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## Old Masculinities, New Monstrosities: *Dientes rojos* (2021) by Jesús Cañadas and Its Reinterpretation of Noir and Supernatural Horror<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In *Dientes Rojos* [Red Teeth] (2021), Jesús Cañadas offers a reinterpretation of the noir genre and the monstrous figure in supernatural horror. This questioning aligns with two interrelated aspects in contemporary Hispanic prose, particularly the fiction produced by Latin American female authors: genre and gender subversion. Drawing on literary and audiovisual references from the noir and horror traditions, Cañadas crafts a feminist manifesto. This article explores how he achieves this, focusing on modern-day reinterpretations of the monster, both as a symbol of the oppressed and as an agent of resistance.

### KEYWORDS

noir fiction; horror fiction; monster; feminism; genre subversion; gender subversion

### 1. Introduction

In his 2021 novel *Dientes rojos* [Red Teeth], Jesús Cañadas (Cádiz, 1980) – part of the wave of Spanish writers of the fantastic<sup>2</sup> that emerged in the early twenty-first century (Roas et al., 2017, pp. 203–214) – questions key elements of the noir genre and the monstrous figure, namely the hegemony of the male gaze in the former and the monster's original definition as a threatening other and the embodiment

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ángela Rivera Izquierdo and Dale Knickerbocker for their linguistic help.

<sup>2</sup> By this term I refer to the genre defined, among others, by Vax (1963), Caillois (1965) or Todorov (1970), whose famous essay – *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* – was translated into English as *The Fantastic*. Among contemporary scholars of the fantastic in the Hispanic area, one must mention authors like David Roas, Elton Honores or Alejandra Amatto. In this article, though, I prefer to use the term *supernatural horror* for two reasons: firstly, because *horror* – as well as *Gothic* – is much more common in English-written essays than *fantastic* – which tends to be confused with *fantasy*, even with other non-mimetic genres –; and most importantly, because I support the thesis that *horror* and *fantastic* point to two different genres. While *Dientes rojos* could be associated with both, it is the elements that elicit the *horror effect* which interest me the most in this text. For a clear distinction between horror and the fantastic, see Carrera Garrido (2024, pp. 27–31).

of evil. Monstrosity, so common in supernatural horror, is here reinterpreted through its connection with a recurring feature in recent non-mimetic Hispanic literature: the gender perspective. Through this lens, women's concerns are brought to the fore, giving rise to an overtly feminist discourse. While this perspective has been incorporated into fiction predominantly by women writers – mainly in Latin America – Cañadas's approach is noteworthy for coming from a man and challenging traditionally masculine codes, especially those associated with the noir tradition (Abbott, 2002). In addition, the novel also intertextually engages with certain milestones of popular literary, film and television culture, from Lovecraft to Clive Barker's body horror, as well as noir films and series such as *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995) or *True Detective* (Pizzolato, 2014 –). This article examines how Cañadas succeeds in accomplishing this, assessing his contribution to the trend of thematic and ideological subversions that characterize contemporary fiction.

## 2. A Story Told in Two Voices

*Dientes rojos* is divided into two parts. The action is set in present-day Berlin, where the wounds of a troubled past can still be felt. Strangled by tourism and gentrification, the city remains split: on one side, an open and cosmopolitan society; on the other, a murky space brimming with poverty and violence. This is but one of the many dualities that run through the novel.

In the first part, detectives Lukas Kocaj and Otto Ritter lead the search for Rebecca Lilienthal, a teenager who has disappeared from a religious boarding school. Both protagonists are built on the antiheroic model established in Hammett's and Chandler's hard-boiled novels (Horsley, 2010, p. 137): cynical, alcoholic, xenophobic, aggressive, misogynistic. Initially, a contrast between them is suggested: Kocaj, the narrator, wishes to distance himself from his veteran partner, nicknamed *Tenaza* [Pincers]. Still, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that the same darkness dwells within him. His family situation as the son of an abusive father and the brutal events he faces ultimately lead to his downfall. His immersion in Berlin's underworld confronts him with nightmarish scenes, culminating in the discovery of Rebecca's mutilated corpse. It transpires that the girl had fallen victim to a nameless femicidal cult that worships a figure known as *The King* and which is made up of rapists and abusers from across the globe.

