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INTERPRETATION, GENDER, AND THE READER: ANGELA CARTER'S
SELF-CONSCIOUS NOVELS

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ABSTRACTINTERPRETATION, GENDER, AND THE READER: ANGELA CARTER'S
SELF-CONSCIOUS NOVELS

by Suzanne Hall

This thesis attempts to account for the unusual problems raised for interpretation by the works of Angela Carter, as well as the particular pleasures which they provide. It demonstrates how Carter's self-conscious novels speculate about the very nature of fiction and, in doing so, challenge conventions which govern the way we interpret not only fiction but also ourselves and our world. The second half of the thesis is concerned with issues of sexual difference, specifically the strategies used by Carter to demystify the false universals which govern gender politics.

Chapter 1 engages with both Nights at the Circus and a selection of reviews of Carter's work in order to establish the particular reader/text relationships which her fiction demands. The breakdown of the traditional distinction between centre and margins in The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman is the focus of Chapter 2: this chapter incorporates Jacques Derrida's model of invagination in its examination of the distinctive intertextual qualities Carter's work displays. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate an important strategic technique employed by Carter's novels to expose and exploit specific reading conventions which underlie the interpretation of character, identity, and gender. Chapter 3 shows how four novels, The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, Love, and The Passion of New Eve, promote a 'realist' mode of reading character whilst continually reminding the reader that character is a construction, in order to demonstrate the power of the conventions which create the illusion of knowable individuals both within and outside fiction. Chapter 4 shows how The Passion of New Eve foregrounds a central feminist question, 'What is a Woman?' This chapter examines the ways in which Carter utilises gender stereotypes, particularly those used to define the female body, in order to debunk them. It also contains an

account of the debate about pornography which Carter's work has excited amongst critics. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the New Eve figures which recur across Carter's fiction and examine the affirmative feminist politics which sustain it. Chapter 5 asks the question, 'What constitutes a liberated female subject?' while Chapter 6, returning to Nights at the Circus, celebrates Fevvers as just such a figure. Each chapter demonstrates how Carter's work continually anticipates readers' responses and dramatises its own fictional procedures. Each chapter also attempts to illuminate, from a variety of perspectives, the liberating 'reading space,' which her fiction opens up.

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INTRODUCTION

Just as anything that wants to call itself a novel is a novel, by definition, so fiction can do anything it wants to do. I think it can do more things than we tend to think it can.

Angela Carter¹

¹ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen, 1985), p.79 (henceforth referred to as Novelists).

Although Angela Carter is widely accepted as being among the major contemporary novelists in Britain, there is still very little extended criticism of her work and no booklength study. Since I began work on this thesis in 1985, the bibliography of Carter studies has grown steadily. At the time of writing, however, there are only twenty-three published articles (in English), and only half of these engage specifically with her novels; the others deal largely with her short fiction, particularly her controversial rewritings of fairytales in The Bloody Chamber.² In many ways, journalism is perhaps the most productive medium for situating contemporary novelists, and there are a large number of reviews--the publication of a new work by Carter is always an event for the general reader even if the published fiction has enticed relatively few academics. The quality of review material, of course, varies enormously, but some of the commentary on Carter's work is very suggestive. This may, in part, reflect Carter's own journalistic skills, and her particular style of writing. Reviewers tend to polarise into those who love and those who hate her work,³ and part

² A series of articles about the pornographic tendencies of The Bloody Chamber have been published. I summarise their arguments in Chapter 4.

All references to Carter's work will be to the editions listed in Bibliography 1, and page numbers will be given in the text.

³ This is not always so obvious in reviews after Nights at the Circus and the film The Company of Wolves, which established Carter's reputation more firmly. Subsequent antipathetic reviewers attempt to disguise

of the aim of this thesis is to ascertain what it is about Carter's writing which generates such extreme responses. Many reviewers identify Carter as a writer concerned with transformation and change, whose writing is affirmative and constructive in a way that much contemporary fiction, particularly fiction by women, is not. But, although these reviewers try to specify the sorts of change which Carter's fictions appear to promote, several also admit that it is extremely difficult to do so. The reviews highlight the problem of interpretation, the specific difficulties that readers--not necessarily academics--have with Carter's fiction; and this is a continuing concern of the thesis. I have incorporated a survey of these reviews into the first chapter, and draw on a selection to inform the rest of the thesis. (The Appendix gives full details of all reviews consulted.)

What the reviews demonstrate most vividly is how difficult it is to place Angela Carter's work. One of the tasks of this thesis is to account for what is special about her work; one of the tasks of this introduction is to situate Carter's fiction by describing briefly how it resembles or differs from that of other contemporary writers, and 'feminist' writers in particular.⁴ Carter's fiction, however, resists categorization: her work does

their intense distaste for her work behind a rather reluctant recognition of her writing skills.

⁴ Reviewers also attempt to place Carter's fiction by identifying literary influences; see Chapter 2.

not fit comfortably into any particular school of writing, and has been given many different, and often contradictory, labels. Lorna Sage points out that "placing" Angela Carter [is] particularly difficult,⁵ Ian McEwan claims that she is not 'all that assimilable, and one suspects she would not want to be,'⁶ and Eve Harvey writes:

In our compartmentalised, prepackaged world Angela Carter is an anomaly, a publisher's nightmare. Like Doris Lessing, she is one of those rare writers who defy classification; the only suitable category is that unfortunately sparsely populated area where literary excellence is the main criterion.⁷

This difficulty may partly explain why there has been so little extended criticism of her work.

Angela Carter has been called a 'postmodern' writer, but this is a problematic characterisation since the term usually describes a predominantly male field of experimental writing. George Kearns, at the opening of a review of several contemporary (male) writers, lists a number of features of postmodernist fiction and concludes: 'Characteristically male, it has been known to show up as

⁵ Lorna Sage, Dictionary of Literary Biography (henceforth referred to as DLB) (Detroit, Michigan: Brucoli Clark, 1982), Vol.14, 'British Novelists Since 1960,' pp.205-12 (p.205).

⁶ 'Sweet Smell of Excess,' profile by Ian McEwan, Sunday Times Magazine, 9 September 1984, 42-44 (p.42).

⁷ Eve Harvey, introduction to '"Fools are my theme, Let satire be my song,"' in Vector, 109 (1982), 26-36 (p.26).

"Angela Carter."'⁸ Kearns's joke, however, is a telling one: two authors (both female) of recently published books concerned specifically with so-called 'postmodernist' fiction both explain that their brief excludes fiction by women. Marguerite Alexander, in Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction, mentions Angela Carter's work only in passing in order to admit that she will not be discussing any women's writing.⁹ Similarly, Alison Lee explains that all of the texts under consideration in her book, Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction, are by men, although in the very same paragraph she acknowledges the irony that 'feminist postmodern writers ... have been marginalized even within a fiction which concerns itself with questioning margins and boundaries valorized by the dominant cultural authority.' Lee is summarising an argument in Patricia Waugh's Feminine Fictions, which, as Lee describes it, laments 'the lack of critical attention paid to feminist postmodernist writers.'¹⁰ According to Waugh, there are contemporary women writers producing 'postmodernist' work, but this work often expresses 'an optimism about the

⁸ George Kearns, 'History and Games,' in Hudson Review, 42, No.2 (1989), 335-44 (p.335).

⁹ Marguerite Alexander, Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), p.18.

¹⁰ Alison Lee, Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction (London: Routledge, 1990), preface, p.xi.

possibility of human relationships and human agency which is rarely articulated in the "classic" postmodern texts of writers such as Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, Sukenick.¹¹ This optimism, it appears, may take the form of, or simply be mistaken for, the sort of 'humanism' which 'classic' postmodern novelists are continually breaking down. It seems, therefore, that if women writers have specific political aims, involving for example, the depiction of a utopian vision, or the construction (however self-conscious) of a unified revolutionary force, the very specificity of these aims earns them a marginalised position vis-à-vis the postmodernist movement.

If Angela Carter cannot be assimilated to the American post-modernists, she does not seem to be quite British either. Nicci Gerrard writes:

Angela Carter, standing out on the British literary landscape, can write novels whose extravagant and exotic surfaces and fabulously self-conscious theatricality turn away from the British literary tradition and use 'all of Western Europe as a great scrapyard.'¹²

Lorna Sage suggests that Carter has been marginalised by the literary establishment because her writing often offends the British sensibility:

Her preoccupations as a writer--deepened and defined over the years--remain radically at odds with the puritanism and the conventional realism

¹¹ Patricia Waugh, in Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern (London: Routledge, 1989), p.169.

¹² Nicci Gerrard, in Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing (London: Pandora, 1989), p.161, is quoting Angela Carter, from the interview with Haffenden, in Novelists, p.92.

that characterize much British fiction. (DLB, p.212)

Elsewhere she comments: '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.'¹³ Ian McEwan describes the mixed critical reception of Carter's work and explains:

Dominant English literary taste, with its lingering preferences for fine social detail, irony, nuances of class and instinctive distrust of the mythical and magical, has until now regarded her with some distrust. (Sunday Times Magazine, 9 September 1984, p.42)

He also lists the 'peculiar' tendencies of Carter's work which render it so risky:

The characteristic elements of her fiction mark her out as a very un-English writer: dreams, myths, fairy tales, metamorphoses, the unruly unconscious, epic journeys and a highly sensual celebration of sexuality in both its most joyous and darkest manifestations. She writes a prose that lends itself to magnificent set-pieces of fastidious sensuality. (Sunday Times Magazine, 9 September 1984, p.42)

Carter, then, writes provocative fiction which takes enormous risks, and which, it seems, often gives offence. Her frequently bizarre, fantastic, and always ironic fiction engages not only with questions of sexuality, but also with pornography and sexual violence (which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4), and with questions of race and class (although, it seems, not in an acceptably low-key manner). Her writing cultivates excess, her short texts always manage to give the impression of being overblown,

¹³ Lorna Sage, 'The Savage Sideshow,' in New Review, 39/40 (1977), 51-57 (p.51).

her longer ones, especially Nights at the Circus, appear enormous, and yet each voluptuous sentence is obviously crafted with care and with relish. John Haffenden suggests to Carter that she embraces opportunities for overwriting, and she responds: 'Embrace them? I would say that I half-suffocate them with the enthusiasm with which I wrap my arms and legs around them' (Novelists, p.91). Hence the kind of vocabulary that sends the reader in flight to a good dictionary. Jacky Gillott, however, commenting on Carter's language in The Bloody Chamber, finds the dictionary unnecessary:

Instead of draping a noun with voluptuous epithets, she will find one, exquisitely sensuous ... 'ciliate' to describe the winter stumps of willow, 'gracile,' for the muzzles of fine-bred horses. It barely matters whether one knows the meaning of the words, they are used with truly lapidary skill. (The Times, 10 January 1980, p.9a)

Carter herself offers information about her literary background to explain her divergence from dominant British literary taste:

The first writers that I read with excitement and conviction were Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, when I was about fifteen ... Then we had this very good French teacher, and we did Les Fleurs du Mal, and Phèdre, and the minute I read Racine, I knew that it moved me much more savagely than Shakespeare...plus the hint of Calvinism, the Jansenism. Anyway at this point I was completely lost to the English tradition. Anybody who's had a stiff injection of Rimbaud at eighteen isn't going to be able to cope terribly well with Philip Larkin, I'm afraid.... Later the surrealists had the same effect. ('The Savage Sideshow,' p.54)

No single category seems to accommodate Carter's work. One way in which her fiction resists

characterisation is by violating generic norms. She has been classified, for example, as a writer of Gothic novels, of horror stories, of science fiction, of fantasy, and of magic realism. And she uses and transforms all of these forms for her own purposes, transgressing accepted literary boundaries and consequently disrupting readers' expectations.

There are, of course, many contemporary and experimental writers with whom Carter shares common ground, but perhaps too many to enable critics to classify Carter in a stable category. Carter's work shares a self-conscious recognition of its status as fiction with, for example, John Fowles's The Magus (1965), John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy; or The Revised New Syllabus (1966), Joanna Russ's The Female Man (1975), David Lodge's How Far Can You Go (1980), Alisdair Gray's Lanark (1981), Frankie Finn's Out on the Plain (1984), Julian Barnes's Flaubert's Parrot (1984), Fay Weldon's Leader of the Band (1988), and many more. Carter's narrators, especially in The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman (1972) and Nights at the Circus (1984), belong to a long line of unreliable narrators with notable twentieth-century counterparts in Nabokov's Lolita (1959) and Pale Fire (1962), Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1980),¹⁴ and Jeanette

¹⁴ In Novelists Carter explains:

People babble a lot nowadays about the 'unreliable narrator'--as in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children--so I thought: I'll show

Winterson's The Passion (1987) and Sexing the Cherry (1989). Carter's habit of experimenting with literary conventions is shared with several North American male writers (usually categorised as 'postmodern'); these are writers who subscribe to a metafictional practice characterised by an extreme self-consciousness about language and literary form which often results in a parodic and excessive style of writing. They explore the many theoretical implications of fiction and also pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. Like so much of Carter's fiction, for example, Robert Coover's short stories, 'The Door,' 'The Magic Poker,' 'The Gingerbread House,' 'The Brother,' and 'J's Marriage,' in Pricksongs and Descants (1969), involve rewritings of fairy tales and Biblical stories. Both Pricksongs and Descants and Coover's novel The Public Burning (1977) share with Carter's work a self-conscious conviction that reality is a construction, and all focus on the notion of appearances. Brian McHale points out similarities between Carter's The Infernal Desire Machines and Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (1973); they share, for example, an interest in Manichaeian allegories. This interest, McHale suggests, may stem from the work of Kafka, Beckett and Joyce.¹⁵ Several of Angela Carter's early novels, in particular The Magic Toyshop (1967),

you a really unreliable narrator in Nights at the Circus! (p.90)

¹⁵ Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction (New York: Methuen, 1987), p.142-43.

