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# “He was a shit, to boot”: Abjection, Subjection and Feminism in “Black Venus”

Richard Pedot

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How can I put it; although I might have liked to write poetry like Baudelaire’s, I certainly would not, for one single minute, have wanted the kind of life that Baudelaire lived. His poetry is the product of terminal despair, and he was a shit, to boot.

(Carter 1997; 41)

They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig.

(Woolf 13-14)

- 1 Focusing on abjection as a means of discussing Angela Carter’s feminism, I obviously do not claim any precedence since, as Anna Hunt recently noted, “Julia Kristeva’s theory [of abjection] is becoming a familiar terrain in Carter criticism” (Hunt 135).<sup>1</sup> Such interest in abjection and its theorisation seems to follow quite logically from a thematic insistence throughout her works on—to put it mildly in her own words—“subterranean areas behind everyday experience” (Carter 1995; 459). The monsters thus unleashed<sup>2</sup> have been a source of discomfort for readers and critics alike, feminists included, who wondered whether the post-modern revisiting of the male canon were not eventually a colluding with it.<sup>3</sup> Abjection, therefore, whether tackled explicitly under that name and understood in Kristevan terms or not, has been a moot point for Carter studies and a challenge for those seeking a way to articulate it in an unambivalent discourse.

- 2 In the following, I will argue that abjection, thematically and structurally, defies articulation or re-articulation even, as far as Carter is concerned, in its most common form—i.e. a Bakhtinian reading of the grotesque or the carnivalesque. It does so in particular because, by definition, it resists binarism. Consequently, although it has a lot to do with gendering, it cannot be gendered, which is despairing news for those who would like to define the author's work in hard lines but should encourage critics to look at it as a truly critical engagement with the issue of subjection, inseparable from that of abjection. For want of space, I will focus my argument on *Black Venus*' eponymous story.
- 3 Let me first introduce as briefly as possible the main terms of abjection and subjection. It has become nearly impossible to consider the former in philosophical, psychological or literary studies without due mention of Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, a book that probably owes more to Mary Douglas's seminal *Purity and Danger* than the scant, but highly relevant, allusions to it in its follower.<sup>4</sup> At stake is an on-going debate between anthropology and psychoanalysis over the relative weight of the social or the individual factor in human phenomena. It need not detain us too long but has implications for the way we may envisage our present concern which bear consideration.
- 4 The gist of Douglas's argument is that taboo has to do with social order and what it excludes to maintain itself. What she variously calls impurity, pollution, dirt, uncleanness—or the abject—is "matter out of place" and must be understood in terms of the social symbolic system: "if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained" (Douglas 40). Instances include, among others, food taboos (e.g. on the meat of animals standing in-between two classes), pollution by death or fear about what pertains to or issues from bodily margins, such as spittle, blood, milk, menses, skin, nails, and so on (Douglas 121). To Douglas, then, "the body is a symbol of society" and "the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small" on it (Douglas 115). It is easy to see how Kristeva's theory falls in with her predecessor's, as when she defines the abject in her first pages—"Abjection is not caused by lack of cleanness or of health, but by that which disturbs a given identity, system, order. That which ignores boundaries, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the hybrid" (Kristeva 12)<sup>5</sup>—or when she returns, as she frequently does, to bodily margins and images of waste. But she parts company with Douglas—quite explicitly in the two occasions mentioned above—over the issue of subjectivity.
- 5 Kristeva approves of the "structuralo-functional" reading of pollution as a threat to social order, as an indication of what society must exclude to persist. But, to her eyes, this begs the question of why should bodily waste, like menses or excreta, represent or metaphorically embody "the objective frailty of the symbolic order" (Kristeva 85). Neither can Kristeva disagree that nothing can be considered repulsive *per se* but only in contravention of the classificatory rules of a given symbolic system. Yet, she is still wondering about "subjective structurations" within each speaking subject which would correspond to a given "socio-symbolic system" (Kristeva 111). How the notion of subjective structuration should be read or how independent of social structuration it is supposed to be is not stated. Like Mary Douglas, with Bruno Bettelheim in mind, we might conclude: "the relation between culture and individual psyche are [*sic*] not made clear" (Douglas 115). However clear the relation, Kristeva's contribution should not be thrown out with Bettelheim's bath-water, since her most significant contribution to the

