

**“MASKED ORGIES”: THE CARNIVALESQUE
IN *LETHAL WHITE* BY ROBERT GALBRAITH**

Evgeniia V. Lapina

Candidate of Philology, Associate Professor of Department for Linguodidactics
Perm State University

614068, Russia, Bukirev str., 15

janerm@list.ru

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2091-0840>

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The article explores the influence of the carnivalesque tradition on character portrayal in *Lethal White* by Robert Galbraith. The theoretical framework is the nexus between feminist criticism and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. The symbolism of a mask appears an important vehicle to understanding the imagery of the novel. The female protagonist, private investigator Robin Ellacott, becomes a primary example of a fluid and dynamic identity. All characters of the novel can be compared to participants of a carnival disguised as figures from fairy tales and chivalric narratives. The female detective unmasks double, illusive, or palimpsestic identities both at work and in private life.

Key words: Robert Galbraith, *Lethal White*, female detective, the carnivalesque, mask, chivalric narrative.

This article is aimed at studying the image of Robin Ellacott, female protagonist of Robert Galbraith’s detective novel *Lethal White* (2018), and her place in the system of characters from the perspective of feminist criticism. According to Sally Munt, the archetypal private investigator is essentially masculine – “the warrior knight, the tough cowboy, the intrepid explorer” [Munt 2005: 1]. Although contemporary literature features new alternative figures of professional female detectives, the negotiation between their femininity and male-emulating pattern of “honorary masculinity” [Merivale 1996: 694] remains complex and nuanced, loaded with connotations of transgression and subversion. Robin Ellacott seems a very unlikely detective: recently married, moving houses, psychologically seriously damaged, and dissatisfied with both her husband and her detective partner for making sole decisions about her future. However, in the novel she evolves into a full-fledged professional who can eventually outshine her partner, Cormoran Strike, as a literary detective and the focus of the narrative.

An important for the characters' narrative arcs metaphor of Venetian carnival can be linked to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. It is based on the representation in the works of François Rabelais of medieval feasts, which included "fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals" [Bakhtin 1984: 5], and indulged in subversiveness for disrupting social order, cohesion, and hierarchy. A powerful symbol that connects *Lethal White* with the carnivalesque is the mask, relating to "transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries" [Bakhtin 1984: 64]. In the world of *Lethal White*, which overlaps the symbolism of carnival with that of a chivalric romance, not a single character remains static and unchanged.

The novel's exposition portrays the female protagonist wearing the image of a captivated princess seeking salvation. However, she transforms from "a damsel in distress" into a female knight, using her work as the space of resistance and reinvention of the self. Robin's best professional skill is her ability to create new masks or new personae with the help of makeup, costume, and accessories. For instance, the hazel contact lenses and clear-lensed glasses combined with neat hairstyle and simple clothes bring to life one of her undercover personalities – romantic and inexperienced Venetia Hall. The symbolism of the mask is emphasized by Venetia's being mistakenly ascribed another identity – that of Verity Pulham, a fencer using a mask and a sword as sports equipment. Talking to Della Winn, the wife of a suspect, Robin "felt a ridiculous flutter of panic, as though Della were about to unmask her" [Galbraith 2018: 153]. Another Robin's avatar, Bobbi Cunliffe, positioning herself as a nonconformist and down-to-the-earth working-class girl, wears thick black eye contouring, multicoloured hair and massive ear cuffs. Robin considers these impersonations an important part of the job and derives a lot of pleasure from assuming other faces and other lives, as these exercises in theatrics increase her power to negotiate different sides of her own identity. Undoubtedly, in *Lethal White* Robin Ellacott finally outgrows the confines of the mask of a sidekick or "Batman's own Robin" [Avanzas Álvarez 2021: 23] and becomes a true professional, the provider of new developments, leads, and evidence for the case.

Drawing on the metaphor of carnival, it is possible to represent the female detective's acquaintances as a parade of masked figures, with the masks modelled on the traditional characters from fairy tales or chivalric narratives. In order to unravel the truth both about the detective case and her own life, Robin must unmask true identities of those who surround her, finding the gap between the image presented to the world and the true self. All male figures in Robin's environment present distorted or caricature versions of the archetypal image of the knight without fear and beyond reproach. They include

Cormoran Strike, Matthew, minister Chiswell, his son Raphael, Geraint Winn, and Jimmy Knight. Undoubtedly, Strike differs from the rest of male characters as Robin's mentor and true friend, treating her as an equal and not taking advantage of their close professional involvement. Nevertheless, he is an unsuitable candidate for the role of a knight and is neither adept at knightly service to a fair lady nor willing to take on responsibilities for his detective partner's happiness or comfort.