Heroes and Villains (1969), and Love (1971) share an interest in the difficulties of role-playing and of playing out 'scripts' with, for example, Donald Barthelme's Snow White (1967), in which a young woman in the contemporary world has to contend with a code of expectations from another era. Carter's Heroes and Villains is also one of many post-apocalyptic dystopias written in the later part of this century: it has much in common with, for example, Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker (1980), which also explores the theme of resistance to a repressive order itself created out of shreds of myths and traditions from the past. Lorna Sage suggests other examples:

Two writers she admires, John Hawkes and J. G. Ballard, are useful reference points for mapping out her imaginative territory, but she has written less trash than Ballard, and is a lot less fey and self-regarding than Hawkes has become. Like them, though, she writes aggressively against the grain of puritanism-cum-naturalism, producing adult fairy tales. (The Savage Sideshow, p.51)

It might seem profitable then to interpret Carter's early literary status alongside that of J. G. Ballard and Robert Coover, whose fictional experimentation left them largely neglected by mainstream audiences and relegated them to a 1960's counter-culture. The importance of such 'eccentric' or 'fringe' writers has been realised and re-appropriated only in retrospect. Carter, as this thesis will document (in Chapter 2), found herself half 'in' and half 'out' of the counter-culture; she was claimed intermittently by both camps, and yet belonged to neither.

This may account for some of the difficulties of 'placing' even her early work in one particular category.

Reviewers and critics are quick to point to the similarities between Carter's work and that of Latin American writers, particularly Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) and Jorge Luis Borges's Labyrinths (1962) (the labyrinth is a favourite figure throughout Carter's work). Isabel Allende's novels, The House of Spirits (1985), Of Love and Shadows (1987) and Eva Luna (1988) might also be included within this group. Walter Kendrick compares Carter's work to that of Márquez and notes her partiality for Borges, but still finds her unplaceable:

Carter's fiction somewhat resembles 'magic realism,' but she's got an intellectual intensity that makes García Márquez look slack and moonstruck. She herself has named Borges as her model, though that claim is both egotistical and self-depreciating. She's never come close to the glittering perfection of Borges's little fables, yet her own work is so juicily alive that his seems arid in its company. There's no one, in fact, enough like Carter to make comparison worthwhile--no real person, anyhow. To find her equal, you'd have to flee into fantasy: Mother Goose in bondage drag, perhaps. (Village Voice Literary Supplement, October 1986, pp.17-19 (p.19))

Criticism has been levelled at those Latin American writers who choose to portray their deeply divided and warring countries through the medium of magic realism. To some critics this approach appears to evade direct political confrontation, and therefore avoid responsibility by not simply stating that they are writing about countries in which it is intolerable to live.

Carter has been criticised in an oddly similar way for avoiding direct feminist disputes and 'enclosing' her political agenda 'safely' within fantasy worlds which appear to have little bearing on contemporary life. Her writing, it appears, is too direct on the one hand and not direct enough on the other. It is her feminist concerns which exclude her from the 'postmodernist' camp, and yet it is some of her more 'postmodernist' techniques, including some of the excursions into fantasy, which, for some critics, blunt the effectiveness of her political explorations. Perhaps, in the end, contexts condition actual responses. Witness the case of Salman Rushdie, who, also using deliberate exaggerations and superimposing the supernatural upon seemingly more concrete and historically grounded elements in order to portray extreme political situations in the Indian subcontinent, has caused a terrible political furore with his 1988 novel The Satanic Verses. This 'indirect' mode of writing has lately proved appealing to other feminist writers. Doris Lessing (in the Canopus in Argos: Archives sequence (1979 to 1983)) and Margaret Atwood (in The Handmaid's Tale (1985)) have come relatively recently to science fiction and fantasy in order to explore the feminist dilemma, while Carter chose to do so much earlier. Carter has, of course, since shown a movement towards what might be described as more historically situated fiction (though elements of fantasy are never absent).

Angela Carter's tendency toward what is often described as 'magic realism' is shared by some British women writers of her own and of the next generation such as Fay Weldon, Emma Tennant and Jeanette Winterson. Carter's fiction, however, is more excessive and experimental than Weldon's, and whilst Tennant and Carter both produce beautifully crafted writing and share a fascination with intertextuality, Carter is far more expansive and affirmative.¹⁶ Winterson's and Carter's work, however, has much more in common, as Nicci Gerrard recognises:

Angela Carter ... is a rather lonely figure on the landscape, though approaching her are younger writers such as the audacious Jeanette Winterson. (Into the Mainstream, p.13)

It is likely that Winterson, who began publishing fiction in 1985, was brought up on a diet of, amongst other things, Angela Carter's work. Similarities in their fiction, however, may also be explained in terms of shifting fashions, which Angela Carter has often managed to anticipate, sometimes to her own cost.¹⁷

¹⁶ The title of Emma Tennant's latest novel, Sisters and Strangers (Grafton, 1990), recalls the North American title of Carter's collection of short stories, Saints and Strangers (published in Britain as Black Venus). Tennant's title might also be read as a description of the similar political aims but radically different styles of the two authors.

¹⁷ The booklet Carter has written introducing a collection of postcards of Frida Kahlo's work, for example, was published in 1989, just two years before a sudden surge of interest in the artist. Unfortunately, Carter's contribution was already out of print and unavailable by the time interest reached its peak in 1991.

Carter's later work might also be compared with the large-scale parodic novels of Joyce Carol Oates, which include Bellefleur (1980), The Bloodsmoor Romance (1982), and Mysteries of Winterthurn (1984). All three of these novels involve the disturbing combination of natural and supernatural, and a wealth of bizzare and grotesque imagery. More important, however, are the similarities between both Carter's and Oates's apparent fascination with scenes of violence, particularly of rape. Oates's morbid obsession with many types of violence has been much written about, whilst critics of violence in Carter's work are more concerned with the seemingly gratuitous pornographic elements of her writing (this is documented in Chapter 4).

Gerrard lists women writers from around the world who display the ability to experiment with and challenge existing conventions--including, perhaps, conventional definitions of what constitutes 'feminist' writing--while remaining, she claims, in the powerful position of being popular writers who reach a large and varied audience:¹⁸

Angela Carter ... Jeanette Winterson ... Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich and Gloria Naylor ... Isabel Allende ... Nadine Gordimer ... Margaret Atwood ... Keri Hulme and Janet Frame ... They treat the world as their stage and language as a

¹⁸ All of the writers are now published by mainstream presses, since feminist presses like Virago and The Women's Press have been accepted as 'mainstream.' Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, and perhaps we should add Alice Walker to Gerrard's list, are now regularly set as required reading for English literature degrees. However, most of the writers listed reach only a minority 'intellectual' audience.

powerful instrument. They feel free to loot the literary past--and moreover most of them write fiction as women writers.

These are the writers who are truly entering the mainstream of literature and culture. Instead of inheriting a confined and stereotypic 'woman's world', they choose to treat the whole world as their own. By their bold and deliberate choice, they are not deserting feminism but are dramatically liberating the meaning of the 'feminist novel'--seeking to give it the implication of mainstream radicalism rather than fringe conservatism. (Into the Mainstream, pp.167-68)

Gerrard also suggests how the publishing houses themselves are redefining what constitutes a 'feminist' book (p.25). Carter's The Passion of New Eve (1977) and French feminist Monique Wittig's Les Guérillères (1969) share many characteristics: both novels, for instance, are structured around feminist revisions of Biblical narrative. Carter's work, however, is not separatist-oriented. Carter also shares more than feminist interests with contemporary black American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, whose narrative inventiveness and fascination with the supernatural are comparable with Carter's. The size and scope of Morrison's Beloved (1987) and Naylor's Mama Day (1988) also match up to Carter's expansive Nights at the Circus. Like Carter's heroine, Fevvers, many of the women portrayed in Beloved and Mama Day display extraordinary strength and disruptive power.

Central to this thesis is a recognition of the challenge Carter's work poses to an important genre

distinction: that between fiction and theory.¹⁹ In this respect her fiction joins a tradition of feminist experimental writing, from Virginia Woolf's The Pargiters²⁰ to the work of French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray,²¹ who seek to break down the barrier between politically engaged feminist discourse and a more literary discourse. Carter's work, however, does not place the two distinct discourses in juxtaposition, as Woolf's does, where one interrupts, in order to disrupt, the other; nor does she, like some writers of what has become known as 'écriture féminine,' refuse any single

¹⁹ For the purposes of this argument I am subsuming literary theory, psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism and philosophy under the one heading, 'theory.'

²⁰ Mary Nyquist, in 'Protesting Too Much: Feminist Discourse Under Pressure,' in Popular Feminist Papers, No.8 (Toronto: Centre for Women's Studies, 1987), writes:

Woolf is deeply conflicted in her attitudes toward the difference between 'fact' and 'fiction' ... She planned to create a new form, the 'Novel-essay,' which would interleave fictional chapters with prose commentaries providing feminist critique. The new form foundered, however, splitting itself apart to become, eventually, on the one hand The Years, a novel, and on the other Three Guineas, a feminist tract....

A draft version of the feminist commentary Woolf wrote before giving up on her experimental 'Novel-essay' has recently been published as The Pargiters. (pp.13-14)

²¹ In the exchange at the end of Hélène Cixous's and Catherine Clément's The Newly Born Woman, translated by Betty Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Clément describes Cixous's writing as 'halfway between theory and fiction' (p.136). Much of Luce Irigaray's writing shares this quality: see, for example, Speculum of the Other Woman, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

mode of discourse by interspersing essay, fiction, poetry and autobiography.²² Rather, she adopts a self-conscious fictional discourse, or metafictional discourse, which the reader is invited to interpret as both fiction and also as fiction about fiction.²³ In a review of Nights at the Circus for American Book Review Richard Martin writes:

It is clear that Angela Carter is no stranger to such postmodern quirks as the 'self-reflexive novel' or the long ongoing love-affair with books about the writing of fiction. (May 1986, pp.12-13 (p.12))

And, in an interview in Women's Review, soon after the publication of Black Venus, Anne Smith reports that Carter describes 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' as 'a kind of

22 One exception to this description is the longer version of Carters' short story, 'Ashputtle: or, the Mother's Ghost,' published recently in the Village Voice Literary Supplement, March 1990, pp.22-23. Carter has published a shorter version in The Virago Book of Ghost Stories, edited by Richard Dalby (London: Virago, 1990), pp.324-25. The longer version takes the form of three different accounts of the Cinderella fairy tale. Unlike any of Carter's other fiction, the first half of the first section of 'Ashputtle' (and the first section accounts for three-quarters of the length of the whole 'story') is written in critical discourse, through which the fictional plot gradually emerges. This half section assumes a knowledge of the original fairy tale; it discusses the writing of the story, the roles of various characters (especially mother figures), the limitations of the fairy tale mode, and certain 'plot devices.' At the half-way point of this section the fictional mode takes over, this time punctuated by critical asides. The second and third sections of 'Ashputtle' are both primarily fictional, much more like her rewritten fairy tales in The Bloody Chamber.

23 Linda Hutcheon, in Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (New York: Methuen, 1984), defines 'metafiction' as 'fiction about fiction--that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity' (p.1).

literary criticism: literary criticism as fiction,
really.'²⁴

Carter's self-conscious fiction also conforms to the more complex definition of 'metafiction' put forward by Patricia Waugh:

In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, [metafictional] writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.²⁵

I hope to show that Carter's work not only comments narcissistically upon its own fictional processes, and upon other fiction, but also speculates about the very nature of fiction itself, and challenges conventions which govern the way we interpret not only fiction but also ourselves and the world. As Lorna Sage has said: 'If she is now one of those writers whom we trust to read back our culture's meaning to us, it is in part because she has explored its dark corners and dead ends with such daring.'²⁶ In the interview with John Haffenden, Carter describes her fiction in discursive terms. Haffenden

²⁴ Anne Smith, 'Myths and the Erotic,' in Women's Review, 1 (November 1985), 28-29 (p.29). Similarly, in the interview with John Haffenden, Carter explains: 'My fiction is very often a kind of literary criticism, which is something I've started to worry about quite a lot' (p.79). In the same interview Carter also says, however, 'Books about books is fun but frivolous' (p.79).