theory of abjection results from her stress on subjectivity, or rather imperilled subjectivity. For her, indeed, the abject constitutes what the subject must ceaselessly reject in order to exist separately: it is a form of *jouissance*—in Lacanian parlance—threatening to engulf the subject who is rescued from drowning by the Other who makes it repulsive to the subject (Kristeva 17). Abjection both summons and annihilates the subject (Kristeva 12) and this can explain why “so many victims of abjection (*l’abject*) are fascinated, if not docile and willing, victims” (Kristeva 17).

- 6 From Douglas to Kristeva, then, there is a shift in emphasis which does not reconcile the anthropological and the psychoanalytical views, but their theories seem to concur that the abject reveals the powers and the dangers of society. Similarly, there emerges from both theories an image of the abject as part of a process of rejection (lat. *abjectus*: rejected) and subjection—a symbolic system of hard and fast lines (Douglas) which prescribes position through the exclusion and subjection or annihilation of what lies in the interstices, etc. (Douglas). Hence, in phallogocentric societies, the feminine body is found to be a prominent site of pollution—see the frequent, though by no means universal, taboo on menses—as the abject other of the semiotic construction of the male subject. The apparent contradiction between the image of woman as Virgin Mary or as Whore in fact illustrates the conjunction of rejection and subjection which defines abjection: it is one and the same thing to *reject* the whore as the abject source of contamination of the social order, and to *subject* woman to the ideal representation of dis-embodied purity, each process upholding the other.
- 7 One can see then that the theory of the abject can both sustain and complicate feminism. Studies of the abject can bring to light a given group’s or society’s symbolic and semiotic scaffoldings and thus contribute to define which position those ascribe to the feminine. Yet they cannot suggest definite outlines for a feminist agenda since the abject is that which has no contours, not even being an object.<sup>6</sup> My argument is that much of the debate about Carter’s feminism results from the—by definition indeterminate—status of the abject. Simply put, we might either go by Carter’s quote about Baudelaire as “a shit” (my first epigraph), reading it as a definite indictment of the abjection of masculinity—which, we may fear, is too peremptory to tell the whole story; or build on Woolf’s allusion to photographs of war atrocities in Spain (second epigraph) which suggests that abjection ignores identity divides (man/woman, human being/animal—or animate/inanimate) and therefore cannot be aligned with either the feminine or the masculine.
- 8 In Carter’s pronouncement about Baudelaire, no precautionary steps (“How can I put it; although I might have liked [...]”) can temper the finality of its conclusion. Her view here, on the face of it, is shared by many critics of “Black Venus.” Readings of the tale usually highlight Carter’s depiction of Baudelaire’s bastardly behaviour towards his mistress and his prejudiced vision of women. Her strategy relies for a great part on the contrast between, on the one hand, the image of woman as Ideal (the muse) and, on the other, the pointed allusions to the squalor of her and the poet’s condition and to the power relationship between muse and poet. Thus, Carter deflates the rhetorics of Baudelaire’s “agonised romanticism” (10) and its denial of reality or—closer to our concern—of a fascination with the abject associated with the feminine and the alien. Here is one instance of Carter’s strategy:

His lively imagination performs an alchemical alteration on the healthy tang of her sweat, freshly awakened by dancing. He thinks her sweat smells of cinnamon

because she has spices in her pores. He thinks she is made of a different kind of flesh than his. (10)

- 9 In other words, Baudelaire is shown to sublimate his fear of and attraction to the abject—bodily excretions, in this case—into poetical images, thus rejecting the feminine other twice: as abject *and* as exotic sublime. The feminine turns out to be a foreign body around which the poetic oyster secretes its pearls—or jewels. The strength of abjection in the poet's universe is nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in the episode where witnessing Jeanne's straddling the gutter and pissing "as if it was the most natural thing in the world," not even letting go of his arm, makes "his Lazarus [arise] and [knock] unbidden on the coffin-lid of [his] trousers" (11). True to either Douglas's or Kristeva's definition, the dissolving power of abjection is imaged in the fantasised corroding effects of the flowing excretion:

It seemed to his terrified, exacerbated sensibilities that the liquid was a kind of bodily acid that burned away the knitted cotton, dissolved her petticoat, her stays, her chemise, the dress she wore, her jacket, so that now she walked beside him like an ambulant fetish, savage, obscene, terrifying. (11)

- 10 Abject then is the poet's love of abjection, fetishised as a black female savage. Here then, in the gutter, shambles the princely albatross leaving a less than pleasant memory of him, unless you count the gift of that other abjection, "the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis" (14), as a fond keepsake. Just like Poe's father in "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" who "melted clean<sup>7</sup> away, leaving behind him in the room as proof he had been there only a puddle of puke on the splintered floorboards" (34), the poet becomes the very source of abjection (in the dynamic sense of the word) as coupled to the rejection of the feminine.<sup>8</sup>
- 11 Baudelaire's example, then, amongst others in the collection, corroborates readings that tend to consider abjection in Carter's works as part of a feminist argument against the subjection of women and more specifically an attempt at "re-presencing Jeanne Duval" (Mumford) as a woman existing in history—the long history of male domination—by bringing out the abject from under the idealisation of woman as muse. We might say that here Carter is in fact following up on the demythologising agenda she set out in *The Sadeian Woman*. Of particular interest to us is her "Speculative Finale: The Function of Flesh," her last chapter, in which she opposes—or tries to oppose—flesh to meat. Her main argument rests on that very distinction: between what is "usually alive and, typically, human" and what is "dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption" (Carter 1999; 137)—at least, we should add, in certain conditions, to circumvent, if possible, its abject character.<sup>9</sup> Carter is interested in how, with Sade, "the garden of fleshly delights becomes a butcher's shop" for the "satisfaction of scientific curiosity in dissection" and the exploration of "the inhuman sexual possibilities of meat" (Carter 1999; 138). Sade, she offers, "writes about sexual relations in terms of butchery and meat" (Carter 1999; 137).
- 12 Sade, probably, figured among "those rare, precious volumes, the jewelled missals, the incunabula, those books acquired from special shops that incurred damnation if you so much as opened the covers" (7) that you browse through on the poet's shelves and from which he could learn to untangle "the history of transgression" (12). So, yes, Baudelaire, seeing in Jeanne "a different kind of flesh," "savage, obscene, terrifying," was a shit, all the more so since he contaminated her with his venereal disease eventually telling on her body "the ghoulish litany of the symptoms" (5), a litany of abjection—at first, black stumps for teeth, "a persistent vaginal discharge that smelled

of mice" (6), until the teeth are gone and her hair falls out, that wonderful hair so revered by the poet, and then nothing remains but a crippled body and a face to "terrify the little children" (12).

13 Read on/from the front line, Baudelaire cannot hope to escape unscathed, no more than his American counterpart whom Clare Hanson, in a reading associating Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, unblinkingly calls "the abject Poe" (Hanson 62). In this light, "Black Venus" is "engaged and interested in challenging the assumptions of the sexualized woman as dark, diseased and corrupting" (Matus 19) and in re-historicising Jeanne Duval in the context of nineteenth-century representations of female sexuality.<sup>10</sup> However, as either Douglas or Kristeva remind us, abjection is that which blurs lines, hard and fast lines, and a mere reversal of abjection from a female to a male position—the shit, the abject male—will not suffice, no matter how sound it is, socially or ethically, to grapple with the unconscious implications of abjection and rejection and the resulting process of subjection.

