

## Desire, disgust, and dead women: Angela Carter's re-writing women's fatal scripts

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Angela Carter's writing is crucial to the rebirth of Gothic horror in the late twentieth century, and an impetus to read, or re-read, myth, fairytale, and the work of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, each significant, acknowledged influences. Carter's work deconstructs the consistently replayed, cautionary narrative of myth and fairytale in which (mainly young) women are first represented as objects of a prurient idolatry, then sacrificed to reinstate the purity and balance which their constructed presence apparently disturbs. Carter shows it is possible and essential to tell other stories. When she turns on her horror influences, she continues this exposé of the representation of women as objects of desire and disgust, springing as it does from ontological insecurity and deep-seated confusions concerning sex and power. Revising and rewriting constraining narratives, Carter's work draws us into the rich confusions of the language, the psychology, the physical entrapments and artifices and the constraining myths, which both Poe and Lovecraft play out through their representations of women, and which her work re-enacts to explode and re-write. As a late twentieth-century feminist, Carter critiques, parodies and exposes the underlying sexual terrors, the desire and disgust fuelling representations of women as variously dead or deadly. Reading early work, 'The Snow Child' (1979), and 'The Man Who Loved a Double Bass' (1962/95) and 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974) we move to re-reading parts of her later work including *Nights at the Circus* (1987). Imaginatively re-stirring the potion of myth, fairytale and horror, Carter's women reject the roles of victims, puppets, pawns, of deadly sexual predators or hags, defining and seizing their own sexuality and agency, having the last laugh.

### Horror, fairytale, myth

Angela Carter creates her radical work partly in response to the material around her: 'I found most of my raw material in the lumber room of the Western European imagination' (1983: 19), and her own reactions against constructions and representations of women, through which she became aware of constraining versions and expectations:

it was, therefore, primarily through my sexual and emotional life that I was radicalised – that I first became truly aware of the difference between how I was and how I was supposed to be, or expected to be (1983: 72)

Linden Peach comments (1998) that Angela Carter's stories 'deconstruct the processes that produce social structures and shared meanings, evident, for example [...] in the way in which the manifestation of the female body in her works disrupts the social construction of women as Woman' (Peach, 1998: 4).

Fairytales are a rich source to plunder and reimagine in order to tell different stories about performance, vulnerability, control and defiance so, 'Carter, like many feminist critics, recognizes fairytales as a reactionary form that inscribed a misogynistic ideology' (Peach, 1998: 74). The brothers Grimm, Perrault, and sources in tales of the women whose work they retold, reappear, reworked throughout her novels, short stories, poetry, drama and critical pieces. Carter acknowledges then writes back against her influences, including those of horror:

I'd always been fond of Poe and Hoffman [sic] – Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious –

mirrors; the externalized self; forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects. (Carter, Afterword to *Fireworks*, 1974: 132-33)

Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft are our focus here, although Hoffmann's influence on Carter has been explored by Paulina Palmer (2017). Poe's own dark mixture of the romantic and the salacious offers a model for a deep-seated cultural fascination with sex and death in which women are desired, destroyed, and desired even more exquisitely when they are post mortem, for as he explains:

the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world — and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover. (Poe, 1846: 165)

Myths of masculinity and men in power get short shrift in Carter's work. She refuses to replay victim rescue narratives such as that of Andromeda tied on the black rocks off Jaffa, awaiting the slaving sea beast, saved by Perseus, while in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), that favourite tale of Renaissance artists and twentieth-century poets, the rape of Leda by Zeus metamorphosed into a swan gets the comic treatment. The lumpy homemade phallic swan in the makeshift cellar theatre reflects the fantasies of Uncle Phillip, arch patriarch of toys who treats people as puppets. The scene ridicules without reducing the terror involved for Melanie, unwilling actor in a version of a disturbing powerful rape myth managed by unlicensed godliness. This is a familiar trajectory for Angela Carter's Gothic horror, which utilises parody and critique without dissipating the damaging horror of the source.

