

‘Bankrupt enchantments’ and ‘fraudulent magic’:
demythologising in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody
Chamber* and *Nights at the Circus*

by

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Note: The terms 'bankrupt enchantments' and 'fraudulent magic' in the title of this thesis are taken from Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* (1979:109).

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Abstract

Angela Carter (1940-1992) positions herself as a writer in ‘the demythologising business’ (1983b:38). She defines myth in ‘a sort of conventional sense; also in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in *Mythologies*’ (in Katsavos 1994:1). Barthes states that ‘the very principle of myth’ is that ‘it transforms history into nature’ (Barthes 1993:129). This process of naturalisation transforms culturally and historically determined fictions into received truths, which are accepted as natural, even sacred.

This thesis explores Carter’s demythologising approach in her collection of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, and her novel, *Nights at the Circus*. The readings of these texts are informed by the ideas that Carter discusses in her feminist manifesto *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, which she describes as ‘a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems [de Sade] raises about the culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it’ (1979:1). In *The Bloody Chamber* and *Nights at the Circus*, Carter questions the culturally determined roles that patriarchal ideology has ‘palmed off’ on women as ‘the real thing’ (1983b:38), and she scrutinizes the relations between the sexes that have resulted from them.

In *The Sadeian Woman*, the subject-object dichotomy of gendered identity is explored as a predatory hierarchy. *The Bloody Chamber* explores the same ideological ground, and ‘the distinctions drawn are not so much between males and females as between “tigers” and “lambs”, carnivores and herbivores, those who are preyed upon and those who do the preying’ (Atwood 1994:118). The most discomfiting point that Carter makes in *The Bloody Chamber* is that patriarchal ideology has traditionally viewed

women as herbivores, or ‘meat’, that is, as passive objects of desire and inert objects of exchange.

In *Nights at the Circus*, the subject-object dichotomy is presented in its spectator-spectacle guise. Fevvers, the female protagonist, is a winged *aerialiste* who articulates an autonomous identity for herself that exists outside of patriarchal prescription. She presents herself as feminine spectacle and, in so doing, becomes simultaneously a spectator, as she ‘turns her own gaze on herself, producing herself as its object’ (Robinson 1991:123). Mary Ann Doane refers to this strategy of self-representation as the masquerade. In ‘flaunting femininity’, Fevvers ‘holds it at a distance’, and in this way womanliness becomes ‘a mask which can be worn or removed’ (Doane 1991:25).

Susanne Schmid points out that ‘every act of deconstruction entails a process of reconstructing something else’ (1996:155), and this suggests that Carter, in demythologising, also remythologises. Roland Barthes argues that ‘the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*’ (1993:135). In the characterisation of Fevvers, Carter creates an ‘artificial myth’ that does not present itself as either eternal or immutable. In masquerading as a feminine spectacle, Fevvers temporarily incarnates an archetypal femininity. But this is just a performance, for Fevvers is also an agent of self-representation, and so she is both a real woman and an artificial myth of femininity.

Key terms

Angela Carter

Demythologising

Feminism

Gender studies

Materialism

Myth

Subject-object dichotomy

Nights at the Circus

The Bloody Chamber

The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History

Biographical outline

- 1940 Born Angela Olive Stalker, 7 May, Eastbourne, Sussex; spends the war in Yorkshire with her maternal grandmother; educated direct grant school in Balham.
- 1959 Junior reporter, *Croydon Advertiser*.
- 1960 Marries Paul Carter.
- 1962-5 Reads English at the University of Bristol, specializing in the medieval period.
- 1966 First novel, *Shadow Dance*, published.
- 1967 Wins John Llewellyn Rhys prize for second novel, *The Magic Toyshop*.
- 1968 Wins Somerset Maugham Award for third novel, *Several Perceptions*.
- 1969-72 Visits, then lives in, Japan, working briefly for NHK Broadcasting Company; sending articles back to *New Society*.
- 1972 Divorced from Paul Carter.
- 1976-8 Arts Council for Great Britain Fellow in Sheffield.
- 1977-9 Settles in South London, with Mark Pearce; member of Virago advisory board; Virago commission *The Sadeian Woman* (1979).
- 1980-1 Visiting Professor on the Writing Programme at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, substituting for John Hawkes.
- 1983 Son Alexander Pearce born.
- 1984 Writer in residence, University of Adelaide, South Australia: *Company of Wolves* (based on *The Bloody Chamber* [1979]) released on film, *Nights at the Circus* published by Chatto & Windus (joint winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for 1985).

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- 1984-7 Teaches part-time on the Writing MA at the University of East Anglia in Norwich.
- 1991 Publishes her last novel, *Wise Children*.
- 1992 Dies, 16 February.

(Sage 1994a:ix-x)

Abbreviations

BC *The Bloody Chamber*. 1995. London: Vintage. First published 1979 by Victor Gollancz.

NC *Nights at the Circus*. 1994a. London: Vintage. First published 1984 by Chatto & Windus.

SW *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. 1979. London: Virago.

Chapter 1

Introduction

But we live in very confused, confusing and dangerous times, and fiction, which is a kind of log of these times, changes its nature and expands and sucks in material from all manner of places and from all manner of styles and genres to be able to adequately describe ourselves to ourselves at all kinds of levels. (Carter 1982:36)

Angela Carter (1940-1992) wrote fiction that investigates the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ that govern our lives (Carter 1983b:38). She has been described as a ‘spell-binder’ (Sage 1994a:1), as an ‘avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism’ (Makinen 1992:2) and even as the ‘high-priestess of post-graduate porn’ (from *New Socialist* in Makinen 1992:3). As disparate as these epithets may seem, they succeed in describing aspects of a writer whose versatile literary feats have never failed to provoke reaction. As a ‘spell-binder’, she creates extravagant landscapes where the marvellous and grotesque become indistinguishable as boundaries are blurred and traditional categories exploded. As a ‘literary terrorist of feminism’, she savagely hacks away at the assumptions, preconceived ideas, old stories and old ‘truths’ that have been accepted unquestioningly as natural, even sacred. And, in the guise of the ‘high-priestess of post-graduate porn’, she reappropriates pornography and uses it to demystify sexuality and critique the existing relations between the sexes.

Carter’s fictional landscapes are spectacular. Lorna Sage writes that Carter’s fictions ‘prowl around on the fringes of the proper English novel like dream-monsters – nasty, erotic, brilliant creations that feed off cultural crisis’ (1977:51). Aidan Day says that Carter’s fiction is ‘a bit extreme’ (1998:1) and Marina Warner states that Carter’s

imagination was dazzling, and through her daring, vertiginous plots, her precise yet wild imagery, her gallery of wonderful bad-good girls, beasts,

rogues and other creatures, she causes readers to hold their breath as a mood of heroic optimism forms against the odds. (1992b:xii)

‘[Nasty], erotic, brilliant’, ‘extreme’, ‘daring, vertiginous’ and ‘wild’ are words which aptly describe the antirealistic style of a writer who believed that there ‘were no limitations to what one could do in fiction’ (Carter 1982:35). Yet, as Aidan Day observes, Carter also insists that ‘her writing, contrary to the way it might sometimes appear, [is] not disengaged from social reality’ (1998:10), a point that she reiterates in an interview with John Haffenden:

JH: I know you find it fundamentally important to have an intelligent awareness of society, and yet the highly stylized and decorative apparatus of your novels might appear to be disengaged from the social and historical realities you want to illuminate.

AC: Yes, this is a very real risk, really tricky. Obviously the idea that my stories are all dreams or hallucinations out of Jung-land, or the notion that the world would be altogether a better place if we threw away our rationality and went laughing down the street . . . that’s all nonsense. I *can* see how it must look to some readers, but the point is that if dreams are real as dreams, then there is a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously. (Haffenden 1985:85)

Carter describes her work as ‘the product of an absolute and *committed materialism*’ (1983b:38), and the imaginary worlds that she constructs as places ‘in which ideas can be discussed’ and ‘speculations about the nature of our experience on this planet [can] be conducted without crap about the imitation of life getting in the way, because whose life are you supposed to be imitating?’ (1982:35). She insists that art cannot be divorced from life, that it is ‘a means of knowing the world’ (SW:13). There is certainly no denying that Carter’s fictions are fantastical, and yet she keeps ‘her eyes on the ground, with reality firmly in her sights’ (Warner 1992b:xi), for, as she says, ‘in order to question reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality’ (1983b:38).

John Haffenden observes that Carter chooses ‘to accentuate the real by writing tall stories in lush locales’ (1985:92), and he comments on the fact that what is now known as ‘magic realism’ is a mode of writing that she has always used (1985:81). Responding to a comparison with Gabriel García Márquez, Carter says that the social forces that produce a writer like him are very different from the social forces that produced her, and that while he finds material for his fiction in the Colombian countryside and folklore she, as a British writer, has to invent much more, because, as she observes,

we don’t have an illiterate and superstitious peasantry with a rich heritage of abstruse fictional material. But I realise that I tend to use other people’s books, European literature, as though it were that kind of folklore. Our literary heritage is a kind of folklore. (In Haffenden 1985:81-82)

Accordingly, she finds material for her books in what she calls the ‘great scrap-yard’ (in Haffenden 1985:92) of Western European culture, which she describes as ‘a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based’ (1983b:41). There she unearths old forms that she infuses with new life as she re-evaluates traditions and established beliefs: ‘I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode’ (Carter 1983b:37).

Although Carter’s texts pose questions about the nature of reality, she maintains that ‘there are no answers which are unequivocally correct’ (in Haffenden 1985:79). She has also described a narrative as ‘an argument stated in fictional terms’ (in Haffenden 1985:79). These comments suggest that Carter’s fictional landscapes are not only places ‘in which ideas can be discussed’ (Carter 1982:35); they are also places where a multiplicity of meanings is generated:

I always hope it's obvious, although I try, when I write fiction, to think on my feet – to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. (Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts . . .). (Carter 1983b:37)

Roland Barthes states that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (1977:148). Carter's perspective of fiction, which acknowledges the creative role of the reader, is a rejection of the patriarchal ideology that proclaims that the 'writer "fathers" his text; in the image of the Divine Creator he becomes the Author – the sole origin and meaning of his work' (Moi 1985:57).

Lorna Sage suggests that Carter was intrigued by the idea that anonymity could be found in the written word, that 'writing was an act that took you out of your own skin, out of your background, gender, class [and] nationality' (Sage 1994a:2):

If you renounced and denied the author's power over the text, the author's traditional authority, you were symbolically defying too the patriarchal powers that decreed *your* place in the book of the world. 'We know now', wrote Barthes in 'The Death of the Author', 'that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space.' The Author-God, and authors who took after Him, were seen as (among other things) enemies of sexual revolution, agents of the gender police, Father-figures behind the conspiracy to present us with a solid, Natural world-picture. (Sage 1994a:3)

In a 1983 piece, 'Notes from the Front Line', Carter describes writing as just another job, a way of making a living. Her observation that writing does not 'make better people' (1983b:41) is evidence of the fact that she certainly does not subscribe to the myth that writers are godlike entities to be revered by the masses; she is quick to point out that many of the 'great male geniuses of western European culture have been either depraved egomaniacs or people who led the most distressing lives' (1983b:41). She also does not find the idea of posthumous fame particularly comforting, and

maintains that the rewards of writing are no greater than those of any other form of self-employment (1983b:41). Carter thus views the myth of the Author-God as a mystification, which she intends to expose:

There are one or two lies in the lumber room about the artist, about how terrific it is to be an artist, how you've got to suffer and how artists are wise and good people and a whole lot of crap like that. I'd like to say something about that, because writing – to cite one art – is only applied linguistics and Shelley was wrong, we're *not* the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. (Carter 1983b:41)

Toril Moi asserts that for 'the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text' (1985:62). I would suggest that Carter's refusal to enclose her texts with final meaning, her iconoclastic approach, and the fact that she does not discriminate between 'high' and 'low' literary forms as material for her fiction defy this patriarchal approach to literature. Carter's fervent rejection of universal experience (especially a universal feminine experience) is also a rejection of 'the patriarchal power that [decrees her] place in the book of the world' (Sage 1994a:3).

The notion that the Author-God has conspired to present us with 'a solid, Natural world picture' (Sage 1994a:3) is echoed by Toril Moi, who, in a discussion of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argues that the dominant ideology that defines artistic creativity as 'a fundamentally male quality' presents us with 'literary images of femininity' that are 'male fantasies too'. These male fantasies have created such myths as 'the eternal feminine' and 'the Angel in the House', the ideal woman who 'is seen as a passive, docile and above all *selfless* creature' (Moi 1985:57). Regarding her experiences as a young woman in the 1960s, Carter writes:

I can date to that time and to some of those debates and to that heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968, my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing.

This investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives – what Blake called the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’- is what I’ve concerned myself with consciously since that time. (1983b:37-38)

Carter situates herself as a writer in ‘the demythologising business’ (1983b:38), a position that she explains as follows:

I’m basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them. (In Katsavos 1994:1)

This thesis examines Carter’s demythologising approach in her collection of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, and in her novel, *Nights at the Circus*. The readings of these texts are informed by the ideas that Carter discusses in her feminist manifesto *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, which she describes as ‘a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems [de Sade] raises about the culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it’ (SW:1).

The Bloody Chamber and *Nights at the Circus* scrutinize the oppressive nature of myths particularly as they apply to the relations between the sexes. Carter questions the culturally determined roles that patriarchal ideology has ‘palmed off’ on women as ‘the real thing’ (1983b:38), and she explodes the reductionist boundaries imposed upon women by a repressive essentialismⁱ. She takes an axe to the cultural constructs ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’, which have been naturalised. She refutes the immutability of universal experience in the same way that she refuses to enclose her texts with a single meaning:

In my work I keep on saying, in what I think is the nicest way, that women are people too, and that everything is relative – you see the world differently from different places. You cannot make any statements which are universally true Everything is determined by different

circumstances, and the circumstances of women are different from those of men. (In Haffenden 1985:94)

I would argue that Carter's 'demythologising' approach is an expression of a feminist consciousness that is primarily concerned with the issues of the material world:

'I'm a very old-fashioned kind of feminist', she says, and her preoccupations are with social justice: 'abortion law, access to further education, equal rights, the position of black women' . . . The current feminist preoccupation with mysticism and Mother goddesses is smartly slapped down: 'I'm a *socialist*, damn it! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?' (From an interview in 1984 with Mary Harron of *The Guardian* in Day 1998:10-11)

To appreciate Carter's demythologising approach it is necessary to explore her views on myth further. When Anna Katsavos asked her in what sense she defined myth, Carter replied:

In a sort of conventional sense; also in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in *Mythologies* – ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean, without trying to work out what, for example, the stories of the New Testament are really about. (In Katsavos 1994:2)

For Barthes, myth 'transforms history into nature' (Barthes 1993:129). This process of naturalisation presents socially and historically determined fictions as facts.

Accordingly, these man-made fictions are transformed into received truths, and, as such, they are accepted as natural, even sacred. But Barthes writes that

one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. (1993:110)

This idea is elaborated upon by Gina Whisker, who observes that dominant cultural myths 'do not necessarily reflect our authentic experiences, but somehow we internalise their versions of our lives, ourselves' (1994:105).

In a patriarchal world, myths of female subordination and passivity are often presented as biological facts, and this suggests that female oppression is natural. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter relates the fact of violence against women to the myth of the female wound. She states that female castration 'is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitude towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed' (SW:23). To accept these social fictions as eternal truths, instead of recognising them as 'products of the human mind' that 'reflect only aspects of material human practice' (Carter 1983b:38), is to preserve the status quo, in which man is the dominator and woman the dominated. But Carter reveals myth's hidden political agenda and seeks to expose myths for what she believes them to be: 'extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree' (Carter 1983b:38).

One way in which myth exerts its oppressive influence in the material world is by transforming 'history into nature' (Barthes 1993:129). I would also argue, as I believe Carter does, that myth often involves an abstraction in which the self is reduced to prescribed 'essences'. Barthes puts it this way: 'In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences' (1993:143). Such an abstraction denies the individual's particularity, her unique circumstances, the complexity of her being and the multiplicity of her experiences. She is typecast, her experience is universalised and, as she thus becomes a 'Woman', she is 'naturalised into a subordinate position', condemned to be part of 'an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender' (Robinson 1991:77). Barthes writes:

Bourgeois ideology continually transforms the products of history into essential types . . . it cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making

of the world, fixated this world into an object which can be forever possessed, catalogued its riches, embalmed it, and injected into reality some purifying essence which will stop its transformation, its flight towards other forms of existence. (1993:155)

I would like to elaborate, first, on the idea of Woman as part of ‘an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender’ (Robinson 1991:77) and, second, on the way in which the typecasting of women encloses them within a prescribed meaning and not only stops their transformation but also denies them access to the centres of cultural power. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter discusses the mythologising of sexuality in the context of pornography. To Carter, sexual relations are always an expression of social relations, since sexuality ‘is never expressed in a vacuum’ (SW:11). For her, ‘the idea of different sexual essences of men and women’ (SW:4) is most explicitly expressed in the stylisation of graffiti, where

the prick is always presented erect, in an alert attitude of enquiry or curiosity or affirmation; it points upwards, it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled. From this elementary iconography may be derived the whole metaphysics of sexual differences – man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting. The male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning. (SW:4)

Carter points out that this reductionism pretends that anatomy is destiny (to paraphrase Freud, however simplistically), when, in fact, it is only a single aspect of the individual’s entirety:

In the face of this symbolism, my pretensions to any kind of social existence go for nothing; graffiti directs me back to my mythic generation as a woman and, as a woman, my symbolic value is primarily that of a myth of patience and receptivity, a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled. (SW:4-5)

The image of Woman as ‘a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled’ suggests that patriarchal ideology has rendered her mute and helpless. Carter argues

that the mythification of women has been a clever confidence trick aimed at excluding them from a meaningful existence in the material world. In *The Sadeian Woman*, she writes that all ‘the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses’ (SW:5). These myths, she reasons, are used to flatter and pacify women, to give them emotional satisfaction ‘at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life’ (SW:5). In this way, mystic roles and mystic voices have been allocated to women so that, like Cassandra, they may speak the truth only to be completely disregarded:

In this most insulting redefinition of myself, that of occult priestess, I am indeed allowed to speak but only of things that male society does not take seriously. I can hint at dreams, I can even personify the imagination; but that is only because I am not rational enough to cope with reality. (SW:5)

The notion that women are irrational, or, as Carter states, ‘not rational enough to cope with reality’ (SW:5), is further discussed by Aidan Day, who observes that ‘Enlightenment reason defined itself against unreason But, as has often been pointed out, it was specifically white masculine reason’ (1998:92). Accordingly, all those who were not white males were relegated to the sideshow: ‘The ideology of white, masculine reason conspired to dismiss . . . the non-white and the feminine to the realm of the non-rational “other” against which it defined itself’ (Day 1998:92). In this context, the feminine is thus defined as belonging to a mystical, non-rational realm which is marginalised by the hegemonic ideology of white masculine reason. ‘Femininity’ thus becomes a culturally determined position which is marginal within patriarchal society, a position which lacks ‘access to the modes of intellectual debate’ (SW:5).

In *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, Genevieve Lloyd also comments on the fact that traditional philosophical writing identifies Reason as 'male' and its opposite (as well as all that it leaves in its wake) as 'female':

From the beginnings of philosophical thought, femaleness was symbolically associated with what Reason supposedly left behind – the dark powers of the earth goddesses, immersion in unknown forces associated with mysterious female powers. (1986:2)

Lloyd argues that the male-female distinction is thus also associated with the Culture-Nature divide: 'the pursuit of rational knowledge has been a major strand in western culture's definitions of itself as opposed to Nature' (1986:2). It would seem that the association of the feminine with Nature stems from the female ability to bring children into the world. Traditionally, this biological fact has been seen as the very manifestation of mysterious feminine forces at work. Carter suggests that fecundity is 'the most troubling aspect' of female sexuality (SW:61), because it has provided patriarchy with the mythical means to exclude women from the public sphere. For Carter, the sanctification of motherhood lies at the heart of all the consolatory fictions which exist in the realm of the 'eternal feminine'. She cites the womb as the last hiding place on this earth for 'the imaginary construct of the goddess' (SW:110) that is the symbol of a universal feminine experience: 'If the goddess is dead, there is nowhere for eternity to hide' (SW:110). To secularise motherhood is to excavate the womb and strip it of all the spurious traditional notions of an 'eternal feminine'. Once the goddess is dead, women will be free to participate in 'this world, in its historic time that is counted out minute by minute, in which no event or circumstance of life exists for itself but is determined by an interlocking web of experiences' (SW:106).

To appreciate Carter's demythologising of motherhood, it is necessary to explore fecundity from the perspective that it is 'the most troubling aspect' of female sexuality (SW:61). Carter says of motherhood that

it is in just this physical difference that the whole opposition of the sexes lies. If men could have babies, they would cease to be men as such. They would become the 'other'. They would become magical objects of strangeness, veneration, obloquy, awe, disregard, and oppression, recipients of holy terror. (Carter 1988:73)

The sanctification of motherhood has thus served to console women for their exclusion from the public domain and, accordingly, prevented them from participation in the material world. It has also made women the martyrs of a holy reproductive function. Carter argues that if the womb is the most sacred of all places, then women 'are sacred because they possess it', which is 'why they are treated so badly for nothing can defile the sacred' (SW:109). In this context, Marks and De Courtivron warn: 'beware of those Thrones for "Woman" that turn her into an altar' (1977:221). This is a point Carter also makes, that the celestial throne of holy motherhood is, in fact, an altar where 'Woman' can be desecrated to 'the extent that she has been made holy' (SW:73). Translated, this means that Woman becomes an object of reverence and is placed on a pedestal, removed from the material world. She is compensated for her inability to act in the world, or her lack of autonomy, by 'a convention of respect which is largely false' (SW:73). To be an object of reverence, or an object of desire is, as Carter states, 'to be defined in the passive case' and to 'exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed' (SW:77).

Marks and De Courtivron hint at some of the deceptive rhetoric that the hegemonic ideology has employed to convince women that their reproductive function is their most laudable attribute:

Woman is supposed to possess a huge secret, probably that of our origins just because gestation occurs in her body: consequently she may remain illiterate, she already knows too much! But she does not know what she knows (do her ovaries know?), it cannot be formulated – She is said to be beyond formulation, knowledge, science: in order to keep her away from these skills. (Marks & De Courtivron 1977:221)

In her discussion of the duplicitous myth of a hallowed fecundity, Carter employs a similarly enticing grand eloquence when she states that the mythic woman is seen as the channel of life, possessor of the

most potent matrix of all mysteries. The great, good place; domain of futurity in which the embryo forms itself from the flesh and blood of its mother; the unguessable reaches of the sea are a symbol of it, and so are caves, those dark sequestered places where initiation and revelation take place. (SW:108)

It would seem that it is in the ‘unguessable reaches’ of the womb, its ‘dark sequestered places’, that Woman has lost her autonomy, the complexity of her being, and the multiplicity of her experiences. It is in this ‘most potent matrix’ that Woman is ‘naturalised into a subordinate position’ and where she is trapped in ‘an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender’ (Robinson 1991:77).

The womb has not only engendered a feminine identity that is bound by the constraints of biological determinism; it is also the birthplace of another binary opposition, namely the creative-procreative distinction, where the Author-God seems to exist in opposition to the Mother-Goddess. The implications of such an opposition are far-reaching, and its hidden political agenda, which is to deny women access to the proverbial corridors of power and knowledge, is closely related to that of the Culture-Nature divide. The myth of the Author-God pretends ‘that books are brain-children, and that therefore only male writers . . . are haunted enough by the *metaphoric* mystery of creation to make work of real depth and intensity’ (Sage 1994a:52). Active masculinity thus creates in the *wunderkammer* that is the mind,

whereas passive femininity procreates in the *wunderkammer* that is the womb. In this context Lorna Sage quotes George Steiner, who asks the following question in *Real*

Presences:

‘Is the biological capacity for procreation, for engendering formed life which is cardinal to women . . . so creative, so fulfilling, as to subvert, as to render comparatively pallid, the begetting of fictional personae which is the matter of drama and of so much representative art?’
(In Sage 1994a:53)

The distinction is clear and deeply embedded in the patriarchal value system: man creates and progresses – woman procreates and is left behind. This state of affairs, which patriarchy has conspired to present as natural, is, in fact, a perspective that has been imposed upon women by the hegemonic ideology, and there is nothing natural about it:

In everything that is supposed to characterize women, oppression is always present. We are willing to sacrifice ourselves? No, we “have been” sacrificed. Maternal instincts? No, but the obligation for women to fulfil a certain role. We are close to nature? No, but we are prohibited from using the tools necessary for social mastery, for the knowledge of our own bodies and for creation. As far as creation is concerned we are left, through an ambiguous play on words, with the “creation” of babies, on condition that it be involuntary, regulated, and “inspired” by other minds than ours. (Marks & De Courtivron 1977:222)

Carter is quick to deflate the deceitful rhetoric that surrounds the womb, and she does not hesitate to secularise sanctified motherhood. She points out that the ‘sacred mother’ has no place in the historic world, and that the notion of maternal superiority ‘springs from the timeless, placeless, fantasy land of archetypes where all the embodiments of biological supremacy live’ (SW:106). Carter sets out to demystify women so that they can partake in the material world and shake the dust of the eternal feminine from their heels. She is not seduced by the poetic fictions that glamorise the womb, but prefers to describe it in physiological terms:

The truth of the womb is, that it is an organ like any other organ, more useful than the appendix, less useful than the colon but not so much use to you at all if you do not wish to utilise its sole function, that of bearing children To deny the bankrupt enchantments of the womb is to pare a good deal of fraudulent magic from the idea of women, to reveal us as we are, simple creatures of flesh and blood whose expectations deviate from biological necessity sufficiently to force us to abandon, perhaps regretfully, perhaps with relief, the deluded priestesshood of a holy reproductive function. (SW:109-110)

Carter's demythologising of motherhood is therefore aimed at separating a woman's identity from her fecundity, and at rewriting traditional notions of an immutable feminine experience into mutability. She recognises that it is only recently that women have been liberated from a life-sentence of perpetual pregnancies. In 'Notes from the Front Line', she celebrates a newfound freedom for women with special reference to herself. She emphasises that this freedom does not stem from the fact that she can work and earn her keep as a writer, for, as she points out, she could have been a spellbinder at any time in the past, and even a professional writer in either Britain or France at any time since the seventeenth century:

But I could *not* have combined this latter with a life as a sexually active woman until the introduction of contraception, unless I had been lucky enough to be born sterile Even if I had been rich enough to afford child care, wealth was no protection against puerperal fever, and being pregnant most of the time is tiring, enfeebling, and a drain on one's physical and emotional resources. In fact, most women were *ill* most of the time until the introduction of contraception and efficient post- and ante-natal care and you need to be quite strong and healthy to write big, fat books. (Carter 1983b:40)

She thus celebrates the emergence of a 'new kind of being' who could not have existed at any other time – a woman who is not forced to choose between a sexually active life and a working life:

The voluntarily sterile yet sexually active being . . . *is* a being without precedent and, by voluntarily sterile, I don't necessarily mean permanently childless; this category includes women who are sterile not all, just most of the time I/we are not the slaves of the history that enslaved our ancestors. (Carter 1983b:41)

The secularisation of holy motherhood is perhaps best illustrated in the title story of Carter's collection of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, when the narrator, the Marquis's sacrificial child-bride, is liberated by her avenging mother, who puts an end to Bluebeard's reign of terror:

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage indifferent sea, like the witnesses of a furious justice. And my husband stood stock-still, as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs. (BC:40)

This passage is emblematic of Carter in her role as 'a kind of cultural saboteur' (Gamble 1997:4), as she unleashes a savage demythologising force that explodes conventional ways of thinking about gender roles and the relations between the sexes. Here the mother, who has conventionally been portrayed as a passive and sacred figure, not only reclaims the subject position, but seizes the reins and straddles the seat that has traditionally been reserved for active masculinity. The image is powerful and subversive: Woman is no longer merely a symbol of blind justice, but the enforcer of a liberating justice that allows us to glimpse the possibility of a transformed society where 'Old Adam, exemplified in God, the King and the Law, the trifold masculine symbolism of authority, will take his final departure from amongst us' (SW:24). Patriarchal authority is thus dethroned by a matriarchal fury and symbolically reduced to an automaton, trapped in a glass case and presented as a commodity, an object of exchange. In this way the Marquis is placed in a position that the hegemonic ideology has habitually reserved for women, a space that he himself had reserved for his bride. The aggressor thus becomes the victim, as traditional roles are reversed in a feminist deconstruction of yet another binary opposition.

Carter describes *The Bloody Chamber* as ‘a book of stories about fairy stories’ (1983b:38), thus emphasising her critical and ironic approach in this collection, which is based largely on Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*. She writes that it ‘turned out to be easier to deal with the shifting structures of reality and sexuality by using sets of shifting structures derived from orally transmitted traditional tales’ (1983b:38). Her perspective on reality and sexuality as cultural variables, neither eternal nor immutable, informs her demythologising approach, and the exploration of these variables in the malleable form of the fairy tale is yet another assault on myth. In her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter observes that ‘most fairy tales and folk tales are structured around the relations between men and women’ (1990:xvii), and it is to this binary battlefield that she brings her own brand of magical metamorphosis, which is materialist rather than escapist. For Carter, the transformation of gender relations depends upon the debunking of social and sexual myths that have reduced women to passive and submissive objects of desire. As an alternative, she envisages relations based on the principle of reciprocity. These ideas are discussed at length in *The Sadeian Woman*, which was published in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*. Carter points out that Sade’s diabolical orgies describe sexual relations in an unfree society, and she says that the one constant in all these orgies is that

the whip hand is always the hand with the real political power and the victim is a person who has little or no power at all, or has it stripped from him. In this schema male means tyrannous and female means martyred, no matter what the official genders of the male and female beings are. (SW:24)

The Sadeian Woman and *The Bloody Chamber* cover the same ideological ground.

Avis Lewallen writes that Carter’s collection of fairy tales is a fictional rendering of

the ideas ‘she expounds in her theoretical analysis of the works of the Marquis de Sade’ (1988:145). And Patricia Dunker says:

The psychology of pornography and the Gothic . . . are subjected to speculative, non-fictional treatment in *The Sadeian Woman*; out of the last metamorphosis come the fairy tales . . . rewritten by the woman disguised, self-styled as the moral pornographerⁱⁱ, the tales in *The Bloody Chamber*. (1984:3)

Margaret Atwood observes that in both books ‘the distinctions drawn are not so much between males and females as between “tigers” and “lambs”, carnivores and herbivores, those who are preyed upon and those who do the preying’ (1994:118). In *The Sadeian Woman*, the construction of gendered identity as a predatory hierarchy is explored in Sade’s characterization of Juliette and Justine. These two sisters must fend for themselves when they are left penniless after the death of their parents. Juliette knows that a woman’s meal ticket is not an honest day’s work, and she heads for the nearest brothel. Her only two goals in life are sexual gratification and financial gain, and she actively pursues them, no matter what the cost. In so doing, she joins the ranks of Sade’s notorious libertines; that is, she accedes to the masculine world of tyranny, or predation, by freeing herself from the constraints of a debilitating femininity to become, in Carter’s words, ‘rationality personified’, a woman ‘who never obeys the fallacious promptings of her heart’ (*SW*:79). The virtuous Justine, however, is a passive and obedient lamb who is not equipped for life in a predatory world. She believes that her beauty and innocence will move others to rescue her, and consequently becomes the feminine victim, the natural prey in the Sadeian universe. Her ‘organ of perception is the heart’ (*SW*:51) and she does not once stop to think, to make a plan or to counteract the innumerable indecencies that are thrust upon her.

Carter writes:

Justine is the thesis, Juliette is the antithesis; both are without hope and neither pays any heed to a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling. (SW:79)

If Justine is dehumanised by her culturally determined position as prey, then Juliette dehumanises herself by embracing a tyrannous subjectivity to escape objectification, for ‘rationality without humanism founders on itself’ (SW:35), and so both women are indeed ‘without hope’ (SW:79). Carter describes the subjectivity of the Sadeian libertine as an ‘absolute egotism’ (SW:25), a ‘diabolic solitude’ (SW:150) which dictates that pleasure ‘may never be shared, or it will be diminished. A shared pleasure is a betrayal of the self, a seeping away of some of the subject’s precious egotism’ (SW:142). For this reason, the good Justine, who is the object of Sadeian sexual voracity, is condemned to a life without a single moment of enjoyment, while the wicked Juliette, who is the perpetrator of Sadeian atrocities, is damned to a perpetual solitude which denies the reciprocity of sensation, because ‘to share is to be robbed’ (SW:142). These women are fixed in an immutable binary pattern where ‘the freedom of one . . . sex, or individual necessitates the unfreedom of others’ (SW: 24). Aidan Day states that it is ‘a framework of rigid dualisms – reason and unreason, aggressor and victim, annihilator and annihilated’, which confirms ‘a lack of humanity and communality’ (1998:98).

In this savage society, where human nature is eternal and experience universal, the hierarchies of power still enforce the notion of the survival of the fittest: ‘The strong abuse, exploit and meatify the weak, says Sade. They must and will devour their natural prey. The primal condition of man cannot be modified in any way; it is eat or be eaten’ (SW:140). The relation between the predator and its prey denies the

possibility of love; it also denies the expression of love as a tender exchange in the garden of fleshly delights. In this dreadful dichotomy there can be only a one-sided predation, the consumption of ‘meat’, which serves to nourish the carnivore’s ego and sate his appetite. Carter writes that in ‘the English language, we make a fine distinction between flesh, which is usually alive and, typically, human; and meat, which is dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption’ (SW:137). The most discomfiting point that she makes in *The Bloody Chamber* is that patriarchal ideology has traditionally viewed the feminine in terms of ‘meat’, that is, as a passive object of desire and an inert object of exchange. In the title story of the collection, Bluebeard’s wives are lambs led to the slaughter, which is why they end up in an abattoir, while in ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, the father exchanges his daughter, ‘his pet’ (BC:41), for a white rose.

To be objectified is to be enslaved, to be the creature of another’s desires and thus to be dehumanised or ‘meatified’. Carter states that this is ‘the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman’ (SW:77), who is a passive, selfless and submissive creature of the male imagination and, like Sade’s Justine, has been robbed of her autonomy and her libido. In demythologising the social and sexual fictions that represent women as ‘property (without a libido of their own, let alone a mind or a room)’ (Makinen 1992:9), Carter seeks to exorcise ‘a cultural definition of the female as passive victim, a definition which attributes libidinal desire only to the male and associates the female with being merely the inert object of that desire’ (Day 1998:144). For woman sans libido equals ‘meat’, and ‘meat’ is devoured by the male sexual appetite. Aidan Day writes that Carter’s empirical materialism leads her ‘to see both women and men as creatures of the flesh and as equally rooted in and driven by fleshly impulses’

(1998:147) He adds that to deny women an equal libido is to fall back on the claustrophobic image of the patriarchal ‘angel in the house’ or to vilify women who do act on their fleshly impulses as whores:

It is patriarchal culture – in a duplicitous attempt to contain the female – which has generated the idea of male libido as threatening to devour sexually unmotivated females or as needing to protect itself against sexually motivated ones. By deconstructing one term of the opposition . . . Carter erases the opposition itself. She uses the image of animals to signify a libido that has been culturally repressed in some women and which needs recognising and articulating in order that they may define autonomous subject positions for themselves. (1998:147)

If the Sadeian model of ‘fuck or be fucked’ (Day 1998:149) dictates that, in the solipsistic pursuit of pleasure, the almighty subject inflicts sex upon an inert object of desire, then Carter’s model of reciprocity proposes, instead, a ‘reciprocal pact of tenderness’ (SW:8) where ‘both partners are changed by the exchange and, if submission is mutual, then aggression is mutual’ (SW:146). Day suggests that this is a model of ‘mutuality or communication, in which human beings interact as both subject and object, individually both thesis and antithesis’ (1998:101). The tales in *The Bloody Chamber* explore the possibilities of transformation when desire is rooted in reciprocity and no longer confined to the oppressive parameters of the predator-prey dichotomy. When the female heroes in *The Bloody Chamber* confront the complexity of their own desires and reclaim their sexual autonomy, they cease to be passive objects of desire. In other words, ‘libido will transform “meat” into “flesh”’ (Makinen 1992:11). The acceptance of their sexuality enables them to encounter male libido on an equal footing, which means that the social conventions that informed the old power relations have been destabilised. In the context of such a monumental shift, male libido is also transformed, and loses its predatory nature in the face of a reciprocal desire.