²⁵ Patricia Waugh, Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (London: Methuen, 1984), p.2.

²⁶ Lorna Sage, 'Mirror images,' a review of the 1987 editions of Love and Fireworks, in the Guardian, 22 May 1987.

comments: 'You've written that exploring ideas is for you the same thing as telling stories: "a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms."' Carter replies: 'Sometimes they are straightforwardly intellectual arguments. The female penitentiary at the end of Nights at the Circus is where I discuss crime and punishment as ideas' (Novelists, p.79).²⁷ This confusion of genres often makes it possible to refer to Angela Carter's fictions as if they were theoretical texts--fiction as philosophy or criticism.²⁸ Elaine Jordan, for example, describes them as 'a series of essays: attempts, trials,

²⁷ This section is also a dramatisation of Jeremy Bentham's model of the Panopticon, made famous by Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). 'The major effect of the Panopticon,' writes Foucault, was 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (p.201).

²⁸ Carter perhaps has more in common with Clarice Lispector, of whom the translator, Ronald W. Sousa, in his introduction to The Passion according to G. H. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), writes:

The fact that the Ukraine-born Clarice Lispector (1924-1977) became a literary cause-célèbre in her adopted Brazil but is viewed in France, because of the very same texts, as an important contemporary philosopher dealing with the relationships between language and human (especially female) subjecthood says much about the genre problematic. Are we to take G. H.'s story as fiction or a speculation on philosophical problems in and through the narration of what we would traditionally call a 'plot'? Where does literature end and philosophy begin? (pp.vii-viii)

processes.²⁹ Some reviewers, not surprisingly, find the fiction/theory mixture disturbing:

Excellent as the writing of the title story ['Black Venus'] undoubtedly is, the same being true of The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe, both stories strike me as extreme forms of imaginative literary history and criticism more than they impress me as stories. (Douglas Dunn, Glasgow Herald, 12 October 1985)

It is readily accepted that theory contributes to fiction, and it has been argued that both the production and reception of Angela Carter's work has been, and continues to be, shaped by contemporary critical theory. Carter attended Bristol University, and also began her publishing career, in the mid-sixties, when the impact of 'Structuralist' theory was beginning to be felt in British literary institutions. F. R. Leavis's influence and that of the New Critics was still dominant in English Departments, but the early works of Roland Barthes (particularly Mythologies (1957) and Elements of Semiology (1964)), Claude Lévi-Strauss (The Savage Mind (1962), Tristes Tropiques (1955) and The Raw and The Cooked (1964)), and Michel Foucault (The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (1966)) were also being published.³⁰ Russian Formalism was also coming into

²⁹ Elaine Jordan, 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions,' in Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction, edited by Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), p.27.

³⁰ The dates given for publications quoted in this paragraph refer to their first publication in French, and not to subsequent translations. For details of translations, see Bibliography 3.

fashion, as the work of, for example, Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Propp became available in translation. Angela Carter's publications up to and including Love not only reflect 1960's theoretical thinking, but also reveal the pressure of this decade's cultural and political movements. Therefore, although Carter keeps abreast of cultural developments, it is worth remembering that she is also prosecuting an ongoing debate with the intellectual and social fashions of her youth. Her continuing pre-occupation with fairy-tale (now picked up by a number of feminist writers³¹) seems likely to have been established during her university reading in the theory and practice of medieval literature. This again links her with the European traditions she defines in the Haffenden interview.

Many critics note how Carter's work continues to interact with current theoretical investigation. Rory P. B. Turner, Kari E. Lokke, Kate Holden, and Paulina Palmer describe the influence of Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque and carnivalesque upon Carter's work.³² Salman

³¹ See, for example, Sara Maitland's Telling Tales: Short Stories (London: Journeyman Press, 1983) and A Book of Spells (London: Methuen, 1983), and Emma Tennant's most recent novel Sister's and Strangers (London: Grafton, 1990).

³² Rory P. B. Turner, 'Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus,' in Folklore Forum, 20, Nos.1/2 (1987), 39-60; Kari E. Lokke, 'Bluebeard and The Bloody Chamber: The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion,' in Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies, 10, No.1 (1988), 7-12; Kate Holden, 'Women's Writing and the Carnivalesque,' in Literature Teaching Politics (henceforth referred to as LTP), 4

Rushdie invokes Carter's name in his attempt to define the term 'carnavalesque' in a recent review of Robert Coover's latest novel, Pinocchio in Venice:

Much of the best writing of the past 30 years can be described, using a term coined by the Russian critic Bakhtin, as carnivalesque. Carnavalesque literature (the novels of Thomas Pynchon and Angela Carter, of Günter Grass and Julio Cortazar) is a turbulent, whirligig writing, a response to a shifting unreliable reality. (Independent On Sunday, 28 April 1991, p.30)

And Carolyn Brown, in her PhD thesis 'Theoretical Fictions,' combines a study of Bakhtin's work and Carter's fiction to elaborate her primarily theoretical exploration of discourses of power and desire.³³ Patricia Waugh cites Angela Carter as an example of the increasing number of women writers whose work has 'been influenced by post-structuralist theory and postmodernist experiment' (Feminine Fictions, p.30). Paulina Palmer claims:

Motifs and passages of symbolic narrative relating to psychoanalytic materials are a constant factor in her writing. They link it to the topic of the re-evaluation of psychoanalytic theory, one which occupies a central, though contentious place, on the current feminist agenda.³⁴

³³ Carolyn Brown, 'Theoretical Fictions,' Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Birmingham, 1985.

³⁴ Paulina Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight,' in Women Reading Women's Writing, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp.177-205 (p.181).

And, in Derrida, Christopher Norris breaks off in the middle of a discussion of Jacques Derrida's 'The Double Session' to illustrate his argument with passages from Nights at the Circus. 'I would guess,' he writes, 'that Carter has read "The Double Session" and read it, what is more, with a keen sense of its fictional possibilities.'³⁵ Norris, however, also writes:

I have no wish to press too hard on what may be--as conventional wisdom would have it--a fortuitous coincidence of 'themes'. But these passages from Nights at the Circus [regarding the invention of Buffo the clown's face] do catch precisely the logic and the effects of that 'dissimulating' movement that Derrida finds at work in Mallarmé's cryptic text. (Derrida, p.52)

What I wish to suggest in this thesis is not only that Angela Carter's fiction may be informed by various types of literary and psychoanalytic theory, but that her fiction also makes a contribution to theoretical thought. It is precisely because Carter does not juxtapose two distinct discourses, theoretical and fictional, but adopts one--fictional--to enact issues raised by the other--theoretical--that she is able to challenge the very distinction between them.³⁶ That is, it is precisely what

³⁵ Christopher Norris, Derrida (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.51.

³⁶ Much of Carter's writing explores and disrupts thresholds or borderlines between one state and another; Chapter 2 discusses Carter's challenge to the fiction/history distinction. Many of her stories involve adolescent heroines who have to make the shift between childhood and adulthood; important events often take place at the time of the winter or summer solstice; and Nights at the Circus is set at the turn of the century.

Robert Young has called the 'conjugation, doubling or duplicity'³⁷ of fiction and theory, which, in Carter's writing, challenges accepted definitions of either discourse.

What, then, can a fictional mode of writing accomplish that a more purely theoretical discourse cannot? Fiction can dramatise, and in doing so, question particular theoretical issues. Rita Felski argues this for feminist fiction more widely:

If literary theory can be used to illuminate contemporary feminist writing, it is also the case that aspects of women's current literary practices can be drawn upon to problematize the more abstract and speculative claims of feminist literary theory.³⁸

To 'problematize' necessarily suggests involvement:

Carter's fiction, therefore, by enacting or embodying what

³⁷ Robert Young, 'Post-Structuralism: The End of Theory,' in the Oxford Literary Review, 5, Nos. 1/2 (1982), 9. Young is using Roland Barthes's 'Theory of the Text' (published in Young's Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.31-47), in order to offer a definition of 'post-structuralism' as that which marks the 'end of theory.' He argues the redundancy of metatextual commentary when all language can be read as what Barthes calls 'text.' In 'From Work to Text,' in Image-Music-Text, translated by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977) pp.155-64, Barthes writes:

The discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder. The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing. (p.164)

³⁸ Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p.1.

in theory must remain 'abstract' or 'speculative,' gains entry into particular theoretical debates. Carter's writing engages with many current crucial political and literary issues, as Elaine Jordan makes clear:

Angela Carter writes from the thick of Marxism's self-critique in the light of both twentieth-century experience, and psychoanalysis: there is hardly a theoretical debate of the past twenty years that she does not subject to imaginative exploration. ('Enthralment,' p.34)

And Ann Snitow, in a recent interview with Carter, has referred to her fictions as battlegrounds:

What makes Carter great--and great she is, as it's time U.S. readers discovered--is that she wears her mantle of style, and her silver sword curiously wrought with signs and figures, into the thickest of modern battles. (Village Voice Literary Supplement, June 1989, p.14)

This thesis is concerned with the ways in which Carter's fiction thematises, exposes, and challenges, the reading conventions which govern the reader/text relationship, narrative centres, intertextual origins, and notions of character, identity, gender, and meaning. Each chapter also shows how Carter's texts anticipate readers' responses and include their own fictional procedures among the objects they describe. Reading conventions, Carter's work suggests, construct not only the text but also the reader; and in this way Carter's work challenges the way we see our own position as readers.

The thesis both begins and ends with a chapter on Nights at the Circus. Many critics have identified this as a break-through novel for Carter which would at last

generate the recognition that her writing so clearly deserves. For example, Ian McEwan's profile of Carter in the Sunday Times Magazine, just prior to the publication of Nights at the Circus, claims:

The publication this month of her novel Nights at the Circus will certainly confirm her as stylist and fantasist, but will also force recognition of an impressive development in the writer's career; in scale, in characterisation, in its narrative momentum and the sheer pleasure of its language, Angela Carter has brought her work to a new height. (9 September 1984, p.42)

(The very existence of this profile in The Sunday Times is evidence of the projected success of Carter's novel.)

Others have claimed that Nights at the Circus marks the beginning of her standing as a 'mainstream' writer (though the release of the Neil Jordan/Angela Carter film The Company of Wolves in the same year also did much to bring Carter's name into public awareness). Nicci Gerrard cites the novel as a significant example of work by a contemporary feminist writer which has intervened in, and been incorporated into, 'mainstream literature':

Nights at the Circus ... succeeds in transforming fictional forms, and it stands clear of the blinkered contemporaneity that limits many modern novels. Moreover, it has reached a larger audience than is traditionally expected for 'feminist' novels. (Into the Mainstream, p.167)

Nights at the Circus was predated by seven extraordinary novels (several of them award-winning), two collections of short stories, and two volumes of non-fiction. However, as John Haffenden suggests to Carter soon after the publication of Nights at the Circus, this earlier work is

often dismissed or ignored. Carter agrees, identifying a particular example:

Robert Nye's review in The Guardian was very nice...but grudging, I think; he seemed rather reluctant to concede that there had ever been anything more than a lot of high-falutin bluster in my earlier work. (Novelists, p.81)

Like the critics cited above, I regard Nights at the Circus as a significant new starting point for Carter's work, but perhaps for different reasons. I began work on this thesis soon after the publication of Nights at the Circus, and it was my reading of this novel which inspired the project; it also encouraged me to explore all of Carter's earlier work, much of which I found equally challenging and rewarding. This thesis is primarily concerned with Carter's novels, although I shall also make use of relevant short stories, and some of her non-fiction, both of which explore complementary issues. Two of Carter's earliest, and now out-of-print, novels, Shadow Dance and Several Perceptions, I deal with only briefly; they belong to a different, more naturalistic mode of writing,³⁹ and although they make interesting first attempts at the kind of experiments I shall describe, it is in the later novels that the experiments may best be examined.