My fascination with Carter's horror began with *The Magic Toyshop*, which undermines myth's licensing of rape fantasy and woman as manipulated object (Wisker, 1984). This developed into locating her engagement with the masters of horror, particularly Poe (1997, 2006), and latterly into probing resonances and responses to work by H.P. Lovecraft (1928), who celebrated Poe and his influence (Wisker, 2015). Carter's Gothic and horror have been increasingly widely explored, often in response to 'The Company of Wolves' (Crofts, 1998), difficulties re-writing the fairytales (Dunker, 1984) and in considering the female Gothic body (Mulvey-Roberts, 2016). It emerged as a popular theme in the recent Angela Carter conference organised by Marie Mulvey-Roberts and Charlotte Crofts in Bristol, where Carter studied and lived (2017).

Carter's earthiness and ridicule, which undermine without ever underestimating the perversity, violence and accompanying terror wielded by male mythic and economic power over women's bodies, run throughout her work. She exposes the control behind the cautionary tale and the destructive Otherising informing the treatment of women and sexual or romantic relations in myth, fairytale, and the work of Poe and Lovecraft. Julie Kristeva's (1988) and Helen Cixous' (1975) theories of the transfer of fear, as well as loathing and disgust onto the abject body of the constructed other is enlightening here. Kristeva talks of:

Our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront the 'demons', or the threat that apprehension generated by the protective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid 'us'. By recognising *our* uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, then there are no foreigners. (Kristeva, 1988: 192)

Working beyond Lacan and Freud, Kristeva and Cixous show this transfer as based on otherising elements of the self. It is a reflection which stares back at the one reflected, and onto which can be

loaded everything that terrifies and disgusts, everything produced from an abjected self to enable the self to move on, having offloaded onto another what both attracts and terrifies. In this respect, Carter's use of reflection, parody and performance are her vehicles of demystification, of debunking pomposity, abjection and perverse power alike. Her use of medieval and eighteenth-century originated bawdy earthiness, grotesque and carnival, punctures perverse pomposity, showing how we might construct and represent what we desire and fear, but we can also fly free from the constricting worldviews of those in power who would restrict freedom and development, as Fevvers, the winged aerialiste in *Nights at the Circus* (1987) realises when a teenager in Ma Nelson's friendly brothel:

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 forever. (39)

Romance is seen as potential entrapment. Carter revels in exposing and satirising such constraining myths, internalised and suffered by mainly female victims. Rape of the vulnerable and women's spiteful jealousy are also exposed, for example in 'The Snow Child' (1979).

### **'The Snow Child' (1979) – a miniature**

'Midwinter – invincible, immaculate' (193), so the story begins.

Carter replays and reveals the narrative trajectory of fairytale and myth in her own fairytale, 'The Snow Child' (1979). Like a tiny toy snowstorm paperweight, this miniature releases and lays bare, rather than restrains or civilises, a rape fantasy driven by male sexual power over a vulnerable, constructed female object. Aloft on their lovely horses, moving through the land they own, ride the Count and his indulged, beautiful wife. His lust drives him to conjure into being a snow child. Elemental tensions between his desire for the sexual victim of his dark fantasies and his wife's sexual jealousy wrench the rich clothes from the Countess and fling them onto the child. His fantasy dresses his vulnerable victim, makes her into what he desires, then, violating her, he kills her. In a trice, in just over a page, the rape of a child conjured from lust dissolves, traceless, into snow. The trajectory is familiar, commonplace, and in this tale it is pared to essentials: vulnerable child-woman, sex object constructed from the fantasy of a powerful man, violated and destroyed. But this is an Angela Carter story. Even here the erased event, the repressed tale, ends in a little comeback. Bowing, his stature and marital courtliness reinstated, the Count picks up from the snow a rose, all that remains of the girl, and hands it to his lovely wife, who drops it. 'It bites!' she said (194). Carter's ending splices horror and fairytale. As this powerful comeback shows, the girls and women in Angela Carter's work do not learn to fear, obey and remain static, the puppets are not confined to their elaborate boxes. She exposes and rewrites the reification and rape fantasies played out in fairytale and classic myth, then further reveals and undercuts the mysogyny in the great male horror writers, Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft.