Defeated by his failure and tormented by personal demons – which even drive him to abuse a woman neighbor – Kocaj ends up taking his own life. His death, though, is not in vain: it serves as a ritual offering that allows the deceased Rebecca to escape the limbo she had been confined to after her death, the so-called *zona de fumadores* [smoking area]. It is from this point onward that *Dientes rojos* fully embraces supernatural horror, marking the beginning of its second part.

Much shorter than the first, this section is narrated by Rebecca, who returns from the Other Side retaining all the memories of her earthly existence, but also

bearing the grotesque appearance she had when buried. In this monstrous guise, she resumes the mission she had begun before her demise: to reach the King and confront him. To this end, she is accompanied by Ulrike, a former classmate; Babsi, a homeless woman who also fell victim to the cult; and, to the reader's surprise, Ritter. Unlike Kocaj, Ritter undergoes a character reversal that elicits a degree of sympathy as his backstory is revealed: his own daughter fell victim to the cult, and, like Rebecca, he is fixated on finding the King.

Thus begins a new descent into hell, whose climax brings us back to the boarding school. Here takes place a startling revelation: Rebecca's sacrifice was not perpetrated by cult members, but by a trio of women who, fed up with enduring male violence, decided to use her to gain access to the King and kill him. These women are none other than the institution's Mother Superior, Babsi, and – shockingly – Rebecca's own mother. The girl's ritual death was the first step toward the throne; her return to life, the second. The third step, granting access to the royal chambers, involves a savage bloodbath. The Three Furies have already set it in motion by slaughtering the school's students. After also killing Ulrike and Otto, they finally offer themselves as sacrificial victims.

Horrified by the manipulation to which she has been subjected, but resigned to her terrible fate, Rebecca does not hesitate to complete the macabre ritual: after slitting her mother's throat, she is taken to the plane of reality where the King awaits her. There, she encounters the spirit of Kocaj, the tormented souls of countless women and, finally, the Monster himself. Unexpectedly, the King turns out to be a frail and cowardly individual. This is made evident when, after failing to persuade Rebecca to become his consort, he begins to plead for his life. She, however, never intended to kill the monster: defying her mother's will, she chooses to dethrone him and take the crown herself. From this renewed position of power, she will strive to fight against the mistreatment of women. The epilogue reveals Rebecca transformed into a true avenger, devoted to safeguarding other women.

### **3. *Dientes rojos* as an Inversion of Codes: The Monstrous Masculine Heroism**

Gruesome and convoluted as it is, the story of *Dientes rojos* raises a provocative array of questions and inversions through two genres that coexist naturally in numerous works, as well as through a variety of references. One of these points to the adventures of Harry D'Amour, the occult detective imagined by Clive Barker in stories like "The Last Illusion" (1985) or *The Scarlet Gospels* (2015). The influence of the role-playing game *Kult* (1981), inspired by Barker's macabre scenarios, is also evident, and has been acknowledged by Cañadas himself<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> He mentions the game during the presentation, at Barcelona bookshop Gigamesh, of the 2023 re-edition of his novel *Los nombres muertos* (2013). There he speaks of *Dientes*

Alongside this reference, exemplary in its blend of crime and the supernatural, two others can be mentioned. One is Fincher's iconic film *Se7en*, the quintessential police investigation that descends into horror territory, albeit without fantastic elements. The other is H. P. Lovecraft's narrative fiction, particularly the stories in which interdimensional entities haunt humanity. The King embodies these figures as a monstrous being to whom human sacrifices are made. Cañadas's character not only recalls Lovecraft's, but also points to one of the latter's inspirations: Robert W. Chambers's short story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895).

The most obvious reference, nevertheless, is the American series *True Detective*, specifically its first season. Cañadas himself has been explicit about the major influence that Nic Pizzolatto's show had on the writing of *Dientes rojos*<sup>4</sup>. In fact, anyone familiar with the show will notice thematic and narrative similarities. As in the novel, the series' investigation revolves around ritual murders of young women, ostensibly sacrifices to a mysterious King. Moreover, Woody Harrelson's and Matthew McConaughey's characters mirror the paradigm embodied by Kocaj and Richter: two flawed, trauma-ridden and 'toxic' individuals. In both cases, the portrayal of such figures involves a critique – manifesting as a deep deconstruction of noir genre stereotypes, especially its forms of masculinity. Still, this critique unfolds differently in each work.

