Riera's most well-known and widely-read story "Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora," in which the deceived reader finds out only at the end that

<sup>5</sup> The image of the double is a category and device that plays a prominent role in Riera's fiction, a characteristic Catherine G. Bellver spotlights in "Convergence and Disjunction: Doubling in the Fiction of Carme Riera."



the lovers are two women. "Estimat Thomas" is different, however, in the increasingly crude and perverse letters written by a Montse writing and vacationing with her mother and sister in Lluç-Alcari. The language indicates at first a woman writing sensuous letters to her lover Thomas. The reading process reveals, however, a girl writing, locked in a bathroom, to what seems to be an older man with whom she apparently is having an illicit affair. An example of the intensity of this passion is evident in the description of one moment of pleasure she remembers: "La teva llengua em té boja. No puc deixar de fantasiejar amb la sensació de la seva humida tebior, dolcíssima i esgarriadora, quan es posa en contacte amb la meua pell i puja per les cames, genolls, amunt... Thomas, Thomas, t'enyoro tant...!" (84). These intense letters of desire, however, do not climax in sexual fulfillment since "Estimat Thomas" soon ends teasing the reader when it reveals that her lover is a German Shepherd, left in a kennel and missed while the family is on vacation. Humor in this story, as in "Una mica de Fred per a Wanda," destroys again the progress of erotic stimulation, leaving the reader's arousal unfulfilled when the end transforms the erotic story into a funny one.

Eroticism, relative though it may be in its strange, forbidden, and perverse manifestations, is not the only agent *Epitelis tendríssims* deconstructs in order to avoid genre specificity and fixed representations of women. Of all the stories in *Epitelis tendríssims* "Pròleg" is the most significant for the (dis)abling of the short story as a genre. Gérard Genette defines prefaces as paratexts, as thresholds of interpretation, "a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author... a zone between text and off-text," a zone neither on the interior nor on the exterior of a text "not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public... at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2). The preface, adds Genette, "enables" the book to be read and to be read properly (197). "Pròleg" is a story that disrupts these functions in a syncretical relation with the short story. First of all, it is not "signed" by Carme Riera as an introduction to the stories in *Epitelis tendríssims*. Instead, fictional Aina Maria Sureda claims it as her own and as the writer of the stories in the collection, except for "Uns textos inèdits i eròtics de Victoria Rossetta" which according to her, she translated from an off-print of an article on the poems of fictitious Uruguayan poet Victoria Rossetta, published in the journal of the fictitious University of Baltimore, and written by fictitious hispanist Barbara Huntington.

Although fictional writers of prologues have been a frequent device for authorial detachment preceding works of fiction, Sureda

disrupts the function of the prologue as monitory when she explains the source of the stories in the characters she meets in the hotel at Lluç-Alcari. This implicates Aina Maria Sureda doubly as the writer and as the protagonist of "Pròleg" and the rest of the stories as well. In this double performance she destroys the function of the prologue as a device which conveys truthfulness in contrast to the artifice of the narrative of the main fictional text the preface seeks to introduce to the reader. When Sureda explains the first story of *Epitelis tendríssims* titled in English, "As you like, darling," as an account of "l'experiència eròtica més insòlita" of her life (18), the prefacer becomes a character and transforms the prologue into the first story of the collection. On this transformation, "Pròleg" dispels the notion of a preface as a disconnected component of the creative process of a volume of essays, poems, or short stories. At the same time, however, the story simultaneously fulfills its function as preface when it unites the collection of short stories, not only through humor and the erotic theme, but also by taking place in Lluç-Alcari during the Summer of 1981 with characters reappearing intermittently in each other's stories. Although unity of theme, time, and place, are not categories that specifically defines the novel as a genre, the narratorial continuity of the stories subtends a space where *Epitelis tendríssims* might be viewed as a novel instead of a collection of unrelated short stories frequently accredited with the role of economy and compression of time against the extended narrative of the novel. Economy and compression of time is a definition of the short story Riera reiterates succinctly when she says that, "La meva concepció del conte com a creació literària? Doncs la creació literària que ho supedita tot al principi d'economia" (quoted by Porqueras-Mayo 171). As a result, *Epitelis tendríssims*, might be presenting a different concept of economy by integrating the concept of the novel and the short story within the same unit. And by challenging genre specificity in this manner, "Pròleg" deconstructs another function of prefaces denoted by Genette which is to define the genre of the fictional text introduced (224-29). The story that immediately follows "Pròleg," "As you like Darling," contributes to this effect of genre ambiguity when it reintroduces Sureda as the protagonist who will carry out the objective stated by Sureda the prefacer: to write erotic tales, a genre hardly undertaken by women writers, and particularly not by "decent" women writers.