### **Poe and Lovecraft – women and sex – desire, disgust and death**

Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, masters of horror, are major influences on Carter, who writes out of and back against their versions of sexual terrors which render the constructed, terrifying female as beautiful, deadly revenant (Poe), or vile hag, shameful, miscegenating grandmother coupling with sea creatures and bringing on humankind the wrath of the Elder gods, the end of the world (Lovecraft). Both of these extremes are products of imaginations roiling in sexual repression,

finding an outlet in reifying and variously destroying women. Carter imagined the origins and upbringing of Poe (born in Boston) and Lovecraft, whose Providence, Rhode Island she visited, exploring his context and his grave. She consulted their papers and letters, reimagining the sources of extreme responses to sex and women, which infuse their work.

When she homes in on the influential work of Poe and Lovecraft, Angela Carter draws us into the rich confusions of the language, the psychology, the physical entrapments and artifices, the constraining myths, which both authors play out through their representations of women, and which she re-enacts to expose, explode and re-write. Carter unpicks and challenges the fascination Poe and Lovecraft have with the myths of women as monstrous, vulnerable, enthralling (Lovecraft, 'Medusa's Coil', 1939), as deadly hags (Lovecraft, 'The Dreams in the Witch House, 1932, and 'The Dunwich Horror', 1928), as capable of luring travellers and students to hell, coupling with the devil or inhuman creatures (Lovecraft, 'The Shadow over Innsmouth', 1936) or as sirens, performative puppets, reified artistic objects and revenants (Poe, 'Berenice', 1835; 'The Oval Portrait', 1842; 'Ligeia', 1838; 'Eleanora', 1842).

Both Poe and Lovecraft were initially brought up as only children mainly by their mothers. Following his mother's death, Poe was adopted by the Allans (and temporarily moved to England) and Lovecraft was brought up by his (spinster) aunts. Poe's parents were in the theatre, as strolling players, and when his father died his mother continued to perform on the stage, nightly dying as Ophelia, and being reborn post performance. In her short story 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' (1985), Carter imagines the young Edgar hiding in a costume basket, fixated on linking beauty and sexuality with performance, death and the return of the beloved, a trope played out in 'Eleonora' (1842) and 'Ligeia' (1838).

Poe's horror is often melodramatic, emphasising the playing of roles, making it a fit choice for Hammer movies in the 1960s. Later, Lovecraft identifies his own debt to Poe, with a chapter on Poe's horror tales in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), where he calls Poe the 'deity and fountain-head of all modern diabolic fiction' (1927: 53). Lovecraft argues that Poe moves beyond earlier authors of horror because he refuses to conform to happy endings, avoids didacticism, and establishes psychological horror. Carter also finds and replays in her own writings the physical and psychological horror in the work of earlier authors, including Webster and Tourneur, the Jacobean revenge dramatists, and of course Shakespeare (see her 'John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' 1994).

Carter takes issue with the representation of evil, as well as of sex and sexuality, in both Poe and Lovecraft, saying of Poe that:

The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism. Character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural – and thus operates against the perennial human desire to believe the world as fact. ('Afterword' to *Fireworks* (1974: 122)

While of Lovecraft she notes that:

Lovecraft tacitly assumes that the 'unnameable' is the temporary embodiment of a free-form, cosmic evil like a blasting dew. This is a convention of the genre in which he works. Some of the consolatory quality of the tale of supernatural terror lies in this; that it removes evil from the realm of human practice and gives it the status of a visitation from another realm of being. It is an affliction. It is a possession. (Carter, 1998)

Her attack focuses first on their refusal to see evil as essentially human, a product of the human mind and behaviour. But she uses her skills of critical parody to perfection on their representations of sex as unnatural and demonic, leading to lasting disruption and disease of mind and body, of individual and generations, of women as the source of such tempting evil, and of their representation as manipulated performers. Carter undermines the destructive delusions of Poe, Lovecraft, myth and fairytale without underestimating the damage and terror, offering instead a balance between polarities, earthy realism, alongside high Gothic moments of horror and fantasy, and an energetic agency.

### **Carter and Poe –dead women, returned lovers.**

The version of Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft which Carter uncovers and dramatises exposes their representations of women, sexuality and sex as variously fascinating, lurking, terrifying and disgusting. She shows these two as masters of horror whose works fundamentally influence the genre, and as locked into both the idealisation of women and the sexual hang-ups of their age.