14 To acknowledge the issue's complexity, I will now consider abjection in one of its ultimate manifestations which, as can be guessed from the above, has no chance connections with "Black Venus": death. As Woolf intuited, in response to the photograph of a dead body, the image of a corpse—the more so when maimed or decaying—loosens the knots of identity. Saying this, however, is not to eschew the gender issue but to be in a better position to face a crucial paradox, which Elisabeth Bronfen, in her discussion of Poe, states as follows:

Paradoxically [...], this obliteration of gender [in a corpse], along with all other socially constructed features, is represented in western culture through a gendered body, the superlatively beautiful, desirable *feminine* corpse. (Bronfen 64)<sup>11</sup>

15 Death and the feminine are thus inextricably mixed but the relationship is not easily unfolded. Indeed, to the paradox just underlined, another one can be added. Linked as it is to death, the feminine is synonymous with abjection but at the same time is a metaphor of sublimation, standing both for abjection and its sublimation—while death, by the same process, is both abject and beautiful. This doesn't cancel out the vision of woman's body as the site of abjection, but complicates it significantly. The equation of the feminine with the abject becomes less straightforward, more of a cultural construction, more an ambivalent representation of what escapes hard and fast rules. Imagining the dead female body as the most poetical image thus is one way of coping with the danger of the abject—which is neither male nor female—by gendering it, that is to say by inscribing the a-semiotic within a semiotic system, and for further protection by sublimating it in a positive *and* static image.

16 What is called for, then, with texts like Carter's—belonging with what Kristeva calls "the literature of abjection"—is a revision of the muse figure. For, both in Poe's and Baudelaire's case, it is poetry which is the ambivalent medium between the abject and the beautiful. The coincidence of the Whore and the Virgin Mary then has its counterpart in the ambivalent figure of the muse. The image of dead woman as muse—or of muse as dead woman—is a disturbing instance of a conflation of purity (the idealised, etherealised muse) and abjection (the corpse as the ultimate source of pollution). One of the most striking representations of the said ambivalence in Carter's works might be the moment in which the young heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" encounters the *embalmed* corpse of the opera singer in her husband's secret vault which she depicts thus: "The cool, sad flame of the candles flickered on her white, closed

eyelids. The worst thing was, the dead lips smiled" (Carter 1979; 28).<sup>12</sup> It would be wrong, I think, to see the smile only as a sign of the victim's disturbing complicity with her torturer. It equally betrays an uncomfortable awareness of a poetic embalment of the abject—the murdered body as a still life picture of the muse—or of the poetic scribble of a smile on the face of abjection—since, for all we know, the smile might as well be the embalmer's creation, the product of some "Poe-etics" of decomposition, to borrow Maggie Tonkin's phrase.<sup>13</sup>

17 Because of this combination of the a-symbolic with the symbolic which can give way to no stable synthesis from which one might draw a definite moral stance, we must also revise some critical trends in Carter studies. I am not thinking of readings that may feel so much unease at Carter's texts that they end up suggesting a complicity with patriarchy. If we agree that abjection points to "the slipperiness of subjectivity, the messiness of existence which the social subject must attempt to delineate and disavow" (Hunt 146), then it becomes obvious that one cannot merely fall back on the hard lines that the text challenges to put an end to the reader's discomfort.<sup>14</sup> We have to acknowledge the ideological unease but also be wary not to come up too readily with rather more sophisticated ways of accommodating it. It is on such readings that do not entirely avoid the temptation and eventually try to salvage a stable feminist position in Carter's works that I would like briefly to focus now to conclude my argument.

18 Rebecca Munford is obviously hedging her bets when, in her introduction to her reading of "Black Venus" she concedes that:

Certainly, there is a sense in which Carter's exuberant intertextual interweaving of a decadent poetic [sic] raises uncomfortable questions about her potential complicity with a male-centred aesthetic structured around the objectification of the female body. (Mumford 2)