"Pròleg," however, is not the only paratext that introduces the objective of *Epitelis tendríssims* as a collection of erotic short stories. An epigraph quoting canonical erotic short-story writer Ana's Nin performs the same objective as well. The epigraph refers to the box in Pandora's myth as a container for women's sexuality, marking Carme



Riera's collection of erotic tales as a questioning, not of women's repression or the method of containment, but of the container itself. That Riera perhaps intended to focus on this aspect of the myth may be implied in the assertion that she tried to avoid, "referencias al aborto, a la relación amorosa, de dependencia... [en] *Epitelis tendríssims* no entra nada de eso; incluso el tema lésbico no lo quise tratar a propósito, porque pensé 'ya está bien'" (Nichols 193). A story in the collection, "Mr. Flowers, un savi botànic" confirms this foregrounding of the container with undercurrents of deceit and anxiety when the protagonist, denoted by the title, titillates another guest in Lluç Alcari with erotic descriptions of his lover. Arousal eventually leads to disappointment when the desired object turns out to be only a cauliflower arriving inside a box. An introduction to an exhibition of jars, boxes, and chests in Classical Greece, "Containers and Textiles as Metaphors for Women," explains the myth of Pandora opening a pithos, a clay vessel, as the opening of the female body through sexual intercourse (Reeder 227). Another article that introduces the exhibition underlines the creation of Pandora from earth and water by Zeus, not as a companion to man, but as punishment by means of unbridled sexual appetite unhealthy to men, since Zeus punished Prometheus' gift of fire by deceiving his younger brother Epimetheus into accepting a gift from Pandora who opened the jar releasing all the evils and diseases into the world (50). *Epitelis tendríssims* suggests a revision of this myth of betrayal, deception, and disease by means of a satirical deconstruction of the vase, urn, and other containers conventionally perceived as embodiments of the female body and traditional objects of desire central to the discourse of ekphrasis. In order to accomplish this task, *Epitelis tendríssims* presents, besides the frequently analyzed mechanism of seduction, deception, and the unavoidable reference to the epistolary genre so characteristic of Riera's texts, a satirical response to women's fixity as objects by men, and moreover, by women following the same patterns of self-deception contained in conventional forms of art.<sup>6</sup> For articles on the subject of seduction and epistolarity in Riera's narrative, see Bergmann and Tsuchiya.

By dis(abling) the container of narrative, ambiguity and indeterminacy remains in the last story of *Epitelis tendríssims*, "Josep Lluís Jacotot agonitza," when the dying patriarch is about to open "l'epiteli tendríssim que cobria els llavis" of his granddaughter in an of sexual transgression (119). Uncertainty remains as to what lips, those of the mouth or speech, or those of the vagina or image. The

<sup>6</sup> For articles on the subjects of seduction and epistolary in Riera's narrative, see Bergmann and Tsuchiya.



implications are clear, however, that the ending of the last story of *Epitelis tendríssims* perceives an open future of undefined possibilities written in a blank space, in the white ink Hélène Cixous urged women to write with in "The Laugh of the Medusa," without the fear of being frozen by gazing into her image: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (252, 255).

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