In 1977 in a television interview with Les Bedford, Carter defines Poe's influences on her work:

I have a kind of familial attachment to Poe. I've used him a lot decoratively, but never structurally. I don't know if that makes sense. [...] I've used a lot of the imagery from Poe. I say I've used it, I've used it as a starting point for imagery of my own. (Bedford with Carter, 1977)

For Poe, women are performative, objects of desire, and sex and death are inextricably linked, a response conditioned in his childhood and adulthood, losing both his mother, and his young wife/cousin. Poe himself appears as a character in 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' (1985), one of Carter's short stories in *Black Venus* (1985) and is a reminder of E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1816 'The Sandman' and Robert Wiene's (1920) *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. In this tale, young Edgar hides in the costume basket:

Now and then, as a great treat, if he kept quiet as a mouse, because he begged and pleaded so, he was allowed to stay in the wings and watch; the round-eyed baby saw that Ophelia could, if necessary, die twice nightly. All her burials were premature. (58)

After marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm, variously described as angelic and beautiful, 'a lady angelically beautiful in person, and not less beautiful in spirit' (Wagenknecht, 1963: 183), Poe witnessed his young wife wasting away with tuberculosis. Women, beauty and allure are linked with death in Poe, and Carter responds directly to the elision, to the underlying values and representations of women in his work.

'The Oval Portrait' (1842) has a male artist painting a female model, who slowly fades and dies as the portrait becomes more lifelike, as if it is draining her. Carter replays this deadly danger of the male gaze as a warning to young women in 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979), where, in a Bluebeard's castle, an impoverished young wife on her wedding night finds herself reflected in a myriad of mirrors in which 'A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewling gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside' (17). Poe's poem 'Annabel Lee' (1849), which deals with another young woman doomed to an early death, has echoes in the figures of the emotionally unstable woman, the Ophelia-obsessed Annabel whose life ends in suicide, and her husband, Lee, in Carter's novel *Love* (1971).

Poe's equation of sex and death can be seen in how women are portrayed in his fiction: as performing, manipulated objects, their allure lasting beyond seeming death. In his stories, often a woman's power comes back to haunt the one who outlasted or killed her, in the form of a ghostly embodiment of a second wife, or a returned spectral self ('Eleanora', 1842; 'Ligeia', 1838).

### **Carter and Lovecraft – disgusting spawning, formless evil**

While Poe's fascination is with idealised, beautiful, dead women, Lovecraft has no such fascination, only fear and disgust. His response to and representation of women is based on distaste at sex and procreation, which expresses itself in miscegenation. Lovecraft's horror focuses on the culpability of women duped and overwhelmed by alien others, who produce spawn debasing any line of inheritance and purity. Lovecraft's women are guilty of coupling with the devil, apes, fishy folk, Elder gods, and bringing unsuspecting ruin on individuals and humankind. His world of horror, his weird, sees individual acts as part of the grander plot from the Elder gods beyond the dark skies, in the ocean depths, the above, beyond, behind and beneath. The leaky door of this betrayal of humankind to eventual destruction is the weakness of women. Lovecraft's women are not beautiful and seductive, even Marceline in 'Medusa's Coil' (1939) is overblown, and finally recognised as a huge black snake inhabiting a human body. Mostly his women are hags, mothers to monsters, whose deformity renders them disgustingly much less than human, and terrifying, dangerous. If Lovecraft enacts women's sexual actions as disgusting, so he also depicts sex as disgusting. Exploring Lovecraft's early reading of the Puritans and acknowledgment in his papers and letters that he found sexuality debasing and degenerate, Bruce Lord (2004) argues that Lovecraft 'places sex in direct opposition to intellect and the pursuit of intellectual ends' (2004: online) S.T. Joshi notes that at age eight, when reading about sex, Lovecraft decided it was not of interest and instead equated restraint and intellect with human development. Lovecraft argued that sex was:

a mechanism which I rather despised or at least thought non-glamorous because of its purely animal nature & separation from such things as intellect & beauty – & all the drama was taken out of it. (Joshi, 2001: 30)

And that restraint and Puritan behaviour were vastly preferable. Carter challenges the sexual terrors which lurk or spew out in Lovecraft's work. Her linking of his weird horror, and a kind of hysterical sexual repression emerges in her wonderful image:

Is it any wonder, when evil finally manifests itself, that it does so as an obscene and huge ejaculation? 'Out of the fungus-ridden earth steamed up a vaporous corpse-light, yellow and diseased, which bubbled and lapped to a gigantic height in vague outlines, half human and half monstrous' ('The Shattered House'). The doctor who posthumously refrigerated himself leaves behind him, when the machinery breaks down, pools of 'something unutterable', a ghastly pus. 'A burst of multitudinous and leprous life – a loathsome, night-spawned flood of organic corruption [...] seething, stewing, surging, bubbling like serpent's slime' ('The Lurking Fear'). On examination, this stream proves composed of uncountable thousands of dwarfed, monkey things, oddly reminiscent of the teeming homunculi early researchers observed when they put semen under the micro-scope. This pus-like matter turns out to be the last of an old Dutch colonial family. Evolution has wound them backwards; they have reverted to their own seminal fluid in three generations. (Carter, 1968: 443-7)

Evil in Carter is real; it imprisons, tortures, kills bodies and minds, and one emanation of it is the perverse dehumanisation and objectification of women as puppets, performers, sexual objects for consumption and destruction in the service of lust, self aggrandisement, and bizarre beliefs. In her use of bawdy and satirical comedy in the midst of prurience and violence acting as idolatory, Angela

Carter exposes and undermines Poe's idolatry and preference for ideas, man-manipulated idealised women, and Lovecraft's embrace of the weird and utter abjection of women as culpable of betraying humankind.

Both authors write about the kind of voyeuristic ownership enabled when constructing an artistic image of a beautiful woman. Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' (1842) and Lovecraft and Zealia Bishop's 'Medusa's Coil' (1939) reveal the need to control the representation of woman, and in the latter tale, women's deviant sexual allure and power, as Marceline is possessed by a disgusting black snake, and the focus on her Otherness (she is from New Orleans, and a Creole) leaks Lovecraft's racism through his sexism. Both tales replay without irony the power and sexual ownership which is instead exposed and critiqued in Robert Browning's powerfully unsettling poem 'My Last Duchess' (1842), where a tyrannous, obsessive nobleman owns the right to display a portrait of his dead wife, whose smiles were jealously owned by him, and whose breath was stopped along with her smiles. Browning's Duke has power over the lasting image, the woman's sexual identity, life and death. Neither Poe nor Lovecraft ironise this kind of compulsive love and control through reification. But like Browning, Carter does.

Carter reacts against the deification, artistic reification, and then sacrifice of woman as sexual object constructed from male heated fantasy in a wide range of her work, including 'The Snow Child' (1979), 'Unicorn' (1964), the short story 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974), Uncle Philip's sadistic control of Melanie as sexualised child puppet in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), and both Christian Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke's perverse representation of Fevers as goddess or owned art object, each constructed from their heated brains, each to be manipulated and either petrified or destroyed in *Nights at the Circus* (1987).

Poe's treatment of the horror of incarceration and bodily destruction ('The Cask of Amontillado', 1846; 'The Pit and the Pendulum, 1842) reminds us of the incarceration of women as forms of living dead dolls for the sexual pleasure of punters visiting Madame Schreck's brothel in *Nights at the Circus* (1987), and the short story 'The Scarlet House' (1977). Houses are engulfing, locations of entrapment, torture and domestic incarceration. Poe's representation of the house, heredity and family as a deadly, incestuous trap in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) is echoed in that of the house of the puppeteer Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), where incest is actually a way of fighting back, undermining his power. Carter also re-writes 'The Fall of the House of Usher'(1839), by turning the story backwards on itself in 'Through the Text Backwards: The Resurrection of the House of Usher'(1988), in which Carter's reversal of the death of the cursed incestuous twins, and the destruction of the lowering family house, built over a dark tarn, re-enacts the revivification of the dead beloved, that favourite Poe trope emphasising both the inevitability of their demise, and yet ending on a note of uneasy threatened calm.