But a denial of the predatory nature of male libido does not negate the animality of desire; Carter writes that ‘the pleasures of the flesh are vulgar and unrefined, even with an element of beastliness about them’ (SW:137-138). Aidan Day states that

Carter certainly identifies an animal dimension to human beings that lies beneath social representations of that animality. In all of the tales in *The Bloody Chamber* it is existing social constructions that repress and misrepresent an animal energy shared equally between the sexes. One of the morals of all these tales is that we have to strip away existing cultural definitions of sexuality in order to reach a base level from which to begin building representation anew. (1998:147)

While *The Sadeian Woman* can be read as a theoretical companion guide to the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, the ideas discussed in Carter’s cultural history regarding the culturally determined nature of men and women, and the relations between the sexes that result from it, are also significant in the context of her 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus*. Here, the circus ring ‘becomes an effective symbol of the patriarchal social order’ (Palmer 1987:198). As Carter states, a ‘circus is always a microcosm’ (in Haffenden 1985:89). The cast of Colonel Kearney’s circus includes the troupe of disheartened clowns, Samson, the cowardly Strong Man; the misogynistic Ape Man and his Educated Apes; the Princess of Abyssinia and her waltzing tigers; Mignon, the unfortunate and bedraggled orphan; and, of course, the marvellous Fevvers, an *aerialiste* like no other. Her slogan: ‘Is she fact or is she fiction?’ (NC:7) refers to her celebrated wings, the ‘source of her fame’ (NC:7) and the site of much speculation about whether she is real or not. This motley crew of performers is joined by Jack Walser, journalist and man of action, who decides to join the circus *incognito* after an interview with its winged star, whose fantastical life story entices him to follow her as far as Siberia.

Against the backdrop of circus life, amid this assembly of diverse characters, Carter discusses the artifice of gendered identity, and here the male-female distinction is presented in its spectator-spectacle guise. At one end of the spectrum is Mignon, submissive and weak, the archetypal feminine spectacle or victim, whose tragic tale of abuse and suffering is a sorrowful repetition of the misfortunes of Sade's Justine. And then there is Fevvers, autonomous and strong, who resists victimization and actively pursues fame and fortune by bending the rules of patriarchal prescription for fun and profit.

If Mignon is Justine then Fevvers is her opposite, but this does not mean that she belongs to the villainous sorority of Juliette, although Carter does comment that one of the original ideas behind the creation of her 'Cockney Venus' (*NC:7*) was 'a piece of writing by Guillaume Apollinaireⁱⁱⁱ, in which he talks about Sade's Juliette' (in Katsavos 1994:3):

'It was no accident that the Marquis de Sade chose heroines and not heroes,' said Guillaume Apollinaire. 'Justine is woman as she has been until now, enslaved, miserable and less than human; her opposite, Juliette represents the woman whose advent he anticipated, a figure of whom minds have as yet no conception, who is rising out of mankind, who will have wings and who will renew the world.' (*SW:79*)

The fact that Apollinaire's rhetoric inspired Carter's creation of Fevvers as the New Woman is evident in the observation made by Ma Nelson, the Madame of the brothel where Fevvers grows up. On looking at the young girl's sprouting wings, she says: 'I think you must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground' (*NC:25*).

And yet, as I have mentioned, Fevvers is very different from Juliette, whom Carter describes as 'a New Woman in the mode of irony' (*SW:79*). For there is nothing

particularly new about Juliette's identity, even if she is 'rationality personified' (SW:79) in an ideological context where the faculty of reason has traditionally been denied women, and even if this attribute allows her to enter into the domain of masculine privilege. There is no denying that Juliette is the opposite of Justine, who incarnates the traditional feminine 'virtues', for Juliette does transform 'herself from pawn to queen in a single move and henceforward goes wherever she pleases on the chess board' (SW:79). Nevertheless, as Carter points out, this seemingly boundless freedom is not so boundless after all, because 'there remains the question of the presence of the king, who remains the lord of the game' (SW:80). Juliette may rid herself of a threadbare femininity, but she does not redefine her own identity outside of patriarchal prescription. She merely slots into an existing place, that of masculine subject, which means that her behaviour is still dictated by the hegemonic ideology. So while Justine is the 'thesis' and Juliette is the 'antithesis' (SW:79), both are women 'whose identities are defined exclusively by men' (SW:77), and the division that separates subject and object, aggressor and victim, spectator and spectacle, remains absolute. And so Apollinaire is right about only one thing in his pseudo-visionary depiction of the New Woman, and that is that Juliette is a figure who rises 'out of mankind' (SW:79); in other words, she is a creature of the male imagination.

What sets Fevvers apart from Justine, who is 'woman as she has been' (SW:79), and Juliette, the Not-so-New Woman, is that she is 'a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling' (SW:79), and so she incarnates a new model of female behaviour that transcends the binary divide of traditional gendered identity, which is governed by an either/or logic. If Juliette is the traditional masculine subject, or spectator, and Justine the typical feminine object,

or spectacle, then Fevvers is both subject and object, spectator and spectacle, which means that, in the creation of her winged circus star, Carter deconstructs the subject-object or spectator-spectacle dichotomy. Unlike Juliette, Fevvers articulates a subject position for herself that exists outside the rules laid down by patriarchy. She presents herself as feminine spectacle, and in so doing becomes, simultaneously, a spectator, as she ‘turns her own gaze on herself, producing herself as its object’ (Robinson 1991:123). In ‘flaunting femininity’, Fevvers ‘holds it at a distance’, and in this way womanliness becomes ‘a mask which can be worn or removed’ (Doane 1991:25). Mary Ann Doane refers to this strategy of self-representation as the masquerade (1991:25), and Sally Robinson describes it as an ‘acceptance and denial of femininity . . . a means toward subverting all notions of a “natural” femininity’ as ‘gender becomes a performance rather than an essence’ (1991:120). Unlike Justine, Fevvers is thus not trapped within the codes of a crippling femininity, for, in playing the masquerade, femininity becomes ‘a take-it-and-leave-it *possibility*’ (Russo in Robinson 1991:120), a mask that can be used and discarded^{iv}.

Nights at the Circus is, amongst other things, a love story (albeit an unconventional one) between Fevvers, who is the New Woman, and Walser, who has to endure much before he becomes the New Man. As a reporter, Walser is the archetypal masculine spectator, who enters into an existing position of privilege without a ‘single quiver of introspection’ (NC:10). This culturally determined identity is presented as universal and immutable, which means that Walser does not experience ‘his experience *as* experience’ (NC:10); in other words, Walser is not modified by experience, because his nature as masculine subject is already fixed, his behaviour is prescribed. John Haffenden observes that Walser ‘has to go through various degrading hoops’ to

become ‘someone who can experience things directly’ (1985:89). In other words, he has to revise and reinvent ‘his rather two-dimensional idea of himself’ (Carter in Haffenden 1985:89). In this process, he will be transformed from spectator into spectacle, as he goes undercover and becomes a clown in Colonel Kearney’s circus. But it is only later, when he suffers from amnesia after the circus train is sabotaged in Siberia, that he will begin to reconstruct his identity on his own terms, and escape from the subject-object, spectator-spectacle dichotomy that governs gender relations. In the past, Walser has treated women as objects; hitherto ‘conquests came easily and were disregarded’ (NC:145). But his attitude begins to change when he falls in love for the first time, ‘a condition that causes him anxiety because he has not experienced it before’ (NC:145). Before this, Carter describes Walser as ‘the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver’ (NC:10), a comparison which she uses more than once to denote characters who are trapped within an archetypal idea of themselves and so exist in the fantasy land of myth that is removed from the material world. When Walser experiences the anxiety of love (and Carter observes that ‘anxiety is the beginning of conscience’ [NC:293]), he begins to suspect that something is ‘badly wrong with the versions of reality’ (Carter 1983b:38) he has been offered. Carter points out that ‘men live by the myths [of femininity] . . . as much as women’ (in Haffenden 1985:91), and this is evident in Walser’s state of mental turmoil when faced with an autonomous woman such as Fevvers, who will not be conquered and disregarded. On recovering from his amnesia, the boy who did not know how to shiver discovers ‘the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of love’ (NC:293). Transformed by a combination of love and a blow to the head which provides him with a blank sheet on

which to rewrite his identity, Walser escapes from his shell of socialisation and so can embark on a relationship with Fevvers that is based on the principle of reciprocity.

In demythologising the culturally determined nature of men and women, Carter deconstructs the subject-object opposition that has prescribed gender relations. In the postscript to *The Sadeian Woman*, she quotes Emma Goldman, who writes:

if partial emancipation is to become a complete and true emancipation of woman, it will have to do away with the ridiculous notion that to be loved, to be sweetheart and mother, is synonymous with being slave or subordinate. It will have to do away with the absurd notion of the dualism of the sexes, or that men and women represent two antagonistic worlds. . . . A true conception of the relation of the sexes will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but one great thing: to give of oneself boundlessly, in order to find one's self richer, deeper, better. (SW:151)

ⁱ “Essentialism” is a belief in the priority of “essences”. An essence would be something like a Platonic Form – a definition, a formula, a set of characteristics that stabilise objects in the world’ (Palmer 1997:51). Anti-essentialists reject the notion that there is ‘any essence to phenomena such as truth, meaning, self or identity. Traditional philosophy is taken to be essentialist in believing that there is such a thing as absolute truth’ (Sim 1998:183). Carter’s anti-essentialism will be discussed later in this chapter.

ⁱⁱ In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter writes that a ‘moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes’ (SW:19). The role of pornography in Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* will be discussed in Chapter 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Guillaume Apollinaire is the name taken by Wilhelm Apollinaris Kostrowitzky, who was born in Rome in 1880 and died in Paris in 1918. After an education in the South of France, he came to Paris, where he initially earned a living through literary journalism. He became a leading figure in younger literary and artistic circles, particularly those of the *Futuristes* and *Cubistes* (Pablo Picasso was among his closest friends). *Alcools* (1913), a collection of poems, is one of his best-known works (Harvey & Heseltine 1959:24).

^{iv} Fevvers' use of masquerade will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

New wine in old bottles: revisiting the past historic and re-imagining the future indefinite in *The Bloody Chamber*

‘The Bloody Chamber’

The title story of this collection is Carter’s tale about Perrault’s Bluebeard. In Perrault’s tale, Bluebeard is a rich villain who marries a series of young women who all disappear mysteriously. He marries again and leaves the keys to his castle in the care of his young bride when he departs on business. She has access to all the rooms except for one, which is strictly forbidden. But prohibitions are made to be broken, and when the young woman transgresses she discovers a chamber of horrors, the final resting place of her husband’s dead wives. Bluebeard returns to find a bloody key that is evidence of his wife’s curiosity, and prepares to execute her for her disobedience. Fortunately her brothers arrive just in time to rescue her. Bruno Bettelheim interprets the bloody key as a symbol of the woman’s sexual infidelity, and the dead wives as the husband’s tendency to overreact to cuckoldry: ‘However one interprets “Bluebeard”, it is a cautionary tale which warns: Women, don’t give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don’t permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed’ (1976:302).

Carter’s tale, however, moves beyond such a simplistic interpretation of marital relations under patriarchy. She uses Perrault’s tale as a springboard for a far more complex discussion of the relations between the sexes as they exist within the oppressive parameters of the predator-prey or aggressor-victim dichotomy. Although

this dualism may seem to exist in an ideological framework where black and white are absolutes, Carter's reworking plunges it into a grey area where white is no longer spotless and black is the colour not only of power but also of despair. The Bluebeard in her tale is a Marquis, and 'rich as Croesus' (*BC*:12). He is also a Sadeian libertine, whose carnivorous appetite usually means his prey's extinction. His bride is a young pianist who has been studying music at the Paris Conservatoire before her 'marital coup' (*BC*:9). She is portrayed as inexperienced in the ways of the world, and it is her innocence which captivates the lecherous Marquis. Accordingly, the stage is set for a tale of exploitation and murder involving a nefarious villain and his unsuspecting victim. But Carter does not stick to such an obvious denouement, for the young bride does not emerge blameless and the Marquis has a tragic aspect, trapped as he is within the stagnant patterns of his contemptible nature. Carter's tale thus treads a dangerous line, and her harshest critics have argued that it topples into the pornographic domain that it sets out to critique. Admittedly, the story does contain scenes which are very disturbing, but, in my opinion, Carter's feminist strategy, shocking as it may be, succeeds.

'The Bloody Chamber' is told from the perspective of the pianist, who recounts the events of her gothic union. The story opens with the young bride (she is just seventeen) in the luxurious compartment of the train that transports her, as she describes it, 'away from girlhood, away from the white enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage' (*BC*:7). The girl's mother is a fearless woman whose life has been particularly adventurous. Her youth includes such daring acts as fighting Chinese pirates and shooting a man-eating tiger. But perhaps her most courageous act was when she 'defiantly begged herself for

love' (BC:8), by marrying a poor soldier who was then killed in battle, thus leaving her to raise their daughter. When the young bride leaves her 'mother's apartment' (BC:7), she symbolically leaves a haven of female autonomy. Unlike her mother, she marries into tremendous wealth, but at the cost of her subjectivity. For this marriage is not a union of minds and hearts, but rather an economic transaction, because there is no doubt that the impoverished young virgin is seduced by the power and riches of her much older suitor:

This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth, his scent of Russian leather – all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one twinge of regret for the world of tartines and maman that now receded from me (BC:12)

She does not yet realise that 'the world of tartines and maman', protected as it may have been, is a place where femininity is active and independent. Marriage to the Marquis, seductive as it may seem with its veneer of opulence and sophistication, its scent of Russian leather, is founded on a different set of assumptions. The Marquis' world is decidedly patriarchal. Aidan Day states:

The girl, ceasing 'to be her' mother's 'child in becoming' the cigar-smoking Marquis' 'wife' [BC:7], is realigned within the order of the father: 'the cigar glowed and filled the compartment with a remembered fragrance that made me think of my father, how he would hug me in a warm fug of Havana, when I was a little girl' [BC:12]. One of the reasons why the girl failed to regret leaving Maman was that she was subject, *as* a girl, to a whole structure of myth and legend about the fulfilments to be derived from partnership with the male. (1998:152-153)

The young bride enters married life in the mode of a typical fairy tale princess who looks forward to a 'happily ever after'. She fantasises about their wedding night, which has been postponed until they arrive at the Marquis' castle. The home they will share exists in her mind as a 'magic place, the fairy castle whose walls [are] made of foam, that legendary habitation in which he [was] born: To which, one day, [she may] bear an heir' (BC:8). But alas, only disillusionment awaits in that 'magic place',

where her romantic fantasies will encounter his predatory appetites. His wedding gift already bodes ill; it is a ‘choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat’ (*BC:11*). The ruby choker can be interpreted as the Marquis’ sneak preview of the show in which he intends to give the young girl a starring role – the spectacle of her decapitation, which he anticipates with such pleasure that he insists she wear the ‘precious slit throat’ (*BC:11*) almost all of the time. He does not see her as a living, breathing, autonomous woman; instead his gaze reduces her to just another trophy in his bloody chamber of misogyny. Her fate will not be decided by her transgression; it has already been decided, and it is not a reproof of curiosity. If disregard for the husband’s prohibition has anything to do with it, then what did Bluebeard’s first wife do to deserve a place in the charnel house where romantic dreams of female fulfilment come to such a sticky end? Marina Warner points out that the ‘first wife cannot have been issued the same instruction (at that point there was as yet no forbidden knowledge, no bloody chamber)’ (1995:246). The ruby choker is thus a harbinger of the young pianist’s violent end.

But it is also emblematic of her designated part in other ways, for the choker is a symbol of suffocation, and she will find herself smothered by the confines of the pornographic role that the Marquis envisages for her as the object of his sadistic desires. And, objectified in this way, robbed of her autonomy, the transformation from ‘flesh’ into ‘meat’ will have begun. Carter warns that objectification equals a life lived in the passive case, and that to ‘exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is to be killed’ (*SW:77*). Whether one reads death, in this sense, as literal or figurative, it is not tempting, no matter how ‘extraordinarily precious’ the ‘slit throat’ (*BC:11*) may appear. In addition, ‘the bloody bandage of rubies’ (*BC:12*) is also

reminiscent of the social fiction of the female wound, which Carter describes as ‘the bleeding scar’ (*SW:23*) of woman’s castration, which ‘transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed’ (*SW:23*). And this is indeed how the Marquis sees his child bride, as a victim whose bloody destiny he intends to fulfil. Aidan Day suggests that the Marquis’ gift also ‘symbolises the connection between male economic power and the power to own, constrict and objectify the female’ (1998:153). He adds that Carter’s tale emphasises that the ultimate expression of ‘this kind of proprietarial objectification of the female is the murder chamber in the Marquis’ castle’ (1998:153).

The most distressing aspect of Carter’s tale is perhaps the fact that the young bride, in spite of her innocence, is not entirely ignorant of her objectification. She is aware of the proprietarial power exerted upon her by the male gaze. On the eve of her wedding, the Marquis takes her to the opera and she has a glimpse of herself from his perspective:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away. (*BC:11*)

Paulina Palmer writes that the ‘gaze is a practical means for men to impose control on women, as well as a symbol of sexual domination’ (1987:185). The young pianist recognises the promise of sexual domination in the assessing eye of her suitor, but she does not recoil. Instead she responds to it, although her response does surprise her. I would argue that the ‘potentiality for corruption’ (*BC:11*) that she recognises in

herself is the fascination that she feels at being desired in such a way for the first time in her young life. It is a sexual awakening, but it is initiated within an oppressive dichotomy, on terms other than her own. Her marriage to the Marquis is, as Aidan Day states, ‘an assimilation to the world of the masculine’ (1998:152). If she is to fit into the role that such an assimilation to the patriarchal world prescribes, she will have to sacrifice her autonomy and allow herself to be reshaped according to the hegemonic ideology’s idea of womanhood.

But perhaps such a transformation has already begun, for she enjoys the opulence which her marriage has afforded her, and it has made her very conscious of her appearance. This is evident when they arrive in Brittany: ‘I was cold; I drew my furs about me, a wrap of white and black, broad stripes of ermine and sable, with a collar from which my head rose like the calyx of a wildflower. (I swear to you, I had never been vain until I met him)’ (*BC*:12). This sudden consciousness of the importance of her appearance is another level of entrapment within the male gaze. Aidan Day quotes John Berger, who observes ‘that the “function . . . of the mirror” in classical European paintings which exemplify the masculine gaze was “to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight”’ (1998:154). The young bride, who never bothered with her appearance when she existed on her own terms in her mother’s world, has become vain. Her involvement with the Marquis and her assimilation to his world is already moulding her into the patriarchal ‘perfect woman’ (*SW*:77) who treats herself as, ‘first and foremost, a sight’ (Berger in Day 1998:154).

When the newlyweds arrive at the Marquis' ancestral castle, she begins to understand that 'happily ever after', for the fairy tale princess, really means passively ever after.

Her disillusionment begins when she first encounters the housekeeper:

[She] kept this extraordinary machine, this anchored, castellated ocean liner, in smooth running order no matter who stood on the bridge; how tenuous, I thought, might be my authority here Her greeting, correct but lifeless, chilled me; daydreaming, I dared presume too much on my status (BC:14)

The phrase 'no matter who stands on the bridge' emphasizes the anonymity and purposelessness that await any woman who has the dubious honour of becoming the Marquis' wife. A wife, unlike a good housekeeper, is replaceable, and in this savage dichotomy, her usefulness does not extend beyond the bedroom. Even there, she is just a face at the end of a long line of women who have found themselves transformed from living flesh into dead meat. When the young girl enters the bedroom, this loss of identity in an oppressive tradition is made explicit by the mirrors that surround the matrimonial bed and fill the room with reflections of her:

Mirrors on the walls He'd filled the room with them, to greet the bride, the young bride. The young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors, identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades 'See', he said, gesturing towards those elegant girls. 'I have acquired a whole harem for myself!' (BC:14)

Aidan Day observes that the multitude of mirrors, 'and hence of girls, emphasizes her objectification: she loses her individuality and becomes an item in a series of multiply reproduced items, a specimen of female sex in the Marquis' harem' (1998:154).

Day notes that at this stage the girl has not yet arrived at 'any fully formed, conscious objection to the Marquis' (1998:154). He has not yet shown her the bloody colours of his predatory nature and she does not yet fully comprehend the harsh realities of the marriage bargain. But 'hints of *his* world' (BC:15) are apparent when he undresses his

bride in a fashion which she experiences as ‘coarse, vulgar’ (BC:15) and humiliating.

Yet, in spite of this, she is dismayed to feel herself aroused by his pornographic attentions:

And when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together . . . the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring. (BC:15)

Paulina Palmer writes:

An important question raised by Carter’s treatment of the interrelation between sex and violence in her fiction is: how does one distinguish between a text which constitutes a serious consideration of the topic and one that is an exercise in pornography? . . . Even though a text generally carries a ‘preferred reading’, it is, in part, open to the different interpretations which the observer or reader chooses to impose on it. Thus, an episode which one reader may interpret as a serious investigation into the female victim’s response to the experience of violent sex, may strike another as pornographic. (1987:189)

The dangerous line that Carter treads between a critique of pornography and ‘an exercise in pornography’ (Palmer 1987:189) is evident in the passage from ‘The Bloody Chamber’ above, and it has provoked a broad spectrum of response from critics. Avis Lewallen states:

As readers we are asked to place ourselves imaginatively as masochistic victims in a pornographic scenario and to sympathise in some way with the ambivalent feelings this produces. The heroine’s own subsequent recognition of total manipulation does not allay my unease at being manipulated by the narrative to sympathise with masochism. (1988:151)

On the other hand, Merja Makinen suggests that

Carter is using de Sade to argue for a wider incorporation of female sexuality, to argue that it too contains a whole gamut of ‘perversions’ alongside ‘normal’ sex While asking for a more mutual sexual transaction, Lewallen dismisses the masochism in ‘The Bloody Chamber’,

as too disturbing, ‘my unease at being manipulated by the narrative to sympathise with masochism’.

Now I don’t deny that it is disturbing (except, perhaps, for the reader who is a masochist). And if it was the only representation of female sexuality, I would be up in arms But it is only one of ten tales, ten variant representations. Moreover, the protagonist retracts her consent halfway through the narrative, when she realizes her husband, Bluebeard, is planning to involve her in real torture and a ‘snuff’ denouement. (1992:12-13)

While I sympathise with Lewallen’s unease, I agree with Makinen, who suggests that we recognise the complexity of female sexuality, and the fact that desire itself can be disturbing and difficult to enclose within the boundaries of a neat definition, as is evident when the young girl says, ‘I was aghast to feel myself stirring’ (BC:15). But what she says remains problematic, and can easily be construed as seeming to ‘reinscribe a patriarchal view of women as responding with a natural masochism to male pornographic abuse’ (Day 1998:159). In this context, I would argue that Elaine Jordan’s interpretation of Carter’s engagement with pornography as a feminist strategy is the most satisfactory thus far, and, accordingly, I quote Jordan at length:

Carter’s writing may simply be consumed but can also produce *wincing* from the fascination of the girl with being acquired and seduced by a knowing and powerful man who ‘wants her so much’ – a wincing recoil of the reader who has been at all seduced by the aroma, texture, dynamics of erotic difference. ‘Was it I who wanted this? Was it this that I wanted?’ The rhetorical figure that’s been on my mind as I’ve tried to characterize Carter’s writing has been *zeugma*, the yoking together of different objects and effects within the same syntax Fascination and recoil are parts of the enticements of pornography, either way. One feminist position is to condemn any truck with such available fascinations altogether. Another is to face the fascination – to spring forward *from* recoil, from wincing at an acknowledged desire What then shall we do with our illicit desires? Flagellate ourselves? The notion of recoil can have an opposite value, one which does not deny or prohibit the energies of desire as they exist: a springing movement which may be experienced as active and productive, rather than a helpless captivation I take the term recoil, or wincing, with its implication of self – overcoming (‘Was it I? Was it this?’), from my notes of a particularly lively account by Charles Scott of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* and *The Order of Things*, notes which continue:
Genealogy is effective history and curative science. It is not a coming to truth or health (concepts which can be used punitively or coercively), but to a knowledge of one’s own

contingent process, as in psychoanalysis. The curative aspect is in a knowledge that finds itself repeating and departing from the inheritance it describes . . .

Repeating and departing from the inheritance it describes struck me as a good account of the process of Carter's writing and the strongest answer to the charge that she reinscribes patriarchy. Where else can you start from, if not from where you actually are? . . . Where we are may include fascinations from which a rational and ethical self recoils. (1992:124-125)

Lewallen says of the young bride's response that the 'intermingling of disgust and desire is not so much fear of the husband as for the sexuality in herself' (1988:151).

Further on in her discussion, she states that Carter's seductive style asks the reader to 'sympathise in some way with the ambivalent feelings' (1988:151) that the 'pornographic scenario' elicits from the young woman. I think that Carter is asking the reader to acknowledge the ambivalent nature of the heroine's response within the social context that has informed such a response. Aidan Day states:

The text acknowledges the depth and power of ideological inscriptions which cause a female to respond in certain ways while at the same time exposing and criticising those inscriptions. What the text does not do is to deny or to evade the inscriptions. (1998:162)

In this context, Elaine Jordan writes:

'The Bloody Chamber' is a strong answer to an existing representation . . . [the] desire to be ravaged by the other, saying 'I can see the fascination, but just look where it gets you – to a spread of pictures in the *Sun*, to a place in a series of defunct and mutilated brides.' (1992:129)

On their wedding night, the Marquis insists that the bride wear the ruby choker, the emblem of his murderous intentions, to bed. The sight of 'the extraordinarily precious slit throat' (*BC*:11) arouses him almost more than her living flesh; so much so that he kisses 'those blazing rubies' (*BC*:17) even before he kisses her mouth. The young virgin experiences the consummation of their marriage as a battle, an impalement: 'In the course of that one-sided struggle, I had seen his deathly composure shatter . . . I had heard him shriek and blaspheme at orgasm; I had bled. And perhaps I had seen his

face without its mask; and perhaps I had not' (*BC:18*). Carter's description of the Marquis' violent orgasm places him firmly in the ranks of Sade's notorious libertines: 'The libertines are indeed like men possessed by demons. Their orgasms are like the visitation of the gods of voodoo, annihilating, appalling' (*SW:149*). In the throes of passion they all scream, blaspheme, thresh or twitch. Carter points out that these descriptions are reminiscent 'of torture' (*SW:149*) rather than love. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that the young girl describes herself as 'infinitely dishevelled by the loss of [her] virginity' (*BC:18*). Afterwards, the Marquis is deceptively gentle towards her, even apologising for his roughness:

He's so sorry for it, such impetuosity, he could not help himself; you see, he loves her so . . . and this lover's recitative of his brought my tears in a flood. I clung to him as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could comfort me for suffering it. For a while he murmured to me in a voice I'd never heard before, a voice like the soft consolations of the sea. (*BC:18*)

This sudden sensitivity and belated concern is purposefully beguiling. It is a clichéd scene from so many romance novels in which the vulnerable young woman finds consolation and a sense of security in the strong arms of the romantic hero. Carter's style is deliberately seductive, and I would argue that it is part of her feminist strategy. First she tells of how the impoverished young girl is lured into a marriage which has 'an economic dimension that lodges power with the male' (Day 1998:152). Then she portrays the next level of entrapment, which is emotional dependence, for economic dependence is only the beginning. The young victim-in-the-making seeks solace from her suffering in the arms of the sadist, 'as though only the one who [has] inflicted the pain [can] comfort [her] for suffering it' (*BC:18*). The Marquis is the perpetrator of the violent act that leaves his young bride traumatised and emotionally vulnerable, and then he pretends to be the only one who can alleviate her suffering. In this way the young girl is deceived into believing that she needs him.

Later that evening, he looks at her face ‘as if he [sees] it for the first time’ and he comments on ‘its promise of debauchery only a connoisseur could detect’ (*BC:20*).

His gaze and his words have a vertiginous effect on her:

I felt giddy as if I were on the edge of a precipice; I was afraid, not so much of him . . . No. I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes. I hardly recognised myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet – might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them? And, in the red firelight I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption. (*BC:20*)

The young girl finds herself transformed by the power of the masculine gaze with its connotations of objectification and domination. Her assimilation to his world demands her rebirth according to masculine codes of femininity. She is slowly becoming his creature, his ‘perfect woman’ (*SW:77*), ‘reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes’ (*BC:20*). This transformation, which is neither natural nor familiar, is the condition of her entry into the subject-object dichotomy, and it is brought about by her dependence on him. It starts off as an economic dependence, but soon she is emotionally, and even sexually, dependent, as she discovers once he has left the castle on the inevitable business trip: ‘I felt a vague desolation that within me, now my female wound had healed, there had awoken a certain queasy craving like the cravings of pregnant women for the taste of coal or chalk or tainted food, for the renewal of his caresses’ (*BC:22*). The young girl’s sexual awakening is in itself a completely natural occurrence, but the fact that her sexual initiation is controlled by the Marquis and takes place on his terms is what makes it corrupt. Her longing for the renewal of a predatory embrace is a ‘queasy craving’ (*BC:22*) and yet another level of entrapment: ‘I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me’ (*BC:22*).

She will soon discover the final destination of her longing for sexual domination. As the original story dictates, the Marquis has departed and the pianist has been left with the heavy bunch of keys and access to the entire castle except for one room: ‘All is yours, everywhere is open to you – except the lock that this single key fits’ (*BC:21*). Her exploration of the castle is an attempt to discover her ‘husband’s true nature’ (*BC:24*), but she finds nothing until she decides to venture into the forbidden chamber: ‘perhaps, here, in this subterranean privacy, I might find a little of his soul’ (*BC:27*). Her quest reveals a torture chamber, ‘a room designed for desecration and some dark night of unimaginable lovers whose embraces [are] annihilation’ (*BC:28*). There she discovers the Marquis’ first wife, embalmed and naked, lying in a catafalque. The second wife’s skull is ‘strung up by a system of unseen chords . . . disembodied . . . crowned with a wreath of white roses’ (*BC:29*). The Iron Maiden is the final resting place of his third wife, ‘pierced, not by one but a hundred spikes’ (*BC:29*). In this moment of truth, this discovery that at the heart of the fairy tale castle lies a bloody chamber of dead wives, the girl’s ‘innocence is purged and she immediately thinks of how she may escape the castle; escape the patriarchal circuit of power that arrogates to itself an absolute, even divine authority’ (Day 1998:155). She retrieves the key from the pool of blood where she has dropped it and flees the ghastly chamber, slamming the door behind her. But her options of escape are limited; she realises that neither the servants nor the local gendarmerie will come to her aid, because they are all in the Marquis’ service. She tries to phone her mother but the lines are dead. Eventually, she seeks solace in the music room, where she confides in the recently appointed piano-tuner. Her only consolation is that her husband will be away for at least six weeks, but even that single hope is shattered when at dawn she sees the headlights of his car approaching in the distance.

The Marquis has returned, the business trip was a ruse and she has played into his hands:

I know I had behaved exactly according to his desires; had he not bought me so that I should do so? . . . I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost Lost as the victim loses to the executioner. (*BC:34*)

He asks for his keys and the pianist, in spite of her efforts to postpone the inevitable, is forced to fetch them. When she returns she finds him sitting on the bed with ‘his head sunk in his hands’ (*BC:35*):

I felt there emanate from him, at that moment, a stench of absolute despair, rank and ghastly The evidence of that bloody chamber had showed me I could expect no mercy. Yet, when he raised his head and stared at me with his blind, shuttered eyes as though he did not recognise me, I felt a terrified pity for him The atrocious loneliness of that monster! (*BC:35*)

What the girl’s observations reveal here is that the subject-object dichotomy, whether it appears in its predator-prey or aggressor-victim guise, is a no-win situation.

Subjectivity, in such an oppressive context, is not as privileged a place as it may initially appear. If the object’s final destination is the bloody chamber, then the subject is damned to live in ‘absolute despair, rank and ghastly’ (*BC:35*), to dwell in an abyss of ‘atrocious loneliness’ (*BC:35*). Aidan Day states:

The Marquis in ‘The Bloody Chamber’ holds essentially to the vision of subjectivity advanced by the Marquis de Sade, a vision that is based . . . on an antagonistic dualism of self and other in which the egotistical, transcendent self can realise itself only through negation: through an impulse towards the negation of others which is at root a drive towards the negation of the self. (1998:155)

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter refers to subjectivity in the Sadeian context as a ‘diabolic solitude’ (*SW:150*), for ‘the libertine chooses to surround himself, not with lovers or partners, but with accomplices’ (*SW:146*). Accordingly, it is a paradigm which, as I have said, means death to the object and damnation to the subject. Carter

suggests love as the way out of this dreadful dichotomy. In ‘The Lady of the House of Love’, the female vampire, who is the predator in the tale, asks: ‘And could love free me from the shadows? Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?’ (BC:103). It is clear that the only tune the Marquis knows is the whistle of the executioner’s sword. He is incapable of breaking the pattern of his murderous behaviour and escaping the shadows of his ghastly existence: ‘My little love, you’ll never know how much I hate daylight!’ (BC:36).

The Marquis’ resistance to change means that the predator-prey dichotomy will have to be destabilised in another way, and Carter achieves this by introducing a third force, the young pianist’s renegade mother, who rides to her daughter’s rescue in a feminist modification of the original story, as Sarah Gamble states: ‘The introduction of the mother . . . changes everything . . . [and] her intervention quite literally breaks up the victor/victim tableau in Bluebeard’s castle courtyard, it introduces a wild-card third element into the fixed dualism of the couple’ (1997:155). The mother descends like an ‘avenging angel’ (BC:39), riding ‘hard and fast, a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow’s weeds’ (BC:38). There is a ‘battering and pounding at the gate, the jangling of a bell, the frenzied neighing of a horse’ (BC:39). In the moment of confusion created by the furore, the young girl jumps up from the executioner’s block and runs to help the blind piano-tuner who is fumbling with the gate. The Marquis is dumbstruck by this sudden turn of events: ‘The puppet master, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns’ (BC:39).

Bluebeard is thus dethroned by a tiger-shooting fury who puts ‘a single, irreproachable bullet’ (BC:40) through his head. Marina Warner, referring to an essay on the slasher movie by Carol Clover, states that ‘the pursuit of the avenging female who tracks down a murderer and finally “slashes” him, meting out to him what he wanted to mete out to her, actually acts as a satisfying fantasy for women’ (Warner 1995:270). Carter’s feminist denouement is indeed satisfying, and there is even a romantic ‘happily ever after’, which, in true Carter style, is based on a different set of assumptions. The young pianist sets up house with the blind piano-tuner, and Aidan Day says of their relationship that it

is a model of what in Carter’s terms is a fit relationship between the sexes because it escapes the cruel . . . dualism of subject versus object; aggressor or dominator versus victim or dominated. The point is put symbolically by the piano-tuner’s blindness. He is not diminished as a man by his symbolic blindness. He is symbolically magnified as a man by virtue of the fact that in his blindness he does not fix and objectify his partner through the masculine gaze. (1998:156-157)

But there is one thing that tarnishes the pianist’s happy ending, the bloody brand which the Marquis has transferred from the key to her forehead just before her intended execution: ‘No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it – not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but, because it spares my shame’ (BC:41). This emblem of shame which cannot be hidden is indicative of the girl’s complicity in her own objectification.

The idea that the young girl is partly to blame for her victimization is problematic. Avis Lewallen states that for her to be branded as guilty, ‘despite recognition of the manipulation to which she has been subject, seems somewhat unfair’ (1988:152).

And, in *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter writes that the

ignorance of one party as to the intentions of the other makes the victim so defenceless against predation that it can seem as if a treacherous complicity unites them; as though, in some sense, the victim wills a victim's fate. But, if any of the Sadeian victims seem to incite their masters to violence by tacitly accepting their right to administer it, let us not make too much of this apparent complicity. There is no defence at all against absolute tyranny. (SW:139)

The young bride would certainly not have entered into marriage with the Marquis if she had known the truth about his contemptible nature. There is also no doubt that the Marquis is an absolute tyrant. Yet I would argue that although the young girl is initially ignorant of the Marquis' murderous intentions, she is not completely blind to the conditions of their marriage. She admits that she does not marry for love, but that she is seduced by his money, power and expensive gifts:

'Are you sure you love him?'
'I'm sure I want to marry him,' I said. (BC:7)

On the eve of their wedding, she sees him looking at her lustfully, like 'a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh' (BC:11). The pianist recognises the 'carnal avarice' (BC:11) of his gaze, and she is aware of her own objectification. In spite of such overt signs of sexual domination, she marries him. She is a music student at the Paris Conservatoire, and her mother is the epitome of female autonomy. She could have chosen to complete her studies and follow a musical career, although the financial rewards would not have been as great. She knows that women are strong and independent because her mother has taught her as much. And yet she marries the Marquis, not for love but for money. Her willingness to enter into such a bargain is the reason why she cannot emerge blameless.