In *True Detective*, the script eventually grants its protagonists something akin to redemption (Linneman, 2017, p. 3). In *Dientes rojos*, by contrast, the fate of Kocaj and Richter takes a decidedly less forgiving path. Not only are they unable to prevent Rebecca's death or to stand up to the King's minions but, as the story progresses, they are increasingly dragged down into the dark abyss they were supposedly fighting against. In their descent – where the alleged heroes come close to becoming villains – it is the victim herself who steps in, taking over to complete what the detectives were incapable of.

Even though it is only thanks to Kocaj's sacrifice that Rebecca is able to escape the smoking area, and although the second part redeems Ritter to some extent, the novel presents a relentless portrait of both men. This is precisely where *Dientes rojos* diverges most notably from its US counterpart, daring to go further in questioning the generic and cultural patterns that serve as its foundation and becoming an unequivocally feminist statement. This is how author Elisa McCausland (2021) describes the novel in her foreword, emphasizing the "inversión de roles" [role inversion]<sup>5</sup> (p. 19) it presents and referring to the story as "un relato que apuesta al

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*rojos* as his "Kult novel" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuCQLF98Vmo&t=2826s&ab\\_channel=Librer%C3%ADaDaGigamesh](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuCQLF98Vmo&t=2826s&ab_channel=Librer%C3%ADaDaGigamesh) (min. 47).

<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges it in most interviews and events about *Dientes rojos*; in the presentation of the book at Málaga bookshop Luces, for example: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeG3X9pkmVY&t=2149s&ab\\_channel=Librer%C3%ADaLuces](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeG3X9pkmVY&t=2149s&ab_channel=Librer%C3%ADaLuces) (min. 5).

<sup>5</sup> All translations from Spanish are my own.

mismo tiempo por su deconstrucción” [a narrative that simultaneously wagers on its own deconstruction] (pp. 19–20). As she states:

No falta [...] en *Dientes rojos* un retrato crítico de las masculinidades que acostumbran a ser protagonistas de la literatura negra. Después de tender al lector el cebo de un aparente antagonismo entre dos policías de generaciones diferentes, Cañadas remueve todas nuestras certidumbres como lectores de *noir* al dejar claro con buen olfato que la evolución de la hombría tradicional en las nuevas masculinidades es, en muchas ocasiones, poco más que una sofisticación aparente, bajo la cual muy bien pueden agazaparse monstruos todavía más tóxicos que los albergados a cara descubierta por sus antecesores, ante los que se creen superiores. [*Dientes rojos* does not shy away from offering a critical portrait of the masculinities that tend to dominate noir fiction. After taunting the reader with the apparent antagonism between two policemen of different generations, Cañadas skillfully dismantles our certainties as noir readers. He highlights, with keen insight, that the evolution from traditional masculinity to new masculinities is often little more than a veneer of sophistication. Beneath this façade may lurk even more toxic monsters – hidden but no less dangerous than those openly embodied by their predecessors, to whom these new men consider themselves superior.] (pp. 17–18)

The word *monster* is indeed key. As noted, Cañadas’s novel redefines the very notion of monstrosity. This redefinition moves in two opposing directions, assigning different values to the concept. Let us recall that the monster, in its basic meaning, is the *other*, the stranger, the external threat that disrupts the established order and incites fear by its mere presence (Cohen, 1996). This is how horror used to conceive it: as an antagonist. In a simplistic division of roles, the focal characters embody good and thus are tasked with combating the creature, the embodiment of evil (Losilla, 1993, p. 72). This perspective began to break down in the last third of the twentieth century, giving rise to narratives in which boundaries became blurred (pp. 139–160). In such stories, the hero is often revealed as a monster, and the former opposition evolves into a disturbing fusion, transforming both figures into two sides of the same coin. According to Leffler (2000):

The most frightening element of the horror story is the main protagonist’s, and thus indirectly the reader’s or viewer’s, encounter with the monster and the fact that this leads to a blurring of the distinctions between monster and protagonist, self and Other, good and evil [...] [T]his monster is seldom an external monster, separate from the main human protagonist, but something that takes over from within, reshaping the human mind and body as the Other. (p. 162)

This is clearly the case with *Dientes rojos*. As McCausland summarizes, those who initially seemed to embody order – the law, literally – and the force opposing evil, ultimately reveal themselves to be only slightly less monstrous, ethically and ideologically, than those they claimed to fight. As for these others, Cañadas introduces another twist, also in line with the evolution of the monstrous figure in today’s horror fiction.