### **'The Man Who Loved a Double Bass' (1962)**

Poe's reification and idolatry as well as Lovecraft's disgust at miscegenation also lurk behind the early 'The Man Who Loved a Double Bass' (1962). Carter's story is of an ill-fated love for a double bass, a curvy wooden musical object caressed, played, slept with by a travelling musician in the Fens. Just by imaginatively turning the loved one into a wooden double bass, which can never refuse his advances, she emphasises the reification of woman as sex object. The musician adores and sleeps with his double bass, a fetishistic set of behaviours tolerated by the rest of the group. Jameson, the transient double bass player, offloads his sexual needs for a static, faceless, limbless, female companion onto the double bass herself, Lola, his permanent companion. She comes to life from wood under the caresses of his fingers on her strings, and is bought appropriate drinks by the rest of the band.

Her shape was that of a full-breasted, full-hipped woman, recalling certain primitive effigies of the Mother Goddess so gloriously, essentially feminine was she, stripped of irrelevancies of head and limbs. (3)

The influences of Carter's teenage years, which saw fights between mods and rockers down South – Clacton, Brighton and Eastbourne, play out through her work here with the warring rival posers in the pub where the band play. First, the jealous destruction of the wooden double bass, smashed into shavings after turmoil in the Fenland pub, and then the musician's bereft, desperate, guilt ridden suicide play up and simultaneously expose and ridicule the sexual perversion of such idolatry. Lola is described as 'firewood', 'splinters', her case a 'coffin' emptied of the pieces of her 'corpse' (p. 9).

### **'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974) and *Nights at the Circus* (1987)**

Carter's 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974) and her mature, marvellous, later novel, *Nights at the Circus* (1987) take the idolatry, reification, possession and preference for dead women into the context of people as puppets, puppets as people, and brothels as galleries of the living dead. This may be seen as a response to Poe's fixation with the untimely death of constructed beauties such as the narrator's cousin 'Berenice' (1835), whose grave clothes appear to suggest she survives her interment, whose teeth are collected post mortem in a box, and 'Ligeia' (1848), where the possession is by an undead woman whose eternal longevity is both sexualised and controlled.

In 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974), Carter interjects in this deadly, prurient idolatry with a vampire doll fed up with being manipulated and playing out the dark terrors and fantasies of punters, turning into a living woman with a will of her own, master of her own sexuality. Much more dangerous than Lola, the wooden double bass, Lady Purple is part of a mass fantasy, as the punters collude with the man who manipulates and created her and her cruel tale. 'The Loves of Lady Purple' is an exposé of sadistic sexual fantasy, since the puppet is a construct of an eternal whore, men's fetish and fantasy, an object of desire and disgust manipulated nightly to perform whoring roles. Born from the fevered brain of the Asiatic Professor, playing on the fevered brains of the punters, she is dressed up for their fantasies, forced to perform their fantasies, and then punished for this performance, hung up and put away. This enacts Kristeva's argument concerning Otherising, and abjection (1988). Sexual perversities and the dehumanising of women unite, grown from a total lack of self-awareness of their origins in the men's minds. Her eyes, rubies, her mother of pearl teeth in a permanent smile, Lady Purple cannot speak, but the Professor, his voice of fur and honey (44), speaks through her. She is 'contagious as evil', forced to enact terrible sexual and violent deeds while performing the story of 'her' life, written by the Professor, composed of a series of performances of desire, in her 'miraculous inhumanity' (48), representing the 'petrification of a universal whore' (47), visiting men 'like the plague' (47). With the utilisation of baroque instruments for sexual torture, she is the 'quintessence of eroticism' (43). As a marionette, all her movements are 'calculations in an angular geometry of sexuality' (44), brought to life by the Professor's skilful manipulation. She is larger than life, infecting those who desired her, and is finally, herself, punished in the show, because this then exorcises the evil, having laid it on her, and all involved can both enjoy the perverse show, and feel exonerated at her demise. But the puppet, behaving like a woman, performing deeds which feed from and punish the fervid imagination, responds to the Professor's kiss like some anti-romantic Sleeping Beauty. Her artificial hair turns back to grow into her scalp, and she comes to life. Lady Purple, wooden, overdressed, manipulated puppet, vampire woman, turns on her Svengali, draining him of his blood to fuel her own system. Seizing her own sexual and economic agency she heads off into the night to set herself up in the town's brothel .