It does not, however, make her a willing victim, and there is no doubt that she is manipulated by a master who has played the same game many times before. She is

also young and innocent and swept off her feet by a tide of romantic notions. If the young girl is seduced by the Marquis' wealth, she is also seduced by cultural ideas of feminine fulfilment. Although she could not possibly have imagined the harsh reality of the bloody chamber, I would agree with Aidan Day, who states that her shameful stigma is not entirely unfair:

Carter has demonstrated the immense amount of manipulation to which the girl was subjected, either indirectly through cultural conditioning or directly through the Marquis, she has also been careful to note at least some element of responsibility on the girl's part for having been taken in by, at least, the Marquis' money. (1998:158)

'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride'

Carter's next two tales, 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride', are about the Beauty and the Beast story. Marina Warner has the following to say about the development of the Beauty and the Beast tale over the past three hundred years:

One dominant curve can be discovered in the retellings from the seventeenth century to the present day: at first, the Beast is identified with male sexuality which must be controlled or changed or domesticated . . . but later the Beast is perceived as a principle of nature within every human being, male and female, young and old, and the stories affirm beastliness's intrinsic goodness and necessity to holistic survival. (Warner 1995:280)

I would argue that Carter's retellings conform to the 'dominant curve' that Warner has identified. In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', desire is domesticated and the fierce Beast is transformed into the bourgeois husband Mr Lyon. The Beauty in this tale is reminiscent of 'the Victorian angel of the house, whose task it is to tame and gentle male lust and animal instinct' (Warner 1995:294). She does not reclaim her sexual autonomy, but merely continues to exist as a passive object of desire within the constraints of the predator-prey dichotomy. Accordingly, the power relations remain unchanged, even if the predator has been 'house-trained'¹. Carter uses the first tale as

a springboard for the second, as if to say that this is where we are but we need not linger, a strategy which Elaine Jordan calls '[repeating] and departing from the inheritance described' (1992:125). 'The Tiger's Bride' thus departs from an existing paradigm and is reminiscent of later versions of the tales, as described by Warner, where the 'animalness' of desire is reappropriated for both men and women. In this context Warner refers to an eighteenth century tale by Henriette-Julie de Murat titled '*Peau d'ours*', or 'Bearskin', in which

the beauty is the beast – at least she is also changed into a beast, and the metamorphosis leads to her escape from a tyrant father as well as a tyrant husband As a she-bear, Princess Hawthorn acquires more freedom of movement than as a young woman, and more freedom of choice. In animal form, she enjoys a tender and even abandoned flirtation with her prince (Warner 1995:283)

Warner points out that this perspective was obscured in the nineteenth century, when notions of feminine decorum (amongst other things) 'affected the selection of editors' (1995:281). Carter thus reclaims an extant, if forgotten, motif in 'The Tiger's Bride', and uses it to destabilise the power relations in the predator-prey dichotomy.

In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', the plot remains true to that of the original story, as Aidan Day observes (1998:35). Although Carter does not veer from the plot outline of the traditional tale, her version opens up a critical distance from the original story and, accordingly, becomes, as she is fond of saying, 'an argument stated in fictional terms' (in Haffenden 1985:79). Carter says that 'some of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are the result of quarrelling furiously with Bettelheim' (in Haffenden 1985:83), and in this context she mentions the Beauty and the Beast tale. Bettelheim has the following to say about Mme Leprince de Beaumont's popularised version of 'Beauty and the Beast': 'In this story all is gentleness and loving devotion to one another on the part of the three main characters: Beauty, her father, and the Beast [The] oedipal love of

Beauty for her father, when transferred to her future husband, is wonderfully healing' (1976:303). But Carter could not disagree more, as she believes 'Beauty and the Beast' to be a sordid tale of female objectification and self-sacrifice in a male conspiracy fuelled by emotional blackmail. The transference from father to husband, which Bettelheim describes as 'wonderfully healing', is revealed, in Carter's tale, as a corrupt transaction which simply entails a change of masters.

Carter's tale thus opens quite aptly with Beauty, the picture of domestic virtue, doing her chores in the kitchen while she awaits her father's return from a business meeting aimed at restoring his fortunes. But her father's car is stuck in a rut and his meeting has confirmed that he is ruined. He does not even have 'enough money left over to buy his Beauty, his girl-child, his pet, the one white rose she said she wanted; the only gift she wanted, no matter how the case went, how rich he might once again be' (*BC*: 41-42). This passage serves to establish the relationship that exists between father and daughter. Aidan Day observes that the father is a patriarch who sees Beauty as 'his girl-child, his pet' (*BC*:41), and Beauty's status (or lack of it) is further emphasized when

Carter points to the position of the female in patriarchy as an object in an economic system of exchange when she allows, in a sentence about the white rose that Beauty's father had promised to buy her, a momentary ambiguity about whether it is Beauty who is bought or the rose that she wanted bought for her. Later in the story it will become apparent that the rose itself signifies Beauty's status as a commodity. (1998:136)

I would argue that the white rose is also emblematic of how selfless Beauty is. She does not demand expensive gifts, although there is a possibility that her father may regain his money. Jack Zipes states that 'Beauty is selfless, and perhaps that is why she has no name. She is nameless. All girls are supposed to become "beauties", i.e., selfless and nameless' (1994:33).

The father, whose car will not budge, thus goes in search of assistance, and so he arrives at the Beast's mahogany front door, which opens of its own accord, silently bidding him to enter. No human presence awaits in the opulent interior of the Beast's home. Instead, a liver-and-white King Charles spaniel welcomes him, and directs him to a 'snug little leather-panelled study on the first floor, where a low table [is] drawn up to a roaring log fire' (BC:43). The female spaniel wears a diamond necklace, and later on in the tale she also wears 'a neat choker of turquoises' (BC:46). These pieces of jewellery are reminiscent of the ruby choker, with its connotation of 'proprietary objectification' (Day 1998:153), which the Marquis gives to the young pianist in 'The Bloody Chamber'. Accordingly, the pianist and the spaniel are connected by the golden thread of the sumptuous jewellery that they receive from their 'masters'. Carter draws a disturbing analogy between women and pets. Within this patriarchal paradigm Beauty's father refers to her as 'his pet' (BC:41), and the spaniel plays the part of a hostess, the epitome of domestic virtue, who sees to the comfort of her master's guests.

In the Beast's home, Beauty's father finds the solutions to all his immediate problems. There is food and drink, a welcoming fire, a telephone and even the card of a garage that advertises a twenty-four hour service. When he has made his arrangements the spaniel reappears with his hat in her mouth indicating that it is time for him to go. In the garden, his arm brushes against a snow-covered rose tree and he is unexpectedly reminded of Beauty's request: 'A chill armful softly thudded to the ground to reveal, as if miraculously preserved beneath it, one last, single, perfect rose that might have been the last rose left living in all the winter' (BC:44). Beauty's father immediately thinks of stealing the flower in spite of the ferocious roar which this notion elicits

from his invisible host. But the man is not put off by the angry warning, as he feels that his action is justifiable, and thus, ‘because he [loves] his daughter so, Beauty’s father [steals] the rose’ (BC:44). Carter’s phrasing foregrounds Beauty’s request, as if she were indirectly to blame for her father’s theft. When the Beast savagely confronts him, the man again uses Beauty as an excuse: “‘It was for my daughter,” said Beauty’s father. “All she wanted in the whole world, was one white, perfect rose”” (BC:44). And, in order to prove his story and placate the Beast, he takes a picture of Beauty from his wallet, and it has the desired effect:

The Beast rudely snatched the photograph . . . and inspected it, first brusquely, then with a strange kind of wonder, almost the dawning of surmise. The camera had captured a certain look she had, sometimes, of absolute sweetness and absolute gravity, as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul. (BC:44)

Beauty’s father, fearing for his life, exposes his daughter to the Beast’s scrutiny. Once the Beast has seen her she becomes the object of his desire and he is ready to negotiate. The last line of the given passage is particularly significant as it criticises the patriarchal ideology which informs Mme Leprince de Beaumont’s popular version of the tale. The camera has captured a specific look that Beauty has ‘as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul’ (BC:44). Beauty is expected to ignore the Beast’s brutish exterior and instead focus on his worthy, if well disguised, personality.

Marina Warner states:

It is easy to catch, in Mme [Leprince] de Beaumont, the worried tone of a well-meaning teacher raising her pupils to face their future obediently and decorously, to hear her pious wish that her pupils should obey their fathers and that inside the brute of a husband who might be their appointed lot, the heart of a good man might beat (1995:293)

In the passage from ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, Carter emphasizes the double standard which seems to be characteristic of patriarchal reasoning by juxtaposing the Beast’s reaction to Beauty’s appearance with his expectation of her. He desires her

because she is beautiful, but she is expected to love him in spite of his appearance. In this cruel dichotomy sexual attraction is the privilege of the male, who has monopolised libido.

The Beast, enamoured as he is by Beauty's appearance, trades the father's freedom and the rose for a date with her: "Take her the rose, then, but bring her to dinner," he growled; and what else was there to be done?' (BC:45). In this oppressive paradigm where women are viewed as objects of exchange, it is the most obvious solution. If the father thought of his daughter as more than just 'his pet' (BC:41), he would never agree to the deal, and if the Beast could win a woman by means other than displays of brute force, then the outcome of the story would be very different. But alas, options are limited under patriarchal rule and, accordingly, Beauty obeys her father and meets the Beast:

Although her father had told her of the nature of the one who waited for her, she could not control an instinctual shudder of fear when she saw him How strange he was. She found his bewildering difference from her almost intolerable; its presence choked her. There seemed a heavy soundless pressure upon her in his house, as if it lay under water, and when she saw the great paws lying on the arm of his chair, she thought: they are the death of any tender herbivore. And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial. (BC:45)

I have argued that patriarchal ideology has traditionally defined the feminine in terms of 'meat'; in other words, women have traditionally been denied self-determination and sexual autonomy. But it is particularly disturbing that Beauty participates in this reductionist definition of herself. She too views herself as a 'tender herbivore' (BC:45), and thus she is reminiscent of Sade's Justine, the virtuous feminine victim who is the natural prey in the patriarchal world. The herbivore is meat to the carnivore, and thus Beauty quite rightly refers to herself as 'sacrificial', for she has

already sacrificed her autonomy. Now she is ready to descend to the next level of entrapment, which will entail exchanging passion for compassion and learning to love the Beast in spite of her aversion. I would argue that the ‘heavy, soundless pressure upon her in his house’ is a sexual tension which she experiences as strange and suffocating, as if his house ‘lay under water’ (*BC:45*). She is entering unknown territory and she finds herself ill-equipped for this confrontation with desire, trapped as she is in the sanitised codes of a prescribed femininity. The Beast’s predatory male sexuality threatens to devour Beauty because she cannot meet it on equal terms. She is the object of desire, passive and demure, a tasty morsel invited to dinner: ‘Yet she [stays], and [smiles], because her father [wants] her to do so’ (*BC:45*).

The Beast is willing to help her father out of his financial dilemma, and suggests that Beauty stay with him while her father resumes his legal career. She ‘[forces] a smile. For she [knows] with a pang of dread as he [speaks], that it [will] be so and her visit to the Beast must be, on some magically reciprocal scale, the price of her father’s good fortune’ (*BC:45*). Although Beauty is filled with dread at the prospect of living with the Beast, she feels obliged to agree. Thus she is passed from one male to another ‘as they [sip] their brandy’ (*BC:45*). It is all done in a very polite manner, but there is no denying the blatant economic objectification of the young girl and the mercenary terms of the contract.

Contrary to her expectations, Beauty’s time with the Beast is spent in ‘pastel-coloured idleness’ (*BC:46*), and she is soon quite at home in the Beast’s house, and even in his company: ‘The enchantment of that bright, sad, pretty place enveloped her and she found that against all her expectations, she was happy there. She no longer felt the

slightest apprehension at her nightly interviews with the Beast' (BC:47). Beauty's quick adjustment to life with the Beast is perhaps due to the fact that her new environment is not so new after all. What has really changed other than the fact that her new surroundings are more opulent? She remains the slave of another's desires, first her father's and now the Beast's.

At this stage Beauty has not committed herself to the Beast entirely, and when her father telephones from London to request her presence there she rushes to join him. Her father has regained his fortunes thanks to his dealings with the Beast, and now he spoils 'his girl-child, his pet' (BC:41) with all manner of gifts and expensive excursions. This glamorous lifestyle does not leave Beauty unaffected:

You could not have said that her freshness was fading but she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days . . . Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterizes certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats. (BC:49)

It is hardly surprising that Beauty, who has been objectified by both her father and the Beast, should treat herself as an object. Carter's reference to the 'lacquer' (BC:49) of prettiness that Beauty acquires suggests the artifice of Beauty's identity as she slots into her culturally determined position as object of desire, defined, or characterized, in terms of her physical attributes. The word 'lacquer' also implies a glossed or varnished surface, as one would expect to find on a toy rather than a person, and this suggests that Beauty is losing her humanity. It is thus apt that she is compared to 'certain pampered, exquisite and expensive cats' (BC:49), and Carter's choice of adjectives succinctly summarises what life as a pet entails for, robbed of her autonomy, Beauty will have to be 'pampered', or taken care of; as an object of desire she will be valued only for her 'exquisite' appearance; while the word 'expensive'

suggests that she is merely a commodity, and the Beast is indeed willing to pay for the pleasure of her company.

Beauty's cosseted existence is interrupted by the little spaniel, which comes to London to remind her of her promise to the Beast. Since her departure, the Beast has deteriorated, and Beauty is shocked to find him diminished, a shadow of his former self:

‘I'm dying, Beauty,’ he said in a whisper of his former purr. ‘Since you left me, I have been sick. I could not go hunting, I found I had not the stomach to kill the gentle beasts, I could not eat. I am sick and I must die; but I shall die happy because you have come to say good-bye to me.’
(*BC*:50)

Aidan Day suggests that in this passage the Beast is exploiting Beauty's ‘very conventional “femininity”, her sentimental susceptibility to sickness in the male and her stereotypical recoil from destruction’ (1998:138). Carter states that ‘Beauty and the Beast’ is ‘an advertisement for moral blackmail: when the Beast says he is dying because of Beauty, the only morally correct thing for her to have said at that point would be, “Die, then”’ (in Haffenden 1985:83). But Beauty, like Sade's Justine, insists on obeying ‘the fallacious promptings of her heart’ (*SW*:79). If she stopped to think about the touching scenario enacted before her, she would perhaps recognise the manipulation underlying the Beast's moving performance. But alas, she is blinded by the pity that the Beast so successfully evokes: ‘She flung herself upon him, so that the iron bedstead groaned, and covered his paws with her kisses. “Don't die, Beast! If you'll have me, I'll never leave you”’ (*BC*:50-51).

Before her trip to London to join her father, Beauty could not bring herself to touch the Beast, although she did not mind his company: ‘It was in her heart to drop a kiss

upon his shaggy mane but, though she stretched out her hand towards him, she could not bring herself to touch him of her own free will' (*BC*:48). Now, however, she has overcome her disgust, and embraces the Beast in the throes of compassion. She has submitted to the Beast's desire and, her self-sacrifice in favour of his needs, her willingness to nurture him, have broken the magic spell and he is transformed: 'it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of all the Beasts' (*BC*:51). The male libido has been tamed by Beauty's gentle touch, and the Beast is changed into the more civilised Mr Lyon. But the description of the man suggests that beastliness still lingers, although it has been masked by a more refined exterior. In the same way, the power relations, which remain unchanged, are masked by the final image of what Aidan Day terms 'a parody of the ideological representation of conventional bourgeois marriage' (1998:139): 'Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden; the old spaniel drowns on the grass, in a drift of fallen petals' (*BC*:51). And so the selfless and nameless Beauty becomes the anonymous Mrs Lyon. She has achieved neither self-determination nor sexual autonomy, but has merely learned 'to love her chains and bonds' (Zipes 1994: 40).

In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', the corrupt transaction between Beauty's father and the Beast is veiled with a veneer of courtesy. Beauty is invited to dinner at the Beast's home, where it is suavely suggested over postprandial drinks that she stay on with him while her father regains his fortune in London. In 'The Tiger's Bride', however, Carter does not beat around the rosebush, but already foregrounds the position of women as objects of exchange in the opening line of the tale: 'My father lost me to

The Beast at cards' (BC:51). It is noteworthy that the Beauty in this tale is the narrator of her own story and, as such, she assumes the power of the speaking subject. If Beauty in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' is selfless and nameless, then the Beauty in this tale is, at least, not voiceless.

Father and daughter are travelling in Italy when they visit The Beast's remote city, where the price of admission is a game of cards with the '*grand seigneur*' (BC:52). Beauty's father is a profligate fool who not only accepts The Beast's invitation, but also continues to play until he is 'left with nothing./ "Except the girl."' (BC:54).

Beauty says:

Gambling is a sickness. My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards
You must not think that my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but at *no more* than a king's ransom
So we teetered on the brink.
The Beast bayed; laid down all three remaining aces
The Beast's man informed me that he, the valet, would call for me and my bags tomorrow, at ten, and conduct me forthwith to The Beast's palazzo.
Capisco? (BC:54)

Although Beauty is overwhelmed by the events of the evening, she does 'capisco'. She is no stranger to the status of women under patriarchy; her mother died young because she was 'bartered for her dowry to such a feckless sprig of the Russian nobility that she soon died of his gaming, his whoring, his agonising repentances' (BC:52). And now Beauty finds herself in a similar predicament, bartered for her appearance to The Beast, penniless and seemingly powerless, realising: 'For now my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment' (BC:56).

I would argue that Beauty's understanding of her status as commodity is the foundation of her transference from girlhood to womanhood, and it is not as 'wonderfully healing' (Bettelheim 1976:303) as Bettelheim suggests. Compounding the trauma of the realisation that her body is now her only currency is the fear and superstition that has been instilled in her from an early age regarding sexuality and the animal aspect of desire. As a child, Beauty was 'a wild wee thing' who could not be tamed 'into submission with a frown or the bribe of a spoonful of jam' (BC:56). So her English nurse would scare her into good behaviour with tales of a tiger-man whose 'hinder parts were all hairy and only from the head downwards did he resemble a man' (BC:56). This terrifying embodiment of desire would supposedly abduct bad little girls and gobble them up. Seemingly, it is best for wayward girls to be threatened into submission lest they heed their desires and grow up to be wicked women; in other words, women who acknowledge their sexual autonomy. Beauty would probably have remained entirely ignorant of the pleasures of the flesh had she not learned from 'the giggling nursemaids . . . the mysteries of what the bull did to the cows' (BC:56). If she did not know much about the garden of earthly delights, then she knew at least that she should not share the details of her newly acquired education with her English nurse for such worldly instruction has traditionally been taboo to decent girls.

Beauty also recalls the story of the waggoner's squint-eyed, hare-lipped daughter, who is impregnated by a bear and subsequently gives birth to a beastly baby, complete with 'a full pelt and teeth' (BC:56). The underlying message is clear: a sexually active woman who acknowledges her desires is ugly, and will end up bearing foul consequences as punishment for her deviant behaviour. Accordingly Beauty, who is bartered for her enticing physical attributes, enters this carnal transaction equipped

only with childhood fears of devourment, superstitions about the horrible repercussions for girls who dare to taste the forbidden fruit, and nasty pictures of fornicating farm-yard animals imprinted on her mind: ‘Old wives’ tales, nursery fears! I knew well enough the reason for the trepidation I cosily titillated with superstitious marvels of my childhood on the day my childhood ended’ (BC:56).

The Beast in this tale is a tiger, as the title states, but he desperately tries to disguise his true nature when he ventures from his habitual solitude. Beauty is both bewildered and disturbed by his strangeness when she meets him on that fateful night:

My senses were increasingly troubled by the fuddling perfume of Milord, far too potent a reek of purple civet at such close quarters in so small a room. He must bathe himself in scent . . . what can he smell of, that needs so much camouflage? I never saw a man so big look so two-dimensional There is a crude clumsiness about his outlines and he has an odd air of self-imposed restraint as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would far rather drop on all fours . . . he wears a mask with a man’s face painted most beautifully on it He wears a wig, too A chaste silk stock stuck with a pearl hides his throat. And gloves of blond kid that are yet so huge and clumsy they do not seem to cover hands. (BC:53)

The tiger embodies a savage sexuality which is powerful and disquieting due to its undeniable otherness. Carter goes to great lengths to emphasize the ‘animalness’ of The Beast in this tale (more so than in ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’), and one is very aware of the tiger’s distress and discomfort when he dons his human facade and tries to appear as a man. I would argue that The Beast’s human attire is representative of the cultural construction of masculinity according to the hegemonic ideology. When The Beast wears his human mask and plays the games of men he also participates in the objectification of Beauty. And yet he is very different from the tiger-man who haunted Beauty’s childhood imagination, as she realises: ‘The Beast goes always masked; it cannot be his face that looks like mine’ (BC:56). The tiger-man has the

head of a man, which is perhaps indicative that he is ruled by patriarchal thought regarding the status of women, and hence he incarnates the threat of devourment. The Beast, on the other hand, represents desire in its unadulterated animal shape, which is why the trappings of traditional masculinity ill become him. This is hinted at in Beauty's description of his home, which, like his mask, gives merely an appearance of humanity: 'I saw The Beast bought solitude, not luxury with his money The Palace was dismantled, as if its owner were about to move house or had never properly moved in; The Beast had chosen to live in an uninhabited place' (BC:57). The tiger's palazzo is a place of solitude which accentuates his status as an outsider, and it is in stark contrast to the lion's comfortable den of masculine opulence in the previous tale. The Beast in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' has mastered the art of being a man, as is evident from his 'snug little leather-panelled study' and its 'roaring log fire' (BC:43). The tiger, however, exists outside of patriarchal prescription, and the palazzo that is emblematic of social identity, of incorporation into the dominant culture, remains 'uninhabited' (BC:57), and serves merely to emphasise his difference.

When Beauty arrives at The Beast's palazzo, she is immediately taken to see him to hear the terms of the transaction. The Beast has 'a growling impediment in his speech' (BC:54) and so his valet speaks on his behalf:

My master's sole desire is to see the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress and that only for the one time after which she will be returned to her father undamaged with bankers' orders for the sum which he lost to my master at cards and also a number of fine presents such as furs, jewels and horses (BC:58)

During this interview with Beauty, The Beast wears his human costume, complete with the 'artificial masterpiece of his face' (BC:58), which Beauty finds particularly

appalling. He has the appearance of a man, and with it he adopts a patriarchal attitude to Beauty. And yet he cannot meet her eyes as she hears his request. He is seemingly as ashamed as she is outraged: 'I could scarcely believe my ears. I let out a raucous guffaw; no young lady laughs like that! My old nurse used to remonstrate. But I did. And do' (*BC:58*). Beauty has clearly not been tamed or frightened into submission, and she is still as spirited as a young woman as she was as a little girl. Her reaction to The Beast's demand is very different from the reaction of the Beauty in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon'. Some may argue that the requests in the two tales are very different. In the first tale the Beast asks merely for the pleasure of Beauty's company, whereas here Beauty is expected to strip. I would suggest that both demands are equally demeaning, because both are founded on the premise that women are objects to be passed around and enjoyed by men. The only difference is that the lion is socially more adept, and uses emotional blackmail to get his way, while the tiger still has much to learn about diplomacy and manipulation. In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' Beauty smiles obligingly, but not so in this tale:

I felt that I owed it to him to make my reply in as exquisite a Tuscan as I could master. 'You may put me in a windowless room, sir, and I promise you I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face, to hide it So I shall be covered completely from the waist upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only the once' (*BC:58-59*)

Beauty's response painfully accentuates the sordid nature of female objectification, as well as her knowledge of her status as a woman. If The Beast wishes to treat her as a sexual object, then she intends to ensure that he does so under circumstances that will make him shamefully aware of the vulgar reality of the situation. When The Beast repeats his request on a second occasion, she makes it abundantly clear that she will not submit to his terms: 'That he should want so little was the reason why I could not give it' (*BC:61*). Beauty knows that her humanity is more than the sum of her

erogenous zones, and she will not allow The Beast to reduce her complex entirety to the single aspect of her anatomy.

The violent indignation of Beauty's protest is not wasted on The Beast. On the first occasion she sees that her words have hit their intended target with such accuracy that The Beast is greatly saddened, and not only because she has denied him: 'How pleased I was to see I struck The Beast to the heart . . . one single tear swelled, glittering, at the corner of the masked eye. A tear! A tear, I hoped, of shame' (*BC:59*). When The Beast repeats his request on a second occasion and Beauty remains adamant that she will not submit to the terms of the degrading bargain, he again expresses his sorrow: 'A tear came from his other eye. And then he moved; he buried his cardboard carnival head with its ribboned weight of false hair in, I would say, his arms' (*BC:61*). This wretched picture of despair is reminiscent of the Marquis in 'The Bloody Chamber' who, once he realises that yet another bride has fallen into his trap, sits on his ancestral bed, 'his head sunk in his hands', frozen in a moment 'of despair, rank and ghastly' (*BC:35*). I have argued that the subject-object dichotomy, embedded as it is in oppression and exploitation, is a dreadful relationship, which benefits no one. The Beast, who still insists on wearing his human mask, finds himself trapped in the codes of a prescribed masculinity. If he is to have a relationship with Beauty, who refuses to be reduced to an object, it will have to be founded on a different set of assumptions.

Meanwhile, the valet has returned Beauty to her dismal accommodation, 'a veritable cell, windowless, airless, lightless, in the viscera of the palace' (*BC:59*). There she meets her lady's maid:

A knocking and clattering behind the door of a cupboard; the door swings open and out glides a soubrette from an operetta, with glossy, nut-brown curls, rosy cheeks, blue, rolling eyes; it takes me a moment to recognise her in her little cap, her white stockings, her frilled petticoats. She carries a looking glass in one hand and a powder puff in the other and there is a musical box where her heart should be (BC:59)

This caricature of a woman, who is the mechanical mirror image of Beauty, is also a cruel reminder of what it means to become a Woman according to the dominant ideology. As such, the clockwork companion is emblematic of Beauty's objectification, of the relationship that exists between Beauty and her father, as well as of the relationship which The Beast, at this stage, still attempts to initiate, as Beauty observes: 'had I not been allotted the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?' (BC:63). It is this question that occupies Beauty when she accepts The Beast's invitation to go riding, and she uses the excursion to meditate on her position. Beauty, who has learned from her mother's fate about the status of women under patriarchy, has, since her arrival in The Beast's city, experienced these harsh realities firsthand. And yet she has refused to define herself in patriarchal terms, as an object bound to lead an 'imitative life' (BC:63). Aidan Day states that as she realises 'the insubstantiality of her humanity as culturally defined, her fear of the beasts grows less. As she goes riding with Beast and valet, she begins to define herself outside of culture and in terms of the animal' (1998:142). This does not mean that she articulates her identity in the oppressive terms of the Beauty in the first tale, who refers to herself as 'a tender herbivore' (BC:45). When Beauty chooses to define herself in terms of the animal, as Day states, she does not submit to an existing characterization of women, for the animal in this context represents instead a life lived outside of patriarchal prescription, and not merely a life lived outside the privileged hegemonic centre:

A profound sense of strangeness slowly began to possess me. I knew my two companions were not, in any way, as other men, the simian retainer and the master for whom he spoke . . . I knew they lived according to a different logic than I had done until my father abandoned me to the wild beasts by his human carelessness. (*BC:63*)

Although The Beast tries to be more like a man, all his attempts are clumsy and artificial. When he wears his human attire and objectifies Beauty, his mask cannot hide the shame and suffering which his participation in masculine codes of behaviour causes him. The Beast and his valet live according to ‘a different logic’ (*BC:63*), and Beauty finds it far less frightening than the inhumane reason which informs the dominant ideology:

This knowledge gave me a certain fearfulness still; but I would say, not much . . . I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason. If I could not see one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me, then the six of us – mounts and riders, both – could boast amongst us not one soul either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out. (*BC:63*)

Aidan Day writes that after ‘this development in Beauty’s awareness, the Beast begins . . . to show himself as partaking in an order of being that also lies outside the patriarchal’ (1998:142). The Beast has not forced Beauty to reveal her fleshly nature, but now he insists that she see him as he is, without his human facade. He has tired of the games men play, and chooses to shed the cultural constraints that have inhibited him from approaching her on equal terms:

The valet held out his master’s cloak to screen him from me as he removed the mask. The horses stirred.
The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers. A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood The valet moved forward as if to cover up his master . . . but I said: ‘No’. The tiger sat still as a heraldic beast, in the pact he had made with his ferocity to do me no harm Nothing about him reminded me of humanity.

I therefore, shivering, now unfastened my jacket, to show him I would do him no harm I showed his grave silence my white skin, my red nipples I felt I was at liberty for the first time in my life. (*BC*:64)

Beauty's reaction to The Beast is a rejection of her appointed place as the natural prey of a predatory male sexual appetite, for she does not recoil from her confrontation with unabridged desire, but chooses to acknowledge and assert her own sensuality. In this she is very different from the Beauty in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', whose libido is so irretrievably repressed that she feels suffocated by the otherness of the Beast and, accordingly, participates in a patriarchal definition of herself as 'Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial' (*BC*:45).

Back at The Beast's palazzo, Beauty systematically rids herself of the last vestiges that bind her to the patriarchal world. She decides that she will not return to her father, but will instead dispatch the clockwork servant to take her place: 'I will dress her in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter' (*BC*:65). She takes off her riding habit and, wearing nothing but a sable coat and The Beast's crystallised tears, she goes to find him in his den. In this context Beauty is the picture of an active and desiring femininity, having reclaimed her sexual autonomy. Carter's representation of femininity as assertive, sensual and unruly flies in the face of cultural stereotypes which portray women as passive and prudish, the natural prey of a predatory male desire. And so Beauty enters The Beast's abode naked, having no further use for the fur coat. There she sees that his clothes, wig and mask are laid out on a chair: 'The empty house of his appearance [is] ready for him but he [has] abandoned it' (*BC*:66). The Beast has shed the unnatural constraints of cultural conditioning, and Beauty finds him in his unadorned and unadulterated state:

He was pacing backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, the tip of his heavy tail twitching as he paced out the length and breadth of his imprisonment between the gnawed and bloody bones.

He will gobble you up.

Nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment. The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw, approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction.

He went still as stone. He was far more frightened of me than I was of him. (*BC:66-67*)

The Beast sans his human facade remains a predator, or dangerous, powerful and wild: ‘the death of any tender herbivore’ (*BC:45*). But Beauty is no lamb; she meets the tiger on equal terms, free of patriarchal prescription and nursery fears. Yet she is ‘shaking’ (*BC:67*); Carter does not dismiss the awe and the intoxicating combination of apprehension and expectation that is part of a sexual awakening. And if Beauty feels nervous then so does The Beast: he is far more frightened of her than she is of him. Merja Makinen writes that Carter’s emphasis of ‘a reciprocal awe and fear’ in Beauty as well as The Beast ‘reinforces the equality’ of the transaction (1992:10).

Beauty stretches out her hand to The Beast, but he growls and snarls, baring his teeth:

I never moved. He snuffed the air, as if to smell my fear; he could not. Slowly, slowly he began to drag his heavy, gleaming weight across the floor towards me He dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. ‘He will lick the skin off me!’ And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (*BC:67*)

The ending of ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ is provocative, and has provided much fuel for heated debate amongst critics. Avis Lewallen argues that Carter does not ultimately succeed in escaping the oppressive constraints of the Sadeian dichotomy:

the heroine’s choice is between a father who values her only in market terms and a tiger, representative of a sexuality that is seemingly free from all economic interest The question of choice or lack of it, is echoed

throughout the tales, and this is the Sadeian framework – fuck or be fucked, both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense. Within this logic, to choose to fuck, given the options, seems a positive step, but the choice in fact is already prescribed. As Patricia Duncker puts it, ‘we are watching . . . the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography’. (1988:149)

If I read Lewallen correctly then Beauty’s choice is between her father, and being metaphorically fucked as an object in the patriarchal world; and The Beast, in which case she will be the one who fucks (but, this time, in a literal sense). If the ending of the tale does function within a Sadeian framework, as Lewallen suggests, then Beauty, who has chosen to fuck, has assumed the role of aggressor, and she is fucking the tiger who, within this dualism, has been reduced to the victim. If, however, as Duncker suggests, Beauty is the ‘willing victim of pornography’ (in Lewallen 1988:149), then she has not chosen to fuck after all, but seemingly just prefers to be fucked in a literal sense by The Beast, who is the aggressor, rather than to be fucked in a metaphorical sense by the dominant ideology.

I think that both critics have dismissed two very important aspects of the tale, namely Carter’s characterization of Beauty and the theme of reciprocity. Carter represents Beauty as someone who resolutely rejects Sade’s Justine as a role model, but her rejection of lambhood does not necessarily mean that she embraces Juliette’s tyrannical alternative. In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter emphatically states: ‘A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster’ (SW:27)ⁱⁱ. There is no doubt that Beauty, by the end of the tale, is a free woman, but her freedom does not depend on the slavery of others; it is a complete rejection of patriarchal ideology, and an articulation of a subject position for herself which exists outside of the Sadeian framework and is thus informed by a ‘different logic’ (BC:63). Beauty, who has reappropriated libido, approaches The Beast on equal terms, and the fact that she is an

active and desiring subject does not diminish him in any way. If that were the case, then Carter would merely be reinscribing the patriarchal myth that a sexually autonomous woman is a danger to men. In 'The Tiger's Bride', however, Beauty and The Beast engage in the expression of a reciprocal desire. They

are modelled on Carter's image of the humane in *The Sadeian Woman* where human beings interact as individually both subject and object, neither aggressor nor victim. In 'The Tiger's Bride' Beauty won't be fucked, as victim, by the Beast, as aggressor; nor will she, as aggressor, fuck the Beast as victim. They will be fucking each other, equally Running with the tigers means self-assertion, but not at the cost simply of devouring the other. (Day 1998:146-147)

In the last lines of the tale, each stroke of the tiger's tongue rips off 'skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world' (BC:67), to reveal the 'animalness' which has been repressed in Beauty. This final action is not, as Duncker suggests, 'the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography' (in Lewallen 1988:149), but rather, as Day states, the stripping away of 'existing cultural definitions of sexuality in order to reach a base level from which to begin building representation anew' (1998: 147).

'The Lady of the House of Love'

'The Lady of the House of Love', which incorporates the Sleeping Beauty motif, is different from the preceding tales in that Carter inverts the dynamics of the predator-prey dichotomy by positing the female as aggressor and the male as the unsuspecting virgin invited to dinner. This story was retitled 'Vampirella' for radio, and the Countess Nosferatu, who is the female protagonist, is an eldritch bride of Frankenstein, stitched together from a selection of somnambulant predecessors who prowl around the pages of the horrorzine. In an article titled 'The Art of Horrorzines', which Carter wrote for *New Society*, she proclaims, 'Vampirella's got a lot more class

in French' (1975:447), and so her Countess, who is of Romanian origin, speaks only the language of love. This is weirdly appropriate for a creature who embodies both death and desire. The Countess is also reminiscent of Dracula's daughter, who is featured in *Vampire Tales*, and whom Carter describes as a Jekyll-and-Hyde figure: Angel O'Hara by day and the bloodthirsty Lilith by night (1975:450). The Countess Nosferatu is as contradictory a creation, 'a girl who is both death and the maiden' (BC:93): 'All claws and teeth, she strikes, she gorges; but nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition' (BC:95). Carter comments that it is 'as if the notion of woman-as-aggressor can't be quite tolerated yet, and so must be presented in . . . schizophrenic fashion' (1975:450). The Countess is thus a tragic protagonist; she does not accede to the masculine world of predation by embracing tyranny, in the mode of Sade's Juliette. Instead her role is thrust upon her. She is the unwilling victim of a cruel tradition, a female vampire who devours her unsuspecting prey and is herself consumed by a ravaging and relentless 'postprandial guilt' (1975:450).

On a superficial level, then, Carter has based the characterization of the Countess on bits and pieces borrowed from the horror tradition. But, on another level, the Countess is also a conglomeration of patriarchal ideas of women, the descendant of a patriarchal tradition which has sought to entomb women in a mystic realm of otherness. Carter argues that all the mythic versions of women are 'consolatory nonsenses' (SW:5). These archetypes, which appear to be radiant affirmations of femininity, are in fact shrouded in the artificial light of subterfuge, and Carter's comments reveal that this is an unbearable light-ness that carries no weight in the real world. And so she represents the mythification of the feminine in the tenebrous

persona of the beautiful and damned Countess, who lives expatriate in a dilapidated castle overlooking an uninhabited town, for she is the nocturnal queen of the unreal:

she is the hereditary commandant of the army of shadows who camp in the village below her château, who penetrate the woods in the form of owls, bats and foxes, who make the milk curdle and the butter refuse to come, who ride the horses all night on a wild hunt so they are sacks of skin and bone in the morning, who milk the cows dry and, especially, torment pubescent girls with fainting fits, disorders of the blood, diseases of the imagination. (BC:95)

In spite of her elevated status in the intangible realm of nightmare and imagination, she is powerless and inconsolable, incarcerated 'in the castle of her inheritance' (BC:95).