Robin imagined that "she had developed a crush on Strike" [Galbraith 2018: 58] and expected that after bursting into her wedding he would rescue her and drive her away. Although as enthralled by this prospect as Robin, Strike chose not to make "the reckless, quixotic decision" of ruining the wedding [Galbraith 2018: 438] and left it for Robin to bring meaning to her life. Never failing on many occasions to support and encourage Robin, Strike makes it clear that in the life of a professional detective there is no space for intense long-term personal relationships. The mask of Guy Fawkes that Strike is wearing for not being recognized during the march of anti-government protesters is very representative of the self-image he would like to translate to the outside world. As an allusion to the leader of the historic Gunpowder Plot, it foregrounds his intention to explode the Parliament – not as a political institution, but figuratively, as an ambiguous "group of people who all had their own personal tribulations and secrets" [Galbraith 2018: 403]. Also, because of its association with the celebrated antitotalitarian film *V for Vendetta* (2005), this mask pictures Cormoran as a lonely fighter against the corrupt system, "a disinterested seeker, not of money or another man's disgrace, but of truth and justice" [Galbraith 2018: 442]. However, the image of an inflexible, morally upright, and self-sufficient person is no more than a disguise to mask Strike's intrinsic inner split and the fear of failure outside professional space.

Robin's husband Matthew can also be seen as a flawed knight. If Strike gives Robin a lot of space for thinking, Matthew tries to usurp authority in the relationship rather than to share it. On the one hand, he always seems to be by her side and surround her with protective care. But on the other hand, Matthew's apparent kindness serves as a mask of an increasingly vigilant and abusive attitude of a domineering male. He squeezes her out of all spheres where she can realize herself as an independent personality and corners her inside the area hedged around with red flags: every crossing of a border triggers his rage or "big sulky silences" [Galbraith 2018: 53]. When Matthew's attempts to invade Robin's private space meet with resistance, he loses all pretence to knighthood in behaviour and in discourse. His affair with Sarah Shadlock is only a logical next stage in the trajectory of the failed hero, a self-proclaimed noble knight turning into his very antipode.

Robin and Strike's client Jasper Chiswell displays his connection with the knighthood through the badge of his army regiment – “the White Horse of Hanover” [Galbraith 2018: 103]. This badge, related to the British royal dynasty, is heraldic and “goes back to the tribal totem of pre-Christian Saxony” [Scriptorium Press 2004:70]. However, the glorified façade conceals child abuse, instigation of suicide, and producing and exporting torture equipment. At the end, both detectives, instead of considering Chiswell “the defender of solid English values” [Galbraith 2018: 285], ascribe to him the mythological function of the gatekeeper of hell, the one who let evil erupt into the human world; this vision of him is supported by describing Chiswell's voice as “subterranean” [Galbraith 2018: 152].

Raphael Chiswell uses artifice to impersonate different characters and assumes a whole range of roles: of a brutally killed little girl (in Billy Knight's confused recollection), of an anonymous hater of minister Chiswell, of an Indian waiter having a one-night stand at Flick's, of Kinvara's scapegoat, later disclosed as her secret lover, of a ghostlike entity in Chiswell House, of a tramp at Paddington railway station, and even of Matthew, leaking out the secrets of family life to the press. When the smokescreen of imposture is finally gone, Raphael's unmasked face has “more of a grimace” than of the charming look of a sex symbol [Galbraith 2018: 606] and reveals inner emptiness of a self-obsessed narcissist and a murderer, hiding the lack of content behind the exuberant variation of forms.