Carter explores the polarities of constraint, imprisonment and freedom. Freedom to imagine and to construct versions of the self are expressed in *Nights at the Circus* (1987) through Fevvers, the winged woman who flies away from being turned into a victim of romance, prostitution, ritual sacrifice, or reification, and instead constructs *herself* as a performance, a feathered intacta, who



genuinely flies, a puzzle for others, which she finds satisfying as well as lucrative. About to be a sacrifice to a series of esoteric gods whose names resemble those of ancient religions or Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* (a fictional grimoire or textbook of magic), Fevvers escapes the Gothic mansion and heated incantations of Christian Rosencreutz, whose powerful voice in the House of Lords denies women the vote and equal human status to men, under the guise of idolising them, and whose name reminds of a variety of nonsense controls imposed by a variety of religious systems.

Artifice and reification are familiar in Gothic horror, where people become objects and objects come alive in a terrifying and strange reversal. Objects of performance can be objects of desire and disgust. Sacrificing these constructs onto offloaded desires and fears offers a moment of purification, of escape from self, a moment of promise of some kind of eternity, escape from the death of the performed self. Constructing an idol of lust and evil, or one to be trapped or sacrificed, offers an opportunity for control for the constructor and controller. In *Nights at the Circus* (1987), the Grand Duke, master of another Gothic castle filled with the icons and trappings of powerful masculinity, seeks to own a version of woman as a performing doll. He has an ice swan dripping into jewels downstairs, while upstairs, seducing/being seduced by Fevvers, his plan is to shrink and trap a real bird woman in a Faberge egg. A golden bird on a golden swing, reduced in size to the doll-like miniature fitted inside the egg, any revelation or seeming live appearance controlled by his management of the hinges and the mechanism, the bird woman, Fevvers, would in his plan be disempowered, reduced, dehumanised, trapped and rendered docile in a permanent performance or silence. The Grand Duke has designs to turn a woman into an object of control, to place a shrunken Fevvers as a golden bird in a golden cage. Fevvers turns his perverse dream against itself, while simultaneously recognising that her own greed has landed her there in the first place 'The cage was empty. No bird stood on that perch, yet. Fevvers did not shrink, but was at once aware of the hideous possibility that she might do so.' (192)

Controlling the Duke's sexual activity, she escapes as the ice sculpture table decoration of herself as a swan melts into free flowing water. This is not just a reflection, it is also a sexual release; for at the same time as Fevvers stimulates the Duke, she also takes control. His temporary ecstasy brings on the ice sculpture of the swan, her alter ego the sculpted swan, beautiful but destined to melt – as she disempowers him, seeking that moment of orgasm to escape both control of her as a sexual being and control of her as an object of a construct of his fantasy. So when she earlier exposes Christian Rosencreutz, she escapes the power that wealth enables. Each man has a heavy reeking masculinity. Rosencreutz tries to cast her as a reflection of his desires and fears, the Grand Duke as an object for manipulation. Whether an idol, a deity steeped in the mystic claptrap wielded by religious and political power – incantation, spells, entire cosmologies of constant and controlling doctrines and rules of belief – or constraint in a gilded cage, in a bejewelled egg, dancing when only wound up – each fate for Fevvers derives from their constructing her as a desired and feared other, and their wishes to manipulate and destroy, sacrifice or control her. Carter exposes this otherising, this disgusted idolatry with sex and woman seen as perversion and contamination. Neither Rosencreutz nor the Duke fully offload sexual and cosmic guilt onto vile, hideous, deceitful woman, as does Lovecraft, nor do they manage to first celebrate and then contain, reify, destroy yet deify post mortem their object of desire, as does Poe, who finds the most extreme beauty, the most extreme sexual satisfaction in a dead woman.

Fevvers' agency is powered by her down to earth, bawdy self, her control of her own performance, her materialistic cold self-awareness and energy in the face of beliefs in the controlling power of universes of wealth, idolatry and perversity, which these men have constructed and managed. Fevvers flies or shrinks and escapes, free, her own fantastic construct. A winged woman seems genuinely to fly, rather slowly like a real bird, rather than a dressed up performer, and also to guffaw and be vulgar, vulnerable and in control. Taking ownership of her own performance, Fevvers refuses to be anyone else's reflection, manipulated doll or sacrificial victim. She undercuts, exposes,

refuses the roles, denies the systems and talks back to the discourses of power which attempt to reduce, manage and destroy her – and lands large, solid, real and free with the last laugh. Carter's carnival and bawdy, the essentially earthy, counteracts the heated constructs of minds wound up in self-loathing, manipulation, desire, sexual and xenophobic othering and reifying.