The Countess thus personifies the dark side of a binary opposition, and in her characterization Carter unleashes a powerful demythologising force. Although this female vampire is the predator in the tale, she is very different from her male counterparts in the other stories, for Carter uses the Countess, the female aggressor, to reveal the harsh reality of the *femme fatale* as mythic type. Like Miss Stern, the archetypal dominatrix whom Carter describes in *The Sadeian Woman*, the Countess Nosferatu is the embodiment of a 'compensatory but spurious female dominance' (SW:20). Carter writes that Miss Stern's behaviour is prescribed: 'She is not cruel for her own sake, or for her own gratification. She is most truly subservient when most apparently dominant' (SW:21). The same is true of the beautiful Countess: when she feeds on the men who are lured to her castle, she does not assuage an autonomous desire, for she 'does not possess herself The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions' (BC:103). The reality of the *femme fatale* is thus far less glamorous than it may initially appear, for she is no different from the dead wives in Bluebeard's museum of misogyny. Carter hints at

their shared status as objects of desire when she describes their resting places in disturbingly similar terms. The Marquis' bloody chamber is furnished with the gothic paraphernalia of the embalming parlour:

At the four corners were funerary urns, of great antiquity, Etruscan, perhaps, and on three-legged stands, the bowls of incense he had left burning which filled the room with a sacerdotal reek . . . [And] at the centre of the room lay a catafalque, a doomed, ominous bier of Renaissance workmanship, surrounded by long white candles. (BC:28)

The Countess's bedroom repeats the morbid style of mortuary design, just as her designated role in an oppressive tradition mirrors the prescribed parts played by Bluebeard's brides:

At the room's four corners are funerary urns and bowls which emit slumberous, pungent fumes of incense. In the centre is an elaborate catafalque, in ebony, surrounded by long candles in enormous silver candlesticks. (BC:94)

In her role as *femme fatale*, 'queen of night, queen of terror' (BC:95), the Countess thus remains as powerless as the mutilated women in the Marquis' bloody chamber.

It would seem that all the roles which have traditionally been allocated to women are equally infused with the bitter elixir of objectification or, as Marks and De Courtivron state: 'In everything that is supposed to characterize women, oppression is always present' (1977:222). Carter emphasizes this point by casting the Countess in a number of archetypal roles throughout the tale, none of which offers the distressed damsel the freedom that she so desperately craves. In addition to being the personification of feminine darkness, the Countess Nosferatu is also 'a child dressing up in her mother's clothes' (BC:100), as helpless and hopeless as Sade's Justine, and yet she has 'a whore's mouth' (BC:101), although she has never used it to assuage an autonomous desire. Her 'soullessness' (BC:94) and beastly hunting habits align her with the animals. She is a creature of the sideshow, the non-rational other against which

masculine culture defines itself. And, as such, she becomes a very literal incarnation of the eternal feminine, and Carter graphically describes the ghastliness of her exiled condition, 'her life or imitation of life' (BC:95). The artificiality of her identity is perhaps best encapsulated in her role as 'Sleeping Beauty' (BC:97), for she is

so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity, for none of her features exhibit any of those touching imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfection of the human condition. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder. (BC:94)

As the epitome of feminine perfection, the Countess is reminiscent of Tristessa de St. Ange, Carter's transvestite movie goddess in *The Passion of New Eve* (1999), who embodies the male idea of "the perfect woman" with such accuracy that "she" could only be a man. Indeed, there never was a woman like Tristessa:

He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity. Tristessa How could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you? (1999:128-129)

In an interview with John Haffenden, Carter states that she created Tristessa 'in order to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity' (in Haffenden 1985:86), and she certainly succeeds in emphasising the man-made quality of the feminine identity. In this context, the Countess's beauty is symptomatic of the extent to which her identity has been colonised by patriarchy.

Thus, immortalised in the gothic castle of an immutable tradition, she yearns to escape her fate: 'In her dream, she would like to be human; but she does not know if that is possible' (BC:95). Humanity, in this context, signifies secularisation, or liberation from the claustrophobic domain of a universal feminine experience, and, accordingly,

the freedom to participate in the real world, 'in its historic time that is counted out minute by minute' (*SW*:106). The tale poses a question which is central to Carter's demythologising approach: 'Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?' (*BC*:93). Is it possible to free ourselves from the social and sexual fictions which govern our lives? In an interview with Anna Katsavos, Carter states that if we do not have 'the capacity at all of singing new songs . . . we might as well stop now' (Katsavos 1994:6).

So far the Countess's life, or abstraction of life, has been characterized by a dreadful monotony. Her waking hours are spent dealing the cards of destiny, but, alas, the 'Tarot always shows the same configuration: she always turns up La Papesse, La Mort, La Tour Abolie, wisdom, death and dissolution' (*BC*:95). On moonless nights she appeases her appetite by hunting small creatures in her sombre garden. At sunrise she returns to her coffin. Sometimes this repetitive ritual is superficially interrupted by an unwary traveller who stops in the deserted square to drink from the fountain of certain death. There he will be met by the Countess's faithful servant and invited to dinner. Dazzled by the unearthly beauty of his bewitching hostess, he will willingly follow her to her bedroom, where she will devour him: 'Afterwards, her governess will tidy the remains into a neat pile and wrap it in its own discarded clothes The blood on the Countess's cheeks will be mixed with tears' (*BC*:96).

The fact that the tale does not end here is proof of Carter's unerring belief in the mutability of experience and the possibility of transformation when love and reciprocity enter the landscape of eternity and bridge the binary divide which heretofore has been reinforced by sexist ideologies: 'The waxen fingers of the

Countess, fingers of a holy image, turn up the card called Les Amoureux. Never, never before . . . never before has the Countess cast herself a fate involving love' (BC:97).

And so a young officer in the British army stumbles upon Sleeping Beauty's remote village while spending his leave exploring Romania. He is 'blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled' and 'rational' (BC:97). As the male ideal, he represents the preferred side of the binary opposition, and Carter consciously constructs his identity around the myth of the solar hero who traditionally transcends the dark and mysterious feminine powers. The young soldier in his virginal glory embodies the light of Reason, and his rationality is exemplified by his chosen form of transport:

To ride a bicycle is in itself some protection against superstitious fears, since the bicycle is the product of pure reason applied to motion. Geometry at the service of man! Give me two spheres and a straight line and I will show you how far I can take them. Voltaire himself might have invented the bicycle, since it contributes so much to man's welfare and nothing at all to his bane. Beneficial to the health, it emits no harmful fumes and permits only the most decorous speeds. How can a bicycle ever be an implement of harm? (BC:94)

If Carter employs the bicycle as a symbol of patriarchal Reason, the question posed in the last line becomes particularly significant; how can Reason ever be an implement of harm? The answer forms part of Carter's social concern regarding the logic, or lack thereof, which informs hegemonic ideals of Reason. Carter writes that the young hero, the embodiment of masculine Reason, who does not yet know the meaning of fear, has about him 'the special glamour of that generation for whom history has already prepared a special, exemplary fate in the trenches of France' (BC:97). In a 1983 piece entitled 'Anger in a Black Landscape', she writes about the irrationality of war and states that 'it is *not* a fine thing to kill or to die for one's country . . . it is a profoundly monstrous and obscene thing' (1983a:47). The heroic army officer, who seems

invincible within the cultural construct of his identity, will soon learn the brutal truth about heroism, not in the land of the vampires, but in the savage reality of war: ‘He will learn to shudder in the trenches’ (BC:104). Carter seems to suggest that it is in the carnage of war where the light of patriarchal Reason flickers and falters, as its credibility wanes in the face of mass destruction.

But there is another battlefield where the effects of flawed Reason have wreaked havoc: the binary battleground where the ideals of Reason have traditionally been associated with masculinity and have thus contributed to the construction of a feminine identity which is based on the principle of exclusion. The result is illustrated in the characterization of the helplessly damned Countess, imprisoned as she is in the fortress of a smothering genealogy. ‘And could love free me from the shadows? Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?’ (BC:103). Is it possible to cross the binary divide and renegotiate the relations between the sexes?

The hero stops to refresh himself at the fountain in the deserted square, where he is met by the mute servant of the house of Nosferatu and invited to dinner. As heroic myth prescribes, the courageous adventurer must abandon everyday reality and cross the threshold into a supernatural netherworld (Gordon 1994:324): ‘This being, rooted in change and time, is about to collide with the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires’ (BC:97).

When the young officer crosses the doorstep into the place of annihilation he is not afraid, guided as he is by the light of his Reason; protected by the special quality of his virginity, he does not ‘shiver in the blast of cold air, as from the mouth of a grave,

that [emanates] from the lightless, cavernous interior' (BC:99). In the boudoir of Countess Nosferatu, it takes a moment before his eyes adapt to the darkness, but then he sees her and he is struck by her insubstantial otherness, the disembodied quality of her voice, her seeming unreality:

she looked like a shipwrecked bride. Her huge dark eyes almost broke his heart, with their waiflike, lost look She shivered all the time, a starveling chill, a malarial agitation of the bones. He thought she must be only sixteen or seventeen years old, no more, with the hectic, unhealthy beauty of a consumptive. She was the châtelaine of all this decay. (BC:101)

She in turn looks at him, and although she sees all that he represents, she remains trapped by the curse of ancestral desire, and any glimmer of hope is stifled by the encroaching darkness of her prescribed condition. She imagines sharing her distress with him, explaining the futility of their situation, perhaps even comforting him in the final moments that precede the inevitable:

When you came through the door retaining about you all the golden light of the summer's day of which I know nothing, nothing, the card called 'Les Amoureux' had just emerged from the tumbling chaos of imagery before me; it seemed to me that you had stepped off the card into my darkness and, for a moment, I thought perhaps you might irradiate it I am condemned to solitude and dark; I do not mean to hurt you. /I will be very gentle You will feel no pain my darling. (BC:103)

These two have only one thing in common; they are both cultural products whose identities have been consciously constructed. For the rest, they are as different as the masculine day from the feminine night. Their conversation is mostly polite and inconsequential; it seems impossible to cross the binary chasm which divides them. And yet each is touched by the presence of the other. He is moved by her condition, although he cannot fully comprehend it, and she would like to step into the light that he represents, but her inheritance forbids it. They are at an impasse. As the ritual draws to its inevitable conclusion, both will be expected to behave in a manner dictated by their roles.

It is dinnertime; ‘the impedimenta of her condition squeak and gibber’ (BC:104), impatient for the consummation that will allay their desires. The events that must follow are anticipated:

The handsome bicyclist, scarcely believing his luck, will follow her into her bedroom She will assure him, in the very voice of temptation: ‘My clothes have but to fall and you will see before you a succession of mysteries.’
. . . . Embraces, kisses . . . your golden head of the lover whom I dreamed would one day free me, this head will fall back, its eyes roll upwards in a spasm you will mistake for that of love and not of death. The bridegroom bleeds on my inverted marriage bed. (BC:104-105)

But he is different from the predecessors who lusted after her. He does not see her as a *femme fatale*: ‘he does not yet know what there is to be afraid of – and due to his heroism, which makes him like the sun, he sees before him first and foremost, an inbred, highly strung girl child, fatherless, motherless, kept in the dark too long’ (BC:104). When she leads him to her bedroom she is under the impression that he is lured by the promise of earthly delight. But he, unlike her usual fare, follows her because he fears for her health and her sanity. Her lugubrious bedroom reminds him of the time his colonel offered him the visiting card for a brothel in Paris where ten louis could buy a ‘naked girl upon a coffin’, the pleasure of ravishing ‘a pretended corpse’ (BC:105):

He had good-naturedly refused the old man’s offer of such an initiation; how can he now take criminal advantage of the disordered girl with fever-hot, bone-dry, taloned hands and eyes that deny all the erotic promises of her body with their terror, their sadness, their dreadful, balked tenderness? (BC:105)

Although the soldier embodies the privileged side of the binary opposition, he has refused an offer of initiation into manhood which would have taught him to treat women as objects, or dead meat. In the same way, he now rejects the behaviour that his identity as masculine subject prescribes and, instead of treating the Countess as an object of desire, he acknowledges the emotions which exist beneath the erotic surface.

She, on the other hand, still expects him to act in the manner of men, and so she begins to undress, but she fumbles and falters; the dark glasses shatter on the tiled floor and this unexpected turn disrupts the pattern of her ancient rite. Aghast, she kneels to gather the broken glass, but a sliver pricks her thumb and she is hypnotised by the sight of her own blood:

It exercises upon her an awed fascination.

Into this vile and murderous room, the handsome bicyclist brings the innocent remedies of the nursery; in himself, by his presence, he is an exorcism. He gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still it spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. He will kiss it better for her, as her mother, had she lived, would have done. All the silver tears fall from the wall with a flimsy tinkle. Her painted ancestors turn away their eyes and grind their fangs. How can she bear the pain of becoming human? (BC:106)

In this moment of reciprocal tenderness, the Countess and the young hero cross the binary lines which have heretofore circumscribed their behaviour. When he tenderly kisses her wound and adopts a nurturing role in the mode of a loving mother, he ceases to be the masculine archetype who is traditionally ruled by thought rather than feeling. When she actively resists the bloodlust of her forebears and chooses to adhere to her own desires, she ceases to be the *femme fatale*, the passive object who has existed only to fulfil the fantasies of others. As she thus escapes the realm of the eternal feminine, she gains her humanity – and with it, her mortality. The next morning the young soldier finds the Countess in her boudoir at the round table where she has seemingly fallen asleep over the cards of destiny. The Tarot cards do not have a single picture on them; her fate can no longer be foretold because it is no longer prescribed: ‘She is not asleep./In death, she [looks] far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human’ (BC:107). Carter calls the Countess’s death ‘the end of exile’ (BC:106), for the Countess is no longer a creature of the male imagination. When she dies, it is the patriarchal idea of a woman that dies, which is why she

looks older and less beautiful in death. In this context I agree with Elaine Jordan, who writes: 'The killing of the object of desire in these stories is not the killing of women, but a killing of masculine representations, in which some women collude' (1992:127).

Accordingly, the Vampire Queen must die in order to break the cycle of ancestral oppression. But there is also another reason for her death; it is an escape from the good intentions of the army officer, who reverts to the heroic archetype and seeks to rescue the damsel in distress and mould her into the image of a decorous wife:

he padded into the boudoir, his mind busy with plans.
We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of these nightmares. (BC:107)

The Countess, who has so painfully reclaimed her subjectivity by actively refusing to perpetuate a suffocating tradition, does not need to be saved by the hero; she has already saved herself. The part of 'the lovely girl' is as spurious as that of the *femme fatale*. To be rescued, to be turned into another stereotype by the hegemonic 'We' is to be objectified all over again. The hero, who for a moment breached the binary parameters of his role, remains part of the patriarchal paradigm, no matter how sincere his intentions may be.

The young man will thus not return from his adventure with an otherworldly bride, as heroic myth dictates, but he will be left with a reminder that symbolises female liberation: 'I leave you as a souvenir the dark fanged rose I plucked from between my thighs, like a flower laid on a grave. On a grave' (BC:107). Eileen Donaldson writes of the fanged rose that it is an image popularised by Grace Nichols and other feminist writers 'of the vagina as a mouth full of sharp teeth. This mouth "eats" the male; it

acts as the tool of his castration, and therefore, of his death as a man (2001:4). Such a reading, however, does not acknowledge the theme of love and reciprocity. The fanged rose, in this guise, would perhaps be a more appropriate emblem for Sade's Juliette, whose freedom depends on the suffering of others. It seems to suggest that Woman as desiring subject is a terror, a patriarchal myth which has been instrumental in robbing Woman of her independence. I would argue that the fanged rose signifies female autonomy, 'the end of exile' (BC:106), but not by merely inverting the predator-prey dichotomy.

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter discusses the stylisation of graffiti which represents Woman as an open hole, 'an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled' (SW:4). She suggests that this 'elementary iconography' depicts Woman's culturally determined passivity and negativity as if she were nothing more than a void waiting for the male principle to fill her with meaning, and so her symbolic value is that of 'a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled' (SW:4-5).

I have argued that the Countess as *femme fatale* receives the short end of the binary stick, and that she is the incarnation of feminine passivity and negativity.

Accordingly, she is the open hole that patriarchal ideology has filled with meaning, the mute, helpless representative of a mythic generation of women, 'Nosferatu's sanguinary rosebud' (BC:103). But when she actively refuses the role that has been thrust upon her, the rose, which is her emblem, is transformed. The space is no longer open, the fangs represent active resistance against oppressive and invasive representations which seek to colonise the female identity. It is thus fitting that the

fanged rose is 'like a flower laid on a grave' (BC:107), because it is laid on the grave of masculine representations of women.

'The Company of Wolves'

The penultimate tale in Carter's collection, 'The Company of Wolves', is a retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood story. Perrault's plot is broadly observed: the young girl is on her way to her grandmother's house when she encounters a werewolf, they make a bet, which the wolf wins, and it is grandmother who pays the ultimate price. Dressed in Granny's garb, the predator awaits his prey, unaware that the feast that he anticipates with slaving jaws is not his usual, submissive, fare, but an equal match in the arena of libidinal impulse. Merja Makinen has the following to say about Carter's tale and the feminist strategy that informs it:

It is not read as a story read for the first time, with a positively imaged heroine. It is read with the original story encoded within it, so that one reads of *both* texts, aware of how the new one refers back to and implicitly critiques the old We recognise the author's feminist turning of the tables and, simultaneously, the damage done by the old inscriptions of femininity as passive. (1992:5)

The discussion that follows compares the tales, in order to explore Carter's departure from the oppressive ideology that pervades Perrault's version.

The damage done by misogynistic versions of the tale is detailed by Jack Zipes, who notes that it

is impossible to exaggerate the impact and importance of the Little Red Riding Hood syndrome as a dominant cultural pattern in Western societies. In this regard I want to stress that in her two most popular literary forms, which have fully captured the mass-mediated imagination in our own day, Little Red Riding Hood is a male creation and projection. Not women but men – Perrault and the Brothers Grimm – gave birth to our common image of Little Red Riding Hood Viewed in this light, *Little Red Riding Hood* reflects men's fear of women's sexuality – and of their own as well. (1983:56-57)

Zipes observes that Red Riding Hood did not begin life as a passive victim, but was originally a wise maiden who orchestrated her own escape. In one version from the oral tradition, she eludes the wolf's predatory desires by pretending to answer a call of nature. The active female protagonist of the folktale is thus a far cry from her passive progeny, immortalised by Perrault:

The "peasant girl" is forthright, brave and shrewd. She knows how to use her wits to escape preying beasts. Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood is pretty, spoiled, gullible and helpless The elaborate details added by Perrault to the oral tale all contribute to the portrait of a pretty, defenceless girl. (Zipes 1983:9)

I would argue that Perrault's Red Riding Hood is reminiscent of Sade's Justine, the passive and naïve beauty whose virtue depends on sexual repression. Both are women whose identities are defined by men and both are made to bear the consequences. Like Justine, Perrault's heroine is trusting and innocent; she does not know that 'it is dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf' (Perrault in Zipes 1983:70). And yet her ignorance does not redeem her, as Jack Zipes points out:

The blame for the diabolical rape is placed firmly on the shoulders of naïve young girls who are pretty and have correct manners. Ostensibly, the seduction would not have occurred had Little Red Riding Hood not stopped to listen to a stranger. (1983:55)

Patriarchal reason dictates that decent girls be denied access to the realm of carnal knowledge, whilst simultaneously expecting them to be familiar enough with the territory to recognise the dangers that lurk there. In this context, the same can be said of Perrault's tender victim as Carter says of Justine: 'She is a good woman according to the rules for women laid down by men and her reward is rape' (SW:38).

Red Riding Hood's narrow sphere of action is determined by the seemingly immutable characteristics that are defined as feminine in the Sadeian framework in

which the plot of Perrault's tale unfolds. Within this dichotomy the young girl, who is the natural prey, is condemned to be devoured, not because she stops to talk to a stranger, but because of the very nature of her predetermined part in a predatory, patriarchal pact. Accordingly, Red Riding Hood's final destination would never have been Granny's cottage, but always the wolf's belly.

Carter's feminist reclamation of the tale refuses to align sexual difference with the subject-object distinction in its predator-prey guise. Her demythologising approach aims to explode the boundaries that have heretofore circumscribed the behaviour of both wolf and maiden. Red Riding Hood's redemption depends on her transformation from a passive victim to a desiring and autonomous self, and the wolf, whose haunting howl has always been an aria signifying appetite, must learn to serenade to a different tune. And yet Carter's retelling is far more intricate than this apparently simple transformation may suggest. In this context, I agree with Maggie Anwell, who states: 'Close examination of Carter's short story reminds us that her original gaze at Red Riding Hood was not an "obvious" feminist reclamation of a fairy story' (1988:77). Carter's solutions are usually radical, and what complicates her textual strategy is that her heroine begins her journey with her identity still firmly embedded in the patriarchal idea of Woman.

The young girl in Carter's tale is a 'flaxen-haired' (BC:113) beauty. She is the specially favoured youngest, who has been much indulged by her mother and grandmother. Her physical attributes have contributed to her status as an object of reverence, and she is placed on a pedestal, artificially elevated above her peers:

Children do not stay young for long in this savage country. There are no toys for them to play with so they work hard and grow wise but this one,

so pretty and the youngest of her family, a little late-comer, had been indulged by her mother and the grandmother who'd knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow. (BC:113)

But Carter points out that the girl's pedestal is, in reality, nothing but a thinly veiled altar. The red hood, which is emblematic of her pampered life, 'has the ominous . . . look of blood on snow' (BC:113). Accordingly, Carter draws a disturbing parallel between her heroine and Sade's Justine, who

begins her miserable career with the idea she never quite rids herself of, that her beauty and virtue are in themselves qualities which demand respect. Beauty, youth and innocence in women give them an artificial ascendancy over a world that allots them love and admiration to precisely the extent a beautiful, young and innocent woman is deprived of the ability to act in the world. (SW:72-73)

This 'artificial ascendancy' (SW:73) is the fatal flaw that transforms Perrault's Red Riding Hood into a tragic figure, a passive victim. In his discussion of Perrault's version, Jack Zipes argues that the red hood is not only symbolic of the girl's pampered existence, but also of her subsequent susceptibility to the wolf's ploys:

As a present from a doting grandmother, it refers directly to the child's "spoiled nature", and Perrault obviously intended to warn little girls that this spoiled child could be "spoiled" in another way by a wolf/man who sought to ravish her. (1983:9)

The notion that a girl is 'spoiled' when she is no longer *intacta* harks back to Justine's conception of a woman's virtue as being firmly located in her vagina (SW:47). Carter states that 'at this period "ruin" applied to a man, means financial ruin. Whereas applied to a woman, it means only that a woman has engaged in sexual activity' (SW: 58). In this context, purity and beauty signify passivity and weakness. These qualities render the young girl defenceless, define her as the 'meat' in a carnivorous reality. Maggie Anwell writes that, in Carter's retelling, 'the transformation of Perrault's faltering, passive figure into the "strong-minded child" is crucial to the reclamation of

the story' (1988:77). I would add that the girl's transformation also depends on her reappropriation of the libido that has been denied her; the lack of which posits her as the natural prey in a predatory dichotomy. In other words, the *rosa mundi* or blessed virgin will have to be secularised, and reclaim her ability to act in the world, as well as her right to fuck, lest she be picked and her petals scattered by the ill winds of patriarchal prescription, because, as Carter states: 'Purity is always in danger' (SW: 73).

Accordingly, Carter's initial depiction of the girl does not yet set her apart from her literary predecessors, but rather aims to portray her as an object of desire:

Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month. She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. (BC:113-114)

This description, which is deliberately general, places Carter's maid in the universal category of delectable, young, virginal morsel. As such she is simultaneously revered for her purity and posited as an object of male lust. One may wonder why Carter would portray her heroine in such a reductionist manner. I would argue that it is part of her feminist strategy, a strategy which Elaine Jordan describes as 'repeating and departing from the inheritance it describes Where else can you start from, if not from where you actually are?' (1992:125). And so Carter's voluptuous maiden is presented in the language of the eternal feminine, where anatomy is destiny and a woman's sexuality is synonymous with her fecundity. Each meticulously phrased sentence henceforth thus becomes a demythologising magnifying glass aimed at emphasising the cracks in the patriarchal image of women. From this perspective, Red

Riding Hood's menstrual cycle is a ticking clock, which 'will strike, henceforward, once a month', until her expiry date. A woman's worth, it seems, has a shelf life. Her womb is 'a magic space', perhaps because it can make her complex entirety and her many varied experiences disappear, leaving nothing but a single reproductive function. The mystification of the womb, in this context, serves to place Carter's heroine firmly within the patriarchal tradition that has used the sanctification of motherhood to console women for their exclusion from the public domain, whilst making them suffer the consequences of a holy reproductive functionⁱⁱⁱ. As if this is not enough, Red Riding Hood is also protected, or rather encumbered, by the power of her virginity, a state which, as Maggie Anwell observes, is 'set apart from the common lot, and in Christian folklore, a prerequisite for female redemption' (1988: 79). Carter writes that the girl's virginity makes her 'a closed system', and this is not only because her hymen still obstructs the entrance to her womb; it also refers to the fact that the girl's identity is defined in terms of this single, physical reality, which automatically seeks to universalise her experience and slot her into a prescribed place, not as an individual, but as a mythic type. Carter explains the idea of the 'closed system', in an interview with Lorna Sage, as a 'parodic imitation of life . . . the clockwork prostitutes going through the motions and being dependent on someone else for their motive power' (Sage 1977:56). And, it is because the girl is 'a closed system', or a mythic type, that 'she does not know how to shiver' (BC:114). For, trapped in an archetypal identity, she is removed from the material world and thus blissfully unaware of the dangers that exist there. In this context, Red Riding Hood thus leaves her mother's house burdened, not only with the basket for Granny, but also with the heavy weight of a crippling femininity. And yet she does not embark on her adventure unprepared; there is a carving knife in the basket amidst the cakes and

jams, lest the protective pentacle of her virginity is not enough to keep the beasts at bay. Carter's maid may be young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, but these traits have not dulled her senses, and perhaps she is already departing from the inheritance prescribed for her.

Red Riding Hood leaves home to seek adventure in the forest, which is also the landscape of desire, a realm that has traditionally been taboo to women: 'Her father might forbid her, if he were home, but he is away in the forest, gathering wood, and her mother cannot deny her. The forest [closes] upon her like a pair of jaws' (BC:114). Aidan Day writes that it 'is patriarchal culture – in a duplicitous attempt to contain the female – which has generated the idea of male libido as threatening to devour sexually unmotivated females' (1998:147). And yet the wolves, who embody a predatory male desire, are not the only perils on the path to womanhood; the forest itself holds the threat of devourment, and it is a warning against the maiden's own budding sexuality. But the girl's sexual curiosity overrides the power of prohibition, for there 'is always something to look at in the forest' (BC:114). She dallies in the domain of appetite and ardour, too enthralled to consider hastening her exploration. It is here then, in his natural habitat, that she meets the werewolf. A distant howl announces his presence, although his appearance belies his true nature:

she saw no sign of a wolf at all, nor of a naked man, neither, but then she heard a clattering among the brushwood and there sprang onto the path a fully clothed one, a very handsome young one, in the green coat and wideawake hat of a hunter, laden with carcasses of game birds. (BC:114)

The encounter is described as playful and flirtatious:

he laughed with a flash of white teeth when he saw her and made her a comic yet flattering little bow; she'd never seen such a fine fellow before, not among the rustic clowns of her native village. So on they went together . . . / Soon they were laughing and joking like old friends. (BC:114)

It is in this light-hearted tone that the wager is made. He shows her the compass which guides him through the forest. She views it with wonder, perhaps because as a woman she has never been equipped with any instruments to direct her through the unruly demesne of libidinal desire. He guarantees that with the aid of this useful implement he will reach Granny's cottage at least a quarter of an hour before her, but she does not believe him:

Is it a bet? he asked her. Shall we make a game of it? What will you give me if I get to grandmother's house before you?

What would you like? she asked disingenuously.

A kiss.

Commonplaces of a rustic seduction; she lowered her eyes and blushed.

(BC:115)

The lycanthrope will win, of course, partly because he is better equipped to find his way through the forest, but also because the young girl purposefully dawdles to ensure his victory. Red Riding Hood, it seems, is emerging as a desiring self, who wants the kiss as much as the wolf does.

While the girl thus tarries in the forest, intent on delaying her arrival, the werewolf hastens up the path that leads to Granny's house. The scene which ensues is bloody and disturbing, but not without significance. I would argue that the grandmother, in this context, represents the girl's feminine heritage, and also her future as a woman, if she were to follow the allotted path through the forest without lingering to enjoy the delights that can be found there. Carter states that 'our flesh arrives to us out of history' (SW:9), and that what 'we have to contend with . . . is the long shadow of the *past historic* . . . that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present (NC:240). Granny's nature has been constructed by the hegemonic ideology, a notion which Carter encapsulates in the image of the grandfather clock that 'ticks away her eroding time' (BC:115) and suggests that Granny has spent her life in

accordance with the beat of a patriarchal drum. Her apparent lack of libido and her inability to encounter unadulterated desire on equal terms is attributed to Judaeo-Christian myth, which Carter views as a 'heritage of shame, disgust and morality that stand between the initial urge and the first attainment of this most elementary assertion of the self'^{iv} (*SW*:11). Accordingly, Granny, who 'is a pious old woman' (*BC*:115), suffers the treatment that has traditionally been reserved for women in a culture that has sanctified the sexual act and sanitised the female identity; she is preyed upon, she is a defenceless lamb led to the slaughter. When the wolf enters Granny's house, she recognises the face of aggressive male sexuality, but she is not equipped to withstand the onslaught:

You can tell them by their eyes, eyes of a beast of prey, nocturnal, devastating eyes as red as a wound; you can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, granny, you thought that was a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin . . . now call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you but it won't do you any good. (*BC*:116)

In her depiction of the grandmother and the events that lead to her devourment, Carter's dissenting voice aims to reveal that the throne of the eternal feminine is in fact an altar, where 'Woman can be desecrated to the extent that she has been made holy' (*SW*:73). The idealisations of the female are discredited as Granny hurls her Bible, which represents the mythic versions of the blessed virgin and the holy mother, as well as her apron, the badge of the angel of the house, in the face of a predatory reality, and finds that they are useless. In this context, Granny is reminiscent of Sade's Justine, whom Carter depicts as 'a good woman in a man's world. She is a good woman according to the rules laid down by men and her reward is rape' (*SW*:38). And thus the 'last thing the old lady [sees] in all this world [is] a young man, eyes like cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed' (*BC*:116).

Now that the grandmother is gone, the lycanthrope prepares to snare virginal flesh as he has so lustfully anticipated. Disguised in Granny's nightcap, he patiently awaits Red Riding Hood's arrival:

Rat-a-tap-tap.

Who's there, he quavers in granny's antique falsetto.

Only your granddaughter.

So she came in, bringing with her a flurry of snow that melted in tears on the tiles, and perhaps she was a little disappointed to see only her grandmother sitting beside the fire. But then he flung off the blanket and sprang to the door, pressing his back against it so that she could not get out again. (BC:116)

It does not take the girl long to guess her grandmother's fate or to appreciate the danger of her own situation. Howling wolves surround the cottage, but even more terrifying is the predator who bars her escape, for he is the worst type of wolf, the kind who is hairy on the inside: 'she shivered, in spite of the scarlet shawl she pulled more closely around her as if it could protect her although it was as red as the blood that she must spill' (BC:117). At this point, the girl has not yet succeeded in ridding herself of the cultural impedimenta that posit her as sacrificial victim. She still heeds the warning that has been instilled in her from an early age regarding the predatory nature of male libido, and so she fears the wolf. She seeks solace in the red hood, as though this symbol of the 'artificial ascendancy' (SW:73) that her youth and beauty have afforded her could possibly protect her. The reference to the blood that 'she must spill' (BC:117) is deliberately ambiguous, as Maggie Anwell observes: 'will it be her lifeblood or the sign of her discarded virginity?' (1988:80). In other words, will she remain a 'closed system' (BC:114), and follow in her grandmother's footsteps only to be devoured, or can she escape her debilitating feminine heritage in order to articulate an autonomous position for herself?

In the meantime, however, she questions the lycanthrope about the howling outside the cottage, and he responds that it is the voices of his brothers and invites her to look out of the window: ‘It was a white night of moon and snow; the blizzard whirled round the gaunt, grey beasts Ten wolves; twenty wolves – so many she could not count them, howling in concert as if demented or deranged’ (*BC*:117). This is the pivotal moment in the tale; this moment when the girl first recognises the ghastly melancholy of the wolfsong and begins to understand the dreadful dynamics that govern the predator-prey dichotomy. She realises that the wolf, who is ‘carnivore incarnate’ (*BC*:110), is as trapped by the ‘diabolic solitude’ (*SW*:150) of his prescribed identity as she is ensnared by the passive defencelessness of her own. I have discussed the predator-prey relationship, in which neither party benefits from the ties that bind them. Carter emphasises this point when she comments on the wolves’ demented concert, which signifies their accursed existence, for they howl ‘as if their hearts would break’ (*BC*:117). When the maiden thus perceives that the wolfsong is not only ‘an aria of fear’ (*BC*:110) but also a song of lamentation, the power relations are destabilised and her perspective of the werewolf is altered. Fear now makes way for empathy, and the rekindling of desire:

It is very cold, poor things, she said; no wonder they howl so.
She closed the window on the wolves’ threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid.
(*BC*:117)

And so Red Riding Hood sheds the red hood that has heretofore defined her. Free of this culturally inflicted encumbrance, she takes off the rest of her clothing with a seductive confidence that is born from the acceptance of her own sexuality. She approaches the wolf ‘clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh’, and freely gives ‘the kiss she [owes] him’ (*BC*:118).

The kiss that the girl bestows upon the lycanthrope elicits ‘a prothalamion’ (BC:118) from the wolves outside the window, a song to celebrate a forthcoming wedding. The altered tone of the wolfsong is reminiscent of the question Carter’s *femme fatale* asks in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’, a question that I have argued is central to Carter’s demythologising approach: ‘Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?’ (BC:93). Carter’s answer is evident: human nature is neither as fixed nor as final as tradition would have us believe, and yet old behaviours are not so easily put to rest, for the wolf is, after all, ‘carnivore incarnate’ (BC:110):

What big teeth you have!
She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the room was full of the clamour
of the forest’s Liebestod but the wise child never flinched, even when he
answered:
All the better to eat you with. (BC:118)

This scene harks back to the ending of ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, where the naked Beauty approaches the Beast, stretching out her hand, and he growls and snarls, baring his teeth: ‘I never moved. He snuffed the air, as if to smell my fear; he could not’ (BC:67). When fear is replaced by autonomous desire, the power relations of the predator-prey opposition are finally and irrevocably changed, for, as Merja Makinen states: ‘the libido will transform “meat” into “flesh”’ (1992:11).