In contrast to the familiar association between monstrosity and the supernatural, the last two decades have seen a growing number of stories in which monsters are, in fact, human, and it has become increasingly plausible, even commonplace, for them to occupy reality, stripped of any fantastic pretext or motivation (Díaz Olmedo, 2011, pp. 25–26). This is precisely what happens in *Dientes rojos*: despite the inclusion of supernatural events and creatures, such as the King, the reader never loses sight of the real-world parallels of the actions and behaviors depicted. Even one of the cult members is overt about his motivations, far from any otherworldly causes:

Nadie nos obliga a hacer lo que hacemos [...]. El Rey no nos posee. No hacemos nada para él, no sacrificamos a nadie en su honor. [...] Ni siquiera nos habla. Solo nos observa. Se oculta entre las grietas del mundo y nos mira. [...] Esto no lo hace ningún monstruo. Esto lo hacemos nosotros. [...] Nadie me ha poseído. Lo hago porque me gusta. [No one forces us to do what we do [...]. The King does not possess us. We do nothing for him, we sacrifice no one in his honor. [...] He doesn't even speak to us. He merely watches. He hides in the cracks of the world and watches us. [...] This is not the work of any monster. This is what we do. [...] No one has possessed me. I do it because I like it.] (Cañadas, 2021, pp. 345–346)

The violence certainly goes beyond the King's supernatural power and is also behind Kocaj's downfall. The only difference is that, in his case, he takes no pleasure in it but experiences it as torment, born of his self-loathing. This is what he confesses to Rebecca in the King's realm:

Yo no os odio, Rebecca. Yo solo me odio a mí. [...] No sabía qué hacer con todo ese odio, nadie me ha enseñado a liberarlo de otra forma que no fuera la violencia. Siempre contra quien yo consideraba más débil, contra quien pensaba que no me la devolvería. [...] Esas descargas de violencia espantaban al fracaso. Me hacían sentir poderoso. Vivo. [I do not hate you, Rebecca. I only hate myself. [...] I didn't know what to do with all that hatred; no one ever taught me how to release it in any way other than through violence. Always against those I considered weaker, against those I thought wouldn't fight back. [...] Those outbursts of violence chased away failure. They made me feel powerful. Alive.] (p. 360)

This is the closest the novel comes to empathizing with the circumstances of abusive monsters. Apart from that, its verdict is unrelenting, and, curiously enough, it doesn't apply solely to men. Monstrosity, understood as an actual threat and a morally and ideologically despicable behavior, also extends to women, in a different way, but with similar negative undertones. Let us not forget the identity of Rebecca's murderers: in their attempt to combat an undeniable scourge, they act with similar savagery. In this sense, *Dientes rojos* avoids simplistic approaches to violence and the stigmatization of sex or gender, complicating instead the answer to a thorny issue, whose resolution should not involve further bloodshed. As Ulrike says:

Esto no se acabará matando al Rey. [...] El arma para acabar con esa violencia de la que habláis es esta: un colegio. Un colegio que enseñe a las niñas a no someterse, a parar los pies a quienes

intenten abusar de ellas. Un colegio que enseñe a los niños que no somos cosas que poseer, que no somos víctimas. [This won't end by killing the King. [...] The weapon to put an end to the violence you speak of is this: a school. A school that teaches girls not to submit, to stand up to those who try to abuse them. A school that teaches boys that we are not things to be owned, that we are not victims.] (pp. 354–355)

There is a utopian undertone to Ulrike's discourse, the educational ideal to which many progressive thinkers aspire. This is, without doubt, the most mature and balanced goal, and, at the same time, the hardest to reach in the short term. At this point, an alternative kind of monstrosity emerges in Rebecca, rewriting the sort presented so far and imbuing the notion with positive, or rather subversive, connotations. It is in this sense that *Dientes rojos* aligns itself with the most prominent trends in contemporary non-mimetic fiction.