³⁹ In Novelists, Carter claims:

The first novel I wrote, Shadow Dance, was about a perfectly real area of the city in which I lived. It didn't give exactly mimetic copies of people I knew, but it was absolutely as real as the milieu I was familiar with: it was set in provincial bohemia. (p.80)

Carter's fictions can be seen as a series of experiments. They can also be seen as a continuous and evolving process: each novel builds upon or reinterprets the experiments taking place in the earlier fiction (and we could include the short stories here too).⁴⁰ Many of Carter's earlier experiments come to fruition in Nights at the Circus, which is why this particular novel is so important. I do not wish to suggest, however, that the ongoing experiments throughout her work come to any ultimate conclusion in Nights at the Circus. Rather, I would claim that each volume Carter has published functions both as a conclusion and a new beginning: each offers answers to some questions but they are answers which generate still more questions. Hence the many apparent resolutions in Nights at the Circus serve only to present more problems and open up new possibilities (just as The Minister's attempts to contain Dr Hoffman's apparitions in The Infernal Desire Machines only serve to generate a more complex breed of illusion (pp.22-23)). Harriet Gilbert, in her review of Nights at the Circus for The New Statesman, registers the effect of all these questions as a compulsion to read and reread the novel:

Change is what the book is about: centrally, the changes confronted and engineered by Modern Woman; more widely, change as a terrible, beautiful, self-perpetuating force. For this reason, the book cannot end: other novels have

⁴⁰ There are, therefore, many recurrent (they might even be termed 'obsessive') motifs which crop up again and again across all of Carter's fiction. I will document some of these motifs as they emerge in my analyses.

refrained from providing 'an answer'; Carter's would have to be eternal to put all its questions ... This reader put her hangover off by taking a hair of the dog that bit her by starting all over again. (28 September 1984, pp.30-31 (p.30))

The thesis is structured in a sort of sonata form, where Chapter 1, a reading of Nights at the Circus, acts as the exposition; Chapters 2 to 5, a long development section, explore the experiments carried out in Carter's earlier fiction which, I believe, prepare the way for her latest novel; and finally Chapter 6 marks a return to the exposition material--'the hair of the dog that bit'--and reinterprets Nights at the Circus in the light of the intervening chapters. Each chapter explores a different issue, and in each case I have chosen the novel or novels most overtly concerned with the specific issue in order to demonstrate what is often a common feature across her fiction. At the same time, however, several chapters (particularly, 3, 5 and 6) do consider changes in Carter's work over time.

Chapter 1 engages with both Nights at the Circus and reviews of Carter's work in order to establish the sort of reader/text relationships which her fiction demands. This chapter begins to describe two issues which I believe are crucial to Carter's work, and which are central to my thesis: the importance of doubleness and paradox, and the ways in which Carter's writing self-consciously dramatises problems of interpretation. The second chapter once again engages with a particular novel: it examines inter-textuality in The Infernal Desire Machines. With the aid

of Derrida's model of invagination, I exploit this feature of Carter's work to demonstrate how it puts into question the traditional distinction between centre and margins. The chapter will examine what is central and marginal in The Infernal Desire Machines, and show how the novel reflects Carter's own central yet marginal position within the literary establishment. Once again, this chapter exhibits the self-conscious interest of Carter's fiction in matters of interpretation; it also points towards some of the liberating qualities associated with Carter's writing and begins to raise some of the gender issues which dominate the last three chapters of the thesis. Chapters 3 and 4 show how Carter's fiction exposes and challenges the reading conventions which govern the way we read character, identity, and gender. Chapter 3 shows how four novels, The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, Love, and The Passion of New Eve, promote a 'realist' mode of reading character whilst continually reminding the reader that character is a construction, in order to demonstrate the power of the conventions which create the illusion of knowable individuals both within and outside fiction. Chapter 4 shows how The Passion foregrounds a central feminist question, 'What is a Woman?' This chapter examines the ways in which Carter utilises gender stereotypes particularly those used to define the female body, in order to debunk them. It also contains an account of the debate about pornography which Carter's work has excited amongst critics. Chapters 5 and 6 look

at the New Eve figures which recur throughout Carter's work, and explore the affirmative politics which sustain, and the positive experience of reading, her fiction.

Chapter 5 asks the question, 'What constitutes a liberated female subject?' while Chapter 6, returning to Nights at the Circus, celebrates Fevvers as just such a figure.

Each chapter attempts to illuminate, from a variety of perspectives, the potentially liberating 'reading space' which Carter's work opens up.

The second reading of Nights at the Circus in Chapter 6 enacts the process of change produced by the intervening chapters. I do not wish to suggest, of course, that this second reading is a definitive reading; rather, it engages with just some of the challenges to which a reader of Carter's work is exposed. The structure of the thesis reproduces my own experience of Carter's work, which having begun with her latest novel, took a detour via her earlier work and returned to Nights at the Circus. It might also almost be said to imitate Carter's own writing of her last novel which, according to Ian McEwan, began to take shape some ten years before finally appearing in print in 1984 (Sunday Times Magazine, 9 September 1984, p.44). In the interim, Carter wrote and published The Passion of New Eve, The Sadeian Woman, and The Bloody Chamber, and put together her collection of journalism Nothing Sacred. McEwan quotes Carter as saying, 'I had to wait till I was big enough, strong enough, to write about a winged woman' (Sunday Times Magazine, 9 September 1984,

p.44), which suggests that the intervening years and their fictional experimentation were necessary preparations for the questions which produce and animate Nights at the Circus.⁴¹

⁴¹ In her article, 'Notes from the Front Line,' published in On Gender and Writing, edited by Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983), pp.69-77, Carter writes:

My work has changed a good deal in the last ten or fifteen years ... and, for me, growing into feminism was part of the process of maturing. But when I look at the novels I wrote in my twenties, when I was a girl, I don't see a difference in the emotional content, or even in the basic themes; I recognise myself, asking questions, sometimes finding different answers than I would do now. (p.69)

CHAPTER ONE

'NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS': REPORTING, REVIEWING, READING

Ainsi, pour le lecteur, tout est à faire et tout est déjà fait.

Jean-Paul Sartre¹

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 58.

It can be argued that a reader, in the activity of interpreting a text, is in control of that text--reading into it and getting out of it whatever that reader wants to find. But the same argument can always be inverted to suggest textual control on the grounds that it is the text which provokes the reader's responses. The above argument suggests a reversible condition of reading that is always the same for all texts. Some texts, however, particularly many contemporary experimental novels, often labelled 'postmodern,' exhibit a self-conscious awareness of the problems of interpretation. Some also anticipate a variety of reading responses, and in doing so, question accepted reading conventions. Angela Carter's fiction attempts to demystify a whole range of such conventions by exposing as cultural constructs what are often considered to be essential conditions of reading. Where Carter's writing differs from that of many other 'postmodernist' writers, I shall argue, is in the way it not only subverts reading conventions but simultaneously re-evaluates and dramatises their indispensability. I begin the thesis with a consideration of Carter's latest novel, Nights at the Circus (1984), because, of all of Carter's fiction, this novel is perhaps the one most explicitly concerned with the issue of the readers' control of/surrender to a text, and because of the challenge to reading conventions which this implies. All of Carter's novels are concerned, to varying degrees, with comprehending their own criticism, but Nights at the Circus, it can be argued,

also exploits the reading conventions it examines in order to orchestrate its own critical reception. Nights at the Circus also dramatises the very process whereby a reader may be seduced by a text and potentially changed by this experience. The argument in this chapter, regarding the unstable and reversible reader/text relationship which Nights at the Circus dramatises and exploits so overtly, forms the foundation upon which my thesis is constructed; each of the chapters which follow explores different issues and different novels, but all are specifically concerned with the power struggle between reader and text.

This chapter will be divided into five sections. Section I establishes the credentials of a reading figure within the text: this character is Walser, a reporter, whose job it is to watch, interpret, and write down what he sees. The section shows how the opening of Nights at the Circus portrays Walser as a detached reader who appears in control of his story--his text--but who, as the novel progresses, and as his text gradually takes over, loses this command and his secure perspective. Section II looks again at Walser, but this time shows how the novel simultaneously encourages an alternative reading of him, this time as a man who is, from the beginning of the novel, vulnerable to domination and manipulation by his text. By following the fate of a character who appears to occupy the place of the reader in Nights at the Circus we can see how the novel self-consciously dramatises an

important power struggle between the two contradictory readings.

Sections III and IV of this chapter imitate the pattern of the first two sections, with a selection of reviewers in the place of Walser, and the novel itself in the place of Walser's story. The reviewers here represent a notional--hypothetical and multiple--reader, since they read and interpret the novel precisely in order to imagine what 'a reader' (obviously, often very different kinds of reader) might feel and understand. Where Walser represents a reader within the world of the novel, the reviewers represent a notional reader outside the novel. The fictional reporter and 'factual' reviewers, however, have much in common, since both are professional readers whose jobs involve the interpretation and reporting of a particular 'story' to a wider readership. Walser's 'text' is the sensational and mysterious life of Fevvers, a world famous aerialiste and apparently winged woman who claims to have been 'hatched' like a bird from an egg. The reviewers' text is, of course, Nights at the Circus, which contains Walser and his story; hence the relationship between Walser and the reviewers is not a simple allegory. It is complicated by the fact that the reviewers also have Walser, and many other fragments of the narrative to which Walser is not a party, to interpret. The reviewers polarise into those who try to maintain a distance from, in order to master and contain the novel, and those who relinquish control and celebrate the intoxicating

experience of journeying through it. These sections also suggest how the novel superimposes the apparently incompatible modes of reading which have been posited, explored and criticised earlier in the novel. Section V considers the very end of the novel; it describes both Fevvers's and the novel's dependence upon their respective audiences, and shows how Nights at the Circus dramatises a re-evaluation of a mode of reading where the reader commands the text. It concludes by suggesting how the novel has not only anticipated its own critical reception but has also orchestrated a sales-boosting publicity stunt.

I

Nights at the Circus is divided into three parts according to topography: the three different locations are London, St Petersburg and Siberia. Interestingly, each part of the novel is roughly equal in length, and there is a definite turning point at the centre of Chapter six of the St Petersburg portion, the very heart of the novel. In the London section of the novel we are introduced to Fevvers--'"Cockney Venus,"' apparently winged woman, and 'the most famous aerialiste' (p.7) of the turn of the century. The first section is set in Fevvers's dressing room after a show, where with help from her foster mother Lizzie, Fevvers is recounting the story of her life to Walser, a sceptical American journalist.

Before Fevvers's story gets properly underway, however, the narrative jumps back to an earlier point during the same evening to describe Walser's experience of Fevvers's trapeze act in which she appears to be performing at an impossibly slow pace but never quite defies the laws of gravity. Back in the dressing room, Fevvers's story tells how Lizzie adopted the foundling Fevvers after finding her abandoned outside a Whitechapel brothel in a basket full of broken shells and straw. It tells of her upbringing in a family of suffragette whores, the sprouting, at puberty, of a pair of wings, and her first attempts at flight. Walser hears about the destruction of the brothel upon Ma Nelson's, the Madame's, death,² and Fevvers's and Lizzie's descent into poverty along with Lizzie's revolutionary, Italian, ice-cream-making family; he also hears about Fevvers's subsequent incarceration and escape from Madame Schreck's famous house of freaks. Fevvers tells how she escaped from Madame Schreck's, only to be trapped once more, this time by Christian Rosencreutz, who wishes to sacrifice her in order to attain eternal youth; she then describes her escape from his Gothic mansion and her journey back to London. In the course of the interview Fevvers attempts to seduce Walser both narratively and sexually, and he, in turn, is fascinated by her and her story; he attempts, although not altogether successfully,

² Another female 'Nelson' appears in Shadow Dance: Morris identifies the woman who is to become his favourite café waitress by this name (p.62).

to remain detached, sober and sceptical as the two women ply him with champagne and confuse him by playing tricks with the clocks. In the second part of the novel Walser joins Colonel Kearney's circus as a clown in order to polish up his sense of wonder and follow Fevvers on the Grand Imperial Tour. The tour starts in St Petersburg and, in the third and final part of the novel, moves on, by train, to Siberia.³

Nights at the Circus encourages the reader to relate to Walser as a fellow reader or a guide through the text. But what sort of reader does he represent? He is portrayed as a detached observer who is in control of himself and his story. When he interviews Fevvers after her performance, for example, her dressing room is described as 'a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor, sufficient, in its homely way, to intimidate a young man who had led a less sheltered life than this one' (p.9). We are also informed that:

He filed copy to a New York newspaper for a living, so he could travel wherever he pleased whilst retaining the privileged irresponsibility of the journalist, the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing ... His avocation suited him right down to the ground on which he took good care to keep his feet. (pp.9-10)

Walser represents a mode of interpretation which aims to decipher 'truth,' grasp meaning, and master the text. He

³ I am aware that this short summary is inadequate but also that it may be a useful reference point. It is one of the aims of this chapter, and a recurring motif throughout the thesis--Chapter 2 in particular--to show that Carter's fiction is particularly resistant to summary.

is a professional reporter, confident in his assumptions about reality and deception, and is careful to keep the object of his reporting in clear perspective. His 'reports,' then, serve as summaries which grasp the essence of some experience or event. He obviously delights in uncovering deception, 'since he was a good reporter, he was necessarily a connoisseur of the tall tale' (p.11); but his profession depends on his 'habitual disengagement' (p.10) from the object of his study in order to disclose the facts--the 'truth'--to his reading public. The truth he wants to uncover here, of course, is whether or not Fevvers's wings are real; and this, for Walser, is a clear-cut question; this is a commission he relishes (p.11). His job is 'ostensibly, to "puff" her; and, if it is humanly possible, to explode her, either as well as, or instead of' (p. 11). This description of Walser suggests that he assumes not only that there is a 'truth,' a centre, which will account for everything, but also that he can find that truth. Belief and disbelief, for Walser, then, amount to a black and white question of fact. He intends, we are told, to 'see all but believe nothing'; that is, he proposes to observe but not give credence to what he sees, because he does not trust appearances (until, presumably, he is at the indisputable central 'truth').⁴ This, however, highlights a paradox in

⁴ I shall discuss the question of 'appearances' in relation to notions of character in The Magic Toyshop, Love, and Heroes and Villains in Chapter 4.

the 'reporting' mode of reading he represents. As a detached observer but also as a seeker of 'truth,' Walser situates himself outside of his text, in the audience at Fevvers's show and at her narrative performance in the dressing room, but what he seeks involves burrowing to the centre, to discover the 'true story' that lies behind the illusion the performance constructs. He situates himself outside his text, yet seeks to penetrate its heart without relinquishing his original position.⁵

Reviewers frequently identify Walser as a fellow spectator; he represents the 'inside man.' These reviewers often encourage would-be readers to identify with Walser since, as we have seen, his situation inside the novel appears to map the progress and problems that arise for the reader. Amy E. Schwartz, for example, writes:

Fevvers takes up most of the novel's foreground, but it is Walser, initially the unflappable reporter ... who serves as the intermediary to readers, accompanying them through various stages of befuddlement. (New Republic, May 1985, pp.38-41 (p.39))

Elaine Feinstein claims:

Fevvers ... dominates the reader as easily as she does Walser, the bewildered journalist who is trying to ferret out the true story of her feckless life. (The Times, 2 September 1984, p.9a)

And Adam Mars-Jones writes:

⁵ This inside/outside opposition, especially in regard to the reader/text relationship, is also discussed in Chapter 2.