And so the wise maiden, who is the picture of newly liberated libidinal impulse, can laugh in the face of patriarchal threats of devourment: ‘The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing’ (BC:118). This defiant burning of the clothes represents the triumph of unadulterated desire over the cultural representation of sexuality. Accordingly, the girl not only destroys the symbolic red shawl that defines her as a sacrificial lamb; she

also deliberately incinerates the werewolf's civilised veneer, knowing that 'if you burn his human clothing you condemn him to wolfishness for the rest of his life'

(*BC*:113). Once the lovers have thus assuaged a reciprocal desire, she

will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf. (*BC*:118)

In Perrault's version it is the wolf who eats the girl, and the moral of the tale is clear: young girls who venture from the prescribed path and linger in the realm of carnal delight will get what they deserve. Not so in Carter's enigmatic ending, where, as Carter explains in an interview with John Haffenden, it is the girl who 'eats the wolf' (Haffenden 1985:83). But this 'savage marriage ceremony' (*BC*:118) is not a mere reversal of roles where, instead of being devoured, the girl becomes the aggressor and consumes the wolf, in the mode of Sade's Juliette. It is rather a depiction of Woman reappropriating libido, or, almost literally, ingesting an unrefined sensuality, so that it may become a part of herself. Aidan Day has the following to say about this union:

The opposition of subject versus object, active versus passive, is transcended so that each individual in the encounter may be at once both. Just as the girl refuses to be 'meat', refuses to play the part of merely object of consumption or victim, so the wolf, traditionally solely the aggressor, is described at the last as 'tender'. (1998:149)

This image of boundaries transcended is encapsulated in the idea of the winter solstice, when the threshold that separates this world from the mystical realm of otherness can be most easily crossed: 'Midnight; and the clock strikes. It is Christmas Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through' (*BC*:118). But the boundaries that are crossed are not necessarily only those that separate masculinity and femininity in their various guises as subject-object

or predator and prey; they are also the fortified borders that civilised society has erected to separate the ego from the id in a bid to repress the unruly animality of libidinal desire, as Carter states: ‘We keep the wolves outside by living well’ (BC:115). Maggie Anwell elaborates upon this reading as follows:

if, as [Rosemary] Jackson suggests, many fantasies of dualism are dramatisations of the struggle between the libido and the ego, and if, therefore, we analyse this story as an attempt to recover repressed desire, then the outcome of the relationship between the wolf (repressed desire) and the girl (ego) is critical In Carter’s ‘The Company of Wolves’ the girl asleep safely in the arms of the wolf, who is now ‘tender’, is indeed an image of healing, in which the ego is able to face the strength of desire without losing the ability to control its less pleasurable aspects. As the girl negotiates an understanding with the wolf, the howling of the wolves and the raging blizzard die down: ‘All silent, all still’. The external world registers that boundaries which would have left the individual resistant to new experiences and growth have crumbled. (1988:83)

Once again Carter’s tale has divided opinion amongst critics over whether it succeeds in representing a positive image of emancipated female sexuality. Some argue that her reclamation of the tale merely succeeds in reinscribing patriarchy. Patricia Duncker states that ‘Red Riding Hood sees that rape is inevitable – “The Wolf is carnivore incarnate” – and decides to strip off, lie back and enjoy it. She wants it really. They all do’ (1984:7). Robert Clark is less harsh than Duncker, and recognises that Carter’s version does represent an image of woman enjoying her sexuality and being empowered by it, although he questions the circumstances that lead to this depiction of female sexual autonomy:

These positive aspects . . . are achieved at the cost of accepting patriarchal limits to women’s power: the woman is pursued, surrounded, implicitly threatened. The wolf is agent, she is responsive object When the girl strips off her clothes, the fact that the wolf is essentially coercing her is obliterated as attention focuses on the readiness with which the girl undresses The point of view is that of the male voyeur; the implication may be that the girl has her own sexual power, but this meaning lies perilously close to the idea that all women want it really and only need forcing to overcome their scruples. (1987:149)

I would argue that the question raised by these concerns is whether Red Riding Hood would have reclaimed her repressed libido if there were another way to escape the otherwise fatal clutches of the wolf. Carter does emphasise the girl's budding sexual curiosity; the maiden is attracted to the 'dashing huntsman' (BC:114), and she purposefully tarries in the forest to ensure that he wins the wager. She is also disappointed when she arrives at her destination and sees 'only her grandmother sitting beside the fire' (BC:116). These textual elements do hint at the girl's awakening desire, although they are not enough to distinguish Red Riding Hood from a traditional romantic heroine in a Mills and Boon novel, and they certainly do not prepare the reader for the sexual abandon that follows. Furthermore, when the maiden realises that she is alone with the lycanthrope who has recently devoured her grandmother, her first thought does not turn to the exciting deflowering possibilities that the situation presents, but rather concerns finding a means to defend herself: 'She wanted her knife from her basket but she did not dare reach for it because his eyes were fixed upon her' (BC:117). I have argued that the turning point in the tale comes when Red Riding Hood recognises that the predator is as trapped by the prescribed codes of masculine behaviour as she is by the fixity of her own identity, and that this realisation presents possibilities which preclude death by devourment.

And yet I have to agree with both Duncker and Clark that Carter's heroine is not entirely convincing as the image of woman empowered by the reclamation of her sexuality, because the element of coercion is disturbingly present, as is the suggestion that female sexuality can be a survival technique. As Margaret Atwood states: 'don't try this technique on a street mugger' (1994:130). If, however, the story is read as an exploration of the relationship between the libido (the wolf) and the ego (Red Riding

Hood), these concerns no longer apply, and the final picture of the girl asleep in the arms of the ‘tender wolf’ (*BC*:118) is, indeed, as Maggie Anwell suggests, an ‘image of healing’ (1988:83). In this context, Paulina Palmer writes: ‘Even though a text generally carries a “preferred reading”, it is, in part, open to the different interpretations which the observer or reader chooses to impose upon it’ (1987:189). ‘The Company of Wolves’, however, allows too much room for ambiguity, and I would argue that, finally, it does not quite succeed in offering a new and improved image of female sexuality.

ⁱ In *From the Beast to the Blonde* Marina Warner quotes Carter as observing that ‘The Beauty and the Beast’ tale has been ‘increasingly employed “to house-train the id”’ (1995:310).

ⁱⁱ Elaine Jordan uses the same quote from *The Sadeian Woman* to argue against those critics who believe that Carter ‘is offering Juliette as a model and ignoring her complicity with a system that oppresses women’ (1992:120).

ⁱⁱⁱ Carter says of motherhood that ‘it is in just this physical difference that the whole opposition of the sexes lies. If men could have babies, they would cease to be men as such. They would become magical objects of strangeness, veneration, obloquy, awe, disregard, and oppression, recipients of holy terror’ (1988:73).

^{iv} In the context of Judaeo-Christian myth, Carter adds that ‘it is a wonder anyone in this culture ever learns to fuck at all’ (*SW*:11).

Chapter 3

No longer a bird in a gilded cage: secularising the eternal feminine in *Nights at the Circus*

Part 1: London

Angela Carter's 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus* opens in the dressing-room of the fabulous Fevvers, 'most famous *aerialiste* of the day' (NC:7), who is narrating her life story to the American journalist Jack Walser:

'Lor' love you, sir!' Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. 'As to my place of birth, why, I first saw the light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the "Cockney Venus", for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me "Helen of the High Wire", due to the unusual circumstances in which I came ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*.' (NC:7)

Hatched indeed, for Fevvers is the incarnation of a hyperbolised feminine difference; as a winged woman, she is 'a metaphor come to life' (Carter in Haffenden 1985:93).

The wall-sized poster in her dressing room, a 'souvenir of her Parisian triumphs' (NC:7), alludes to her symbolic status in foot-high letters that brazenly proclaim her slogan: 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' (NC:7). Carter's statement suggests that Fevvers is, of course, both, and in an interview with Anna Katsavos, she elaborates upon this idea when she says that the creation of her Cockney Venus was inspired by a piece of writing by Guillaume Apollinaire about Sade's Juliette, in which he discusses the New Woman in the early twentieth century:

and the very phrase he uses is, "who will have wings and will renew the world". And I read this, and like a lot of women, when you read this kind of thing, you get this real 'bulge' and think, "How wonderful . . . How terrific," and then I thought, "Well no; it's not going to be as easy as that." . . . How inconvenient to have wings, and by extension, how very, very

difficult to be born so out of key with the world. Something that women know all about is how very difficult it is to enter an old game. What you have to do is to change the rules and make a new game, and that's really what [Fevvers] is all about. (In Katsavos 1994:3)

Accordingly, Fevvers is Apollinaire's New Woman, but not quite as he imagined, for Carter has demythologised her and put her to work in the service of women. Although Fevvers signifies 'the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground' (NC:25), she is defined as much by her humanity as by her wings, a notion which is aptly expressed in one of her many stage names, for she is not 'billed the "Cockney Venus", for nothing' (NC:7). Mary Russo notes that 'Fevvers straddles high and low culture' (1995:159) for, in addition to being likened to Venus, she is also compared to Helen of Troy, although, unlike her illustrious predecessor, 'this Helen launched a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side' (NC:8). It is her vulgar earthiness which grounds Fevvers and sets her apart from her literary ancestry, because it denies all the essential attributes which have traditionally been prescribed for denizens of the realm of the eternal feminine. There is, after all, nothing celestial about her overpowering personal aroma ('something fishy about the Cockney Venus' [NC:8]), her free and easy attitude to flatulence ('better out than in, sir' [NC:11]), or her gluttonous appetite for champagne and food ('she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety' [NC:22]). But it is not just Fevvers' flagrant physicality that distances her from the traditional symbolic woman who has merely served as a vessel for patriarchal meaning; it is also her unique personality, as Lorna Sage observes:

Fevvers is a symbol come to life *as a character*, who makes meanings on her own account What Carter does is give Fevvers the mobility, particularity, weight, and humour of a character, and so give her back her gender. (1994a:48)

Aidan Day describes Fevvers as ‘a reappropriation on behalf of women of what had been appropriated – the figure of woman – on behalf of men’ (1998:178), and I would describe this strategy of reappropriation as the axis of Carter’s demythologising approach. Although Fevvers is endowed with individuality and autonomous motivation, she is also, as Sage states, ‘a fictive mutant’ because ‘iconographically speaking, she’s far from original’ (1994a:47). In addition to being Apollinaire’s New Woman, she is also, according to Sage, both ‘Leda *and* the swan’, as well as ‘the Winged Victory of Samothrace’ (1994a:47). The latter is a classical Greek marble statue that the ravages of time have robbed of her head and arms. Carter also identifies Fevvers with the Winged Victory, except that, as she is quick to point out, Fevvers ‘does have a head!’ (in Haffenden 1985:93) and, in true materialist fashion, she is ‘out to earn a living’ (Carter in Katsavos 1994:3). In Paris, her feathered appendages and skill on the trapeze have earned her the name ‘*l’Ange Anglaise*, the English Angel’ (NC:8), but, if Fevvers is indeed an angel, then she is a secular one for whom ‘the music of the spheres [is] the jingling of cash registers’ (NC:12). In the character of Fevvers, Carter liberates the Victorian ‘angel of the house’ and makes her an angel of the high-wire. It is perhaps for this reason that the novel is set at ‘the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history’ (NC:11), or, as Carter said in an interview, ‘at exactly the moment in European history when things began to change’ (in Katsavos 1994:3).

It is on the stage of the Alhambra Music Hall in the ‘final, waning, season of the year of Our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety nine’ (NC:11), that Jack Walser, the sceptical, square-jawed journalist, first sees Fevvers’ act. When the curtain goes up Fevvers is prone under a robe of red and purple feathers behind tinsel bars. As the

band plays ‘Only a bird in a gilded cage’, she slowly gets up, pretending to be trapped. When her trapezes are lowered from aloft, however, she seizes the shiny bars of her frail cage and parts them to step daintily through the gap. Flinging off her robe, she is revealed in her voluptuous splendour, her pink fleshings creating the illusion of nudity but for the sequins which adorn her nipples and crotch. On her back she bears the brightly-dyed burden of her plumage, and everything about her invites the spectators to revel in the gaudy extravagance of her appearance:

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic gaze, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.

She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!

LOOK AT ME! (NC:15)

The band now begins to play ‘The Ride of the Valkyries’ as Fevvers spreads her wings to the audible amazement of the audience. She jumps up to catch the dangling trapeze, and Carter describes her as being ‘transfixed’ upon the undeniably phallic, ‘arching white sword of the limelight’ (NC:16). What is perhaps most astonishing about her performance is that she does not attempt to go any further than the ‘hack *aerialiste*, the everyday wingless variety’ (NC:17), except that she manages to do the daring feats in slow motion. When the average trapeze artiste

performs the triple somersault, he or she travels through the air at a cool sixty miles an hour; Fevvers, however, contrived a contemplative and leisurely twenty-five, so that the packed theatre could enjoy the spectacle, as in slow motion, of every tense muscle straining in her Rubenesque form. (NC:17)

Her act is received with deafening applause and resounding cheers; bouquets pelt the stage but she takes no notice, since ‘there is no second-hand market for them’ (NC:18):

Her face, thickly coated with rouge and powder so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, is wreathed in

triumphant smiles; her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood's grandmother. (NC:18)

It may seem contradictory that Fevvers, as the representative of the New Woman at the dawn of a new century when things will finally begin to change for women, earns a living, as Carter states, 'by making a show of herself' (in Haffenden 1985:88). Mary Ann Doane (1991:21) writes that in the hegemonic system which aligns sexual difference with a subject-object dichotomy, male subjectivity has traditionally been matched with the agency of the look. There is nothing new about the female spectacle who displays herself for the male gaze, and this would suggest that Fevvers is merely one in an infinite line of women who have earned a living by making a show of themselves. But Fevvers is the New Woman, and although she enters an old game, she changes the rules to her own advantage, which, as Carter points out, is what she is 'all about' (in Katsavos 1994:3). In her analysis of *Nights at the Circus*, Sally Robinson argues that Carter disrupts the subject-object dichotomy by 'assigning agency to the (feminized) spectacle, making of her, simultaneously, a spectator' (1991:117). Robinson's argument draws on feminist film theory, particularly Doane's theory of masquerade, which theorizes the female spectator. Doane suggests that the binary opposition which posits woman as object to man's subject, image to his look, is supported by another opposition, that of proximity and distance in relation to the image (Doane 1991:21). In her reading of Doane, Sally Robinson states:

Woman has been aligned with the image because . . . she has come to represent proximity rather than distance. While man gazes, from a distance, at Woman as image, Woman "is the image". . . . For the female spectator, or reader, things are slightly more complicated. She can either identify with the masculine agency of the gaze and enjoy a kind of "transvestite" subjectivity; or she can, masochistically, identify with the image. There is, however, another alternative, one theorized by Doane as playing the masquerade. (1991:119)

Robinson describes the masquerade as a process akin to what Irigaray terms *mimicry*¹:

a self-conscious re-enactment, by women, of the place traditionally assigned to Woman within narrative and other discourse Masquerade, Doane argues, is a mode of “flaunting femininity”, of a woman producing *herself* “as an excess of femininity”. (1991:118,119)

In the context of masquerade, femininity becomes a spectacular production, a means of self-representation (as Robinson points out), which not only ‘designates the distance between the woman and the image of femininity’ (Doane 1991:39) but also dismantles ‘the question of essentialism before it can even be posed’ (Doane 1991: 37). Robinson quotes Judith Butler, who elaborates upon this anti-essentialist aspect, when she concludes that the masquerade

“may be understood as performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearance that makes itself convincing as a ‘being’” – with the consequence that “all gender ontology is reducible to a play of appearances”. (1991:121)

The anti-essentialism which underlies Doane’s theory of masquerade is also evident in Carter’s depiction of Fevvers, who is not born a woman but is ‘hatched’. Aidan Day writes that the notion of ‘hatching’ is ‘a metaphor for the idea that gendered identity is something that is not given but is made and can be remade’ (1998:181). It is the artifice of gendered identity which the masquerade seeks to expose by appropriating and exaggerating the traditional codes of femininity in a parodistic performance of what patriarchal ideology has presented as ‘natural’:

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, *imagistic* Masquerade . . . involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. The masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity. (Doane 1991:25-26)

As a double strategy which both accepts and denies femininity, the masquerade deconstructs the traditional opposition between male spectator and female spectacle (Robinson 1991:118). In her discussion of *Nights at the Circus*, Sally Robinson takes Doane's analysis of the masquerade one step further by suggesting that Fevvers, in masquerading her femininity, not only displays herself for the male gaze, but also appropriates the masculine position, by turning her own gaze on herself and by turning an active gaze on Walser, the male spectator (1991:121,122). Robinson believes that Carter's text not only reverses the traditional positions by granting Fevvers the agency of the look; it displaces the opposition of masculine and feminine by what she terms 'the both/and logic' (1991:123), according to which Fevvers is both spectator and spectacle. The 'both/and logic' which Robinson ascribes to Fevvers is illustrated in a number of instances during the course of Fevvers' narrative, and Robinson points out that the displacement of gendered opposition can be observed in Walser's response to Fevvers' gaze, which she terms 'a confusing and disarming sense of gender ambiguity' (1991:124). At one point Fevvers fixes 'Walser with a piercing, judging regard, as if to ascertain just how far she [can] go with him It [flickers] through his mind: Is she really a man?' (NC:35). Later, Fevvers gives Walser 'the touch of an eye like sudden blue steel' and he wilts 'in the blast of her full attention' (NC:78). Robinson suggests that the 'word "wilted" evokes an emasculation of Walser, caused by Fevvers appropriating the agency of the look from him', and the consequence of this castratory gaze is 'Walser's temporary inability to *write*: to take hold of Fevvers' narrative and put it in his own terms' (1991:124): 'Walser did indeed feel himself at the point of prostration. The hand that followed their dictations across the page obediently as a little dog no longer felt as if it belonged to him. It flapped at the hinges of the wrist' (NC:78). Robinson comments that he is, 'as it were,

emasculated by Fevvers's gaze, and loses the power of the speaking subject' (1991:124). She argues that Fevvers' 'appropriation of the gaze signifies her control over her narrative', just as the traditional practice which posits woman as the object of the gaze renders her powerless (1991:124). Accordingly, Walser, the detached foreign correspondent who has come to debunk the myth of Fevvers and her wings, to solve the 'feminine enigma', as Robinson puts it (1991:122), is, instead, 'lasooed . . . with her narrative and dragged . . . along with her' (NC:60). And yet the maverick manner in which Fevvers appropriates the gaze and controls her narrative does not render her any less a woman: 'she does not position . . . herself as masculine. She disrupts the singularity of masculine/feminine positions by representing herself as both spectacle and spectator' (Robinson 1991:125).

In the context of Doane's theory of masquerade and Robinson's application of it to the characterization of Fevvers, Jane Arthurs' discussion of the transgressive potential of the trope of the 'unruly woman' in her analysis of the female grotesque is also significant. She states that 'the unruly woman inverts the power relations of gender by breaking the codes of bodily decorum' that modern societies have constructed as 'an ideal of bourgeois femininity' (Arthurs 1999:142). This perspective is particularly reminiscent of Doane's notion of woman producing herself as an 'excess of femininity', in that both suggest a transgression of the boundaries which the hegemonic ideology has constructed in order to contain woman within a passive, sleek and decorous image of herself. Arthurs writes that in 'transgressing these codes of femininity, the unruly woman . . . demands attention by making a spectacle of herself, talking loudly, dressing flamboyantly and taking up space with her size and loose, energetic movements' (1999:142,143).

Everything about Fevvers blazons sublime excess and the transgression of traditional boundaries. Watching her stage act through his opera-glasses from the press box, Walser's first impression is of 'physical ungainliness':

he thought of dancers he had seen in Bangkok, presenting with their plumed, gilded, mirrored surfaces and angular, hieratic movements, infinitely more persuasive illusions of the airy creation than this overliteral winged barmaid before him My, how her bodice strains! You'd think her tits were going to pop right out. (NC:15-16,17)

Even the notorious Iron Maiden cannot restrain the fleshly opulence which is Fevvers, and in flight her performance retains a gaucheness which is a far cry from the hieratic movements of the graceful dancers who constitute Walser's traditional frame of reference: 'nothing subtle about her appeal, which was just as well if she were to function as the democratically elected divinity of the imminent century of the Common Man' (NC:12).

The divine vulgarity which characterizes Fevvers' performance also manifests itself in the discordant tones of her voice. For not only does this 'unruly woman' talk loudly and 'lasso' Walser with her narrative, she also has a 'cavernous' voice, 'a voice made for shouting about the tempest', the 'voice of a celestial fishwife', and Walser seems to become its 'prisoner' (NC:43). Fevvers' voice is described as musical, and yet, as Mary Russo observes: 'In relation to music as organised sound, "this voice is not for singing," meaning that it is "noisy" in the technical sense and exceeds the regimes of canonical Western music' (1995:175). Her voice, her 'dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's' (NC:43), like her body and her movements, ignores cultural constraints and 'flies from the cavern, above the tempest, and to the heavens and down again to Cockney London' (Russo 1995:174). And yet, unlike the siren, the mythic enchantress who exists in the twilight zone of the eternal feminine, Fevvers is fully human, as the 'writhing snakes' nest' of stale silk stockings and the 'elaborately

intimate garments . . . redolent of use' (NC:9) that are strewn around her dressing-room testify. Nonetheless, this room that Carter describes as 'a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor' (NC:9) appears to be an extension of Fevvers' performance, for,

in spite of the mess, which [resembles] the aftermath of an explosion in a *corsetière*'s, Fevvers' dressing-room [is] notable for its anonymity . . . not even a framed photograph propped amongst the unguents of her dressing table . . . No lucky mascots, no black china cats nor pots of white heather. Neither personal luxuries such as armchairs or rugs. Nothing to give her away. A star's dressing-room, mean as a kitchenmaid's attic. (NC:13-14)

Although this spectacular display of the 'accoutrements of femininity' (Doane 1991: 26) would be sufficient 'to intimidate a young man who had led a less sheltered life' than Walser (NC:9), it reveals nothing more about Fevvers than her stage act, except perhaps for 'the highly personal aroma, "essence of Fevvers", that [clogs] the room' (NC:9). I would argue that Fevvers' dressing-room not only reduces 'all gender ontology . . . to a play of appearances', as Butler suggests (in Robinson 1991:121); it also reduces the notion of a particularly feminine 'essence' to nothing more than a 'highly personal aroma'. At a glance one would not guess that it is 'in this very dressing-room, here, in the Alhambra Music Hall, among her dirty underwear' (NC:11), that Fevvers has just signed a six-figure contract for a Grand Imperial Tour to Russia and Japan, just as one would not think that the 'English Angel' dreamt, 'at nights, of bank accounts' (NC:12).

All Walser's attempts 'to "puff" Fevvers, 'to explode her' (NC:11), have proved fruitless. Neither her stage act nor the intimacy of her dressing-room brings him any closer to answering the question posed by her slogan and, as he listens to the fantastical events which constitute her life story, he finds it increasingly difficult to

distinguish between fact and fiction. For, although this war correspondent has witnessed many of the great events that make up history, he is ill-equipped for 'herstory' that begins with a foundling hatched from an egg and abandoned on the doorstep of a brothel in London's East End, 'a little babe most lovingly packed up in new straw sweetly sleeping among a litter of broken eggshells' (NC:12). It is Lizzie, Fevvers' foster-mother, companion and narrative accomplice, who finds her and takes her in. And so it happens that Fevvers is raised by a community of prostitutes headed by a one-eyed Madame named Ma Nelson. It is in the brothel that Fevvers serves her 'apprenticeship in *being looked at* – at being the object of the eye of the beholder' (NC:23). From the age of seven until adolescence, she plays an ornamental Cupid in the drawing-room where the women receive their customers. Then her feathered appendages swell and spread, 'along with the beginnings of great goings on in . . . the bosom department' (NC:23). From age fourteen to seventeen she poses as the Winged Victory, with her hair, face, wings and upper body all coated in white, to exist 'only as an object in men's eyes' (NC:39):

Such was my apprenticeship for life . . . I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could be more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited, I waited . . . although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did *not* await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever! (NC:39)

Fevvers' apprenticeship in the brothel is a preview of life as a Woman, a life in which she will be expected to fulfil a number of archetypal roles, prescribed according to the dictates of essentialism. In this context Barthes writes:

Bourgeois ideology continually transforms the products of history into essential types . . . it cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world, fixated this world into an object to be possessed, catalogued its riches, *embalmed it*, and injected into reality some purifying essence

which will stop its transformation, its flight towards other forms of existence. (1993:155, my emphasis)

I would argue that Fevvers' experience as a *tableau vivant* echoes Barthes' description of objectification. Both emphasise the unnaturalness of this transformation of living flesh into inert 'meat' (SW:137) when they describe it in the language of the funeral parlour. Fevvers likens the wet white that covers her face and torso to 'a death mask' that seals her up in a 'sarcophagus of beauty', while Barthes speaks of being 'embalmed', injected with a 'purifying essence' that denies transformation. And yet Fevvers observes that the 'appearance of marble' conceals a very different reality: 'nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I!' (NC:39). Evidently, Fevvers' apprenticeship does not succeed in naturalising her into a subordinate position. Instead, it encourages her very literal 'flight towards other forms of existence' (Barthes 1993:155). Although Fevvers assumes the traditional feminine position of spectacle in Ma Nelson's house, she does it self-consciously, and so designates the distance between herself 'and the image of femininity' (Doane 1991:39). She is both spectacle and spectator, re-enacting the place traditionally assigned to Woman while observing the consequences of accepting such a fate. Though she does not yet know how she will escape her prescribed part, she already knows that she will not wait to be rescued: 'I did *not* await the kiss of a magic prince With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever!' (NC:39).

It is Fevvers' apprenticeship in the brothel that enables her to explore the contradictions between women and Woman; the prostitutes instruct her in the complexities of the former and the customers teach her about the reductionism of the latter. For Fevvers is not the only one who plays the masquerade in Ma Nelson's

house; when Lizzie opens the door and lets the men in, all the girls ‘needs must jump to attention and behave like women’ (NC:40). Though the clients believe that whores work for pleasure, as if they were ‘*damned souls*’ intent ‘to lure men to their dooms’ (NC:38), the reality is that they are only working women doing it for money. As Fevvers remarks to Walser, no ‘woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity’ (NC:39). I would argue that the discrepancy between women and Woman manifests itself in the brothel as the difference between the interests which the women choose to pursue by day and the simulacra of pleasure that are extracted from them at night, a notion which is encapsulated in Fevvers’ comment that in Ma Nelson’s house ‘a subtext of fertility underwrote the glittering sterility of the pleasure of the flesh available within the academy’ (NC:39). For by day the brothel is an industrious female community where the women engage in a variety of intellectual, artistic and political activities. At night, these suffragists must put away their books, typewriters and musical instruments to fulfil their prescribed parts as objects of desire. The great divide which separates women from Woman, the reality of daylight from the artifice of night, is also evident later, when the brothel is closed down by Ma Nelson’s clergyman brother, who inherits the house after her sudden death. He decides to turn this house of ill repute into a hostel for fallen girls, and the women are given until the following morning to vacate it. It is on that final morning, after a night of reminiscing, that they decide to open the heavy curtains in the parlour to have one final look around in the clear light of day, and, as Fevvers observes, none of them can recall when those curtains have last been drawn:

for with those drapes there had been made the artificial night of pleasure which was the perennial season of the salon. But now, with the Mistress of the Revels departed into darkness, it seemed only right and proper that we should give it all back to common day. (NC:49)

As the soft light of subterfuge is ousted by the ‘cold light of early dawn’, the ‘perennial season of the salon’, the realm of the eternal feminine, is unmasked:

We saw, now, what we had never seen before; how the moth had nibbled the upholstery, the mice had gnawed away the Persian carpets and dust caked all the cornices. The luxury of that place had been nothing but illusion, created by the candles of midnight, and, in the dawn, all was sere, worn-out decay Then we understood the house had served its turn for us, for the parlour itself began to waver and dissolve before our very eyes. Even the solidity of the sofas seemed called into question for they and the heavy leather armchairs now had the dubious air of furniture carved out of smoke. (NC:49)

The artfulness that has made Ma Nelson’s house seem so comfortable, lavish and safe is reminiscent of patriarchal ideology’s deceit in presenting the altar on which female autonomy is sacrificed in the alluring guise of a pedestal. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter writes:

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate . . . they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses (SW:5)

It is hardly surprising, then, that these women, who have heretofore earned their livings as objects of desire, leave behind a shady and threadbare existence for the bright opportunities which beckon at the dawn of a new century, and they all turn to ‘these “new women” jobs’, as Carter calls them, ‘like becoming hotel managers and running typing agencies’ (in Katsavos 1994:3).

After ‘so many years of selling tricks to dirty old men’ in Ma Nelson’s house, Fevvers and Lizzie hope to make a new life for themselves in Battersea, selling ‘good ice-cream at modest prices to little children’ (NC:51) in Lizzie’s sister Isotta’s ice-cream parlour. But the peaceful existence which they hoped for is soon interrupted by a string of misfortunes and, prompted by financial necessity, Fevvers once again finds

herself bound by the sterile contract of bought pleasure. And so the darkest chapter in her life begins, with a descent into the underworld of the damned and dispossessed, an ill-fated internment in Madame Schreck'sⁱⁱ museum of woman monstersⁱⁱⁱ. The gruesome proprietress, who once toured the side-shows as a Living Skeleton, takes the concept of objectification to subterranean levels, and the women who make up her misogynous exhibition are slaves and prisoners, entombed in 'a sort of vault or crypt . . . with wormy beams overhead and nasty damp flagstones underfoot, and this place was known as "Down Below", or else, "the Abyss"' (NC:61). Here, the *tableaux vivants* are hidden behind curtains in stone niches in the wall until a customer, rigged out in a fanciful costume, arrives to elect the idea of Woman best suited to his perverted imaginings. For if 'Ma Nelson's house accommodated those who were perturbed in their bodies', then Madame Schreck caters for those who are 'troubled in their . . . souls' (NC:57).

Madame Schreck's motley crew of unfortunates are, as Fevvers points out to Walser, 'prodigies of nature' (NC:59) who possess 'freakish' (NC:62) physical attributes. I would argue that Carter uses these physical peculiarities to comment on the cultural construction of femininity, for, in the museum of women monsters, the shadow-side of the binary opposition is made explicit; the word becomes flesh in the various incarnations of otherness that constitute the sideshow against which masculine culture has defined itself. Accordingly, there is the Sleeping Beauty, the epitome of passivity, who fell asleep on her fourteenth birthday, 'the very day her menses started' (NC:63), and now wakes only long enough each day to have a bit of supper. The girl they call Cobwebs is a melancholy creature who plays patience all day long, for patience is her lot in life. Although awake, she is as inert as the Beauty, so much so that her face,

‘from the eyebrows to the cheekbones’ (NC:69), is covered in cobwebs. The Wiltshire Wonder is a diminutive creature, half fairy and half human, who is not three foot high. As a little woman, she is too small and insignificant to bother her pretty little head about matters of this world, and so is treated as a doll or pet. These three women, who embody the essentially feminine virtues, are ill-equipped for the rigours of the real world, which is why they are isolated from it, and must exist expatriate in the abysmal gloom of the eternal feminine. Albert/Albertina, the archetypal hermaphrodite, comes to rest in this ‘lumber room of femininity’ (NC:69) as an outdated symbol of unity who has failed to bridge the gap of sex-role division. Ricarda Schmidt observes that ‘hermaphroditism still adheres to the phallogocentric rule of the One and denies difference’ (1989:66), and so Albert/Albertina is ‘half and half and neither of either’ (NC:59). Of all the women in the museum, Fanny Four-eyes is perhaps the most freakish, at least from the perspective of patriarchy, for Fanny has eyes instead of nipples, and in her characterization Carter emphasises the undesirability of the female spectator within masculine systems of representation. Fanny’s mammillary eyes align her with that traditional figure of unattractiveness and intellectuality, the woman with glasses who ‘looks and analyzes, and in usurping the gaze poses a threat to an entire system of representation’ (Doane 1991:27). Fanny’s ‘freakishness’ is compounded by the location of her second set of eyes, for they prevent her from complying with the obligations of biological determinism; she cannot be a mother because, as she comments to Fevvers: ‘How can you nourish a babby on salt tears?’ (NC:69).

These are the girls behind the curtains ‘Down Below’ (NC:61), but they are not the only feminine spectacles in Madame Schreck’s service; there is also Toussaint, the manservant, who is black and, literally, does not have a mouth. Although he refuses to

participate in the *tableaux vivants*, Madame Schreck abuses his muteness to contribute to the lugubrious atmosphere of her museum. Fevvers describes him as a ‘connoisseur of degradation’, for he once earned a living in the shows at fairs, and Fevvers tells Walser that she has never seen ‘eyes so full of sorrow as his were, sorrow of exile and abandonment’ (NC:57). Toussaint, for all his manhood, is placed in the feminine position of spectacle, and in this context Mary Russo quotes Guy Debord, who states: ‘the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images’ (in Russo 1995:160-161). Carter expands upon this argument in *The Sadeian Woman*, when she writes that, in the context of Sade’s orgies, ‘male means tyrannous and female means martyred, no matter what the official genders of the male and female beings are’ (SW:24).

In her museum, Madame Schreck is the masculine tyrant and all in her service are feminine spectacles. Except for Albert/Albertina, who serves to demythologise the concept of androgyny, and Fanny Four-eyes, who emblematises the problematics of theorising the female spectator, the characteristics which are displayed as ‘freakish’ in this sideshow are, in fact, the attributes that the ideology of white, masculine reason has presented as ‘natural’ for all those who are non-white and feminine. I would argue that it is this ideology, represented by Madame Schreck’s customers, that is unnatural, and in this context Fevvers quotes Toussaint, who (communicating by means of a writing pad) maintains: ‘it was those fine gentlemen who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones, not we’ (NC:61).

One of these ‘fine gentlemen’ begins to visit Mme Schreck’s every Sunday ‘to worship at [Fevvers’s] shrine’ (NC:71). His name is Christian Rosencreutz, a stooping

figure in his declining years who is patriarchy's proud if decrepit office-bearer, as the heavy gold medallion around his neck proclaims:

The figure engraved on this medallion was . . . a phallus, in the condition known in heraldry as *rampant*, and there were little wings attached to the ballocks thereof. Around the shaft of this virile member twined the stem of a rose whose bloom nestled somewhat coyly at the place where the foreskin folded back. (NC:70-71)

Robinson (1991:130) suggests that the medallion embodies what Carter refers to in *The Sadeian Woman* as the 'elementary iconography [from which] may be derived the metaphysics of sexual difference' (SW:4). In this context the male is active and aspires upwards. The female is passive and, as the parasitic rose suggests, 'has no function but to exist, waiting' (SW:4) in the shadow of the 'virile member' of masculine culture. It is central to Mr Rosencreutz's social and sexual concern that the phallus maintains the potency that is depicted in the engraving. Evidence of the former is revealed when Walser relates to Fevvers the contents of Mr Rosencreutz's speech in parliament on the subject of Votes for Women. As female empowerment would threaten the pillar of patriarchy, Mr Rosencreutz, its self-proclaimed protector, is opposed to the idea, claiming that women are 'of a different soul-substance from men . . . and altogether too pure and rarefied' to be bothered with 'things of *this* world, such as the Irish question and the Boer War' (NC:78-79). But purity and rarefication appear to be hindrances only in the public domain for, in the intimacy of Madame Schreck's, these feminine attributes are far from Mr Rosencreutz's mind, and he does not hesitate to buy Fevvers from the museum's dour procuress for his own purposes. He wants to restore his flagging manhood, which is perhaps why he chooses Fevvers, who is winged 'and aspiring upwards' (NC:77). She is to be his 'rejuvenatrix' (NC:82), the main ingredient in the '*elixium vitae*' (NC:83) from which he will gain eternal youth. This will involve a bizarre ritual during which he will unite

his body with hers and, in so doing, seize upon her ‘mysterious spirit of efflorescence’ (NC:79).

I would suggest that Carter uses the episode that centres on Mr Rosencreutz’s cabbalistic ritual to criticise patriarchy’s construction of the feminine by presenting it in the guise of Mr Rosencreutz’s arcane mythology. To Mr Rosencreutz, Fevvers is at once Azrael, the Angel of Death, and Proserpine, who comes from the hellish depths of Madame Schreck’s to bring new life. He both fears and desires her, a notion which is encapsulated in his description of the female genitalia as the ‘absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down . . . where Terror rules’ (NC:77). And yet, as Fevvers tells Walser, Mr Rosencreutz is ‘no stranger to the Abyss’ and ‘used to come every Sunday, just to convince himself it was as ‘orrible as he’d always thought’ (NC:77). In this context, Mr Rosencreutz uses the same terminology that describes Madame Schreck’s ‘vault or crypt’ (NC:61), which is also referred to as ‘the Abyss’ or ‘Down Below’ (NC:61). Sally Robinson says of this analogy between anatomy and geography that it suggests ‘the mixture of horror and desire that characterizes male constructions of the female body within Western discursive traditions’. She points out that this attitude is also represented by Walser, who, ‘on hearing about this “abyss”, feels “revulsion” and “enchantment” simultaneously’ (1991:129). In this context anatomy is, evidently, destiny, as Carter observes: ‘Woman is negative’, for between ‘her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning’ (SW:4). This is how Mr Rosencreutz regards Fevvers. In his eyes she is an empty symbol, an open space to be filled with whatever meaning suits his grand design. And so he ‘apostrophises’ (NC:81) her – that is, he ‘addresses his

remarks to her as if to an “imaginary or absent person” (Robinson 1991:129): ‘Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states . . . manifestation of Arioriph, Venus, Achamatoth, Sophia’ (NC:81). This mythification of the feminine, ‘the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses’ (SW:5), is intended to flatter Fevvers into submission and to obscure Mr Rosencreutz’s hidden agenda. For the pedestal on which he has placed her is an altar on which he plans to sacrifice her. As it turns out, the nefarious deal made with the devilish Madame Schreck is a contract on Fevvers’ life, an unforeseen point which turns out to be the sharp end of a blade, ‘a sight more aggressive than [Mr Rosencreutz’s] other weapon’ (NC:83). Seemingly, Mr Rosencreutz’s ebbing manhood will only be revived if Fevvers is transformed from living flesh into dead ‘meat’ (SW:137), a rite which represents the epitome of objectification, and reveals the wrongs that have traditionally strengthened the pillar of patriarchy.