19 But her admission is largely qualified by the rest of her argument that Carter "re-presents" Jeanne Duval, and the conclusion that "the relentless subversion and explosion of [the male-centred] tradition invests her re-visioning with a feminist politics" (Mumford 11). Now, much as we can agree that Jeanne Duval's figure is given a fuller historical status by the author's re-visioning strategy, we still have to question her "*presence*" in what amounts to a "utopian" *re-presenting* of her life after Baudelaire's death—as the narrator imagines it in the last pages. It is difficult to reconcile the assertion of "*presence*"—a tall order, especially in a post-modern context—and the awareness of a textually-mediated (re)creation with so many blurred frontiers. There is, of course, the unsettling insistence of the abject on the feminist agenda, along with the author's equivocal engagement with her male model and muse but also with her heroine. Speaking *for* Jeanne, rather than letting her voice be heard—how could she?—the narrator/author is representing her as a deputy or a solicitor would rather than representing her: not unlike Baudelaire whose rhetorics and imagery stick to hers, "[her] eloquence denie[s] her [Jeanne] language" (9). Lastly, if *presencing* then means focusing on the abject as that which lies outside poetic language and therefore debunks the poet's agonised romanticism, then it becomes difficult for Jeanne Duval to stand as a subject, if we remember Kristeva's argument that the abject engulfs the subject.

20

Jeanne then is more willed into being/presence than present, which implies indeed that it behoves the reader to take up the cudgels Carter scattered through her text in not unambiguous ways—not an easy task, on any terms. Clare Hanson's objection to "The

Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe," in many respects a companion piece to "Black Venus," illustrates the problem. Drawing on both Butler and Kristeva, Hanson argues that "a resignification of the domain of the abject/excluded will 'force a radical rearticulating of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all'" (Hanson 61).<sup>15</sup> Carter's story is found to be wanting in this respect, moving rather towards stasis and a re-inscription of the phallogentric archetype of the maternal-feminine equated with death.

- 21 Should we agree that the story is such a stasis, there would still arise the question of what happens to the notion that "for Butler the zone of exclusion offers a vantage point from which the heterosexual symbolic can be challenged"? Or, otherwise stated, who failed to take up the challenge: the author or the reader/critic? We may in fact wonder how the abject can be made to re-signify for a subject when it lies outside the symbolic to begin with, as "an attractive and repulsive magnet [which] places the one haunted by it [the abject] literally beside oneself" (Kristeva 9). Besides, Hanson's reading also begs the question of the signifying medium: the compactness of the tale format—to deal "directly with the imagery of the unconscious" (Carter 1995; 459)—may not be comparable in this respect to the far lengthier format of the novels, usually a more discursive or even didactic vehicle.
- 22 Generally, any attempt at re-signification shuns seminal tensions in Carter's works, as can be seen in the vogue of Bakhtinian criticism. Betty Moss, for instance, reading "Peter and the Wolf," assimilates the unease elicited by the Gothic—one of Carter's models—with the ambivalence which Bakhtin considers is provoked by the grotesque, and goes on underlying Bakhtin's view of this ambivalence as regenerative (Moss 190-1). The Bakhtinian grotesque relies on strong binaries, i.e. hierarchies—high/low, mind/body, the elite/the people, the masculine/the feminine...—whose reversal is equated with a subversion of social order. However there are both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons why we should not take Bakhtin's views for confirmation of the subversive power of the Carterian grotesque. As is known—and as Carter herself was aware<sup>16</sup>—the grotesque overthrow of social hierarchy is but transitional, and eventually leaves it intact, being something of a safety valve. Moreover, as soon as the grotesque stands in indefinite kinship with the abject—which is more often than not the case in Carter—then we have to drop any idea of its regenerative power, as abjection is not on the side of *désir* but of *jouissance*, that is to say engulfment, the fading of the subject (Kristeva 17). In other words, the grotesque body—seen through Bakhtinian lenses—is not the bodily abject, as it is already part of a signifying structure which abjection puts to task.
- 23 Let us consider "Black Venus" again. Undeniably, even the relatively short space of the story can accommodate grotesque elements and those may farcically serve a social critique, as when the poet is said to make "a performance worthy of the Comédie Française out of a fuck," a "five-act drama with farcical interludes" and then he cries and "talks about his mother" (12) or when Jeanne warns him he should let "the bloody cat out, before it craps on your precious Bokhara" (3). The low and the feminine can then overthrow the high and the masculine. But how are we to "re-articulate" the episode in the gutter? Are we prepared to see an image of Jeanne's regeneration in her buying false teeth and a wig thanks to the sale of a manuscript or two? And what about the description of her finding herself and coming down to earth? It would be heartless, if not downright cynical, to read it without a qualm about its bitter ironies: "You could