The voice belongs to Fevvers, but the point of view is the journalist Walser's, intrigued but basically unconvinced; the reader's complex nature, hungry for enchantment but also resistant to it, is beautifully served. (Times Literary Supplement (TLS), 28 September 1984, p.1083)

These reviewers map the reader/text relationship neatly onto Walser's and Fevvers's 'subject/object' relationship; however, the narrative 'voice' in the first part of this novel does not belong solely to Fevvers, nor the 'point of view' solely to Walser. Whilst Walser obviously does, to some degree, occupy the place of the reader in the novel, the London part is narrated in the third person. Ricarda Schmidt describes it much more accurately as a 'mediating omniscient narrator (who sometimes moves into Walser's consciousness).'⁶ The novel, by reporting things which 'even Walser did not guess' (p.12), continually makes it clear that the story Walser intends to write about Fevvers does not constitute the whole story of the novel.

By identifying Walser as a guide through the novel, readers only repeat the reporter's own situating of himself with regard to the object of his story, since as a guide he plays both a marginal and a central role. As a 'guide' he is a fellow observer figure, detached from the events along with the reader, but he simultaneously constitutes the central narrative thread which readers attempt to keep hold of in order to orientate themselves within the novel. I am, of course, using Walser in just

⁶ Ricarda Schmidt, in 'The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction,' Textual Practice, 3, no.1 (Spring 1989), 56-75 (p.69).

this capacity in this chapter; to show how the novel dramatises particular modes of reading. (Chapter 6, however, will focus upon Fevvers, to offer an alternative, but complementary, reading of Nights at the Circus.)

In Fevvers's presence, Walser soon begins to lose his sense of perspective, and we witness his failing attempts to maintain a firm and controlling grasp over both himself and his story. Walser endeavours to keep Fevvers in the position of 'object,' but from quite early in the novel there is clearly a struggle for control of the narrative, and for the subject and object positions. At one point, for example, when the third person narrative is introducing the three main protagonists, Fevvers, Lizzie and Walser, it is interrupted by Fevvers's voice, and with it the implied present tense, which usurps power and easily takes over the scene: "'Ready for another snifter?'" (p.12). Fevvers's voice shifts the balance of the narrative immediately since it suggests the supposed object's refusal to be objectified; it is almost as if Fevvers spurns being reported and wants to report herself. Conversely, of course, her surge into the text at this point may also be read as a call for attention, as a demand to be reported. Fevvers, it appears, wants to be both subject and object.

As if Fevvers's extraordinary life story and gravity-defying act were not intoxicating enough, champagne and erotic suggestion are mixed into Fevvers's provocative narrative. Walser finds that he cannot tell the

difference between the effects of the alcohol and the effects of Fevvers's flirtation: 'A seismic erotic disturbance convulsed him--unless it was their damn' champagne' (p.52). This is reflected by the frequent use of double entendre which links the sexual attack and the narrative attack, and suggests, indeed, that they are the same thing: Fevvers, for example, 'pulled the dripping bottle from the scaly ice' and 'invitingly shook the bottle until it ejaculated afresh' (p.12). Similarly, '"Ready for another snifter?"' (p.12) might refer to the champagne, but also represents a sexual 'come-one,' both of which are potentially intoxicating and bamboozling.

In order to maintain control of himself under this attack Walser employs several tactics. One of these is to attempt to write everything down, to fix his interpretation of events in front of him on his notepad, since for Walser, as a reporter, writing is his way of controlling the world. Practically, this tactic has some effect since the more Walser writes the less he drinks:

The young reporter wanted to keep his wits about him so he juggled with glass, notebook and pencil, surreptitiously looking for a place to stow the glass where she could not keep filling it. (p.9)

Symbolically, too, by making use of his pencil, Walser hopes to maintain sexual dominance: the pencil, like the champagne bottle, functions as a barely-disguised phallic symbol. Walser casts himself in a productive and creative role, as reader and as writer, and thereby attempts to assume narrative control.

The novel links writing and self-control metaphorically: the following very long sentence, for example, describes Walser's reaction to Fevvers's trapeze act:

Her wings throbbed, pulsed, then whirred, buzzed and at last began to beat steadily on the air they disturbed so much that the pages of Walser's notebook ruffled over and he temporarily lost his place, had to scramble to find it again, almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box. (p.16)

The description is retrospective, slotted inside the interview in the dressing room after the stage performance, and it underlines the resemblance between Fevvers's performance on and off stage; Walser has the same problems interpreting and reporting them both. The passage draws an analogy between the near loss of both Walser's notebook and his equanimity; and it is signalled by the repetition of the word 'place': he temporarily 'lost his place' in the notebook, and 'almost displaced' his composure. The London section frequently makes use of a pun in this passage on the word 'compose' to connect Walser's writing to his state of mind. As a producer of his own script Walser 'composes' himself by 'composing' the story, or put another way, his degree of composure is represented by the state of his composition. The final part of the sentence reinforces the link by suggesting a material nature to Walser's scepticism. He manages 'to grab tight hold of his scepticism,' as if it and his

notebook were the same thing, just as 'it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box.'

If we trace the metaphor linking Walser's writing and his self-control further through the novel, his gradual loss of command over the former reveals a gradual dissolution of the latter. For instance, towards the end of the first section of the novel Walser's writing fails to keep a distance between himself and his object of study. Faced by Fevvers's seductive attack Walser almost loses his composure and his composition, since his notes cease to reflect his own interpretation of events:

Walser wilted in the blast of her full attention ... [he felt] 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 hinge of the wrist.
(p.78)

At this point, Walser is not composing his text, Fevvers and Lizzie are dictating. This loss of control is also shown as a physical, if only temporary, loss of the writing implements when Fevvers grasps both pen and notebook: "'You must know this gentleman's name!" insisted Fevvers and, seizing his notebook, wrote it down' (p.78). In doing so, she grasps the symbols of both his narrative and sexual dominance; she therefore takes away any pretence to control that Walser may have been harbouring. Walser retrieves the book and struggles to retain his now rather fragile scepticism against further attack. However, Fevvers repeats this symbolic action a few pages later, when she places her foot on Walser's knee

and dislodges the notebook, as if to prove to him that she can take control at any point (p.83).

Walser vainly attempts to continue writing well into the second part of the novel where, still working as a journalist but now disguised as a clown in the circus, he sends his despatches home from St Petersburg via the British Embassy. The St Petersburg part of Nights at the Circus describes circus life, and, according to Carter, it has been crafted as if it were itself a circus:

The middle section is very elaborately plotted, like a huge circus with the ring in the middle, and it took me ages tinkering with it to get it right. A circus is always a microcosm.⁷

Now that Walser's identity is split between two professions, his writing style has changed with his identity:

Walser reread his copy. The city precipitated him towards hyperbole; never before had he bandied about so many adjectives. Walser-the-clown, it seemed, could juggle with the dictionary with a zest that would have abashed Walser-the-foreign-correspondent. (p.98)

Language, Walser is learning, can be used for invention as well as for reporting, for the creation of fictions as well as for the fixing of fact. As journalist/clown, he is hovering on the threshold between using language as a transparent medium to report the 'truth,' and the sheer pleasure of linguistic invention. This whole section celebrates the freedom to juggle with language, where the

⁷ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (henceforth referred to as Novelists) (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.76-96 (p.89).

language of the text does not function merely as a transparent medium for the communication of fact, but is foregrounded and continually makes the reader aware of the novel's linguistic status. Our attention is drawn towards this surface by, for example, the many foreign languages spoken, particularly by Fevvers (p.128), by the songs which Mignon sings but cannot understand (p.132), and by Walser's 'exchange with the speaking eyes' of the dumb Professor of the chimpanzees (p.108). It is a section which, like Buffo, wears its insides on its outside, and a portion of the 'most obscene and intimate insides, at that' (p.116). The language of the central section of the novel, then, not only describes circus performances, but also celebrates its own status as performance; it dramatises this freedom of invention on all levels, in the content it describes, on the level of narrative, paragraphs, syntax and individual words. The clowns, who can invent their own faces and 'make' themselves (p.121) are striking, and are frequently noted by critics as examples not only of the novel's concern with the freedom of invention, but also of the breakdown of accepted notions of identity.⁸ When Walser sees his own clown face we are told that

he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom ... He experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the

⁸ See for example, Christopher Norris's comments in Derrida (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1987), p.52; and Rory P. B. Turner's 'Subjects and Symbols,' Folklore Forum 20, nos.1/2 (1987), pp.39-60.

freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque. (p.103)

Here, 'being' and language are intimately linked, as Walser begins to comprehend the freedom not only of inventing his own false identity, but also of linguistic invention, by means of which identity may be constructed. The writing of this section also reflects and celebrates the freedom of the 'burlesque'--of inventive imitation and caricature, of inversion and subversion. The narrative, as many of the reviewers point out, fragments, and the point of view not only shifts again and again but is often ambiguous. There is a scene, for example, which is set in Fevvers's hotel room and describes not only how Fevvers resentfully takes care of Mignon (resentfully because she assumes, mistakenly, that Walser and the ape-man's wife are lovers), but also cuts backwards and forwards, in a sort of montage effect, between the present moment and a complete history of Mignon's life (pp.126-44). The voice throughout this section is that of the omniscient narrator, but it also often appears to be mediated via the consciousnesses of several of the characters present. The linguistic freedom celebrated in this part of the novel results in many passages of over-ripe prose, which is perhaps best illustrated by Walser's own excessive and overwritten copy.

This central section, however, not only celebrates the freedom of invention but also starts to dissolve in its own excesses, in uncontrolled invention and lushness

of narrative fabrication. This is symbolised by Buffo the clown, for whom 'things fall apart at the very shiver of his tread on the ground. He is himself the centre that does not hold' (p.117).⁹ This process of dissolution due to excess is dramatised again and again in the novel, but perhaps the most memorable example is the clown's dance in St Petersburg; the 'dance of disintegration; and of regression; celebration of the primal slime' (p.125), and its repetition in the last section of the book, when the clowns dance 'the whirling apart of everything' until they dance themselves 'off the face of the earth' (p.243).¹⁰

The description of excess and freedom, which is acted out in the writing of the novel, can be described as functional. It can be interpreted as a dramatisation of the corruption of uncontrolled inventiveness. This interpretation is suggested by Buffo, who explains how clowns--the most obvious symbols of excess in the

⁹ In characterising the clowns Carter often uses allusions to the New Testament and the poetry of W. B. Yeats. At this point Carter encompasses both sources by alluding to the third line of Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming' (The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp.210-11), which goes on to describe a state of chaos and breakdown, which precedes a moment of inception of a new and antithetical civilisation:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

¹⁰ The notion of the danger of too much freedom is also an important theme in The Infernal Desire Machines, where, for example, the acrobats of desire's unprohibited and extensive rape of Desiderio leads to the landslide which not only causes their annihilation, but also the destruction of the entire travelling fair.

novel--are a corrupting influence upon children: "'The child's laughter is pure until he first laughs at a clown"' (p.119). It also dramatises the limitations of what appears limitless, where the sheer lushness of invention is self-defeating and cancels out difference, rendering everything the same. Adam Mars-Jones describes this very clearly:

Angela Carter piles on the prodigies until everything is equally miraculous--except that a miracle needs a humdrum context, or at least a whiff of the mundane to set it off. (TLS, 28 September 1984, p.1083)

Walser is on the point of losing command of journalistic language and consequently also on the point of losing control of his text, because writing as a clown is not even trying to control the world. Walser the reporter is the producer of his text, of Fevvers and her story, but it appears that Walser the clown is a product of, and a performer in, the circus itself. As a member of both professions he is balanced precariously between the two polarised positions. Perhaps luckily for Walser, he is relieved from his contradictory position when he loses the physical capacity to write, having hurt his arm trying to protect Mignon from attack by an escaped lioness. Walser loses his mode of controlling the world when he cannot write, and therefore finds himself transformed: 'He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a real clown' (p.145). This description occurs exactly half way through the novel in a very short chapter. Chapter

six of the St Petersburg part of the novel, as I mentioned earlier, marks the centre of the novel; it also functions as a hinge between one half of the novel and the other.