When Fevvers realises it is her life that has been bought, and not only her virginity, she ceases to masquerade as Mr Rosencreutz’s idea of Woman. Or, as Sally Robinson puts it: ‘She is more than willing to play the part of feminine spectacle for fun and profit, but it is another thing entirely to relinquish control over that spectacle’ (1991:130). The moment she sees his shining blade, it is out with her own gilded sword, a relic from her days in Ma Nelson’s house. This sudden shift from fertility goddess to avenging angel catches Mr Rosencreutz by surprise, and completely deflates the authority with which he has commanded her to ‘Lie down upon the altar!’ (NC:83) only moments before: ‘He fell back, babbling unfair, unfair . . . he’d not thought the angel would come armed’ (NC:83). Fevvers seizes this moment of consternation to escape through the open window and make her way back to

Battersea, where it is her turn to be surprised, as Isotta and her husband Gianni's house is 'packed to the roof with the refugees from Madame Schreck's' (NC:84). For, as it turns out, Fevvers' story is not the only one with a happy ending. After her kidnapping, Toussaint discovers that all that is left of Madame Schreck are the empty widow's weeds hanging from the curtain rail where Fevvers placed her during a wage negotiation, which was violently interrupted by Mr Rosencreutz's henchmen. With the proprietress thus passed on, the prisoners are free to pursue lives outside the ghastly walls of the museum. Their purses heavy with the wages due to them, the women escape with Toussaint into the night and on to better things.

And 'What has become of them all, sir?' (NC:85). The Wiltshire Wonder is reunited with her human parents, Albert/Albertina gets a post as a ladies' maid, Fanny returns to Yorkshire to establish an orphanage, Cobwebs trains as a painter in chiaroscuro, and the Beauty still sleeps 'a sleep more lifelike than the living, a dream which consumes the world'. For, as Fevvers tells Walser, 'we do believe . . . her dream will be the coming century' (NC:86). And if the new century heralds an age in which 'no women will be bound down to the ground' (NC:25), then it is only fitting that Fevvers, as its representative, leaves behind the dark days of internment to embark upon her illustrious career on the high trapeze. The rest is history. Big Ben announces that it is six o' clock and Fevvers and Lizzie prepare to go home. But, although the Scheherezadic night has ended, it is only the beginning of Walser's entanglement in Fevvers' life story. He is so taken by the Cockney Venus that he decides to do a series of inside stories on the circus, and so he signs up incognito on Colonel Kearney's Grand Imperial Tour, to follow Fevvers to St Petersburg and beyond.

Part 2: Petersburg

The tale resumes in St Petersburg, the first stop on Colonel Kearney's Grand Imperial Tour and, as the last lines of Part 1 indicate, it will be a 'story straight from the Ringbark', inviting us 'to spend a few nights at the circus' (NC:91). For the change in location also signals a shift in narrative focus, as Ricarda Schmidt observes:

While Fevvers' narration has dominated Part I . . . her voice can only occasionally be heard in Part II. Here the strange and fascinating life of the circus is unfolded by an omniscient narrator or through the consciousness of the circus members. Structure is broken up but not broken down. For all these stories, while surpassing the horizon of the heroine within the fictional world . . . are thematically linked with the utopian Fevvers theme as variations or reversals. (1989:69)

This thematic link is immediately established in the figure of the baboushka who, although not a circus performer, provides humble accommodation to the clowns. As Fevvers' narrative concludes Part 1, so the story that the baboushka tells Little Ivan, her grandson, introduces Part 2. But this tale, which is a simple one of a pig that goes to Petersburg, is vastly different from the spellbinding yarn that lassoed Walser and dragged him all the way to Russia. For the baboushka 'can't be bothered with the pig and its story' (NC:97). Unlike Fevvers, she is not the subject of her narrative, as she is not the subject of any other aspect of her life. In the characterization of the baboushka, Carter continues her preoccupation with the plight of women at the end of the nineteenth century. And if Fevvers is the New Woman, then the Russian grandmother is her feminine heritage: both symbol 'and woman, or symbolic woman' (NC:96), she represents women as they have been, 'bound down to the ground' (NC:24):

The toil-misshapen back of the baboushka humbly bowed down before the bubbling urn in the impotently submissive obeisance of one who pleads for a respite or a mercy she knows in advance will not be forthcoming, and her hands, those worn, veiny hands that had involuntarily burnished the handles of the bellows over decades of use, those immemorial hands

of hers slowly parted and came together again just as slowly, in a hypnotically reiterated gesture that was as if she were about to join her hands in prayer. (NC:95)

The description of those ‘immemorial hands’, which labour the bellows in an emulation of the gestures of prayer, is an apt portrayal of the baboushka as the angel of the house, another incarnation of the eternal feminine. This is why her work suggests ‘a kind of infinite incompleteness’, for ‘a woman’s work is never done’ (NC:95). The semblance of religious ritual which is perpetually repeated in the thwarted movements of her weary hands is just that – an appearance, which belies a cruel reality, in the same way that the pedestal of sanctified domesticity conceals the altar of a martyred femininity. And so the baboushka and Fevvers exist in opposition to each other; the ‘old’ woman is misshapen by a lifetime spent hunched over the hearth, while the ‘new’ woman is winged and ‘aspiring upwards’ (NC:77).

In a dark corner of the baboushka’s kitchen, Walser records his first impressions of St Petersburg on a battered typewriter. Since his decision to join the circus, he has begun life as a performer under the tutelage of Buffo the Great and his troupe of buffoons, from whom he will learn the art of clowning. As it turns out, this is the ideal appointment for one who wishes to conceal his identity for, when Walser puts on his make-up, it is a stranger who returns his gaze from the mirror. In this moment, contemplating the transformation effected by his new identity, Walser feels ‘the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom . . . the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being’ (NC:103). And yet the freedom of the clown mask is deceptive. It is masquerade taken to the extreme, where it ceases to be self-representation and becomes, instead, self-annihilation. Carter describes the white faces of the clowns who are gathered around the baboushka’s

dinner table as possessing ‘the formal lifelessness of death masks, as if . . . they themselves were absent from the repast and left untenanted replicas behind’ (NC:166). This metaphor is reminiscent of the wet white that covers Fevvers’ face in her days as the Winged Victory, which she compares to ‘a death mask’ that seals her up in a ‘sarcophagus of beauty’ (NC:39). But Fevvers’ mask conceals an active subject ‘vibrant with potentiality’ (NC:39), whereas the clowns’ masquerade ‘eclipses’ (NC:122) identity, as Buffo argues: ‘And what am I without my Buffo’s face? Why nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy’ (NC:122). For Fevvers, masquerade is ‘a self-conscious re-enactment . . . of the place traditionally assigned to Woman’ (Robinson 1991:118), which calls ‘into question the system in which it plays its part’ (Jordan 1994:194). Masquerade, in this context, is connected to material reality, which means that although Fevvers articulates a subject position that exists outside of patriarchal prescription for herself, she does not alienate herself from the mechanisms of this world, which, as Carter observes, ‘is all that there is’ (1983b:38). The clowns, on the other hand, are “‘ex-centrics”, outsiders’ (Robinson 1991:126). Buffo, who started out in life as an acrobat, explains to Walser that

there is no element of the *voluntary* in clowning . . . we take to clowning when all else fails. Under these impenetrable disguises of wet white, you might find, were you to look, the features of those who were once proud to be visible . . . the *aerialiste* whose nerve has failed, the bare-back rider who took one tumble too many (NC:119)

For the clowns are victims of reality; this notion is emblematised in Buffo’s act, which parodies his inability to act in the world:

He is a big man, seven feet high and broad to suit, so that he makes you laugh when he trips over little things. His size is half the fun of it, that he should be so big . . . and yet incapable of coping with the simplest techniques of motion. This giant is the victim of material objects. Things are against him. They wage war on him. When he tries to open a door, the knob comes off in his hand. (NC:116)

And so the clowns rebel against the established order that does not accommodate them by invoking chaos and celebrating disintegration. Aidan Day states that this reaction 'is seen in the novel as not having any practical social or humanitarian use Clowning and carnivalesque disruption of established order are not the means of bettering specifically the situation of women' (1998:186). This is illustrated by Little Ivan's growing fascination with the circus clowns. To him, they represent a means of escape from the drudgery of a life lived in poverty with his grandmother. And so he wishes that he, too, 'could terrify, enchant, vandalise, ravage, yet always stay on the safe side of being' (NC:151). In other words, that he could do as he pleases without getting into trouble. For this is perhaps what Little Ivan admires most about the clowns: that they are 'licensed to commit licence and yet forbidden to act, so that the baboushka back at home could go on reddening and blackening the charcoal even if the clowns detonated the entire city around her and nothing would really change' (NC:151). But this childish fantasy of no responsibility, of action without consequence, is double-edged, for although it may provide the boy with an escapist intermission and protect him from answering to his grandmother, it will also prove futile in changing his and his grandmother's circumstances. In this context, Day observes that Little Ivan's 'fascination is with something that can never aid the suffering woman back home' (1998:187). And so, once the dust of disintegration has settled and the smoke of chaos has cleared, the city is revealed to be exactly as it was. The 'exploded buildings' have gently wafted 'to earth again on exactly the same places where they had stood before' (NC:151).

For the clowns, despite their riotous celebration of anarchy and dissolution, have no effect on the material world. They are in fact licensed to 'terrify, enchant, vandalise,

[and] ravage' (*NC*:151) by the very authority against which they apparently revolt. In the characterization of the clowns, Carter emphasises the futility of privileging clowning and the carnivalesque as a means of disrupting the dominant culture. In a 1991 piece entitled 'In Pantoland' she writes:

The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment . . . after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened. (Carter 1991:399)

In this context, Sally Robinson quotes Judith Mayne, who observes that 'the carnival may exist as a safety valve, as a controlled eruption that guarantees the maintenance of the existing order' (in Robinson 1991:127). And so the clowns are 'the whores of mirth . . . mere hirelings' (*NC*:119), whose sound and fury are but a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. This is evident from a story which Buffo relates to Walser, a story which 'is not precisely true but has the poetic truth of myth and so attaches itself to every laughtermaker' (*NC*:121). It is set in Copenhagen, where Buffo receives word of his beloved mother's death on the morning that he must bury his adored wife, who has passed away while giving birth to their stillborn child. With all his family wiped out, Buffo stumbles into the ring at matinee time and, consumed by grief, cries: 'The sky is full of blood!' (*NC*:121). This exclamation of sorrow immediately has the audience erupting in gales of uncontrollable laughter. In some bar between performances, a barmaid advises a depressed customer to go 'along to the Tivoli and take a look at Buffo the Great. He'll soon bring your smiles back!' (*NC*:121). For the clown, who represents a light-hearted interlude which carries no weight in the real world, may act in earnest only to be completely disregarded: 'It was as though a fairy godmother had given each clown an ambivalent blessing when he was born: you can do anything you like, as long as nobody takes you seriously' (*NC*:152). In this context, the clown is reminiscent of Woman in her mythic redefinition as occult

priestess, who 'is indeed allowed to speak but only of things that male society does not take seriously' (*SW*:5). For the carnival and the realm of the eternal feminine are not as disparate as they may appear; both harbour incarnations of otherness and both are marginalized by the centres of cultural power. In reference to the invocation of great goddesses as a means to pacify women, Carter warns that the 'revival of the myths of these cults' may give women emotional satisfaction, but 'at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life' (*SW*:5). The same is true of opting 'to lose your wits in the profession of the clown' (*NC*:120). In an interview with John Haffenden, Carter states that 'the notion that the world would be altogether a better place if we threw away our rationality and went laughing down the street' is 'nonsense' (in Haffenden 1985:85). Escapist ex-centricity will not bring about social transformation, as Lorna Sage observes:

In the last analysis there are no alternative worlds, the 'other' is a myth, and the clowns, those 'whores of mirth' [*NC*:119] who are 'licensed to commit license and yet forbidden to act' [*NC*:151], are a pun on chaos and stasis, the stuff of nightmare. (1994a:49-50)

Just as the baboushka genuflects before the hearth in a never-ending obeisance which parodies religious ritual, and as the clowns continue their customary celebration of disintegration and regression, so another, who is equally pitiful, also repeats the habitual gestures of her allocated position in life. Her name is Mignon, although she has heretofore been known only as the Ape-Man's woman. As Walser closes the door upon the chaos of Clown Alley, she throws herself weeping at his feet, 'covering his hands with kisses' (*NC*:125) in the unmistakable manner of the bedraggled victim who hopes for a respite. In a farcical scene earlier that day, Walser has saved her from an escaped tigress to whom her lover, the Strong Man, has abandoned her, having first slaked his lust on her submissive person. That evening her husband has beaten her 'as

though she were a carpet' (NC:115) and thrown her half-naked 'on to the Russian winter streets' (NC:127). And so Walser comes 'to inherit the Ape-Man's woman' (NC:126) for, as Carter's word choice indicates, Mignon is merely an object to be passed around between men. She is not in control of her life; like Sade's Justine 'her poverty and femininity conspire to rob her of her autonomy' (SW:51). And, as her literary predecessor once sought help from the family priest 'pale with mourning, tear-stained, in a little white dress' (SW:47), Mignon now presents herself to Walser as an object of pity, hoping that he will be moved to rescue her. And no-one knows how to make a more moving picture than Mignon, dressed as she is in a 'thin, faded, cotton wrapper, no coat or shawl, so her arms were dappled mauve with cold' (NC:126). When Walser pulls her upright he is struck by how light and insubstantial she is, like an 'empty basket' (NC:126) – or an empty vessel to be filled with patriarchal meaning. Once on her feet, she leans against him for support while she finishes off crying, 'knuckling her eyesockets like a child. The dark marks on her face could have been either tearstains or bruises' (NC:126). And whatever the origins of these marks, they brand Mignon as a victim who belongs to the sorrowful sorority of whom Justine is the patron saint: 'two centuries of women who find that the world was not, as they had been promised, made for them and who do not have, because they have not been given, the existential tools to remake the world for themselves' (SW:57).

And so Mignon exists in contraposition to Fevvers, who changes the rules to her own advantage. Carter emphasizes the vast difference that exists between these two women, who represent two contrasting kinds of spectacle, by juxtaposing her description of Mignon grovelling in the poorly lit alley with a picture of Fevvers on a freshly pasted circus poster that Walser is scrutinizing when the starveling child

throws herself on his mercy. This picture is a copy of the wall-sized poster that Walser first encountered in the *aerialiste's* London dressing room, and it shows Fevvers 'in all her opulence, in mid-air, in her new incarnation as circus star' (NC:124). If Fevvers resists patriarchal prescription by playing the masquerade and inventing her own identity, as the words 'new incarnation' suggest, then Mignon occupies the place that has traditionally been assigned to Woman by the dominant ideology, and so she is rendered powerless by her production as feminine spectacle, as 'image-object offered for the male gaze' (Robinson 1991:121). Robinson compares Mignon to Marilyn Monroe, whom Carter calls, 'along with Sade's Justine, a martyr to be used by "connoisseurs of the poetry of masochism"' (Robinson 1991:125). For Mignon, like 'Marilyn/Justine has a childlike candour and trust and there is a faint touch of melancholy about her that is produced by this trust, which is always absolute and always betrayed' (SW:63). In reference to Monroe, Carter states:

This fatherless and bruisable child was never clever, was dumb; like a fox is dumb . . . This dumbness is not stupidity but a naivety so perfect it is functionally no different from stupidity; it is only because she is innocent of her own strength that she thinks she will hurt easily. Because she is innocent of her exchange value, she thinks she is valueless. (SW:66)

For the dumb blonde^{iv} (Justine/Marilyn/Mignon) has 'all the dreadful innocence of lack of self-knowledge' (SW:64), which is why she so blindly accepts the idea of Woman imposed upon her, so that she is 'always more like her own image in the mirror than she is like herself' (SW:63).

If Mignon is cast in the same mould as Marilyn Monroe, then Fevvers, on the other hand, 'is basically Mae West with wings' (Carter in Haffenden 1985:88). Both Fevvers and West are agents of self-representation who exploit the production of an

excessive femininity for pleasure and profit. Carter describes West as an ‘economically independent’ woman

who wrote her own starring vehicles in her early days . . . and subsequently exercised an iron hand on her own Hollywood career. The words she spoke in her movies were the words she had written herself; the dramatised version of herself she presented to the world was based on the one she both invented and lived for herself. (SW:61)

Mae West arrived in Hollywood at the age ‘traditionally associated with menopause’, when a woman’s ‘sexual life may be assumed to be at an end’ (SW:60) in a culture where female sexuality is equated with fecundity. Carter writes that this allowed her ‘some of the anarchic freedom of the female impersonator or pantomime dame’ who, like ‘the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, may say what she pleases, wink at and nudge whomever she desires but we know it is all a joke upon her, for she is licenced to be free because she is so old and ugly that nobody will have her’ (SW:60,61). West exploited this freedom by selecting ‘theatrical and cinematic roles of women whose work entailed sexual self-display’ (SW:61) but, as Carter states, the joke was on her audience for she was ‘in reality a sexually free woman’ and ‘could pick and choose among her adorers with the cynical facility of the rake’ (SW:61). This strategy, which Carter refers to as a ‘superior kind of double bluff’ (SW:61), is no different from Fevvers’ masquerade, for both women engage with a patriarchal construction of femininity only to disrupt it. And so West, like Fevvers, flaunted a ““freakish” femininity’ (Robinson1991:123): ‘She made of her own predatoriness a joke that concealed its power, whilst simultaneously exploiting it’ (SW:61). When Walser first sees Fevvers’ act he wonders whether, in order to earn a living, ‘a genuine bird-woman’ might not have to pretend ‘she was an artificial one’ (NC:17). In this context Sally Robinson states: ‘Take away the “bird” from “bird-woman” and what you have

is the notion that a “genuine” woman, in order to take an active subject position, must pretend to be “artificial” – a woman masquerading as an idea of woman’ (1991:123).

It is the picture of Fevvers in her incarnation as the ‘Madonna of the Arena’ (NC:126) that inspires Walser, burdened as he suddenly finds himself with the fate of the forlorn Mignon, to take the dishevelled waif and enlist the help of the Cockney Venus who ‘[waggles] her bum from the poster’ (NC:126). In the ensuing episode, the account of Fevvers’ meeting with Mignon is interspersed with Mignon’s complete life story, emphasizing the fact that ‘Mignon is the very opposite of Fevvers: small, underdeveloped, weak, submissive, the born victim who has an endless story of exploitation behind her’ (Schmidt 1989:69). When Mignon is just six, her father murders her mother before killing himself, and this day marks the beginning of Mignon’s descent into the misery and hardship that will comprise her ill-fated life. She then spends some time in an orphanage, works as a kitchen maid, lives on the streets, thieves, begs and prostitutes herself, until one winter’s night, after she has not eaten for two days, she places herself in the path of a gentleman who comes hurrying down the pavement in her direction. This man, Herr M., is absorbed in his own affairs, and he would brush Mignon aside except that a disinterested glance at her face suddenly provides him with a solution to the problem that he has been grappling with. It is Mignon’s ‘great resemblance to a spectre’ (NC:133) that strikes him most, for Herr M. is a medium who photographs the dead for the benefit of the grieving living. But his business has come to a standstill since his assistant, who was also his model, eloped to Rio with her lover. And so it happens that Mignon’s ‘daily work henceforward [consists] of personating the dead, and posing for their photographs’ (NC:134).

Herr M. is described as ‘a scientist *manqué*’ (NC:135), or what Carter calls a ‘mad scientist’ (in Haffenden 1985:88), a figure which she uses consistently in her novels as emblematic of male authority^v. In this episode from Mignon’s life, patriarchy’s treatment of the feminine is literally presented as a confidence trick, and so it is appropriate that Herr M., as the embodiment of the ruling ideology, is ‘sincerely fascinated by the art and craft of illusion’ (NC:135). From this perspective, the comfortable apartment above the grocer’s shop that doubles as Herr M.’s business quarters becomes a patriarchal microcosm or, in Carter’s terms, an ‘imaginary brothel where ideas of women are sold’ (SW:101). Herr M.’s photographic enterprise functions on the assumption that all ‘young girls look the same after a long illness’ (NC:135). During a séance, Mignon will emerge from a darkened alcove in his L-shaped drawing-room, carrying an electric torch under her nightgown for ghostly effect. In this artificial light, her figure further obscured by the clouds of incense, the lace curtains and Herr M.’s bulky camera, she could be any young woman. And when the grieving clients look upon her glimmering outline, their eyes are usually blinded with tears. At this point in the illusion, Herr M. takes the photograph and in ‘the unexpected thunder and lightning of the flash’ Mignon’s face looks to each who sees it ‘the perfect image of the lost’ (NC:137). And so Herr M.’s customers are duped into believing that they have received ‘authentic pictures of the loved and lost ones, that proved, in whatever world they now inhabited, they flourished still’ (NC:136). These ‘authentic pictures’ of femininity, which represent women as ghostly incarnations of otherness who flourish in a mystical realm beyond the realities of this world, are reminiscent of patriarchy’s equally deceptive mythification of the feminine. For the manner in which Herr M.’s camera reduces the individual identities of the departed into a single portrait, which ‘is the perfect image of the lost’, is similar to patriarchal

ideology's reduction of women to a normative representation of Woman. In both instances these images of femininity bear Mignon's face for, like the deceased, she too is 'lost' and has no place in the world, or, in Doane's terms, she is 'the woman who is the image, without maintaining any distance from it' (Robinson 1991:125).

As the incarnation of an oppressive male authority, Herr M.'s deception is twofold. On the one hand he sells fraudulent pictures of femininity to a public eager to believe that their deceased wives and daughters now dwell in a 'happy land' where 'there is no sickness, no pain' (NC:136). This version of reality is, after all, easier to accept than the fact that these women have been eternally silenced. On the other hand, he pretends to be Mignon's benefactor, although his interest in her extends only as far as her usefulness in sustaining the illusion upon which his business is founded. But for Mignon, who is accustomed to living on the street and being abused by a multitude of men, the commodious conditions of this new form of exploitation seem like a veritable change in fortune, and so 'she could hardly believe her luck: a bed, with sheets; an armchair; a warm stove; a table, with a cloth; mealtimes!' (NC:134). If Herr M.'s customers are blinded by grief, then Mignon is impaired by a naivety so complete that she mistakes oppression for cake just because it has icing on top. For although she 'thought she was in heaven . . . it was a fool's paradise and, in literal terms, that is an exact description of Herr M.'s establishment' (NC:134). Yet Herr M. does not see himself as corrupt. On the contrary, he prefers to focus on what he believes to be the humanitarian aspects of the service that he provides. And so he is not above applauding his own efforts: 'did he not comfort, did he not console? Did he not, out of the goodness of his compassionate heart, assuage the suffering souls who brought their pain into his parlour?' (NC:136). It is this ability to rationalise his

fraudulent business that typifies Herr M. as another incarnation of patriarchal authority, a position which requires a talent for disguising personal profit as public service. For Herr M.'s tainted reasoning echoes that of Mr Rosencreutz in Part 1, who, in order to maintain his own position of power, pretends that women are better off without the right to vote because they are 'altogether too pure and rarefied to be bothering their pretty little heads with things of *this* world' (NC:79).

As it turns out, the fool's paradise that is Herr M.'s establishment is not foolproof. The reason for this is that the verisimilitude of Herr M.'s illusion depends on the fact that the people who look at the photographs are grief-stricken, their vision and judgement clouded by their recent loss. Accordingly, only the heartbroken can gaze upon his work, and so Herr M.'s portraits are issued with a prohibition: should his patrons show the pictures to anyone else, the faces of the deceased will fade away. Finally, however, a mother cannot resist showing the photograph of her darling youngest daughter to a jealous older sister, who cannot 'endure the thought of her sibling's posthumous rivalry' (NC:138) and takes the snapshot to the police. Soon after, Herr M.'s duplicity is uncovered by a detective, posing as a bereaved uncle, who manages to trap Mignon by the tail of her nightgown before she can retreat. In the face of irrefutable evidence, Herr M. makes a full confession and is sent to jail. Yet many of those who have been duped refuse to believe the truth, for, 'however hard they scrutinised the glossy prints, they never saw Mignon's face but saw another face Oh, dear delusion! And still Mamma sleeps with the picture under her pillow' (NC:139). And so the image of the suffering young woman is preserved and perpetuated by a public who is unwilling to accept that their picture of reality has been fabricated. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter writes that the fact that the holy Justine has

more spiritual great-granddaughters than her profane sister ‘serves to show how much in love with the idea of the blameless suffering of women we all are, men and women both’ (SW:101).

With the revelation that Herr M. is no more psychic than the average con artist, Mignon is once again left to fend for herself. No charges are brought against her, secure as she is ‘in the victim’s defence of no responsibility’ (NC:139) for, although she worked as Herr M.’s assistant, it is clear that she is incapable of doubling as his accomplice. And so she finds a job working in a bar, which is where she has the misfortune of meeting the Ape-Man, who has ‘a fine nose for a victim’ and takes ‘her on solely in order to abuse her’ (NC:140). It is this turn of events which finally leads a scantily-clad Mignon to throw herself on Walser’s mercy in a poorly-lit alley on a cold winter’s night in Petersburg, and which leads Walser to procure Fevvers’ help in rescuing the wretched girl.

It is with Mignon’s first introduction to Fevvers that the difference between these two women once again becomes strikingly apparent. For the German orphan cannot speak English, although she has been travelling with the circus for some time in her capacity as the Ape-Man’s woman. Fevvers, on the other hand, who, as the subject of her own narrative, has managed to entice Walser all the way to Russia with her ability to master and manipulate the subtle art of autobiographical elaboration, cannot be silenced in any of a number of languages. Her ability to usurp the traditionally masculine position of the speaking subject is yet another way in which she ‘disrupts the singularity of masculine/feminine positions’ (Robinson 1991:125). And so she addresses Mignon, who has been silenced by her inability to communicate in the

language of Colonel Kearny's circus, 'in a clatter of languages, Italian, French, German, all barbarously pronounced and grammatically askew but rapid as machinegun fire' (NC:128). Later, when Fevvers orders food and champagne for the destitute duo who have arrived on her doorstep, she does so in Russian. Although she has only been in Petersburg for a short space of time, she holds 'a rapid communication with the waiter . . . and must have already learned enough Russian to make jokes for the man abruptly guffawed before he bowed out again' (NC:142).

But Mignon's inability to communicate in English will not leave her out in the cold for much longer. With Fevvers' help, the silenced girl's fortune is about to change. For, although Mignon hardly speaks, she can sing, as the small company gathered in Fevvers' hotel room soon discover when a 'sweet, artless soprano' (NC:132) issues from the bathroom where the battered child has been sent to clean up after a day that has left her reeking of hardship and abuse. And, even if Mignon is unaware of the haunting effect of her song, it communicates more to her audience than anything she could have said:

it was as though the scarcely-to-be-imagined tragedy of her life, the sea of misery and disaster in which she swam in her precarious state of innocent defilement, all found expression, beyond her consciousness of her intention, in her voice. (NC:132)

It is Mignon's song that inspires Fevvers to introduce her to another woman who does not speak, but allows her music to communicate on her behalf. The Princess of Abyssinia is a circus performer who plays the piano while the trained tigers in her menagerie dance to the tunes. She gave up on talking early in her career, when she discovered the big cats' adverse reaction when she communicated in that medium which nature had denied them. It is for this reason that the Princess is initially suspicious of Fevvers' idea that Mignon's singing be incorporated in the tiger act.

But, as the *aerialiste* explains, in an enthusiastic if one-sided conversation that she conducts with the Princess in coarse French, singing and speaking are very different modes of expression:

‘To sing is not to speak,’ said Fevvers, her syntax subtler than her pronunciation. ‘If they hate speech because it divides us from them, to sing is to rob speech of its function and render it divine. Singing is to speech what is [sic] dancing is to walking. You know they love to dance. (NC:153)

And so Mignon is allowed to audition with the Princess and her tigers, and the ecstatic purr which soon resounds from the beasts’ cage in response to Mignon’s song seems to confirm Fevvers’ point that singing is indeed quite a different thing from speaking. This audition marks the beginning of the Princess and Mignon’s love affair, a relationship which is heralded by the kiss that the Princess bestows upon Mignon at the end of her song. For these two, whom Carter describes as possessing ‘a quality of exile, of apartness from us’ (NC:153), are united through the music which is ‘their common language, in which they’d found the way to one another’ (NC:168). And so Mignon, who has been objectified and victimised in a system of representation that she does not understand, who has been rendered mute by her inability to communicate in the common language of the circus, finds a voice and a place in the world through the polyphonic possibilities that music represents.

Ricarda Schmidt observes that this unexpected happy ending is not a logical conclusion to Mignon’s tragic story, and seems to be motivated ‘by Carter’s belated recognition of lesbianism in her fiction and the political intention to portray it positively’ (1989:69). This is a valid point, as the fulfilment which the two girls find in each other’s arms is indeed described in utopian terms. But there is more to this happy ending than the tardy lesbian-love-conquers-all theme that Schmidt identifies. I

would argue that Carter uses the motif of music as a means to transcend the binary divide that categorises people and prescribes human relations. Unlike Mignon, the Princess is not a weakling. With her dark skin and bloody apron, Carter describes her as Kali (NC:153), the fierce Hindu death-goddess, and even Fevvers, who is not easily intimidated, views the Princess as ‘a tough customer’ (NC:153). For although the Princess and Mignon both possess a ‘quality of exile’, the difference is that the Princess has ‘chosen her exile amongst the beasts, while Mignon’s exile [has] been thrust upon her’ (NC:153-154). They are described as ‘twinned opposites’ (NC:153), and so one would expect that, in a system where human relations are dictated by a subject-object dichotomy, it would be only logical for Mignon to once again find herself in a subordinate position. But this is not what happens, for Mignon and the Princess do not speak the language of binary division; they find harmony in the music that is ‘their common language’ (NC:168) and so, as a pair, they ‘transcend their individualities’ (NC:203).

The notion that music can bridge binary oppositions is also evident in the scene in which Mignon auditions for Colonel Kearney, who has the final say on new appointments. In this part of the act, Mignon dances with one of the tigers while the Princess plays the grand waltz from *Onegin*. As they dance, it becomes clear that the tigress, who is the tiger’s usual partner, is consumed by jealousy, and so the Princess beckons to the audience for a volunteer to rescue the ferocious wallflower. Walser, who is sitting next to the Colonel, is soon cajoled into the cage, in spite of his loud protestations. In a scene which can only be described as prelapsarian, the tigress steers Walser around the ring alongside Mignon, whirling by in the embrace of her own beastly date. Then all the tigers are on their hind legs, waltzing ‘as in a magic

ballroom in the country where the lemon trees grow' (NC:164). And it is indeed a 'magic ballroom', a moment made possible by the suspension of the animosity that exists between the predator and its prey, with the only perceptible strains being those issuing from the Princess's piano. This temporary transcendence of traditional boundaries is encapsulated in Carter's description of how the bars of the circus ring seem to disappear as the waltz reaches its climax:

The bars of the arena went past, first one by one, then, as the tempo quickened, resolving themselves into one single blurred bar, a confinement apprehended but no longer felt, until that single bar itself dissolved and all that remained was the limitless landscape of the music within which, while the dance lasted, they lived in perfect harmony. (NC:164-165)

Although Mignon has found a place and a purpose in the Princess's tender embrace through the music that unites them, such harmony is still a long way off for poor Walser, who, like Mignon, is also transformed by circus life, albeit in quite a different manner. As Mignon has ceased to be a victim, and gained autonomy in her relationship with the Princess, Walser is also displaced from his traditional role in life. The difference is that, unlike Mignon, his journey has begun from the privileged side of the binary divide, although his destination will be very much the same as hers. The sceptical journalist who interviews Fevvers in Part 1, the eternal spectator who surveys life from a position of 'habitual disengagement' (NC:10), who takes good care to keep his feet firmly on the ground, is swept up by and submerged in life with the circus. This process begins on the very first night in Fevvers' London dressing room, when Walser struggles to maintain his equilibrium in the overwhelming company of the Cockney giantess whose fantastical life story captivates him and lures him all the way to Russia. And though he convinces himself that his interest in her is purely professional, the moment he decides that he will follow her half way across the

world, under the guise of doing a series of inside stories on the circus, he already begins to surrender his customary detachment to emotional involvement.

In the beginning of his employment with the circus, Walser succeeds in leading a double life. This requires that he relinquish a measure of his privileged masculine heritage, as he can no longer be merely a spectator, but must masquerade as a spectacle and endure the humiliations which working undercover as a clown demand of him. Although this arrangement proves advantageous initially, circus life has conspired against Walser and, in an episode which he could not have foreseen when he embarked on his odyssey, he injures his right arm in an heroic effort to rescue Mignon from an escaped tigress. With his arm in a sling, he can neither write nor type, and so he is robbed of his profession: ‘for the moment, his disguise disguises – nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a *real* clown’ (NC:145).

But this is not the only occurrence that destabilises Walser’s world, for he has also fallen in love (‘a condition that causes him anxiety because he has not experienced it before’ [NC:145]) with Fevvers. His profession as journalist, his role as permanent bystander, has not prepared him for such an eventuality. Walser has never ‘experienced his experience as experience’ (NC:10); life has never demanded it of him. With his ‘thatch of unruly flaxen hair’ and ‘his ruddy, pleasant, square-jawed face’, he slipped quite effortlessly into the ready-made role of a foreign correspondent, the archetypal part of ‘a “man of action”’ who ‘subjected his life to series of cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle’ (NC:10). And so he has never experienced a ‘single quiver of introspection’ (NC:10); hitherto,

‘conquests came easily and were disregarded’ (NC:145). But all that is changing, for, as Carter observes in an interview with John Haffenden, Walser’s

rather two dimensional idea of himself – as the foreign correspondent, the person in control, the permanent bystander, with the privileged marginality of the journalist – has to be broken down before he can become . . . not a fit mate for Fevvers at all, but a serious person. (In Haffenden 1985:89)

And so Walser, who is wandering the streets of Petersburg having successfully enlisted Fevvers’ help with Mignon, but also having been snubbed by the Cockney Venus because she assumes that Mignon is his mistress, finds himself in uncharted territory. No woman has ever succeeded in humiliating him as Fevvers has, and this ‘has set up a conflict between his own hitherto impregnable sense of self-esteem and the lack of esteem with which the woman treats him’ (NC:145). He now finds himself on the receiving end of the treatment that he has heretofore so easily meted out to others; for the first time in his life, he is the one who is conquered and seemingly disregarded. This leaves him in ‘a state of mental tumult, conflict and disorientation’ (NC:145), and has him roving the streets on a freezing city night. It is during this aimless excursion that he finds himself gazing at the statue of the city’s founder, the great horseman on his plinth. He does so with a vague sense of foreboding, as though this horseman were not an effigy but rather ‘the herald of four yet more mythic horsemen’ (NC:145). And Walser’s fear is not unfounded, for, though he cannot articulate his uneasiness, it is due to the fact that he is already on the threshold of a personal apocalypse, as the end of his world of masculine entitlement draws near.

With his arm in a sling, Walser’s part in the clown act has to be modified, and so Buffo comes up with an entirely new routine that will cause no further damage to Walser’s injury, although the guarantee does not extend to his already fragile sense of

self. Henceforward, Walser will be the Human Chicken, an unenviable position that leaves him at the mercy of the other clowns, who, during the first rehearsal of the act, begin to pelt Walser with eggs found in various parts of their clothing. With egg streaming down his face and blinding him, Walser lunges at them, but to no avail. As the clowns continue to torment him, he lashes out repeatedly, his anger rising in equal measure to their merriment. The act is very successful, and afterwards the clowns tell him that ‘his baulked gestures of fury were the funniest thing, as they drove him round the ring with blows and mocking cries; his baulked gestures of fury and his comic wound’ (NC:153). Walser has become a real clown, as his gestures cease to affect the material world. The word ‘balked’ suggests that his actions, impassioned as they may be, are ignored, completely disregarded. Even his wound is described as ‘comic’; it is no longer perceived as a real injury, just as Walser is no longer perceived as a real person. He has become a real spectacle instead and, as such, he is made to understand the ambivalent blessing which each clown receives when he is born; from now on he ‘can do anything [he likes], as long as nobody takes [him] seriously’ (NC:152). From now on, Walser will wear a cockscomb and run round the arena crowing as the other clowns pursue him. In addition, Buffo has decided to embellish the act by making the Human Chicken the main course in that part of the act known as the Clown’s Christmas dinner. And so Walser, with his cockscomb and his crowing, is emasculated, in an act which demands that he emulate what Stuart Gordon describes as ‘a symbol of strutting masculinity’ (1994:147). In this context, however, the cock’s traditional symbolism is mocked, persecuted, served for dinner and thus subverted, as the predator becomes the prey and the spectator becomes the spectacle.

But all is not lost for Walser, even though he finds himself at the bottom of the proverbial food chain. For Fevvers takes to flirting with him after she finds out that she was mistaken about his relationship with Mignon. In a conversation with Lizzie, she refers to him as ‘a nice young man’ (NC:171). Lizzie, however, does not approve, as she believes that Walser is not ‘hatched out, yet’ (NC:171). She sums the situation up as follows: ‘The clowns may pelt him with eggs as if eggs cost nothing but his own shell don’t break, yet He’s living proof that travel don’t broaden the mind; instead it renders a man *banal*’ (NC:172). Aiden Day, who observes that Carter uses the notion of ‘hatching’ as a metaphor for the idea that gendered identity is malleable, states that the anti-essentialism of this metaphor means ‘that men can be remade just as much as women’ (1998:181). Lizzie’s comment about Walser’s not being ‘hatched out, yet’ emphasises the fact that Walser’s identity is in the process of being reconstructed, although the thick shell of socialization which seals him up in an archetypal masculinity, an identity which Lizzie calls ‘*banal*’, has not been broken yet.