say that Jeanne had found herself; she had come down to earth, and, with the aid of her ivory cane, she walked perfectly well upon it" (13). What could "her self" be with such a prosthetic body? and what her stance or status thus supplemented with a cane, whatever its monetary value? How far she has strayed from the albatross, "sooty" as it was (9). How far from "carnavalesque liberation" (Wisker 193), from Gothic, Poe-esque horrors, too.

24 The grotesque in "Black Venus," especially in the concluding section, is more than contaminated with the abject, so much so that it can hardly be an instrument of social and personal transformation. Therefore, "the carnivalesque energies" of Carter's works should not obscure "the ambivalences and tensions that these energies mediate" (Britzolakis 56)—i.e. the tensions and ambivalences characterising abjection. But there is yet another paradox, on which I would like to conclude, which is that there might be more regeneration in store for Baudelaire, if we consider his poetic legacy, including to writers like Carter. Carter's ambivalent relation to the French poet has often been noted and Carter's dismissive comment on his being a shit is no less ambiguous, as the excluded abject remains artistically attractive—remember: "[she] might have liked to write poetry like Baudelaire's."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Carter here, to borrow Lucy Armitt's words, "flirts with textual danger on her own untamed terms" (Armitt 98) and risks contamination by the literature of abjection.

25 Consider the end of the story. To most readers, it will coincide with the last, seemingly uncompromising, allusion to "the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis." However, those are not the story's very last words as it goes on with "Sed non satiata," given in the original French, followed by a short note referring to the other poems in the *Black Venus Cycle*. This suggests a parallel between Baudelaire's venereal gift and his poetry. Is poetry, then, the true Baudelairean syphilis, infecting readers and writers beyond his grave? The poem is not only at the end of the text, it is there, with many others by Baudelaire, from the very beginning, interlacing its image and fantasies with Carter's own writing<sup>18</sup>—and resonates to the end as a call to embark for Cythera in search for an ever-receding reflection in a mirror, telling us of abjection and the difficulty for the self to emerge and stand free:

Dans ton île, ô Vénus! je n'ai trouvé debout  
 Qu'un gibet symbolique où pendait mon image  
 —Ah ! Seigneur ! donnez-moi la force et le courage  
 De contempler mon cœur et mon corps sans dégoût!  
 (Baudelaire l. 57-60)

26 I do not wish to imply that Carter is merely, uncritically, reduplicating her literary ancestors in the literature of abjection (Baudelaire, Poe, Sade...). Her own interpretation of Sade as a moral pornographer who "might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes" (Carter 1979; 19) shows how concerned she was both with abjection and its critical potential and how difficult such a position is bound to be. Her re-visioning of the male canon cannot escape being, in the true sense, equivocal. But the equivocation is also part of the literature of abjection, one of its "virtues," as Kristeva suggests. She relates abjection to perversion in that the former neither ignores nor bows to a law, a prohibition or a rule, but rather twists or corrupts them. The same obtains for the literature of abjection, which plays with and circumvents Religion, Ethic, Law—proving them both necessary and absurd—but at a distance from the abject: "The writer, fascinated by abjection, will represent its logic, project himself/herself into it, introject it and pervert language—form and content—

accordingly. But on the other hand, just as the feeling of abjection is both abjection's judge and accomplice, so is literature when it comes to terms with it" (Kristeva 23). So, Kristeva concludes, what such literature calls for is "an easing of the Superego," of those necessary but untenable hard and fast rules which, as Douglas also implies, deny the messiness of existence.<sup>19</sup>

- 27 We have to see equivocation in Carter's literature of abjection as such a call, and see its critical potential for a more complex perception of the mechanisms of feminine subjection, and consequently forego any hope of defined answers. Abjection is an exacting muse.