This half-page chapter both sums up the events so far in the novel and then projects into the future.¹¹

Interestingly, at this point the novel switches briefly into the present tense, and since the story is no longer to be told in retrospect--as an interpretation of past events--this particular shift of tense symbolises, and indeed dramatises, the fact that readers will no longer be encouraged to interpret events as reporters, separated from narrative events by an apparent lapse of time. Now, in order to read the rest of the novel, readers must be prepared, like Walser, to spend their nights at the circus in the ring rather than in the audience, involved in a continual process of interpretation of changing events. Here in the centre of this central chapter, I will abandon my reading of Walser as the producer of his text, since at this point it is clear that he is no longer in control; he has been forced to give up his job as reporter and cannot write.

¹¹ Carter may be imitating Samuel Beckett's novel Murphy (London: Picador, 1973); the central section of this novel serves a similar purpose.

II

Just as the opening of Nights at the Circus portrays Walser as a reliable ally for the reader, a reporter and experienced observer who sees all and believes nothing--a convincing depiction which, as I have demonstrated, satisfies many reviewers--so this same opening simultaneously suggests that he is an incomplete and vulnerable character, who is lacking in self-knowledge. In this way, Nights at the Circus encourages an alternative reading of Walser as someone open to manipulation and change, and suggests that the novel can be read as a Bildungsroman, in which Walser is taken on a journey of self-discovery. In this interpretation Walser represents a second type of reader: one who journeys and learns, and one who abandons him/herself to the text's control. This mode of reading represents and celebrates the power of the novel to challenge and change its readers.

At the opening of the novel Walser is described as vulnerable, as a man who 'had not experienced his experience as experience' (p.10). He is frequently described as 'the young reporter' (p.7), and is referred to as somehow incomplete:

There remained something a little unfinished about him, still. He was like a handsome house that has been let, furnished. There were scarcely any of those little, what you might call personal touches to his personality.
(p.10)

Walser's vulnerability, it is suggested, is due to the way he interprets the world around him from a detached position; his 'habitual disengagement' (p.8), we are informed, extends even to his own identity; consequently, he lacks something, and this 'something' is his own subjectivity:

I say he had a propensity for 'finding himself in the right place at the right time'; yet it was almost as if he himself were an objet trouvé, for, subjectively, himself he never found, since it was not his self which he sought. (p.10)

It is Walser's lack of self-awareness which leaves him open to manipulation and change.

Walser's experience of life is described in terms of an outside/inside opposition. None of his wealth of reporting experience, we are told,

had altered to any great degree the invisible child inside the man ... Sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. (p.10)¹²

He may seek out the 'truth' about the material for his stories but he has never looked inside himself, for his own centre. Lizzie, in the second part of the novel, maintains that Walser is, as yet, unborn:

'Not hatched out, yet,' Lizzie summed him up. 'The clowns may pelt him with eggs as if eggs cost nothing but his own shell don't break, yet.' (p.171)

¹² Carter describes Jeanne Duval (in 'Black Venus,' Black Venus) in exactly the same way: 'She never experienced her experience as experience' (p.9), and 'Jeanne was not prone to introspection' (p.12).

The egg and hatching metaphor recurs throughout the novel (it is first encountered at the end of the very first paragraph of the novel, where Fevvers describes her own unique entrance into the world). Walser's exterior character, it seems, is the hard shell of experience, but waiting inside the man is an 'invisible child,' a part of him which has yet to grow up. Fevvers describes this in a different way when she sits across from Walser in the train's dining car and puzzles:

What is it this young man reminds me of? A piece of music composed for one instrument and played on another. An oil sketch for a great canvas. Oh, yes; he's unfinished. (p.204)

According to Fevvers, Walser has yet to find his correct voice for expression--he is a piece of music being played on the wrong instrument. He is 'an oil sketch for a great canvas' which has been conceived of, but not yet brought to fruition.

It takes a train crash to break Walser's shell and launch 'the child' into the world: though this is only the first stage of Walser's 'hatching,' the process being completed later in the novel. Walser's rebirth is described as a 'sea-change! Or, rather, forest-change' (p.250). On its way through Siberia the circus train is dynamited and Walser, unconscious, and buried under a pile of table-linen and other debris from the restaurant car, is left behind for dead when the main circus party is captured by bandits. He is uncovered, some time later, by Olga, an escapee from Countess P's penitentiary for women

murderers. (Walser is already, though unknowingly, linked with Olga since he lodged at her mother's house in St Petersburg, and introduced Olga's son, Ivan, to the life of a clown.) Olga discovers 'a ruddy, flaxen-haired young man in a child's short, white trousers, sleeping sound as if between white sheets on a feather bed' (p.222), and she wakes him with a kiss (the reference to 'Sleeping Beauty' is made explicit). Finally, and symbolically, Walser's hatching is celebrated by the breaking of a great many eggs:

Walser crouched over the basket of eggs but found they were easily crushed. Disgruntled, he kicked the basket over and had some fun watching the eggs that remained whole roll around ... Walser had some more fun jumping on the rolling eggs and smashing them. (pp.223-24)

Walser is hatched as an innocent, a tabula rasa, an empty sheet with nothing written on it (no story, no text): 'Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank' (p.222).¹³ It is Walser's centre which has been hatched out, but this centre, we are informed, is as vacant as the surrounding landscape: he is described as 'the empty centre of an empty horizon' (p.236). Walser's inside has changed places with his outside and he has become the vulnerable child which used to lurk inside him, unnoticed. It is this child-Walser whom Olga and the other escaped women convicts teach to walk:

¹³ The tabula rasa image recurs throughout Carter's fiction when other characters are similarly reborn; see particularly Chapter 6.

They lifted him to his feet, to see if he could walk. After a few tries and demonstrations, he got the hang of it and laughed out loud with delight and pride as he toddled with increasing confidence back and forth. (p.222)

Now that Walser's inside is dominant, he is left without knowledge of his other, outer, confident self. The Shaman, whom Walser meets in the forest, and who adopts him as an apprentice, imagines Walser as a 'little bird hatched from an egg whose shell had disappeared' (p.264). Walser now experiences everything as experience, but is unable to assimilate or interpret this experience since he can no longer observe, only participate:

He is a sentient being, still, but no longer a rational one; indeed, now he is all sensibility, without a grain of sense, and sense impressions alone have the power to shock and to ravish him. (p.236)

In his apprentice Shaman state, then, Walser represents a reader controlled by his text: he sees all and believes everything, since, for him at this point, as for the Shaman: 'there existed no difference between fact and fiction' (p.260).

But who is responsible for Walser's hatching out? Is this the result of the text's manipulation? Or Olga's kiss? Walser's text is of course Fevvers and her story, and she is partly responsible; at least Walser's fragmentary memories suggest that she is:

The odds and ends of cast-offs knocking about inside the box that used to hold his wits sometimes come together, kaleidoscope-wise, in the image of a feathered, tender thing that might, once upon a time, have sat upon his egg. (p.236)

(At the end of the novel, however, when Fevvers sees that 'he was not the man he had been or would ever be again,' she assumes that 'some other hen had hatched him out' (p.291).) Fevvers and the Shaman, have a great deal in common: Ricarda Schmidt notes that 'both their livings depend on the fact that their society accepts them, believes in them, and gives them food/money in return for the spiritual vision they offer' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.71), and describes their shared practice of the confidence trick. The Shaman, however, truly believes that 'seeing is believing,' whereas Fevvers offers this as a challenge to her audience. Walser the apprentice Shaman, therefore, represents a reader totally seduced by the text who fails to recognise that there is any trick or magic involved.

Walser hatching could be said to have begun at the beginning of the novel, where, in Fevvers's dressing-room, he was seduced both sexually and textually by the very flirtatious aerialiste and her (almost) incredible story: 'Fevvers lassoed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her' (p.60).¹⁴ It is her voice, which represents both Fevvers's body and her narrative, which has lured Walser toward her and held him spellbound:¹⁵

¹⁴ In the interview with John Haffenden, Carter claims to have modelled Fevvers on Mae West--'Mae West with Wings,' and notes: 'The way Mae West controls the audience-response toward herself in her movies is quite extraordinary' (Novelists, p.88).

¹⁵ Carolyn See, reviewing Nights at the Circus for the New York Times Book Review (2 February 1985, p.7),

Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife.... Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a sirens. (p.43)

At the end of the interview, however, when Fevvers finally stops talking, Walser finds even her silence fascinating. Walser is hooked, both narratively and sexually, and he is therefore left deeply unsatisfied when their meeting ends:

Walser was intrigued by such silence after such loquacity. It was as though she had taken him as far as she could go on the brazen trajectory of her voice, yarned him in knots, and then--stopped short. Dropped him. (p.89)

He consequently joins the circus in order to follow her around the world.

By the central chapter, Part 2 Chapter 6, Walser acknowledges, but still does not comprehend, his obsession with Fevvers:

He [Walser] suffers a sense, not so much that she [Fevvers] and her companion have duped him--he remains convinced they are confidence tricksters, so that would be no more than part of the story--but that he has been made their dupe. (p.145)¹⁶

comments upon the magic qualities of Fevvers's narrative: 'The combination of this bizarre history and Walser's state of confusion make one wonder whether Fevvers has been sitting for an interview or casting a spell.'

¹⁶ Walter Kendrick, in Village Voice Literary Supplement, October 1986, pp.17-19, compares Walser with Carter's description of the Marquis de Sade's Justine in The Sadeian Woman, concluding that:

The characters who interest Carter most, whose stories she loves to tell and retell, all share this unfledged quality--even Lizzie Borden....[from Black Venus] In the course of their stories, real experience rips them open, empties them out, often with appalling violence and always with ravishing sexiness. (p.18)

There is a vital difference between the women's having 'duped him' and his having been 'made their dupe'. If Fevvers and Lizzie had duped him, Walser would no longer think they were confidence tricksters; he would believe in them and that would be the end of the investigation. He has instead a sense that he has become their creature, even though they have not fooled him. That is, he does not know, he only 'suffers a sense,' that he has been made a dupe, and to be made a dupe is to have become the object of someone else's story.¹⁷ Walser, it appears, has been made a dupe precisely because of his determination to avoid being duped. It is the very fact that Walser has the confidence to assume that he can get to the 'truth' behind the Fevvers story which makes him so vulnerable to seduction, and therefore open to change, because Fevvers's lure relies upon his desire to master both her and her story. The more Walser strives to get hold of Fevvers's story, the more the story takes hold of him.

Walser as reporter is like the reader who assumes s/he can discover the 'truth' behind the novel, but is trapped by this very assumption. In this way Nights at the Circus anticipates the strategies of its own interpretation and demonstrates the limitations of a reading which sets out to master a text. Shoshana Felman makes the following comment about psychoanalytic readings

¹⁷ Walser is only one in a long line of Carter's male characters who are constructed as objects. See below, Chapter 5.

of Henry James's The Turn of the Screw, but it is equally applicable to readings of Nights at the Circus:

To master ... [is] to refuse to read ... to 'see it all' is in effect to 'shut one's eyes as tight as possible to the truth'; once more, 'to see it all' is in reality to exclude.¹⁸

Nights at the Circus also dramatises, and criticises, the opposite extreme to a 'reporting' mode of reading which aims to give the 'facts.' As we have seen, Walser as apprentice Shaman is like a hypothetical reader who has abandoned the quest for a definitive reading and only experiences rather than interprets the text: that is, one who is manipulated and constructed by the text.

III

The modes of reading dramatised within Nights at the Circus are reenacted by the reviews of the novel.¹⁹ These reviews can be organised into two categories: there are those which attempt to dominate the text in question, and

¹⁸ Shoshana Felman, Writing and Madness: (Literature/ Philosophy/ Psychoanalysis), translated by Martha Noel Evans and the author (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.234.