In the meantime, the circus’s sojourn in Petersburg is coming to an end. Fevvers, who has been a huge success, is showered with invitations, but she decides to accept only one, that of the Grand Duke, whose overtures have been very persuasive. Since the Grand Gala Opening he has been sending Fevvers Parma violets, her lucky flower. Amidst the green stalks of the first bouquet she finds a glittering diamond bracelet in a shagreen box. The invitation, which arrives later, is accompanied by another shagreen box, this time containing a pair of diamond earrings and a note which promises a matching necklace should Fevvers accept a dinner invitation from the Duke, and if she complies with the condition that she arrives without a chaperone. Blinded by

greed, Fevvers cannot be dissuaded in spite of Lizzie's best efforts, and so it happens that she has a date with the Duke after her final performance in Petersburg, confident that she will have the necklace and still be in time for the Trans-Siberian Express, which leaves at midnight for the next leg of Colonel Kearney's Grand Imperial Tour.

The Grand Duke, like Mr Rosencreutz and Herr M., is another incarnation of Carter's symbolic mad scientist who represents patriarchal authority. The 'fine, masculine smell of leather upholstery' (NC:184) in the coach that is sent to transport Fevvers to the Duke's home already suggests that she is about to enter a patriarchal domain where her autonomy is endangered. Snow whirls down from the sky, blanketing the city in white as Fevvers travels through the cold streets. Carter describes this first indication of winter as 'a visitation that arrives with such a magical caress you can scarcely believe, at first, how the winter of these latitudes will kill you at its vast leisure – if it gets the chance' (NC:184). This depiction of the danger that lies beneath the surface of the seemingly gentle touch of the snow introduces an ominous atmosphere that hints at another veiled threat presented in the guise of a flattering invitation and the lure of expensive gifts. But Fevvers is oblivious to such subtle warnings; she sees 'no death in the snow. All she [sees is] that festive sparkle of the frosty lights that [makes] her think of diamonds' (NC:184).

On her arrival, the coachman leaves Fevvers to ring the doorbell, and it is the Duke who does her the honour of letting her in. This finally alerts the *aerialiste* to the fact that all is not as it should be, for the man is so eager to have her alone that he has given his servants the night off. The Duke's house is described as 'the realm of minerals, of metals of vitrification – of gold, marble and crystal . . . and a sense of

frigidity, of sterility, almost palpable, almost tangible in the hard, chill surfaces and empty spaces' (NC:184). He leads Fevvers to his study, where, amidst the vodka, champagne and caviar, there is a life-sized statue of her in ice, at 'full spread, "styling" and smiling' (NC:186). As Fevvers, who is greatly unsettled by the cold masterpiece, fortifies herself with some caviar, the Duke tells her that he is 'a great collector of all kinds of *objets d'arts* and marvels' (NC:187) and that, of all things, he loves toys best. I would argue that the Duke represents the patriarchal desire to organise reality according to archetypes, to transform, as Barthes puts it, 'the products of history into essential types'; a need that will not be sated until it has 'fixated this world into an object which can be forever possessed' (1993:155). It is for this reason that the Duke's house is depicted as the realm 'of vitrification', for he desires to convert individuality, all that is different and marvellous, into *objets d'arts* which can be forever 'possessed' and catalogued in his already substantial collection. Such is his interest in Fevvers; he values her only as 'a *rara avis*' (NC:185) which can be added to his hoard, and his intention is made explicit in the frigid contours of the ice statue.

Aside from the unnerving existence of the statue, there is something else in the Duke's study that bothers Fevvers: a pile of glasses is arranged beside the vodka bottle, and she cannot help but wonder whether the Duke intends to invite his friends. The presence of the extra glasses is soon explained, and it is not as Fevvers fears – it is, in fact, worse. As she watches, the Duke begins to write the letters of her christened name, Sophia, with the glasses. With a stiff little bow he tells her that it is a Russian custom, performed in her honour. He then fills each glass to the brim with vodka before drinking every single one. Fevvers is mesmerised as she counts thirty-five glasses being emptied down the Duke's throat without any ill effect. And she is

right to be alarmed by the Duke's seemingly innocent gesture, for not only is it disturbing that someone can still be on their feet after imbibing such a large quantity of spirits, it is also the very nature of the ritual that is deeply troubling. The fact that the Duke spells out 'Sophia' rather than 'Fevvers' suggests that he wishes to assimilate Fevvers into the patriarchal world outside of which she has defined her identity. For, as Lizzie relates to Walser in Part 1, Fevvers was only christened Sophia because the vicar would not accept the name that her foster-mothers had given her when the foundling was discovered on the doorstep of their house of ill repute. And so the name Sophia suffices only for Fevvers' 'legal handle' (NC:13) and, as such, it represents her identity under the Law of the Father. In using her christened name, the Duke rejects the autonomy that Fevvers has achieved outside of patriarchal prescription, and thus seeks to reduce her to the object status that is accorded to women under patriarchal rule. This desire is made explicit when he empties the glasses of their fiery content, an action that conveys his need to drain her of her subjectivity, her fiery individuality, so that she may be transformed into an empty vessel, an *objet d'art*, void of any meaning except that which he would impose upon her.

As if to give her a glimpse of the future he envisages for her, the Duke insists on showing Fevvers his musical trio, with the excuse that she should have music with her dinner. He presses a button and a section of the bookcase lining the wall opens. The trio, on a wheeled podium, emerge from the tenebrous depths within before the wall falls back into place. The musicians are 'almost full grown . . . only a little less large than we are and constructed of precious metals, semi-precious stones and the plumage of birds' (NC:187). Carter's emphasis on the size of these puppets suggests that they

may have been life-sized before they were reduced to toys. On looking at the feathers which are part of their construction, Fevvers shudders ‘as a cowboy does when he sees a blond scalp on an Indian’s belt’ (NC:187). It is as though she sees her likeness in the plumed performers, one of which is even in the shape of a big bird; its ‘Joseph’s coat of feathers’ (NC:187) more than hints at the *aerialiste*’s own polychromatic plumage. Instead of a beak, this bird has a flute, expertly fashioned from ivory. The stringed instrument is a harp or lyre in the shape of a ‘hollow woman’ (NC:188) who, instead of a torso, has a set of strings attached between her breasts and pelvis. Her arms are extended in a supplicatory gesture accidentally achieved the last time the mechanism that operates her wound down. The percussion section is the least disturbing. It is a bronze gong which sounds itself without the usual need for a gong-stick. The trio remain motionless; they cannot play until the Duke presses another button, and then they come to life, animated by volition other than their own. The gong agitates itself, the female harp moves, setting in motion a hidden mechanism which draws her hands up against her heart-strings so she may pluck ‘a chord from herself’ (NC:188), while the bird brings forth a strange melody from the flute that has replaced its beak. As the eldritch harmonies fill the room, Fevvers attempts to provide a logical explanation for the uncanny effect of the clockwork orchestra whose music does not seem to be ‘of this planet but of some remote and freezing elsewhere’ (NC:188). Her rational mind insists that they are toys: ‘there’s a musical box inside the bird. And anyone who could make a grandfather clock could put that harpy together. And, the gong is sounded by electrical impulses’ (NC:188). But, all the same, Fevvers feels the hairs on the nape of her neck rise, and when she sees the Duke’s self-satisfied smile she understands that he wants her to be afraid of him. And, for the first time in her life, Fevvers refuses champagne.

A drop of water falls from the nose of the ice Fevvers, striking the rim of the caviare dish with a resounding ‘plink’ that adds a disturbing note to the ‘weird geometry of the haunting, circular, not-quite-random, fully inhuman music’ which ‘[deforms] the angles of the room’ (NC:189). On first showing her the ice sculpture, the Duke expresses the desire that Fevvers melt in the warmth of his house just as her frozen counterpart melts. For the Duke yearns to possess Fevvers, which requires that her resistance thaw, and her autonomy dissolve. As the water drips from her effigy, Fevvers cannot help but feel that she is coming undone: ‘When she heard her nose melt, she felt faint’ (NC:189). But the evening is far from over, and Fevvers has not yet seen the rest of the Duke’s collection. He offers her his arm and guides her to the gallery, which is lined with glass cases, each containing a glittering egg that ‘never came from a chicken but out of a jeweller’s shop’^{vi} (NC:189). Carter’s emphasis on the fact that the sparkling eggs are not laid but made suggests that, aside from being ostentatious ornaments in a priceless collection, these eggs are also symbols of the artifice of gendered identity. And as the Duke, who represents the patriarchal desire to diminish individuality and recast identity in archetypal moulds, ‘hatches’ each egg, Fevvers is confronted with various versions of herself, each very different from the larger-than-life persona which she has so successfully hatched herself.

The first egg is made of pink enamel and opens up lengthwise to reveal an inner shell of mother-of-pearl, which, in turn, opens upon a yolk of hollow gold. Inside the yolk is a golden hen and inside the hen is a golden egg. When hatched, this minute egg reveals a tiny picture frame, set with microscopic jewels. And inside the frame is a miniature of the *aerialiste* herself, ‘in full spread as on the trapeze and yellow of hair, blue of eye, as in life’ (NC:189). The difference, however, is that this lustrous and

decorous image of Fevvers is contained within the jewel-encrusted boundaries which the Duke, who represents the hegemonic ideology, has constructed. And these traditional boundaries are the very ones which Fevvers' masquerade, her production of herself as an excess of femininity, has sought to transgress. Yet, in spite of the 'increasing sense of diminishment' (NC:190) she feels, and the odd effect that the music seems to have on the dimensions of the room, Fevvers is flattered by this minute tribute. Earlier, the Duke persuaded her to remove her shawl and allow him to see her wings in exchange for whichever egg she chose. Now, she allows him to 'run his hands over her breasts and round beneath her armpits' (NC:190), as if his recent homage deserves some kind of recompense. And all the while the toy musicians continue to play, accompanied by the slow melting of Fevvers' replica in ice: 'squeak, twang, bang and splash' (NC:190).

The next egg is of simple jade, and sits in a jewelled egg-cup. The Duke turns a little key and the eggshell separates into two hollow halves. Inside the white agate interior is a little tree, with dark green foliage expertly carved from semi-precious stones. Flowers made of pearls and diamonds, and fruits made of citrine, stud the golden boughs. When the Duke touches one of these fruits, it splits open and out flies a tiny golden bird, singing, to Fevvers' surprise, 'Only a bird in a gilded cage'. At the end of the chorus, the little songster folds its wings and the jade egg closes again. As much as the beautiful toy delights Fevvers, she struggles to maintain her composure on hearing the song that is part of her stage act. For in this 'realm of minerals, of metals of vitrification' (NC:184), the refrain, which Fevvers has only ever employed in the mode of irony, introduces a new and discordant note into the menacing cacophony of the toy musicians and the melting ice sculpture. It is as if the little bird's melody

merely echoes its master's voice, and Fevvers heeds the threat, as she turns away from the jade egg with a 'sense of imminent and deadly danger' (NC:190). And as her ice effigy continues to thaw, each reverberating splash seems to signal her own decomposition: 'she felt more and more vague, less and less her own mistress' (NC:190). Yet, in spite of feeling increasingly out of her depth, she still thinks that the Duke deserves something for his latest tribute, and so she unfastens the hooks and eyes at the back of her dress to release her plumage. While the Duke fumbles with her feathers, a 'deep instinct of self-preservation' (NC:191) guides her hand to the virile member already asserting its presence under the fabric of his riding breeches. The Duke's arms tighten around her, and she cannot help but notice that he is exceptionally strong, so much so that he could pin even her to the ground. Her eyes search the shadows for a means of escape, but the two-tiered room does not have a single window. And then the situation progresses from bad to worse, as the Duke's investigation of her bosom uncovers Ma Nelson's sword where it lies hidden in her corset. With a disturbing little laugh he investigates the dangerous toy before snapping it in half and discarding the pieces. In an interview with John Haffenden, Carter states that every time Fevvers encounters a mad scientist 'she loses a little more of herself' (in Haffenden 1985:88), and it is no small thing that she has now lost the sword with which she protected herself against that zealot, Mr Rosencreutz. This weapon has served in the past to preserve her autonomy against the likes of the Duke, who would colonise her identity. Now that Fevvers is disarmed and defenceless, she 'could have wept' (NC:191).

But, instead of giving vent to her emotions, the *aerialiste* gathers her scattered wits and proceeds to the next case, while continuing to pleasure the Duke, who has become

so distracted by her persistent fondling that he hardly notices as she opens the glass cabinet with her free hand. The third egg is silver, patterned with a lattice of amethyst, and, inside it, to Fevvers' delight, is a miniature of the Trans-Siberian Express, the very train that she must catch at midnight when it leaves St Petersburg for the next stage of Colonel Kearney's imperial extravaganza. Reaching eagerly into the box, she exclaims: 'I'll have this one!' (NC:191) with such fervour that the Duke is temporarily roused from the stupor that her desperate caresses have induced. But Fevvers does not stop her skilful ministrations; she has 'not served her apprenticeship at Ma Nelson's for nothing' (NC:192), and if the Duke would take her sword then she will use his 'sword' against him – a strategy that reverses the power relations in the Duke's planned seduction. Observing that his plan is about to derail, the Duke weakly attempts to restrain the greedy fingers of Fevvers' free hand, which have clasped the train, but she will not let go. In a voice 'glutinous with tumescence' he protests: 'Not that one. The *next* one's for you. I ordered it specially. They delivered it this morning' (NC:192). The egg that he indicates is of white gold topped with a little swan. It contains a golden cage with, inside it, a perch of rubies, sapphires and diamonds. And, as Fevvers has suspected, no 'bird stood on that perch, yet' (NC:192). For the Duke intends to return Fevvers to the egg from which she has hatched an autonomous identity, so that she may be remade as his idea of her, that is, as a bird in a gilded cage. Aware of the horrible possibility that she might shrink, that she might be reduced to the Duke's diminutive idea of her, Fevvers bids the diamond necklace goodbye and contemplates 'life as toy' (NC:192). The Duke, meanwhile, has been rendered helpless by the ceaseless movement of Fevvers' hand, as his glazed eyes and panting breath reveal. The musical trio orchestrate 'the geometrics of the implausible' (NC:192), and when the ice sculpture collapses with a wet smash, Fevvers is spurred

into action. She drops the toy train on the carpet at the same time that the Duke ejaculates: ‘In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers [runs] helter-skelter down the platform, [opens] the door of the first class compartment and [clammers] aboard’ (NC:192). She throws herself weeping into Lizzie’s arms just as the stationmaster blows his whistle and waves his flag and the Trans-Siberian Express departs, with its freight of circus performers and animals, for Siberia.

Part 3: Siberia

It is a depleted Grand Circus that crosses the inhospitable Siberian landscape to perform before the God Emperor of Japan. Aside from almost losing his star to the Grand Duke, Colonel Kearney has suffered a number of other misfortunes. On the last night in St Petersburg, Buffo the Great loses his wits in his final and most spectacular performance. And so the closing somersault of the great clown’s career is out of the ring and into a Russian madhouse, accompanied by a doctor and two unsmiling Mongolian giants. Due to the master clown’s untimely descent into derangement, a pale and shaking Walser seeks refuge in Fevvers’ dressing-room, quite forgetting that he is to be the tigress’s dance partner in the next act. The show goes on without him, but the jealous tigress vents her anger on Mignon, which results in a carefully aimed bullet from the Princess’s gun moments after the abandoned beast gets her claws into the frills of Mignon’s dress. And so the graceful beast leaves the circus in a knacker’s van. In addition, the Ape-Man’s troupe of Educated Apes has tired of his drunken ways and, dissatisfied with the terms of the renegotiated contract that the Colonel offers them, they take the night train to Helsinki.

Yet Colonel Kearney will not allow force of circumstance to deflate his dream of taking his tuskers across the tundra, even if the pachyderms do not take kindly to the bitter weather of the northern wilderness. For ‘the elephants no longer resembled the pillars of the world’ and it is indeed as if these weakening giants signal the approaching collapse of the Colonel’s enterprise. The disastrous last night in Petersburg has left its mark. Since Buffo’s supervised departure in a strait-jacket, the clowns are ‘in a state of suspended animation’ (NC:200), unable to do anything except sleep, smoke and play cards. And these days the tigers watch the Princess like cats would watch a bird that is just out of their reach; the mutual pact that existed between the beasts and their keeper has been broken by the fatal shot fired from her gun. But the Colonel’s optimism, which has become increasingly febrile and desperate, has him counting his blessings, for at least he still retains ‘exclusive use of the Cockney Venus’ (NC:203).

Despite traversing the taiga in five-star comfort, Fevvers does not take well to confinement. In the carriage she shares with Lizzie, the *aerialiste* clips her toenails for want of anything better to do. She wears only her petticoat and so, stockingless and corsetless, she presents ‘a squalid spectacle, a dark half-inch at the roots of her hair which [tangles] with the dishevelled plumage that [has] already assumed a dusty look’ (NC:200). The fact that Fevvers’ natural hair colour has begun to show at the roots of her bottle-blond coiffure, and the reference to the fading colours of her brightly-dyed plumage, indicate that she is losing the glamour of her self-styled persona. As the train travels deeper into the Siberian wastes, and as the bright lights of civilization cease to be even a distant speck on a receding horizon, Fevvers’ masquerade begins to unravel. For, as the distance between Fevvers and the centres of cultural power

increases, so the distance between herself and her carefully constructed idea of herself as feminine spectacle diminishes in equal measure, as she herself observes: ‘As soon as I’m out of sight of the abodes of humanity, my heart gives way beneath me like rotten floorboards, my courage fails’ (NC:197). Exiled from the material world, Fevvers no longer self-consciously re-enacts Woman’s traditional place, but rather finds herself in that very place, on the ‘broad forehead of the world that had the mark of Cain branded on it when the world began’ (NC:197). And so, instead of pretending to be a bird in a gilded cage, as she does on stage, she now *is* that bird in a gilded cage, trapped in the ‘*gemütlich* comfort’ of the train that transports her ‘through the deep core of winter and this inimical terrain’ (NC:199).

But it is not just the desolate geography that conspires to rob Fevvers of her difference. She has also fallen in love with Walser, a situation that, according to Lizzie, affects Fevvers’ behaviour. And so, when the *aerialiste* buys a number of carved bears from an old man at one of the stations en route, to send home to the children in Battersea, Lizzie swears the gesture is meant only to impress the young American. She observes that Fevvers is growing more and more like her own publicity: ‘Ever the golden-hearted Cockney who don’t stand on ceremony’ (NC:198). What Lizzie’s comment suggests is that Fevvers is becoming the image of femininity that she uses as a marketing ploy, and this means that soon there will be no distance between herself and the idea of herself which she projects. The idea that Fevvers’ feelings for Walser could threaten her masquerade is echoed by Sarah Gamble, who states that true love ‘carries with it the danger of being cut down to size, naturalised’ (1997:165). For Walser is, as yet, ‘unhatched’ and as such he remains, in Lizzie’s words, ‘the adversary’ who will not ‘put by his wiles’ if Fevvers pretends ‘to be an

ordinary girl' (NC:198). Lizzie's observation indicates that much is still to happen before Fevvers and Walser can embark upon a relationship that is based on the idea of love between equals. Fevvers will have to learn the answer to the question she poses to Lizzie: 'who *am* I supposed to be like if not meself [?]' (NC:198), and Walser, who has already endured much, must, as Carter states, still 'be broken down before he can become . . . a serious person' (in Haffenden 1985:89).

When the train is blown up by a band of outlaws, everything changes. The various members of Colonel Kearney's circus are catapulted into the Siberian wilderness, where, according to Carter, 'they can discuss philosophical concepts without distractions . . . they can discuss Life . . . as they stride off through the snow' (in Haffenden 1985:87). At this point, Fevvers' and Walser's ways part and, as Ricarda Schmidt observes, both 'undergo various experiences and developments in the process of which various social concepts are discussed with regard to their potential for freedom' (1989:70). The survivors of the Colonel's circus are kidnapped by outlaws who have a vested interest in Fevvers. Walser is not among the captured. Although alive, he has been knocked out by a blow to the head, and is submerged in a soft tomb of tablecloths and napkins from which he will be rescued later by an escaped murderess. Henceforth, his adventures will be described in alternating chapters with Fevvers' story. In the meantime, the Colonel, Fevvers, Lizzie, Mignon and the Princess, Samson the Strongman and the clowns and their dogs follow their captors into what Fevvers describes as 'the heart of limbo' (NC:225).

Ricarda Schmidt states that in Part 3 Fevvers encounters people who 'embody lack of freedom in various forms' and who exist as 'manifestations of belief in false hopes'

(1989:70). The outlaws are the first of these, and their encampment is indeed a stagnant realm, as the word 'limbo' suggests. They are not natives of Siberia, as Fevvers observes: 'I do think they're strangers here as much as we' (NC:227). For the outlaws live in exile in makeshift shelters deep in the forest and, as if to emphasise their isolation, Carter describes this heart of darkness as a place where the silence is interrupted only by 'the howling of the wolves, a sound that chills to the bone by virtue of its distance from humanity' (NC:228).

On arrival, the captives from Colonel Kearney's circus are taken to a shed and, aside from being imprisoned, they are treated quite kindly and provided with tea, vodka and cold roast. Soon afterwards, the outlaw chief requests Fevvers' presence in his hut. He introduces himself and his men as 'the brotherhood of free men' (NC:229) and states: 'we exist outside a law that shows us no pity and we demonstrate by our lives and deeds, how the wild life in the woods can bring liberty, equality and fraternity to those who pay the price of homelessness, danger and death' (NC:229). Fevvers, who is not unsympathetic to the spirit of the chief's peroration, rightly notes that the sentiments, though sincerely expressed, need 'attending to here and there' (NC:229). For the idea of liberty is negated by the price it demands, and to be equally ostracised is no equality at all. Even the word 'fraternity' is loosely applied in this context, because it refers merely to a situation that is brought about by force of circumstance. It turns out that this brotherhood of men, who are not free at all, are on the run because they killed government officials who violated their sisters, wives and sweethearts. They have kidnapped Fevvers because a report in a recent newspaper claims that she is engaged to the Prince of Wales. Having read that she would be passing through Transbaikalia, they have sabotaged the circus train in the hope that 'the Britannic angel' (NC:231)

will intercede on their behalf with her future mother-in-law, the Queen of England, who in turn could explain their unfortunate predicament to the Tsar of Russia. Once the Tsar has forgiven them for what they believe to be a simple misunderstanding, they will be able to return to their villages and resume their lives as farmers.

On hearing the chief's heartfelt request, Fevvers might laugh if she were not so moved by the man's infallible belief in the innate goodness of the traditional powers of state. For it is not only the outlaws' actions in defence of their womenfolk that are to blame for their exiled condition; it is also their naïve faith in a benevolent higher authority that makes them incapable of functioning on the terms of a rapacious world. It is perhaps for this reason that the brigand chief's outfit, complete with peasant caftan criss-crossed by bandoliers, with a pair of pistols and a wide-blade sword at the belt, complemented by his extraordinary moustaches, reminds Fevvers of the costume of a comic-opera bandit. For the leader of the outlaws is an archetype, as Fevvers' observation that comic-opera bandits 'copied his get-up, not he theirs' (NC:230) indicates. As such, he belongs to the timeless, placeless land of myth to which his artless world view is ideally suited. In the real world, however, it is only in comic operas that the suffering of the working class is of any concern to heads of state. When Fevvers points out that his hopes are based on faulty premises, of which her royal engagement is not the least, the outlaw chief breaks out in a 'furious tempest of rage, grief and despair, well-nigh Wagnerian in its intensity' (NC:232), as if all the world were indeed a stage. Such is his fury at society, the newspapers, the duplicity of state – and his own gullibility – that it is only Samson the Strongman who can curb his outburst, with a blow to the head.

On being returned to her companions, Fevvers relates the details of her interview with the leader of the outlaws and, amidst general sympathy for the deceived bandits, there is also concern for their own predicament. For, should these desperate men decide to vent their anger on their hostages, Colonel Kearney's captured party would find themselves, as Fevvers observes, in a 'pretty pickle' (NC:233). Their fears are not assuaged by the unmistakable sounds of the outlaws drowning their sorrows in vodka and, 'comic operetta brigands as they were' (NC:234), lamenting their pitiful state in a bass baritone chorus of which the singing becomes increasingly distorted as time wears on. It is Lizzie's idea to ask the clowns to entertain their hosts, in the hope that, once they have cheered up, the outlaws may be willing to listen to reason: 'Make 'em smile, make 'em laugh – then we can talk to them. Bring them back to life, my lads' (NC:243). The clowns are not easily convinced, but when Lizzie suggests that they should think of their performance 'as a requiem for Buffo' (NC:242) they all exchange a sombre look. Grik and Grok take their instruments and strike up the Dead March from *Saul* before Fevvers unbars the door so they may proceed to do their best for the despondent audience sitting around a fire outside. Without Buffo, the clowns' efforts are desultory, and yet they manage to coax a response from the outlaws, who are simple folk. This in turn inspires Grik and Grok to play a more rhythmic tune, and so the clowns begin to dance. What follows is a nihilistic spectacle of disaster and disintegration which is an apt tribute to the departed Buffo, who is remembered for his final embrace of madness and chaos. This dance is 'the dance of death' (NC:242), because it celebrates 'the whirling apart of everything, the end of love, the end of hope' (NC:243). Carter's statement that the clowns 'danced the dance of the outcasts for the outcasts who watched them' (NC:242) indicates that the clowns and the outlaws are the same, united by their inability to act in the world and their involuntary

expatriation by a system which does not accommodate them. And when the outlaws respond to these wild arabesques with mirthless laughter, when they join in this deadly dance of ‘the passed perfect’ (NC:243), of immutability and finality, it is a confirmation of their defeat, of their belief that there is ‘no triumph over fate’ (NC:243). As Fevvers watches the escalating mayhem of the crazed gavotte, she contemplates the foolishness of having believed that the clowns could somehow improve the situation. But she does not watch for long, for the outcasts have danced up a raging tempest of wind and snow which threatens to engulf everything, so that the *aerialiste* and her companions retreat to the shed where they are protected against the worst of the storm, because, unlike the exiles, they place their ‘faiths in reason’ (NC:243).

When the blizzard subsides, freshly fallen snow has put the campfire out and the world outside looks newly made. All evidence of the existence of the outlaws and the clowns has been erased except for a shred of red satin, a broken violin and one of the clowns’ dogs which has been left behind – the rest have ‘been blown off the face of the earth’ (NC:243). In this final comment on the uselessness of the clowns, Carter reiterates what Aidan Day refers to as ‘her novel’s sympathy with the worldly, the material and the his/herstorical’ (1998:187). In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter writes: ‘There is no way out of time. We must learn to live in this world, to take it with sufficient seriousness, because it is the only world that we will ever know’ (SW:110). Nothing will come from throwing away rationality, just as ‘nothing’ comes and swallows up the clowns and the outlaws while material reality remains unaffected – nothing has happened.

In the meantime another person has joined the motley crew of captives. The Escapee, who, like the outlaws, is another incarnation of belief in false hopes, is an educated young man whose cherubic features are well set off by the light of idealism radiating from his eyes. If the outlaws have placed their faith in the altruism of authority, then the Escapee pins his hopes on a shining tomorrow ‘of peace and love and justice’ (NC:239), in which the human soul will finally achieve perfection. He has been sent off to exile for attempting to blow up a police station in his quest for Utopia, and this revelation makes Lizzie look upon him kindly, until he admits that the dynamite was damp and no damage was done. Expostulating about his inefficiency, Lizzie takes him to task on the glittering generalities that brighten his discourse as much as his countenance. In the diatribe that follows, she expounds upon some of the ideas which are central to Carter’s materialist perspective. Aside from the fact that Lizzie does not believe in the soul, since there is no verifiable evidence of its existence, she also questions the Escapee’s essentialist idea of perfection, because, as she eloquently argues, perfection is relative, due to the infinite variation in human perception and experience. And, since ‘tomorrow never comes’ (NC:239), we must contend with the present, which (and this is the only point on which Lizzie does agree with him) is imperfect. But, as she points out, this has nothing to do with the soul or with its secular equivalent, human nature. Instead, it is a matter of ‘the long shadow of the *past historic* . . . that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present’ (NC:240). It is social institutions, which Lizzie terms ‘the anvil of history’, that need to change in order to change humanity. And, contrary to what the Escapee believes, this is not a quest for perfection, but rather the pursuit of something ‘a little better’ or, at least, ‘a little less bad’ (NC:240). The Escapee’s irrepressible optimism, his quixotic dream of the perfection of mankind, stands in opposition to the wretched

pessimism of the clowns and the final disillusioned dejection of the outlaws and yet, like them, he too has been exiled from the material world. The reason for this is that utopian visions are as ineffectual in affecting real social transformation as the escapist ex-centricity of the clowns or the disenchanting hopelessness of the deceived bandits. It is between these extremes that Carter's voice of reason, which resounds in Lizzie's discourse, proposes a materialist solution that neither ignores nor despairs of the realities of this world.

Before the Escapee and Lizzie come to blows about how humanity can best be improved, Fevvers steps in to ask if the Escapee has any news of the outside world. It turns out that on his way he met up with a band of women who had escaped from a nearby asylum for the criminally insane. These women had all been found guilty of killing the husbands who abused them, and had been selected from a number of Russian prisons to be incarcerated in an isolated institution designed to elicit their repentance and thus their salvation. This prison is a *panopticon*, run by a cruel Countess who had poisoned her own husband and hoped to ease her conscience by facilitating the redemption of others guilty of the same crime. But the inmates of this dreadful place, who had murdered their husbands to preserve not only their dignity but their lives, were not susceptible to the Countess's version of enforced atonement, and escaped with the help of the wardresses, who were as trapped as they in the House of Correction. These women now hoped to found a female Utopia in the taiga, and had asked the Escapee if he would mind providing them with a pint or two of sperm to ensure the continued existence of their republic of free women. This donation would be preserved as posterity in a patent ice-bucket, which resembled a giant thermos flask, that they had rescued from the wreck of the Trans-Siberian Express. Once

again, it is Lizzie who takes issue with the finer details of the utopian idea and, on hearing of the women's solution to the problem of procreation, she asks: 'What'll they do with the boy babies? Feed 'em to the polar bears? To the *female* polar bears?' (NC:240-241). But Fevvers, who is more interested in whether the women found any trace of Walser, hushes her and presses the Escapee for news of human survivors. It seems the women did find a blonde foreigner, buried under a mound of table linen, but they left him behind when they saw a rescue party approaching. By the time they encountered the Escapee, however, they 'were already regretting having abandoned such a fine repository of semen' (NC:241). The women's reference to Walser in the language of biological determinism links up with Lizzie's inquiry regarding the women's contingency plan should their reproductive efforts result in boy babies. For although Carter relates these women's crimes and their subsequent suffering at the hands of the cruel Countess with great sympathy, and although she depicts their endeavour in utopian terms (the 'white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished' [NC:218]), she does not propose female supremacy as a solution to the gender conundrum. In fact, when Fevvers and Walser are united at the end of the novel, their relationship is based, not on the idea of dominator and dominated, or free woman and semen repository, but rather on the principle of reciprocity, which does not allow for the freedom of one person to depend on the suffering of another.

Fevvers is delighted that Walser has survived the train wreck and, overcome with emotion, exclaims: 'My young man will come and save us!' (NC:241). But the ever-practical Lizzie likes the sound of the rescue party better and so, once the clowns and the outlaws have been swept up into oblivion, it is decided that the little group of

survivors will set out in the direction of the railway track. They don the improvised outfits that Lizzie has made from the bearskins provided by the outlaws, and head off under the guidance of the Escapee, who, though initially wary that the rescue party might rescue him right back to prison, is persuaded by the Colonel's extravagant promises of an American passport. But the Escapee, whose head is mostly in the clouds, takes a wrong turn and, instead of reaching the railway, they end up on the bank of a wide frozen river.

On the opposite side of the river is a little house and, from its isolated location, the Escapee guesses that it is the home of 'an exile such as he [is]' (NC:245). This is true, for, like the Escapee, the old man who lives in this house and whose long hair, beard and fingernails tell their own story of loneliness and neglect, also finds himself in the destitute heart of Siberia due to ill-considered idealism. He fell into the trap of false beliefs when the corrupt Mayor of R. persuaded him to leave the security of his job as a music teacher at a girl's school in Novgorod to found a conservatory in remote Transbaikalia. With a bit of vodka to aid his cause, the Mayor painted a rosy picture of the untapped musical talent of the taiga, of the children of fur-traders, government officials, station masters and such, not to mention the offspring of the native peasants, all flocking to the conservatory, eager to display their untold talents. What the Maestro did not know was that the Mayor had received a large sum from the government for this Transbaikalian project, and had forgotten about the project completely as soon as he had pocketed his ill-gotten earnings. Without so much as the fare home, the Maestro thus finds himself deserted and disillusioned with only his piano – that is, until Fevvers and the rest arrive on his doorstep.

Since the sabotage of the circus train in which the tigers were lost, the Princess of Abyssinia, bereft of her beasts and her piano, has been in such a state of inconsolable somnolence that Fevvers remarks to Lizzie: ‘If we don’t get that girl to a keyboard soon, it will go the worse for her’ (NC:245). And so it is fortuitous that their wanderings through the wilderness lead the party to the hitherto unfrequented Conservatory of Transbaikalia. When they knock on the door, there is no response. They enter and walk through the gloomy, unkempt interior with, as yet, no sign of the old Maestro. In the third room they find, ‘as if in answer to a prayer’ (NC:246), a grand piano, the sight of which lifts the glaze from the Princess’s eyes. She flexes her fingers and claps her hands with the delight of a child, but as she approaches the instrument, a frightful, gaunt figure jumps up from behind it, waving his arms, flailing his limbs and causing a terrible uproar. In the commotion created by the raving old man and perpetuated by the Princess’s desperate efforts to get to the piano, Mignon steps forward and begins to sing.

Much has happened since Fevvers first heard Mignon sing in the Hotel de l’Europe, and it is hard to believe that this confident young woman, who now takes ‘hold of the song in the supple lasso of her voice’ (NC:247), is the bedraggled orphan who, not so long ago, relied on Fevvers’ charity and sang as if she were only ‘a kind of fleshy phonograph, made to transmit music of which she had no consciousness’ (NC:247). And although there are now no tigers to tame, Mignon’s music does succeed in quelling the beastly din made by the wild old Maestro, who, instead, begins to play an accompaniment on the out-of-tune piano. When the song is finished the Princess, who is no longer exiled amongst the beasts, speaks for the first time: ‘Fuck and shit,’ she says. ‘That piano needs a screwdriver’ (NC:248). And then the three of them, Mignon,

the Princess and the Maestro, happily begin to discuss the best way to strip the piano down.

The next morning, the Maestro tears himself away from the music room long enough to take the hungry non-musicians fishing, which, in the frozen river, involves cutting out blocks of ice and seeing if any fish are trapped inside. On their return, when they are still out of sight of the front door, they hear Mignon's song, which begins 'Kennst du das Land?', echoing through the wilderness, while the Princess accompanies her on the newly-tuned piano. And this land of which Mignon sings is 'the Eden of our first beginnings, where innocent beasts and wise children play together', where 'the tiger abnegates its ferocity' and 'the child her cunning' (NC:155). When Mignon asks if you know this land, it is not because she doubts its existence; instead the grandeur of her questioning confirms that there is such a place, and the reason it seems prelapsarian is that it exists outside of patriarchal prescription. When Fevvers and the rest reach the garden gate, they see that the house is roofed with the native tigers of the place, 'who had never known either confinement or coercion; they had not come to the Princess for any taming' (NC:249). Sarah Gamble states that the beauty of this scene 'conjures up the seductive notion that this signals the final cancelling out of the doctrine of predation' (1997:163). For these wild tigers are different from their circus counterparts, whose pact with the Princess existed 'to prevent hostilities, not to promote amity' (NC:149). This time the dynamics of the relationship do not depend upon the threat of a loaded shotgun and thus, when these tigers get up on their hind legs, 'they will make up their own dances And the girls will have to invent new, unprecedented tunes for them to dance to' (NC:250). This idea of dancing to a different tune is reminiscent of the longed for 'new song' (BC:93) in 'The Lady of the

House of Love'. Although Carter depicts this resolution in utopian terms, the ideology which informs it is no different from Lizzie's materialist perspective that it is the 'anvil of history' that must be changed 'in order to change humanity' (NC:240). The premise is that human nature is socially determined and can thus be modified. In this context, the new music which Carter proposes is not 'the music of the spheres' (NC:275), which would be better suited to the Escapee's ideal tomorrow, but rather the music of 'blood, of flesh, of sinew' (NC:275), which is of this world, which is not prescriptive and to which the tigers will dance 'of their own free will' (NC:250).