Like a bawdy cockney, Carter's work is a performance of an extreme. Her representations of the down to earth amidst the magical and/or perverse constraining constructs which society offers women and men, and which they imbibe, take in, ingest, reproduce, then assert, that which they are fettered by to reveal the mind-forged manacles of behavioural and psychological control.

I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business .... 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 – is what I've concerned myself with consciously since that time. (Carter, 1983, pp. 70-71)

Carter's famous demythologising quotation is not just about escape from myth and fairytale but, as with Roland Barthes' own views (1957) on myth it springs from culturally internalised constructions. In *Nights at the Circus* (1987), in the midst of the high Gothic and artifice, the controlling plans of both Christian Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke would seal Fevvers up as a religious sacrifice to eternal youth, or an object of entertainment, a golden bird on a golden bough, an ornament of perverse imagination, a winged flying cockney Venus. The demythologising can be focused both on her realisation of the earthy usefulness of money, which she is to be paid for her collusion, on the debunking of the powerful men's underpinning theorising, and on Fevvers' realisation of the necessity of self-preservation and escape.

Carter shows that we internalise performance as real, we construct ourselves as reflections which then entrance us, so in 'Alice in Prague or the Curious Room' (1993), the Alice figure comes out from and goes back through the mirror, to reveal how the magical world is both freeing and a trap. Also entrapping is film, and its dream factory, Hollywood. In 'The Merchant of Shadows' (1989) the producer has lasted, pretending to be his own aged partner of the opposite sex, and in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Tristessa, the ideal woman, born a man, represents performance of woman as icon.

Celebration of sexual energy as liberation is at the heart of many of the stories, as it is with Melanie revelling in her own body at the end of *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), and in Carter's dealings with de Sade, most notably in *The Sadeian Woman* (1978). What she critiques is dehumanisation through objectification as puppet, icon or sexual slave, finding the most disturbing example (beyond the double bass and the whorish marionette) with the tableaux vivants in Madame Schreck's brothel cellar in *Nights at the Circus* (1987). Here there are static embodiments of perverse versions of woman as sexual object, succumbing by design or accident to the plans of others to work out desire, disgust and death.

Fuelled by a vital element of socialism, Carter's women always recognise the power of economics, as they do of sexual energy, which she refuses to condemn. On the one hand, she is a product of the liberated 1960s and 70s herself, and in the vanguard of writing about women and sexual power, who are turning the tables. On the other hand, she is using the Gothic to reveal and manage the contradictory or paradoxical.

## **Conclusion**

In the famous comment in 'Notes from the Front Line' Carter acknowledges, 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (1983, p. 69). Her revisiting of fairytale, myth and horror challenge their misogyny and reification.

The hang ups and perversities she saw in fairytale, myth, Poe and Lovecraft are her target and her source material. Carter's women are not willing victims, static sex objects devoid of identity, power and voice, neither are they prudes, nor sexless. These positive versions are enacted when women fly free like Fevvers and choose their own mates, and later when her women deliberately dress up to re-enact their performative bawdy youth as do the twins in *Wise Children* (1991). Agency is the clue. Carter's women construct themselves and their sexual selves, and at the core of this is her wonderful bawdy debunking of the terrified prurience of both Lovecraft and Poe, the one representing the figure of the beloved as most beautiful when dead, the other representing his greatest terrors as wayward grandmothers who prefer beasts and pass on their sick heritage, and seeing sex as a terrifying spume of evil. As a late twentieth-century feminist, Carter critiques, parodies and exposes the underlying sexual terrors, the desire and disgust fuelling representations of women as variously dead or deadly in fairytale, myth and in the work of the two great masters of Gothic horror, Poe and Lovecraft. Carter shows it is possible and essential to tell other stories, revising and rewriting these received, constraining myths, particularly ones in which women reject the role of puppets and pawns (*The Magic Toyshop*, 1967; *Nights at the Circus*, 1987; 'The Loves of Lady Purple', 1974), seizing their sexuality and agency, having the last laugh.

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