The name ‘Geraint Winn’ bears a clear reference to the Arthurian Welsh tradition [Scriptorium Press 2004: 70]. However, in *Lethal White* Geraint Winn appears one of the most disgusting male characters, whose “faintly amphibian” appearance [Galbraith 2018: 142] reflects his nature of a “lazy, lecherous, self-important and indiscreet” man [Galbraith 2018: 150], a latent paedophile bringing his daughter to fencing sessions only to get access to “sweaty teenage girls” [Galbraith 2018: 163]. Pretending to take high moral ground of an avenger of his daughter's death, he acts as a petty criminal, “a thief and a liar and maybe more” [Galbraith 2018: 221], blackmailing Chiswell and dragging money out of the charity fund. His accomplice Jimmy Knight despite his telling surname is an antithesis of a chivalric hero, “Robbing Hood” rather than Robin Hood [Galbraith 2018: 157]. Claiming that he abhors “a carnival of capitalism” [Galbraith 2018: 297], he in fact tries to extort from Chiswell the money from trading gallows to the Third World.

The female characters can also be categorised according to the archetypal images that they embody. Thus, the figure of the witch lies at the basis of such characters as Sarah Shadlock, Kinvara Chiswell, and Strike's ex-fiancée Charlotte Ross. All the three women are in clear opposition to Robin, jealous of her and ready to go to any lengths to hamper her progress. Sarah,

Matthew's university friend and lover, carefully engineers the episode with "the diamond earrings her fiancé had bought her snagged on Robin's pillow" [Galbraith 2018: 475]: like a fairytale princess, Robin pricks her finger but, instead of falling into a deathlike slumber, wakes up from illusions about the state of her marriage. Kinvara, apart from being a criminal, scared of the female investigator's power to detect her role in the case, is a jealous woman, hyperaware of the strong impression Robin has produced on Raphael. Charlotte becomes Robin's strongest opponent: "a dark, graceful woman who was sixteen years' worth of knowledge and memories ahead of her when it came to Cormoran Strike" [Galbraith 2018: 278]. She has the potential to drag Strike back into a toxic relationship and thus distract him from Robin and the agency.

The rest of the female characters occupy less narrative space but can be also fitted in the chivalric scenario, becoming inverted or retwisted representations of literary archetypes. For instance, the image of non-sighted politician Della Winn, "half-masked behind the impenetrable black glasses" [Galbraith 2018: 153], pays ironic tribute to the traditional figure of the blind prophetess: talking wisely and expertly about the condition of the nation, she does not know what is happening in her own family and in the accounts of her charity. Izzy Chiswell and Flick, united by having an affair with Jimmy Knight, exercise the functions of magic assistants or threshold guardians of politically charged spaces, but prove to be rather inefficient, more of a nuisance than of real help. Robin's mother Linda Ellacott is, of course, the queenly mother of the princess, generous but authoritarian, placing her daughter's safety above her happiness.

Overall, the narrative plays with the symbolism of the carnival mask, revealing it through intertextual references and allusions in the form of evocative names, familiar plot motifs, and recognizable details, loaded with cultural meaning. The image of the carnival is reinforced by setting the action against the background of the London Olympic Games with their theatrical opening ceremony and a colourful parade of athletes from different countries. Association of the female detective's progress with a knightly quest provides a useful lens for the analysis of her position in the web of relationships and the pattern of her interaction with other characters.

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«МАСКАРАДНЫЕ ОРГИИ»: КАРНАВАЛЬНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА В РОМАНЕ РОБЕРТА ГЭЛБРЕЙТА «СМЕРТЕЛЬНАЯ БЕЛИЗНА»

Евгения Витальевна Лапина

к. филол. н, доцент кафедры лингводидактики

Пермский государственный национальный исследовательский университет
614990, Россия, г. Пермь, ул. Букирева, 15

janerm@list.ru

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2091-0840>

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В статье рассматривается влияние карнавальской культуры на поэтику системы образов в романе Роберта Гэлбрейта «Смертельная белизна». В качестве теоретической базы используются феминистский критицизм и теория карнавальской культуры М. М. Бахтина. Маска выступает ключевым символом для понимания образного ряда романа. Идентичность главной героини, частного детектива Робин Эллакотт, находится в процессе изменения и развития. Образы персонажей напоминают участников карнавала в масках героев сказок и рыцарских романов. Женщина-детектив разгадывает смысл окружающих ее масок и в профессиональной деятельности, и в частной жизни.

Ключевые слова: Роберт Гэлбрейт, “Смертельная белизна”, женщина-детектив, карнавальная культура, маска, рыцарский роман.

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