¹⁹ The reviews have been selected from a survey of British and American literary journals and newspapers. Review material has been chosen for this chapter on the basis of relevant comments on the pleasures and difficulties encountered when reading Nights at the Circus. Ironically, of course, in the very act of selecting reviews I am unavoidably exerting some sort of control over both the reviews and the novel whose control I am attempting to analyse; I too am trapped in the inevitable problem of reading and interpreting. The polarisation of reviews I describe here is also true of reviews of other works by Angela Carter.

by this I mean those reviewers who attempt to stand back from the text and offer the reader the 'gist' of the story, an outline of the plot, and a sense of its central meaning. And there are some reviewers who acknowledge, and abandon themselves to, the seductive powers of this novel, as Walser abandons himself to Fevvers and her story. The first category of review follows, of course, the accepted rubric for the genre: to prepare for prospective readers a neat and manageable package which includes a summary of the plot, a sense of the book, its aims and goals, and usually some sort of value judgement. These reviewers often take the stance of a universal reader: they refer to 'what the reader feels here' rather than to what they feel. They assume the position, like Walser as reporter, of 'ring-side'²⁰ spectators who try to make sure that their nights at the circus are spent safely in the audience, and out of the circus ring. Yet they also set out to grasp and report what is at the centre of the novel, what 'truth' lies within or behind it. In effect, these reviewers attempt to contain the novel, as if they were the whole audience wrapped around the circus ring.

Within the 'reporter' category of reviewers there are two subcategories, differing only in the degree to which they respond, or do not respond, to the novel: the

²⁰ Carter uses this same metaphor to describe Evelyn as an outsider, a spectator, watching the gradual dissolution of New York City in The Passion of New Eve: he was 'all agog in [his] ring-side seat' (p.15)

reviewers who are least sympathetic to Nights at the Circus tend not to progress beyond the first section, while others, sceptical but fascinated, praise the London portion but are disappointed by the later parts of the novel. For some of the former the novel appears to be an object of ridicule. Bruce Van Wyngarden's response is a typical example:

Nights at the Circus by Angela Carter is the early leader in the 'Wierdest Novel of the Year' contest ... If there is a message here, I failed to find it. (Saturday Review, January 1985, p.79)

These reviewers regard the novel in the way Walser regarded Fevvers before he met her: as a story to 'explode.' The reviews often exhibit only the reviewers' creativity, their own production of the story; reviewers may even have their review already written before they encounter the novel (from other reviews of Nights at the Circus, for example, or from Carter's previous work--there is a lot of evidence of repetition between reviews, some of which I will demonstrate). Several of these reviewers maintain that the book is a hoax, just as, before he met her, Fevvers was to be an entry in Walser's series of interviews 'tentatively entitled: "Great Humbugs of the World"' (p.11). John Mellors writes:

Angela Carter's performers are on 'the ludic game'. They work in Colonel Kearney's circus, and the Colonel's motto is 'The bigger the humbug, the better the public likes it'. That is the way to play 'the ludic game', he insists, 'in one word: Bamboozlem'. That could be Angela Carter's motto, too. (Listener, 11 October 1984, p.30)

For the few reviewers who remain rigidly outside the novel expecting to observe from a distance, the experience of the text is never open; they do not experience the text 'as experience' and they retain their scepticism fully intact. Nights at the Circus encourages but resists any reading which aims to contain it and extract the essence, as Geoffrey Trease, amongst others, discovers. Trease maintains a distance between himself and the novel, but consequently finds himself unable to grasp any meaning:

It is all utterly (and presumably intentionally) unreal, a monstrously tall story appropriate for an artiste of the high wire. This talented and imaginative novelist must know what it--and she--are about. I am not sure that I do.
(British Book News, January 1985, p.47)

The problem here is that Carter's novel suggests that it be both looked at and looked through, but is peculiarly resistant to the latter: it appears to promise, but denies, the reader control--just as Fevvers appears to be offering Walser the scoop of her life story, but denies him the 'truth' and the total control he seeks. Fevvers demands to be looked at, 'LOOK AT ME!', but cannot be grasped (in both physical and intellectual senses of the word), 'Look, not touch ... Look! Hands off!' (p.15).

Some reviewers are charmed by the opening section of the novel, but are later disappointed by, and condemn, parts two and three. For many of these reviewers, the control they praise within the text itself is intimately related to their own sense of control, and subsequent loss of control, as readers. These reviewers resemble Walser

as journalist who at the beginning of the novel gives the illusion of being in control, but finds his sense of control being eroded; unlike Walser, though, several of these reviewers identify this crisis as a major fault in the novel. Such reviewers begin by praising the impressive opening of Nights at the Circus only to lament the subsequent breakdown of limits and dissolution into chaos. Adam Mars-Jones, for example, writes:

Nights at the Circus doesn't so much start as break like a wave; the first third of Angela Carter's new novel is a glorious piece of work, a set-piece studded with set-pieces ... The balance tips at the beginning of the second section, and never manages to regain equilibrium... The achievement of the first section is never repeated ... Nights at the Circus starts off in full commanding cry, and later disappoints the towering expectations it has created for itself. (TLS, 28 September 1984, p.1083)

And Paul Clay claims that, at the beginning of the St Petersburg section,

Carter's florid, energetic style begins turning an already complicated narrative into a three-ringed extravaganza. (Time, 25 February 1985, p.87)

(Walter Kendrick obviously did his homework for his survey of all of Carter's work in The Village Voice Literary Supplement (October 1986, pp.17-19) by reading other reviews: he plagiarises this sentence from the Time review word for word.) Richard Martin, in a review with the title 'Three Ring Circus' (he may also have found the inspiration for his title in the review in Time), claims that the first section of the novel

is by far the most riveting and accomplished section of the novel ... the first section alone is worth the irritation and confusion of the remainder. (American Book Review, May 1986, pp.12-13.)²¹

There is always, of course, one exception to a rule, and this takes the form of a review by Michael Wood:

Things are clearer once we have been given Fevvers' past life, and the novel moves from London to St Petersburg and Siberia. (London Review of Books, 4 October 1984, p.16)

The criticisms levelled at the later, 'uncontrolled,' parts of Carter's novel, I suggest, are in response to the reviewers' own sense of disorientation as the novel begins to challenge a 'reporting' mode of reading.

Adam Mars-Jones is dismayed when he can no longer reduce the narrative of Nights at the Circus to Walser's interpretation of Fevvers's story. 'Without Fevvers's voice and Walser's point of view,' he claims, 'the narrative falters':

²¹ A TLS reviewer ('Facing the Past,' 20 December 1969, p.1329) makes similar comments about Heroes and Villains:

The control of the material in the early chapters is formidable ... This only falters at the moment when Marianne, forced into marriage with Jewel and finding herself passionately attracted to him, is lost.

Marianne, the heroine of this novel, is another of Carter's 'observer' figures who prefers to remain an onlooker. Marianne's shift out of her home environment to a life among the Barbarians and her complex attraction toward Jewel both challenge the way she reads her surroundings, just as Walser's experiences of the circus and his attraction toward Fevvers challenge his. Neither narrative is told exclusively from either Marianne's or Walser's point of view, but both of these characters, at the opening of each novel, may be read in the place of the reader, and both are challenged and changed.

The point of view becomes curiously fragmented, tending to see Fevvers through Walser's eyes while supplementing this partial perspective with a feverish omniscience elsewhere. (TLS, 28 September 1984, p.1083)

Worse than a novel which has no strong and reliable central character to act as a guide, it seems, is a novel, Nights at the Circus for example, which appears to suggest such a character--which attracts readers by confirming particular accepted reading conventions--but which subsequently questions that character's central function.

Several reviewers find fault with the sheer excess and elaborate invention which characterise the middle section (and the opening of the Siberia section) of Nights at the Circus; it destroys, they claim, the careful balance, and the enchantment, of the opening. Amy E. Schwartz, for example, finds it all exhausting:

Such extravagant invention sometimes becomes a strain, not on readers' credibility--it's hardly an issue--but on their endurance. (New Republic, May 1985, p.40)

Adam Mars-Jones feels that the novel loses all sense of direction and stable identity: 'The sentences lose their sense of mission,' he writes, and the many 'compulsively elaborated histories are likely to baffle the reader, and weaken the focus of the book' (TLS, 28 September 1984, p.1083). Carolyn See notes the seductive qualities of the second two sections of the novel, but also describes them as overwhelming and over-sweet:²²

²² In several of Carter's earlier novels chaos and excess have been described as boring. Desiderio in The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, for example, is bored by the excess of Doctor Hoffman's exotic

By this time the reader begins to feel like a child who's spent all his allowance on 10 pounds of chocolate chip cookies and eaten every one of them down to the last crumb. Page by page, even chapter by chapter, 'Nights at the Circus' is delicious, a sweet for the mind, but after a while, it's hard not to get a little queasy. (New York Times Book Review, 24 February 1985, p.7)

These reviewers' readings, however, once again act out the novel's own dramatisation of the corruption and dissolution of too much freedom.

The central St Petersburg section of the Nights at the Circus can also be interpreted as an ironic representation of the 'centre' of the book which reviewers are trying to grasp. What it represents, of course, is 'the centre that does not hold' (p.117), a 'centre' which is shown to be, like the circus itself, a performance, a celebration, and a critique of the freedom of invention. It is also a dramatisation of Fevvers's repeated challenge to her audience, 'seeing is believing' (pp.15, 17, 83), where only what can be seen on the surface of the text, the language, exists; like Buffo's face, this language has no 'truth' behind or beyond it:

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. (p.122)

It is possible to interpret this central portion of the novel just as Walser interprets the circus ring itself:

What a cheap, convenient, expressionist device, this sawdust ring, this little O! Round like an eye, with a still vortex in the centre; but give

illusions, and the chaos they cause. Similarly, Evelyn, in The Passion of New Eve, is bored by the corruption and chaos of New York.

it a little rub as if it were Aladdin's wishing lamp and, instantly, the circus ring turns into that durably metaphoric, uroboric snake with its tail in its mouth, wheel that turns full circle, the wheel whose end is its beginning, the wheel of fortune, the potter's wheel on which our clay is formed, the wheel of life on which we all are broken. O! of wonder; O! of grief.

Walser thrilled, as always, to the shop-soiled yet polyvalent romance of the image. (p.107)

The centre of the novel is represented by the circus ring, which from the 'see all and believe nothing' standpoint of many reviewers appears as only the Zero, or the empty circle symbolised by the 'O.' However, given 'a little rub as if it were Aladdin's wishing lamp,' which would involve 'the positive or negatives of belief' (p.10), the ring turns into a 'magic circle' (p.107), which represents a powerful and disruptive version of our world turned inside out.

So far in this section I have described reviewers who attempt to master and control Nights at the Circus, and I have shown how the novel both encourages and yet frustrates this mode of reading. As I suggested at the opening of this chapter, readers who appear to be controlling the text might also be interpreted as readers who are being controlled by their text, on the grounds that it is the text which provokes the reader's responses. I have already suggested that reviewers who think themselves in control of the novel in the opening section are often responding to the control which they recognise in the text itself. It is therefore possible to interpret

Nights at the Circus as a novel which not only manipulates its readers, but also as one which dramatises its own critical reception, since the reviews of this novel not only elucidate the text, but also reproduce it dramatically: the novel, 'through its very reading ... acts itself out.'²³

IV

The novel, as I have shown in section II, also dramatises another mode of reading where Walser represents readers who abandon themselves to the text's control; some reviewers respond to the novel in this way. 'Nights at the Circus,' Kathy Stephen writes, 'is the sort of book that is more enjoyable to read--and very enjoyable it is--than to reflect upon' (Books and Bookmen, October 1984, p.16). But what does happen when a reviewer ceases to reflect upon a book? Some reviewers are themselves caught up in the experience of Nights at the Circus, and, rather like Walser as apprentice Shaman, they are unable to stand back and interpret. To review at all, of course, reviewers must establish some sort of distance between themselves and the text, in order to describe the experience: several resort to metaphor in order to compare it to other experiences which are beyond their

²³ These are Shoshana Felman words in Writing and Madness, p.148; they are equally applicable to Nights at the Circus.

control. These reviews therefore do not report facts about the novel, or attempt to offer their readers the 'gist.' Rather, their own writing imitates the novel as they, too, celebrate the freedom to juggle with language.

Some reviewers describe Nights at the Circus as if it were a dream. Kathy Stephen, for example, begins her review:

I dreamed I spent a spate of nights at the circus, recently. It was a particularly wild show, and every now and then I thought I would be over-whelmed; but I stayed with the dream, secretly not wanting it to end.