It is not just the tigers who have been attracted by Mignon's song. On the margins of the forest, Fevvers notices a group of people whose Mongolian features reveal them to be native woodsmen of Transbaikalia. Amongst them, to her immense surprise, is a tall, blonde foreigner, dressed in long shaggy skirts adorned with ribbons and shiny baubles, and riding a reindeer. In spite of his strange outfit, she recognises the man to be Jack Walser, who fails to recognise her because he has lost his memory and, since he was rescued from beneath an avalanche of tablecloths and napkins by one of the women from the penitentiary, has joined this primitive community of bear-worshippers. She calls out to him, interrupting the last verse of Mignon's song. The spell woven by the music is broken. The tigers awaken from their enchantment and roar in a troubled way; the tribe look at the tigers as if seeing them for the first time; Fevvers spreads and sets off in pursuit of Walser, and in the general tumult that follows the woodsmen retreat and Walser's reindeer runs off into the depths of the forest. And so the little group find themselves alone once more at the Conservatory.

While Walser has been accepted into a Finno-Ugrian tribe, much has happened to Fevvers since their ways parted after the destruction of the circus train. She has broken a wing and so, for the moment, she is grounded. In addition, Lizzie's handbag, with all its household magic, has been lost in the explosion, which means that Fevvers is bereft of peroxide for her hair and bright dyes for her plumage: 'every day, the tropic bird looked more and more like the London sparrow as which it had started out in life, as if a spell were unravelling' (NC:271). It is Fevvers' masquerade that is 'unravelling', for not only has she lost 'that silent demand to be *looked* at that had made her once stand out' (NC:277), but she no longer turns her gaze upon herself; she feels 'glum and irritable when she [sneaks] a peek at herself in the old man's bit of flyblown mirror' (NC:271). She is distressed at the speed with which she is losing her looks, and the knowledge that Walser is so near and yet out of her reach makes her feel even worse. But there is more to her misery than that:

She knew she had truly mislaid some vital something of herself along the road that brought her to this place. When she lost her weapon to the Grand Duke in his frozen palace, she had lost some of that sense of her own magnificence which had previously sustained her trajectory. As soon as her feeling of invulnerability was gone, what happened? Why, she broke her wing. Now she was a crippled wonder. (NC:273)

Fevvers' sword was a relic from her days in Ma Nelson's house, when she posed as the Winged Victory. It was the old Madame's idea that since Fevvers, unlike her marble predecessor, had arms, she should hold something, and so it came about that she posed with a gilt ceremonial sword. At the time, Ma Nelson spread the word that Fevvers was 'the perfection of, the original of, the very model for that statue which, in its broken and incomplete state, has teased the imagination of a brace of millennia with its promise of perfect, active beauty that has been . . . mutilated by history' (NC:37). The statue of the Winged Victory, 'mutilated by history' as it is, represents the mythification of the feminine, the way in which Woman has been robbed of her

autonomy (her head) and her ability to function in the world (her arms). When this disabled symbol of femininity is restored in the figure of Fevvers, the patriarchal idea of Woman is demythologised and the ‘promise of perfect, active beauty’ is fulfilled. And this time the Winged Victory has a sword, which represents an active resistance to the patriarchal desire to colonise the female identity. But Fevvers has lost this sword to none other than the Grand Duke, who is the very incarnation of that oppressive need to vitrify woman in a reductionist image of herself. And it is as if this unfortunate state of affairs threatens to realise the Duke’s hitherto thwarted desire, for, disarmed and crippled, Fevvers is no longer as far removed from the Winged Victory of Samothrace as she once was. Her masquerade is coming undone, and consequently the distance between herself and the image of femininity has decreased:

The Cockney Venus! She thought bitterly. Now she looks more like one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit. Helen, formerly of the High-wire, now permanently grounded. Pity the New Woman if she turns out to be as easily demolished as me.

Day by day she felt herself diminishing, as if the Grand Duke had ordered up another sculpture of ice and now, as his exquisite revenge on her flight, was engaged in melting it very, very slowly, perhaps by the judicious application of lighted cigarette ends. (NC:273)

The fact that Fevvers is losing her beauty, her talent and her singularity is further emphasised by Colonel Kearney’s reaction to the news that his former star has decided to leave the circus. The Colonel has decided to head back to civilisation in order to revive his fallen enterprise. With the shrewd manipulation of some high-flown rhetoric, Colonel Kearney manages to recruit the Escapee for the cause of Capitalism. Now the Colonel wants to know who of the depleted circus party are ready to return with him to the ring. Mignon and the Princess have decided to remain with the Maestro at the Conservatory to make, as Mignon observes, the ‘music that sealed the pact of tranquillity between humankind and their wild brethren, their wild

sistren, yet left them free' (NC:275). The Strong Man, who has been much changed since he left Mignon to the mercies of the escaped tigress, will stay behind with them. An outraged Fevvers declares that she will be going in the opposite direction of the Colonel who has so easily abandoned Walser to his fate amongst the heathen tribe. But the Colonel, who prides himself on his ability to recognise a profitable endeavour, is not concerned, given that the Cockney Venus might now more aptly be described as the 'Feathered Frump' (NC:276). For the fallen Angel, the Winged Defeat is becoming naturalised: 'Since she had stopped bothering to hide her wings, the others had grown so accustomed to the sight it no longer seemed remarkable' (NC:277). Looking at her increasing shabbiness, her no longer unusual appendages, the Colonel thinks she looks like a 'cheap fraud' (NC:277).

The notion that Fevvers' authenticity seems to reveal her as a fraud is indeed paradoxical. It is a point which Walser ponders in Part 2, when he observes that if Fevvers is indeed a prodigy of nature, she ceases to be an extraordinary woman:

no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but – a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer . . . an alien creature forever estranged . . . / As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. (NC:161)

Fevvers' marketability, her capacity to function as an active subject in a 'world with a cash-sale ideology' (SW:58) depends upon the preservation of the enigma that surrounds her identity. This notion is encapsulated in her slogan: 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' (NC:7), an advertising ploy which attracts audiences and makes Fevvers a very rich woman. During her internment in Madame Schreck's museum of woman monsters, Fevvers relinquishes control of the spectacle and, like the other women who are imprisoned there, she becomes merely an exhibit, an object to be displayed. For it

is Fevvers' masquerade, her 'self-conscious re-enactment . . . of the place traditionally assigned to Woman' (Robinson 1991:118) that enables her to be both spectator and spectacle. When the mask slips, as it does in Part 3, her strategy of self-representation comes undone, which means that she is in danger of being naturalised into the position traditionally reserved for Woman. Her autonomy depends upon the artifice of her identity, for authenticity implies naturalisation, categorisation and, as Walser observes, objectification. When the Colonel thus refers to her as a 'cheap fraud' (NC:277), he means that she is no longer a serious player in the world of free enterprise. Translated, it implies that Fevvers has lost her ability to function in the material world. This is further illustrated when the sly circus proprietor manages to swindle the usually astute businesswomen out of the money due to her for her performances in St Petersburg. The Colonel triumphantly exclaims that breach of contract means she forfeits a fortune and Fevvers, who knows she has been outsmarted, can only respond with a 'pathetic attempt at defiance' (NC:277) which is laughed off.

A dejected Fevvers decides to set off in search of her beloved Walser. For it is the young American 'who [keeps] the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks She [longs] to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes' (NC:273). In this context Sally Robinson asks if Carter is, 'at the last minute, returning her narrative to a conventional love story, complete with an all too familiar ideology of gender' (1991:131). I would suggest that although *Nights at the Circus* is indeed a love story, it is far from conventional. For Carter redefines the notion of love, and the relations between the sexes, by proposing a model of reciprocity that transcends the binary divide, so that both partners may be 'changed by the exchange

and, if submission is mutual, than aggression is mutual' (SW:146). This redefined love story is already prefigured in the relationship between Mignon and the Princess of Abyssinia, a fact which is not lost on Fevvers, who, on looking at the altered orphan, exclaims: 'Love, true love has utterly transformed her' (NC:276). When Fevvers embarks on her search for Walser, it is so that she may see 'the wonder in the eyes of the beloved and become whole again' (NC:285). The fact that she envisages looking at Walser as he looks at her already suggests a disruption of the convention that cites Woman as the object of the gaze.

As if to reinforce the notion that Fevvers is not about to be assimilated into the patriarchal tradition that equates being 'sweetheart and mother . . . with being slave or subordinate' (Goldman in SW:151), Carter takes the opportunity to comment on the pitfalls of the habitual 'happy ending' as Fevvers and Lizzie trudge on across the tundra. Lizzie warns Fevvers that true 'lovers' reunions always end in a marriage' (NC:280), and to emphasise the extent of this contractual obligation she adds that when a woman gives herself she also gives her bank account. But Fevvers does not intend to relinquish control of her autonomy or her financial independence, and so she suggests that Walser should rather give himself to her: 'Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well – I'll *sit* on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him' (NC:281). Carter does not, however, propose a mere inversion of the existing power relations, and so things will not turn out like that. For Walser has already been hatched out during his sojourn with the bear-worshippers.

Walser's hatching out really begins with the head injury that erases his memory and thus his history, so that, like 'the landscape, he was a perfect blank' (NC:222). When the women from the penitentiary leave him behind, he wanders off into the wilderness, where he encounters a shaman who gives him a generous portion of fly agaric 'distilled through the kidneys' (NC:238), which has a startling effect on one who has so recently lost his wits. Even the Shaman, who is well acquainted with the drug, is suitably impressed, and decides that Walser must be an apprentice shaman, since he displays such an aptitude for the hallucinogen-induced trance. And so it comes about that Walser joins the tribe, to whom he is solemnly introduced by the Shaman as 'this dreamer' (NC:254). Fortunately for Walser, his state of delirium is an asset in the tribal context, where ranting and raving is a sanctified occupation. Accordingly, he is accepted into this primitive community as a 'representative of the spirit world' (NC:254) whose babbling in a foreign tongue is proof that he must be in a holy trance. As Walser slowly begins to recover his memory under these foreign circumstances, he does indeed believe himself to be the receptacle of demented visions, for the fragmented recollections of a world outside the village are so alien to tribal life and so distorted by the hallucinogenic urine with which the Shaman so frequently doses him, that all his previous experiences are rendered 'null and void' (NC:252).

The tribe themselves inhabit a mythic realm, 'a temporal dimension which [does] not take history into account' (NC:265). This ahistoric dream world is largely the invention of the Shaman, who devotes himself 'to assigning phenomena their rightful places in his subtle and intricate theology' (NC:253), a wearisome task which demands that the visible world be interpreted according to the information that the

Shaman receives through dreaming. Accordingly, much of his time is productively spent sleeping and, could he write, he might well put a sign on his door that reads: 'Man at work' (NC:253). Like his predecessors, Mr Rosencreutz, Herr M., and the Grand Duke, the Shaman is also an incarnation of patriarchal authority; he is the creator of the myths that govern tribal life and, as such, he weaves the intricate and complex fabrication that constitutes the tribe's 'entire sense of lived reality, which [impinges] on *real* reality only inadvertently' (NC:253). The Shaman's position of power depends upon his ability to persuade the tribe of his authenticity, and this is easily done. It involves the mastery of three basic skills: 'prestidigitation or sleight of hand' (NC:263), which allows the Shaman to conceal various things, such as baby mice, spiders and so forth, upon his person, to be produced at exactly the right moment when, for instance, a diagnosis is made; ventriloquism, which enables the Shaman to assume a voice that mimics the voices of the spirits and to 'throw' it so that it may appear to come either from the patient or from the mouth of a carved idol; and, finally, the ability to look particularly solemn, for 'who would believe a giggling shaman?' (NC:264). This, however, does not mean that the Shaman is a humbug: 'His [is] the supreme form of the confidence trick – others [have] confidence in him because of his own utter confidence in himself' (NC:263). For do not the spirits take forms visible only to him? Do they not speak in voices to which only he can hearken? So while the Shaman knows perfectly well that an evil spirit in the form of a mouse is causing a patient's illness, lesser mortals often need proof, which necessitates the production of a fleshly imitation that can then be visibly exorcised. Satisfied that the illness has been cast out, the patient will be well on his way to a speedy recovery. And what can the Shaman possibly gain from his selfless acts of subterfuge? Quite a lot, actually, for if the tribe stops believing in his powers he may be revealed as rather

disturbed. He may well be seen as pretty perverse once his more unsavoury habits are no longer conveniently consecrated by tradition. And, even worse, he could be expected to engage in the productive labour – ‘the drudgery of hunting, shooting, fishing and the sporadic cultivation of late barley’ (*NC:264*) – of which he has heretofore only enjoyed the fruits. The very idea of such industry would have the Shaman reaching for another tumbler full of the potent piss that he so successfully distils through his kidneys. And so, in addition to his other talents, it is the Shaman’s duplicitous ability to disguise personal gain as public service that earns him a place in Carter’s gallery of emblematic patriarchs.

Walser lives with the Shaman and the Shaman’s bear, which is not yet a year old. This bear is ‘part pet, part familiar; he [is] both a real furry and beloved bear and, at the same time, a transcendental kind of meta-bear, a minor deity and also a partial ancestor’ (*NC:257*). I would argue that the mythification of the bear in this context represents the mythification of the feminine in patriarchal ideology, according to which Woman is part pet, part incarnation of otherness; she is both flesh and blood and a transcendental kind of meta-woman, an angel of the house and also a mother goddess. The Shaman believes the bear to have descended from the sky in a silver cradle and dropped in the thicket where the Shaman finds it and takes it home. Back in the village, the bear’s ears are pierced and it is given copper earrings, a copper collar and a copper bracelet, so that it will look pretty for the duration of its visit in this world. On its first birthday, the bear will be taken to the god-hut to be sacrificed in front of an ursine idol that already presides over a mound of bear skulls. The whole village will attend this ceremony, during which the bear will be made to feel very special indeed before its throat is slit. In this way, the bear’s spirit will be propitiated

by the villagers, who will vigorously lament its imminent departure from the confines of the 'fleshy envelope' (*NC:258*) that heretofore has merely hindered its true vocation, which is that of messenger between this world and the next: 'We're so sorry, bruin! How we love you, poor little bruin! How bad we feel because we must do away with you!' (*NC:258*). And so the pedestal on which the bear is initially worshipped will become an altar on which it will eventually be sacrificed, in a ritual that is not unlike the one employed by the hegemonic ideology to despatch Woman to the realm of the eternal feminine once her spirit has been propitiated or consoled for her 'lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate' (*SW:5*). Once the bear is thus freed from its corporeal constraints, its head will be cut off, to be set in the middle of a common table while its body is roasted over an open fire. All those who eat of it will share in the strength and valour of the bear, comforted by the thought that little bruin will soon be born again, captured, reared and killed again, in an ongoing cycle of reincarnation and 'golly! didn't he taste good!' (*NC:258*). The body of the bear is ingested to fortify the tribe, just as the image of Woman is appropriated to edify patriarchy. And although the bear will be offered the most delectable titbits of its own anatomy, 'the liver, the sweetbreads, the tender meat of loin and buttock' (*NC:258*), which will be laid before the bleeding head, it will be unable to participate in the banquet. In the same way, Woman is offered the opportunity to partake in the pleasures of her own flesh, and yet denied the right to enjoy the feast, because symbolically her head has also been severed; that is, she has been deprived of autonomy. In this way Woman has been transformed 'from living flesh to dead meat' (*SW:138*) to be devoured by the hegemonic appetite.

One evening, for want of anything better to do, Walser teaches the bear to dance. As the bear begins to get the hang of it and as the two circle the Shaman's hut, Walser remembers how he used to dance with another predator, how he used to dance a . . .

“Waltz!” he cried. And then, with glad recognition: “Walser! Me, Walser!”

(NC:259). Walser's head is clearing day by day, and he is increasingly visited by memories, although he does not always recognise them as such, since the Shaman is always present to interpret his visions according to his own complex cosmology. On one occasion, when the Shaman presents Walser with a particularly distasteful dinner, in an atmosphere thick with the smoke of burning herbs that procure visions, Walser embarks on a trip down a culinary memory lane which has him rambling out loud about hamburgers, fish soup, eel pie and mash. The Shaman interprets this recital as a sign that Walser is ready for his shamanising drum. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that Walser begins to accept the fact that he must be a gifted dreamer, as this is the only explanation of his difference that is available to him, and yet, at times, he cannot help but question the answers provided by the Shaman's comprehensive metaphysics. This has him wondering: ‘Is there, as I sometimes imagine, a world beyond this place?’ (NC:260). It is, of course, useless to ask the Shaman if a world beyond the tribe exists. The Shaman knows that such a world exists, and he visits it often during the trances for which he has a hereditary gift. On such trips he finds the air above Transbaikalia ‘thick with flying shamans!’ (NC:261). And, because the Shaman does not distinguish between fact and fiction, it seems only natural to him that the world of Walser's visions is the dream world that he too frequents. This would be the end of the discussion, according to the Shaman, but these answers no longer satisfy Walser. At such times

he [will] sink into troubled introspection. So Walser [acquires] an ‘inner life’, a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that [is] entirely

his own. If, before he set out with the circus in pursuit of the bird-woman, he [was] like a house to let, furnished, now he [is] tenanted at last, even if the interior tenant [is] insubstantial as a phantom and sometimes [disappears] for days at a time. (NC:260-261)

The Walser who interviews Fevvers at the beginning of Part 1 is described as a man of action who has a talent for finding himself at the right place at the right time, and yet it is almost ‘as if he himself [is] an *objet trouvé*, for, subjectively, *himself* he never [finds], since it [is] not his *self* which he [seeks]’ (NC:10). This is because, in the past, Walser has merely slotted into the ready-made roles which society has had to offer: he stumbles upon life as a journalist, and so he becomes the archetypal spectator; Colonel Kearney appoints him a clown, and so he becomes the archetypal spectacle. Now, for the first time in his life, he questions his position, the position of visionary dreamer which is imposed upon him by the Shaman, who is an incarnation of patriarchal authority. In so doing, Walser begins to articulate a position for himself that exists outside of patriarchal prescription, outside the closed system which is life according to the Shaman, and thus he begins to hatch from the shell of his socialisation. Walser’s new-found faculty for ‘speculation and surmise’ is displayed when he wanders down to the railway track one day and encounters a little tribal boy watching the smoke of a departing train disappear into the distance. Walser recognises the look of yearning on the child’s face and he is reminded of the boy he once was, watching the departing ships in San Francisco Bay. In this way Walser remembers the sea, and he knows that the Shaman could never understand the extent of the landless wilderness, having lived so far inland all his life. And so Walser realises that the Shaman ‘[can] not interpret *this* vision; he [can] not decide what the sea [*means*]’ (NC:261). Henceforth, Walser will begin to interpret his own dream material, which means that he will begin to experience ‘his experience *as* experience’ (NC:10). Very

soon, he will be a new man, and not just a fit mate for the new woman, but a serious person.

While Walser begins to recover his self in the bosom of the tribe and in spite of the Shaman's efforts, Fevvers and Lizzie are approaching the village. It is New Year's Eve and, as if to suggest that Fevvers' fortune is about to change, the two stumble upon some frail violets, Fevvers' lucky flowers, growing among the roots of a big pine. Fevvers' heart, already touched by the sight of the violets, is further warmed by the welcoming vision of human habitation:

A village! Homes! The signs of the human hand keeping the wilderness at bay! Life seemed to her to have been held in suspension during their wanderings in the solitude; now the solitude existed no longer and things were about to pick up again. She might even find bleach or dye in this village, might she not, and start to put herself back together again.
(NC:285)

Before this, as they are making their cumbersome way towards this very destination, Lizzie comments on Fevvers' loss of glamour and confidence since they have left St Petersburg: 'You're fading away, as if it was always nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim' (NC:280). For, as Sally Robinson observes, a 'spectacle without an audience is no spectacle at all' (1991:130), and this is one of the reasons why Fevvers' masquerade is coming undone. Now, however, things seem to be looking up for the Cockney giantess, close to a prospective audience as they are, and within reach of who-knows-what cosmetic possibilities.

Once in the village, the two women approach the most official-looking building, which turns out to be the god-hut. The interior is ill-lit by a primitive lamp hanging from the ceiling and seemingly deserted, except for what appears to be an idol crouching in the corner – an idol wearing a white shirt, the front of which is stained

with dried egg-liquor, and now beginning to converse in fluent American: ‘Whence cometh thou? Whither goeth thou?’ (NC:287). Lizzie hears something growling under the table and grabs hold of it; the bear, whose sacrifice has been interrupted, strikes back, and as the two begin to scuffle they knock over the table and bang against the idol in the corner, who in turn topples against another, similarly-clad idol. In the chaos that ensues, the lamp is extinguished and Fevvers, joining in the *mêlée*, begins to wrestle with someone unmistakably human who, as she ascertains when she makes a grab in the dark, is male. As the two women struggle against what seems to them to be the ‘ghosts of a team of morris dancers’ (NC:288), someone speaks in a strange, guttural language. This person must be asking for some light to be cast on the situation, because presently an odd glow radiates from the corner of the god-hut. The fuss dies down and Fevvers sees that she is straddling Walser, although he is almost unrecognisable in his shamanising outfit, with a long, pale beard hanging halfway down his chest. Even stranger than this is the vatic stare in the grey eyes, which are void of any scepticism. Fevvers feels ‘the hairs on her nape rise’ when she sees that he is looking at her as if, ‘horror of horrors, she [is] perfectly natural – natural, but abominable’ (NC:289). In Walser’s ‘phosphorescent eye’ (NC:289), Fevvers is reduced to a spectacle, and as he begins to chant ‘Only a bird in a gilded cage’ (NC:289) as if it were some kind of dirge, she knows the song is meant to do her harm. Under the influence of the Shaman, who has begun to drum an exorcism, Walser believes Fevvers to be a spectral visitant from the other world, and as such she is naturalised into the position traditionally reserved for Woman. Now both men attempt to banish her to what they perceive to be the distant country of her origins, which is the realm of the eternal feminine:

Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though

it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea. (NC:289)

For Walser and the Shaman, who are both used to hallucinations, view Fevvers as an emanation of their imaginations, and as such she has no place in this world. To emphasize that Fevvers is being reduced to an idea by the male gaze, Carter writes that the Cockney giantess sees herself in Walser's eyes, 'swimming into definition, like the image on photographic paper; but instead of Fevvers, she [sees] two perfect miniatures of a dream' (NC:290). The fact that Fevvers comes face to face with patriarchal authority here is suggested by Carter's allusion to both Herr M. and the Grand Duke. Fevvers sees herself as 'the image on photographic paper', as if she were nothing more than one of the ghostly ideas of Woman which the fraudulent photographer sells to an unsuspecting public. At the same time, she is confronted with diminutive replicas of herself, as if she were indeed only a toy in the Grand Duke's collection, a toy that has been robbed of its singularity and can now be reproduced. It is hardly surprising that, under these circumstances, Fevvers feels her 'outlines waver'; she feels herself 'trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes' (NC:290), compelled as she is to contemplate life as a bird in a gilded cage. In that moment, she suffers the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (NC:290).

Lizzie, who observes her foster-daughter's predicament, urges Fevvers to show them her wings, the site of her singularity. Fevvers shrugs off her furs and spreads, but on these men, accustomed to visions as they are, her plumage has no effect. Then, however, the door opens and the rest of the villagers enter the god-hut, and, as Fevvers feels their eyes on her back, she tentatively flutters one wing. This has the

desired effect: ‘her plumage rippled in the wind of wonder, their expelled breaths. Ooooooh!’ (NC:290). As this marvellous gust of admiration wafts through the stale air of the god-hut, Fevvers is revived. It is as if she is on stage again, as if the primitive lamps in the god-hut are indeed ‘footlights’ beyond which the eyes of the audience fix upon her ‘with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that [tell] her who she [is]’ (NC:290). The Cockney Venus, it seems, will not be relegated to the suffocating darkness of the realm of the eternal feminine and, as she basks in ‘the shine of the lamps . . . like stage-lights’ (NC:290), she reclaims her subjectivity. Fevvers is once again ready to play the masquerade and to present herself to her audience as a spectacle: ‘She [puts] on a brilliant, artificial smile’ and sinks down ‘in a curtsy towards the door, offering herself to the company as if she were a gigantic sheaf of gladioli’ (NC:291). Walser scrambles to his feet; a haze has cleared from his countenance and Fevvers sees he is not the man he used to be: ‘some other hen [has] hatched him out’ (NC:291). And if she feels any anxiety regarding Walser’s reconstructed identity, it is soon abolished when he approaches her, with wonder radiating from his eyes and expressed in every syllable: ‘What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?’ (NC:291). For Walser is no longer the sceptical journalist intent on solving the feminine enigma, nor is he the Shaman’s apprentice who would expel Fevvers from the dimensions of this world; instead he acknowledges her singularity, and, on hearing this, she bats her lashes at him, ‘beaming, exuberant, newly armed. / “That’s the way to start the interview!” she [cries]. “Get out your pencil and we’ll begin!”’ (NC:291).

It is indeed a new beginning, and as they start their interview afresh Fevvers fills in some of the gaps in her earlier narrative while she washes herself in a pot of water

from the samovar in the Shaman's hut and a naked Walser waits on the Shaman's brass bed. Walser notices that Fevvers indeed appears not to have a navel, but he is 'no longer in the mood to draw any definite conclusions from this fact' (NC:292). For Walser no longer wishes to 'puff' (NC:11) the mystery that is Fevvers; he no longer desires to contain her within a neatly defined idea of herself. And Fevvers, in this new relationship with this new man, no longer needs to circumvent the rules that govern the old game, and so she can allow her mask to slip – which is exactly what she does when she tells Walser: 'I'll play tricks on you no more' (NC:292). While Walser has been 'hatched out of the shell of unknowing' (NC:294), Fevvers has learnt 'that it is possible for her to be accepted as a woman, wings and all, without becoming the embodiment of an abstract idea or a freak' (Gamble 1997:165-166), and so she 'becomes herself' (Carter in Haffenden 1985:88). In this context, Carter relates an American friend's observation that although everyone changes throughout the novel, Fevvers does not 'so much change as expand', a notion which Carter confirms by adding that Fevvers 'does seem to get more pneumatic' (in Haffenden 1985:88). The Cockney Venus has regained her confidence without the application of make-up or peroxide – but this does not mean she has no more tricks up her sleeve, as Walser discovers, smothered 'in feathers and pleasure' (NC:294) as he is, for one question still begs to be answered: 'Fevvers . . . why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world"?' (NC:294). This final twist in a tale told by the most unreliable of narrators suggests, perhaps, that although the performance has to end, it does not mean that all the questions need to be answered, for Carter does not present us with a finite symbol of femininity. Instead we have Fevvers, who does not submit to any concrete definitions of herself. And so the deceived husband's query is met only with the wild

abandon of uncontrolled laughter, which flies in the face of restriction and oppression. The novel thus ends with an open-ended question carried forward on a gale of universal mirth as the ‘spiralling tornado of Fevvers’ laughter [begins] to twist and shudder across the entire globe’ (NC:295).

ⁱ Elaine Jordan describes Irigaray’s notion of mimicry as follows: ‘acting out the ascribed identity so as to expose it as playing out a role which could be changed, to call into question the system in which it plays its part’ (1994:194).

ⁱⁱ *Schreck* is the German word for ‘nightmare’, while *schrecklich* means ‘terrible’ or ‘dreadful’. These words aptly describe the fiendish Madame Schreck and her ghastly museum of woman monsters.

ⁱⁱⁱ Madame Schreck’s museum is perhaps emblematic of the Victorian preoccupation with the freakish. *The Tom Thumb Archive* describes how a man named Phineas Taylor Barnum reaped enormous profits in the nineteenth century ‘from exhibiting a number of “human curiosities” (like Tom Thumb) whom he presented ostensibly for their educational value’ (2002: para.1).

^{iv} Carter uses this term in reference to Monroe in a 1980 piece written for *New Society* entitled ‘Hal Ashby: *Being There*’ (1980:369).

^v The mad scientist appears in various guises in *Nights at the Circus*. Fevvers has already encountered him in the character of the mystical Mr Rosencreutz, who tried to use her as the main ingredient of the *elixum vitae* which he believed would rejuvenate him. Later in the novel, this representative of

patriarchal authority will feature as both a toymaker and a shaman. The mad scientist is also recognisable in Carter's other novels. In *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) he is the sinister toymaker, Uncle Philip Flower, while, in *Heroes and Villains* (1969), he enforces his authority as the drop-out Professor, Donally, who is the shaman of the tattooed and painted Barbarians. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), he is the fanatic Doctor of the title, who creates reality-distorting machines fuelled by the secretions of caged lovers.

^{vi} The Duke's collection of eggs is reminiscent of the jewelled eggs created by the Russian Court jeweller, Carl Peter Fabergé, for the Russian Imperial family at the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: demythologising and/or remythologising?

Angela Carter says that she is ‘in the demythologising business’ (1983b:38), and that all myths are ‘extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree’ (1983b:38). And yet, as Susanne Schmid points out, ‘every act of deconstruction entails a process of reconstructing something else. In this sense, every text, however anti-mythic it may be, still contains a mythic dimension’ (1996:155). In her creation of Fevvers, the winged circus star, Carter does, after all, create a New Woman, or a new symbol of femininity, which could be read as a new myth. On the one hand, the creation of her Cockney Venus is emblematic of her demythologising process in that she reappropriates Guillaume Apollinaire’s idea of Sade’s Juliette as the New Woman, secularises his idealised image of femininity, which is described in such high-flown rhetoric, and puts her to work in the service of women. That is, she proposes a redefined feminine identity that exists outside of the subject-object dichotomy, and creates an autonomous female hero who is able to function in the material world. In this way Carter does demythologise an existing idea of the New Woman, yet she is also presenting us with her version of the New Woman. This could be interpreted as remythologising, as Susanne Schmid observes: ‘the reader is presented with a new archetype, the bird woman Fevvers’ (1996:152).

Since Carter herself states that she puts ‘new wine in old bottles’ (1983b:37), the question here is perhaps not whether she infuses old vehicles with new meanings but, instead, whether these new meanings are merely new myths, which, like the old ones,

are ahistorical and claim to convey eternal truths. In other words, is Fevvers just ‘a new archetype’, as Schmid (1996:152) says, or does Carter’s feminist strategy succeed in debunking old myths without creating new ones that seek to universalise feminine experience? Carter argues that all ‘archetypes are spurious’ (SW:6), and that the

nature of the individual is not resolved into but is ignored by . . . archetypes, since the function of the archetype is to diminish the unique ‘I’ in favour of a collective . . . being which cannot, by reason of its very nature, exist as such because an archetype is only an image that has got too big for its boots and bears, at best, a fantasy relation to reality. (SW:6)

If Fevvers is indeed an archetype, in spite of Carter’s vehement condemnation of all archetypes, it means that she is a representation of a universal feminine experience that diminishes ‘the unique “I” in favour of a collective . . . being’ (SW:6). Should this be the case, then Carter demythologises existing codes of feminine behaviour, which have as their figureheads various mythic versions of women, only to remythologise by creating a new mythic version of women that presents itself as eternal and immutable. If this is so, it means that she goes against her professed intentions, and contradicts her subversive and anti-essentialist proclamations about the duplicitous nature of myth. Nevertheless, in creating a winged woman Carter has, as Ricarda Schmidt points out, created ‘a new signifier which is still without a corresponding signified in the world outside the novel’ (1989:73), and this could suggest that perhaps Fevvers does, at best, have only ‘a fantasy relation to reality’ (SW:6).

In an interview with Carter, Anna Katsavos asked if Fevvers ‘is out to create her own myth’ (1994:3), to which Carter replied: ‘No, Fevvers is out to earn a living’ (1994:3) – a statement which implies that Carter’s *aerialiste* has more than a fanciful relation to the material world. In Chapter 3, I discuss the fact that Fevvers is different from her

literary ancestors who are exiled to the realm of the eternal feminine by the dictates of a reductionist essentialism. For Fevvers is, as Carter says, ‘a metaphor come to life’ (in Haffenden 1985:93), and so she is both symbol and woman, fact and fiction, defined by her humanity and her wings. In creating a character that is ‘very literally a winged spirit’ (Carter in Katsavos 1994:3), Carter comments on the cultural construction of the ideal woman, who is a male fantasy, ill-equipped to function in the material world: ‘How inconvenient to have wings, and by extension, how very, very difficult to be born so out of key with the world’ (Carter in Katsavos 1994:3).

Roland Barthes argues that ‘the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth* All that is needed is to use it as a departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth’ (1993:135). Fevvers can indeed be read as an artificial myth, debunking essentialist notions of the feminine identity as biologically determined, rather than culturally variable. In this sense Carter does remythologise, but not by creating another feminine archetype. If, as Barthes states (1993:135), the creation of such an artificial myth uses existing myth as its departure point, then Fevvers, whom Lorna Sage describes as ‘a fictive mutant’ (1994a:47), fulfils this prerequisite. Not only is she a version of Apollinaire’s New Woman, but she is also, as Sage observes, both ‘Leda *and* the swan’, as well as ‘the Winged Victory of Samothrace’ (1994a:47). And Carter does take the signification of these various representations as the foundation of her ‘third semiological chain’, the first terms ‘of a second myth’ (Barthes 1993:135), a strategy which she describes as ‘putting new wine in old bottles’ so that ‘the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode’ (Carter 1983b:37).

In creating an artificial myth that does not present itself as either eternal or immutable, Carter comments on the artifice of gendered identity as culturally determined, neither natural nor universal. By playing the masquerade and producing herself as the archetypal feminine spectacle or image of Woman, Fevvers herself reappropriates an existing myth of femininity, which posits the female as object of the male gaze. In masquerading as an idea of Woman, Fevvers becomes an artificial myth because she temporarily incarnates an archetypal femininity. But this is just a performance, a production, a publicity stunt, for Fevvers is also a spectator, an agent of self-representation whose public persona is a finely judged act. And so she is both fact and fiction, a real woman and an artificial myth of femininity. In this way, 'gender becomes a performance rather than an essence' (Robinson 1991:120), and the myth of a natural femininity is debunked. In its place is an artificial myth that engages with the hegemonic construction of femininity only to disrupt it. This can be read as a remythologising, because 'this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology' (Barthes 1993:135), but it is ultimately a demythologising, because myth is robbed of its god-given status and exposed as man-made, so that if, as Barthes states, 'the very principle of myth' is that 'it transforms history into nature' (1993:129), then this demythologising serves to expose 'nature' as 'history', that is, as culturally determined.

The fact that Carter is not out to create another feminine archetype in the figure of her Cockney Venus is also evident from one of the conversations that Fevvers and Lizzie have as they trek across the Siberian wastes in search of the amnesiac Walser. Carter says that she purposefully places her characters in the wilderness so that they 'can discuss philosophical concepts without distractions' (in Haffenden 1985:87). This

particular discussion takes place as Fevvers and Lizzie approach the village of the bear-worshippers, where Walser has found sanctuary as an apprentice shaman. Fevvers, whose masquerade has begun to unravel in the isolated wilds, feels increasingly euphoric as they draw near the wooden houses, the ‘signs of the human hand keeping the wilderness at bay’ (NC:285) and she is convinced that her beloved Walser is waiting there for her. It is New Year’s Eve and the change in circumstances has inspired the now hopeful Fevvers – she bursts forth in a flood of rhetoric about the coming century and her own significance as a symbol of the New Woman:

And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! All the women will have wings, the same as I The dolls’ house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed (NC:285)

This utopian vision of women’s liberation in the twentieth century is indeed enticing. It is also reminiscent of Apollinaire’s effusive description of Juliette as the New Woman ‘who will have wings and who will renew the world’ (SW:79). In an interview with Anna Katsavos, Carter describes her response to Apollinaire’s flight of fancy regarding the future of female emancipation: ‘And I read this, and like a lot of women, when you read this kind of thing, you get this real “bulge” and think, “How wonderful . . . How terrific,” and then I thought, “Well no; it’s not going to be as easy as that”’ (in Katsavos 1994:3). Carter’s reaction to Apollinaire is echoed by Lizzie, who interrupts her foster-daughter’s zealous proclamation with some materialist insight: ‘It’s going to be more complicated than that You improve your analysis, girl, and *then* we’ll discuss it’ (NC:286). In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter’s materialist perspective can occasionally be heard reverberating in Lizzie’s voice of reason, and it does not include utopian visions of a shining tomorrow when all ‘women will have

wings' (NC:285), for, as Lizzie tells the Escapee earlier on: 'To pin your hopes upon the future is to consign those hopes to a hypothesis, which is to say, a nothingness' (NC:239). What we have to contend with is not the future perfect, but 'the long shadow of the *past historic* . . . that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present in the first place' (NC:240).

In the light of these statements, Fevvers' next rhapsodic wave of rhetoric, which has not ebbed in spite of Lizzie's input, seems infinitely frivolous, and cannot be taken seriously, since she gushes on about a 'bright day' when she will no longer be 'a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm' (NC:286). Lizzie does not even dignify this last remark with a response, and in her loaded silence one can almost imagine a similar reaction from Carter to the suggestion that Fevvers is another archetype, or 'female paradigm' (NC:286).

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