#### **4. *Dientes rojos* as an Inversion of Codes: The Heroic Female Monstrosity** According to Moraña (2017):

A veces lo monstruoso puede simbolizar la hegemonía que elimina y que niega; en otros escenarios, el monstruo representa lo contrario: la ira de los desplazados, los desaparecidos, los innombrables. En este caso, es enemigo de la impunidad, constituye la voz gutural de una conciencia acallada, pero acechante, que vuelve por sus fueros. [Sometimes the monstrous can symbolize a hegemony that obliterates and negates; in other scenarios, the monster represents the opposite: the rage of those displaced, disappeared, unnamable. In this case, it is the enemy of impunity, the guttural voice of a silenced yet vigilant conscience that returns to reclaim its rights.] (p. 43)

If in the first part of *Dientes Rojos* monstrosity is fraught with negative connotations, pointing to an oppressive order sustained even by those who allegedly work to dismantle it, in the second its meaning is significantly altered. At first, the monster goes from signifying the threatening, evil or horrifying to representing the different, the subaltern. Further on in the narrative, it even ceases to stand for this abused or mistreated other, emerging as an agent of resistance and opposition to the status quo that becomes emblematic of the more classic understanding of monstrosity. As Moraña (2017) argues, “el carácter potencialmente emancipatorio (cuestionador, deconstructor, reorganizador) de lo monstruoso no debe ser desestimado” [the potentially emancipatory (questioning, deconstructive, reorganizing) character of the monstrous should not be overlooked] (p. 88). It is from this perspective that Rebecca is reconceptualized in the novel's final pages. Her post-mortem appearance deviates significantly from the physical norm. Additionally, her mere presence as a resurrected being causes unease around her. These two aspects make her a monster, at least in Carroll's sense (1990, pp. 27–35). Yet beneath this initial layer another more abstract interpretation is possible, allowing us to see the reconceptualized monster described above. A dialogue between Babsi and Rebecca makes this explicit:

Has dejado atrás la Rebecca que eras antes y te has convertido en otra cosa. ¿Sabes por qué? Porque la Rebecca de antes solo podía ser una de las princesas del Rey. Una prisionera, una víctima. Y tú ya no eres nada de todo eso [...]. Tú has escapado, Rebecca. Y ahora eres lo contrario a la princesa, a la presa, a la víctima: eres un monstruo. Una gorgona. [You have left behind the Rebecca you once were and have become something else. Do you know why? Because the Rebecca of before could only ever be one of the King's princesses. A prisoner, a victim. And you are no longer any of that [...]. You have escaped, Rebecca. And now you are the opposite of a princess, a prey, a victim: you are a monster. A Gorgon.] (Cañadas, 2021, p. 287)

The choice of the Gorgon as the avatar of the new Rebecca is more than telling, as it is one of the monsters most strongly linked to women since antiquity. Pedraza (1983) presents the most famous of these creatures, Medusa, as a negative double of Athena (pp. 178–179). Cohen (1996), for his part, says: “The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith [...] or Gorgon” (p. 9). Such has been the meaning associated with this mythical being in Western cultures for centuries, from foundational myths to modern fiction. In fact, this association extends to almost all female monsters prior to the twenty-first century. All women are monsters insofar as they have historically been conceptualized as the great ‘others’ of society and, thus, as threatening. For Moraña (2017), such a connection “[p]arte de la interpretación del cuerpo femenino como un cuerpo carente, mutilado, que evidencia – como el cuerpo del monstruo – una desviación de la norma” [stems from the interpretation of the female body as a lacking, mutilated body that demonstrates – like the monster’s body – a deviation from the norm] (p. 231). Furthermore, figuratively, “[e]l monstruo, como la mujer, es situado en el margen del sistema, al borde del abismo de la irrepresentabilidad: es lo desviado, anómalo e incomplete” [the monster, like the woman, is situated on the margins of the system, on the brink of the abyss of unrepresentability: it is the deviant, the anomalous, and the incomplete] (p. 229). Both views are, of course, the product of the male gaze. As José Miguel G. Cortés (1997) explains:

[L]a *vagina dentada*, la *mantis religiosa*, la *mujer canibal* son creaciones masculinas cuya función es mitigar los propios demonios, creaciones de hombres que ven a la mujer como amenaza, como lo *otro*, lo desconocido, el reflejo monstruoso que nos interroga y puede llegar a cuestionarnos y nuestra relación con el mundo y con el propio cuerpo. [*The vagina dentata*, the *praying mantis*, the *cannibal woman* are male creations whose function is to assuage their own demons – creations by men who see women as a threat, as the other, the unknown, the monstrous reflection that interrogates us and can challenge both our relationship to the world and to our own bodies.] (p. 91)

This is the same perspective adopted by many scholars when approaching horror fiction prior to the third millennium. Among them, Barbara Creed stands out. In her essay *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), she proposed a reevaluation of horror cinema by considering the misogynistic stances that, in her view, underlay



the monsters in several key films. Focusing on male viewers' revulsion at images of abjection<sup>6</sup> associated with femininity, she concluded that horror was rooted in patriarchal men's fear of women, especially those who transgress the boundaries imposed on them (and are punished for doing so).

Although widely criticized by later scholars, Creed's theorisation remains a valuable reference point in the representation of the woman monster in horror fiction. As suggested, and pointing to the seemingly increased feminist consciousness in today's Western world, the portrayal of the female monster as an antagonist – a force opposed to good and stability – has been supplanted by powerful depictions that actively challenge patriarchal views. These portrayals reimagine the creature as a being endowed with agency and, more significantly, capable of evoking empathy from audiences. This new paradigm features in numerous literary, cinematic, and theatrical works from recent decades. Notably, Creed herself decided to expand her essay in 2023 to include films illustrative of this trend, such as *Teeth* (Lichtenstein, 2007), *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Amirpour, 2014), and *The Girl with All the Gifts* (McCarthy, 2016). In these movies, Creed contends, “[t]he monstrous-feminine is a powerfully othered, hybrid figure – a terrorist – whose aim is to undermine or destroy the oppressive, exclusionary patriarchal order” (p. 192).

The same can be observed in the Hispanic scene across a significant number of literary works. Indeed, many present-day authors – again, predominantly female and Latin American – use the monstrous within the framework of non-mimetic fiction as a tool or, to paraphrase Moraña, as a *war machine* to confront injustice and assert their autonomy against a perceived tyrannical order. As Boccuti (2023) states, this represents “una reacción a una condición de opresión que ya no se puede tolerar más, la huida de un orden monstruoso a través de la creación de otro (des)orden, en el que, sin embargo, la monstruosidad parece ofrecer la posibilidad de constituirse como sujetos autónomos y reestablecer la justicia” [a reaction to a condition of oppression that can no longer be tolerated, an escape from a monstrous order through the creation of another (dis)order, where monstrosity appears to offer the possibility of becoming autonomous subjects and reestablishing justice] (p. 247). This dynamic gives rise to works that, according to Álvarez Méndez (2023),

subvierten las normativas y arquetipos patriarcales de lo femenino en respuesta a las imágenes de monstruosidad unidas desde antiguo a la mujer que han identificado a esta con lo amenazante

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<sup>6</sup> Abjection has gained significant critical weight both in gender and horror studies since Kristeva (1982) defined it as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (p. 4), and stated that menstrual blood, among other feminine fluids considered abject, embodies “the objective frailty of symbolic order” (p. 70).

y lo incomprensible, que han otrificado su identidad durante siglos tomando lo femenino como un todo monstruoso y han consolidado una construcción social del género. [subvert patriarchal norms and archetypes of femininity in response to the longstanding images of monstrosity associated with women. These images have historically identified women with the threatening and the incomprehensible, othering their identity for centuries by framing femininity as an inherently monstrous whole, thus reinforcing a socially constructed notion of gender.] (p. 79)

This is exactly what happens in the second part of *Dientes rojos*, following Rebecca's rebirth as a Gorgon. Her metamorphosis, apart from symbolic, is terrifyingly literal. It is not, however, the ability to turn people into stone that characterizes her new self, but another feature frequently linked to the Gorgon: the *vagina dentata*. This myth, mentioned above as one of men's greatest fears about women – more specifically, about their sexuality (G. Cortés, 1997, p. 92) – does in fact emerge in Cañadas's novel. In a remarkably shocking episode, readers discover that Rebecca has developed this peculiar feature in her anatomy. The scene overflows with body horror, yet disgust is balanced by a fascination with the empowerment that the anatomical singularity represents. Far from threatening, it emerges as a legitimate defense mechanism through which the girl takes her final leap: from victim of a perverse monstrosity to an equally powerful force of confrontation<sup>7</sup>. The process culminates on the book's final page, where she, now established as a vigilante, delivers a rallying cry that encapsulates the scope of the inversion:

Soy la mujer de mimbre, la gran cabrona, la espíritu santa. Soy la mujer del saco, la medusa que sostiene la cabeza cercenada de Teseo [*sic*].<sup>8</sup> Soy toda la violencia de la que os habéis apoderado y que ahora os devuelvo. Mi nombre es Rebecca y soy la Reina de Amarillo. Y no estoy sola. [I am the wicker woman, the great badass, the female holy spirit. I am the bogeywoman, the Medusa holding Theseus's [*sic*] severed head. I am all the violence that you have seized and that I now return to you. My name is Rebecca, and I am the Queen in Yellow. And I am not alone.] (Cañadas, 2021, p. 367)

## 5. Conclusions

One of the aspects that make *Dientes rojos* unique is that it was written by a man: a cisgender and heterosexual man, to be more precise<sup>9</sup>. In a context in which female

<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, the novel's title can both refer to the teeth offered to the King and to the *vagina dentata* itself. For more information on this motif and its relation to the Gorgon myth see Koehler (2017).

<sup>8</sup> I would say this is a mistake, as Perseus, not Theseus, is the human *hero* in Medusa's myth. One must admit, though, that both were paladins of the patriarchal order, so it is possible that Cañadas was referring to the Minotaur's slayer, after all. The ideological meaning would remain, in any case, roughly the same.

<sup>9</sup> Cañadas himself acknowledges this status in the Málaga presentation, assuming his limitations when he started writing the novel ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeG3X9pkmVY&t=2149s&ab\\_channel=Librer%C3%ADaLucas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeG3X9pkmVY&t=2149s&ab_channel=Librer%C3%ADaLucas), min. 27). One of the reviewers who read this article, by the way, suggested I tackle the issue of new masculinities. *Dientes rojos*, though, only implicitly refers to this

authors systematically subvert – or at least reinterpret – the codes upon which the fantastic and horror have been constructed for centuries, it is significant that men writers seek to embrace the cause, and do so from similar perspectives. Cañadas's work goes even further. On the one hand, it incorporates into this questioning a genre like noir: unequivocally hypermasculine in its origins, women were seen in this genre either as objects or evil beings – *femme fatales* (Abbott, 2002, pp. 21–64). On the other hand, the novel contrasts two ways of understanding monstrosity. The first is primarily associated with abusive men, while the second pertains to women who revolt against oppression, leaving behind the traditional roles of princesses and victims. While the first type of monstrosity remains laden with negative and undeniably horrific values, the second stands as a transgressive alternative, rooted in a feminist reinterpretation of the meanings commonly attributed to monstrous women in Western narratives. The distribution and operation of each form of monstrosity leave no room for doubt in the book analyzed here.

*Dientes rojos*, in any case, is open to discussion. Although most reviews have been positive and appreciative of its critical component, there are also voices condemning the excessive violence of the story. Interestingly, some see it as a book that deeply despises men, while others describe it as a kind of masculine sadistic fantasy that perpetuates the view of women as objects of desire<sup>10</sup>. This last interpretation would clash with the author's intentions, as well as with the novel's alignment with the more subversive works of contemporary non-mimetic fiction written by women. Or might the same judgment be applied to those as well? The debate is open.

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topic: even if the author himself may represent the recent shift in male sensibilities, his depiction of masculinity focuses mainly on its toxic side. What would be interesting is to analyze how readers – especially women – approach Cañadas's resignification of female monstrosity and his understanding of *empowerment*, considering his gender identity: as the review mentioned in the next footnote indicates, there are some who question the scope of the deconstruction, and defend that the novel perpetuates certain stereotypes. If that were the case, Cañadas himself would unexpectedly become an example of the *phony evolution* McCausland described in the prologue. Such discussion might indeed be an appropriate complement to the present article.

<sup>10</sup> Here is one of them: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEGHw3VGCo>. The reviewer says the book's women keep playing the roles of victim and sexual objects (min. 10). She does not mention Rebecca's transformation, though.

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