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## NOTES

1. A very short list of instances of abjection theory in Carter criticism would include: L. Armitt, "The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*," G. Wisker, "Behind Locked Doors," C. Hanson, "Carter and the Limits of Artifice."
2. I borrow here from Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton's introduction to *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*: "Carter delved into the most unsettling depths of Western culture, only to transmogrify its myths and unleash its monsters." (1)
3. See for instance, P. Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy-Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers" or R. Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine."
4. Though Kristeva's awareness of and debt to her predecessor's book is obvious throughout, it is not until p. 84, in her third chapter ("De la saleté à la souillure"—"From Dirt to Pollution") that she first and last mentions it, and the anthropologist's name will return briefly only once in the

next chapter ("Sémiotique de l'abomination biblique"—"A Semiotic Approach of Abomination in the Bible") not, despite the topic, to allude to *Purity and Danger* and its famous third chapter ("The Abominations of the Leviticus") but to Douglas's contribution in historian Jacob Neusner's *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (111).

5. Translations from the French mine, unless otherwise stated.
6. This is why it is on the side of *jouissance*, and not of desire, which implies an *object* (Kristeva 16-18).
7. Note the irony of the adjectival adverb in the context.
8. David Poe indeed disappears immediately after the birth of Edgar's sister.
9. Raw meat, as is well known, is often repulsive and meat taboos are common to all cultures, with variations, always as to the specific meat subject to prohibition.
10. J. Matus cogently argues for placing the story within the context of nineteenth-century anthropological racial prejudices as exemplified by the story of the infamous exhibition, throughout Europe, of the so-called Hottentot Venus, a steatopygous South African slave whom, for instance, Guy de Maupassant derides as "the brown rival of the Venus de Milo" ("brune rivale de la Vénus de Milo")—G. de Maupassant, "Au muséum d'histoire naturelle," *Le Gaulois*, 23 mars 1881, [http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Au\\_muséum\\_d'histoire\\_naturelle](http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Au_muséum_d'histoire_naturelle).
11. The reference is, in particular, to Poe's suggestion that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (E. A. Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," qtd in Bronfen 59).
12. The story, it must be remembered, also has Baudelaire as a tutelary figure.
13. "'The Cabinet' exhumes the muse buried by 'Poe-etics' and in so doing, demonstrates Poe's poetics of the feminine is a poetics of decomposition." (Tonkin 2004; 19)
14. For an instance of such readings, see Robert Clark's contention that Carter's fictions "fall back into reinscribing patriarchal attitudes." (Clark 147)
15. The interpolated quotation is from J. Butler's *Bodies that Matter*.
16. See her interview with Lorna Sage: "The carnival has got to stop. The whole point about the Feast of Fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped." Quoted in Warner 254.
17. She also said to Anne Smith: "The Black Venus poems are incredibly beautiful and also terribly offensive" (quoted in Tonkin 2006; 305).
18. See Pedot 49-52.
19. "It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created." (Douglas 4).

## ABSTRACTS

Cet article examine les liens compliqués de l'œuvre d'Angela Carter au féminisme à la lumière de la place qu'y joue l'abjection, non seulement comme un thème récurrent, souvent indissociable de celui de l'exclusion du féminin, mais aussi en tant que principe innervant son écriture. L'argumentation, appuyée sur «Black Venus,» passe par la discussion d'une tension fertile entre, d'une part, une dénonciation (féministe ?) de l'abjection comme moyen d'assujettissement afin de forcer les individus à occuper des rôles sociaux définis et, d'autre part, une plongée dans ce que Carter appelle le débarras de l'inconscient, au prix d'une perte de subjectivité séduite par l'objet littéraire.

Le débat autour du féminisme de Carter résulte du statut indéterminé de l'abject et nulle réponse définitive n'est à espérer de sa littérature, bien plutôt une perception plus complexe, dérangement et stimulante des mécanismes de l'assujettissement.

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