Later in the same review, she writes:

It is rather like a violent dream: all-encompassing at the moment but somehow forgotten upon awakening, as though the mind could not bear the effort of holding it. (Books and Bookmen, October 1984, p.16)

The difficulty of putting Nights at the Circus into perspective is here likened to the experience of trying to recall a dream which just eludes the memory. Other reviewers describe the novel in terms of the imagery of intoxication--either alcohol or drugs. Amy E. Schwartz, for example, describes how Walser accompanies readers 'through various stages of befuddlement' (New Republic, May 1985, p.39). And Harriet Gilbert notes how Fevvers and Lizzie remain sober whilst getting Walser drunk on champagne. She draws an analogy between Walser's experience and her own encounter with the novel: the novel, she suggests, may be even more intoxicating:

It's Walser who feels that his brain is turning to bubbles--as well he might.

Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus has

the same effect on the reader. And, more ebullient, even than Fevvers, Carter mixes the drinks: politics and magic, history and fantasy, lush sensuality and narrative conjuring, jokes, adventures, literary allusions, dialogue, dialectic--all poured into a glass the shape of a picaresque nineteenth-century novel ... The effect is strange, exciting, alarming, not unequivocally pleasant.... Has Carter written the first addictive novel? (New Statesman, 28 September 1984, p.30)²⁴

Carter's earlier works have provoked similar responses. For example, Miranda Seymour writing for The Times claims:

The Passion of New Eve by Angela Carter is best described as an astonishing experience. (The Times, 25 November 1982, p.10)

Caroline Moorehead, in her review of The Magic Toyshop, The Bloody Chamber and Heroes and Villains for The Times, writes:

Angela Carter's imaginary worlds are so original, so bizarre and so full of talent that they have the quality of dreams. (4 July 1981, p.7d)

Two New Statesman reviews link The Infernal Desire Machines to a drug experience. Barry Cole suggests it is Carter who has been taking drugs:

²⁴ Walter Kendrick, in Village Voice Literary Supplement, October 1986, p.19, also appeals to the notion of addiction: 'There's no one like Angela Carter: if you're not an addict now, get that way at once.' He also writes:

A surprising number of people, I've discovered, have a special fondness for Carter that they nurture like a private vice. When they learn you share it, their eyes get weirdly bright and a little smile curls their lips: another initiate in the cabal, another aficionado of delicious wickedness. Let's go down to the dungeon and compare notes! (p.17)

Throughout the book there's the feeling that the author is more than touched by a dose of the LSDs. Still the reader is made uncomfortable by the thought that she knows precisely what she's doing. (21 July 1972, p.99)

And, ten years later, Harriet Gilbert suggests that the book itself is like a drug:

Explicitly, in the consciousness of her narrator-hero, implicitly in her writing style, Ms Carter maintains the tension throughout this mescaline trip of a book. (30 July 1982, p.21)

Auberon Waugh describes how the very excesses of this novel enchanted him:

No doubt some readers will have no patience with the exuberant ramifications of Miss Carter's imagination. For my own part, I can only testify that I read it enthralled, fascinated and bewitched. (Spectator, 20 May 1972, p.772)

And Lisa St Aubin de Teran describes the experience of reading Black Venus in terms of an intoxicating journey:

We emerge as it were, Bonny and Clyde wise, having conducted a slightly drunken and very violent tour. (Guardian, 17 October 1985, p.27)

It is often not clear, however, whether these dreaming or intoxicated readers learn anything from Carter's texts. The activity of reading and writing for these reviewers constitutes a celebration of the text's multiplicity--a multiplicity which the novel itself both celebrates and also criticises. What all these reviewers have in common, however, is a desire to see all and believe all: not a trace of scepticism is expressed.

In this section and the previous one, I have described how Nights at the Circus dramatises two incompatible modes of reading; it posits and criticises

both a reporter-like reading, where the reader assumes control, and an experiential mode of reading where the text dominates. What I have not stressed, however, is how the novel superimposes these readings, right from the very opening, and how this superimposition dramatises an important and creative power-struggle. What my two readings of Walser show is that there can be no possibility of compromise where the reader is partly in control and the text partly in control: this novel superimposes two totally incompatible modes of reading. Nights at the Circus, I will argue in Chapter 6, thrives on the very superimposition of these two absolute perspectives in order to both attract and enchant the reader, but simultaneously to dramatise and demonstrate how this enchantment has been orchestrated. The tension created between the two modes of reading generates the power of the novel to change the reader, so that the novel becomes a Bildungsroman for both Walser and the reader.

V

Towards the end of the novel Fevvers suffers from an identity crisis. She has been separated from most of the circus party, from Walser, and from an audience. She ceases to perform, abandons the enigma that had sustained her performance--the mystery of her wings--and consequently loses her sense of her own unique self:

Since she had stopped bothering to hide her wings, the others had grown so accustomed to the sight it no longer seemed remarkable.... Where was the silent demand to be looked at that had once made her stand out? (p.277)

Fevvers, once of monstrous and extraordinary size, now discovers herself 'diminishing' (p. 273):

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. (p.271)

and Lizzie comments:

"You're half the girl you were." (p.280)

In other words, just as the St Petersburg section dramatised the limitations of limitlessness, where difference is cancelled out, so Fevvers's miraculous difference is also cancelled when she has no audience, or when all of her audience have become performers. Fevvers's (and Lizzie's) performance--her 'spell'--was of course, also her Scheherazade-like narrative, which drew Walser and her audiences toward her and kept them enthralled. It was her, now abandoned, performance, the novel self-consciously points out, which produced in her own eyes and in the eyes of her audience, the illusion of both her size and her uniqueness. This is made clear earlier in the novel, for example, at the end of the London section, when Fevvers finishes recounting her life story to Walser. We are informed not only of the narrative break, but also of the break of the illusion--including the illusion of Fevvers's super-human dimensions:

Fevvers seemed as if utterly overcome, exhausted to the point of collapse, quite suddenly, as if

by the relaxation of tremendous amounts of energy.... Her heavy head hung down like a bell that has ceased tolling. She even seemed to have diminished in size, to have shrunk to proportions only a little more colossal than human. (p.87)

Towards the end of the novel, therefore, Fevvers gets smaller as her capacity for commanding wonder (and also her financial viability) shrinks: 'She was so shabby that she looked like a fraud and, so it seemed to the Colonel, a cheap fraud' (p.277). The novel, too, as I have already documented, after opening in 'full commanding cry' (TLS, 28 September 1984, p.1083), also diminishes in stature in the eyes of many of the reviewers; it appears to lose the strong identity or direction promised at the opening, and has exploded into a mass of set-pieces and fragmented narratives.

At this stage in the novel, Fevvers longs to see herself reflected in Walser's eyes. That is, she craves to see reflected back her best image of herself, which she so carefully constructed for Walser in her London narrative, and which he so scrupulously inscribed in his notebook (and in his heart):

The young American it was who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true. She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes. (p.273)

She longs to see herself reflected in Walser's eyes and to see her history written down, because both of these, the visual and the written forms, represent the way Walser 'reflects' or has 'reflected upon' her. Walser, she believes, represents her ideal audience; he will

reactivate her performance and confirm her identity as she, herself, has constructed it. She also hopes that he will confirm her as a sexual being, confiding to Lizzie that 'pleasure alone is my expectation from the young American' (p.281).

When she eventually re-encounters Walser, however, he offers her no such satisfaction: 'Fevvers felt the hairs on her nape rise when she saw that he was looking at her as if, horror of horrors, she was perfectly natural--natural, but abominable' (p.289). Under Walser's gaze she feels her identity slipping away:

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection of Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered 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?' (p.290)

Walser's gaze at this point in the novel is of no use to Fevvers because he has lost the journalist's ability to 'see all and believe nothing' (p.10), and has gained the Shaman and his people's mode of reading the world which relies upon the notion that 'seeing is believing': 'They knew the space they saw. They believed in a space they apprehended. Between knowledge and belief, there was no room for surmise or doubt' (p.253). Walser is like the reviewers of Carter's novel who have submitted themselves to the manipulation of the text:

There was a vatic glare in his grey eyes, his eyes of glossy brilliance, his eyes with the pin-point pupils. A vatic glare and no trace of scepticism at all. Furthermore, they seemed to have lost their power to reflect. (p.289)

For the sake of identity Fevvers needs to inspire wonder; that is, she needs an audience who are willing to suspend disbelief in her supernatural attributes. She is constructed by the gaze of the audience who find her wondrous--and in this case it is the 'wind of wonder' (p.290) from the audience of natives in the Shaman's hut, who revive Fevvers: 'the eyes told her who she was' (p.290), they 'restored her soul' (p.291). And their eyes tell her that she is a combination of 'Hubris, imagination and desire!' (p.291), a first class performer, and author of her own script (even if she is an author who is dependent upon an audience): 'She sank down in a curtsy towards the door, offering herself to the company as if she were a gigantic sheaf of gladioli' (p.291).²⁵

The novel, of course, is also dependent upon its audience of readers, and initially relies, for publicity, on the 'wind of wonder' whipped up by the audience of reviewers. As I have already demonstrated, this novel orchestrates the scene of its own, divided, critical reception. It also stages the reasoning behind the particular reception which it both inspires and anticipates. Just as Fevvers is 'twice as large as life' (p.15), an exotic, excessive and incredible creature, so the novel is also enormous, and produced out of what appears to many readers as uncontrolled inventiveness,

²⁵ Chapter 6 contains a detailed discussion of Walser's and Fevvers's dependence upon each other.

which celebrates its own sheer colourfulness and excess.

'Like *Fevvers*,' Gina Wisker has written,

the work calls attention to itself: polemic is translated into a rococco style replete with literary and cultural echoes. Like *Fevvers*, perhaps, 'In a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world.'²⁶

The novel, Wisker suggests, by its extraordinary style, by its excessive use of intertextuality, and by, of course, its presentation of a dazzling, perhaps fraudulent, winged woman, calls attention to itself; it attracts an audience who not only wonder at its sheer excesses, but also bristle with scepticism. Valentine Cunningham calls upon Yeats (one of Carter's favourite intertextual sources) to describe the way Nights at the Circus advertises itself:

'Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye,' said Yeats. On *Fevvers*'s bizarre journey to Byzantium the stilts are as high as Angela Carter can risk making them. (Observer, 30 September 1984, p.20)

Many readers of this novel, like Walser at the opening of the novel, will 'relish' the assignment to "puff" ... and, if it is humanly possible, to explode' (p.11) this novel. This is a novel which appears to depend upon sceptical reviewers for its own identity, and for its readership, just as *Fevvers* depends upon reviews of her act for her publicity: 'Do not think the revelation she is a hoax will finish her on the halls; far from it. If

²⁶ Gina Wisker, 'Winged Women and Werewolves: How do we read Angela Carter?' Ideas and Production, Issue 4: Poetics (1986), 87-98 (p.91). She is quoting Nights at the Circus, p.17.

she isn't suspect, where's the controversy? What's the news?' (p.11). The more rumours and gossip Fevvers's act generates, the bigger her audience at the next performance. Hence the Colonel has extraordinary stories about her published in the press:

That morning, the newspapers carry an anonymous letter which claims that Fevvers is not a woman at all but a cunningly constructed automaton made up of whalebone, india-rubber and springs. The Colonel beams with pleasure at the consternation this ploy will provoke, at the way the box-office till will clang in the delicious rising tide of rumour: 'Is she fiction or is she fact?' His motto is: 'The bigger the humbug, the better the public likes it.' That's the way to play the Ludic Game! (p.147)

The more scepticism and controversy voiced by reviewers of Carter's novel the more popular it may become. This is Nights at the Circus's inbuilt marketing device. It may be interpreted as Carter's response to the lack of serious critical interest aroused by her earlier work (which Walter Kendrick has called '20 years of prolific neglect' (Village Voice Literary Supplement, October 1986, p.17)), and also as an ironic commentary upon what constitutes a best-selling novel in our present media-constructed society. The bigger the controversy the novel produces in its own reviews, the bigger will be its success with the reading public, and therefore the bigger the sales.

Typically, in Carter's work, alternative consequences of such a plot are also suggested. Colonel Kearney's publicity stunts seriously misfire: when he publishes a second, contradictory, item in the foreign news which proclaims not only that Fevvers is 'all woman,' but also

that she is secretly engaged to the Prince of Wales (p.147), the paper is read by bandits who dynamite the circus train and kidnap Fevvers in order that she might "intercede with [her] mother-in-law-to-be, the Queen of England" (p.231) on their behalf.

The end of the novel re-evaluates a reporting mode of reading, since the novel, like Fevvers, needs an audience in order to be able to perform. In this way, the structure of the whole novel imitates the circus which it describes. Angela Carter recounts how the St Petersburg portion is crafted like a giant circus, but, similarly, the very opening and the very ending, which dramatise the importance of the reporting mode of reading, might also be interpreted as the audience which surrounds this circus. The disruptive circus section, therefore appears to be safely contained within the frame of its audience. As I have shown in this chapter, however, Nights at the Circus is a novel which, like a circus, turns itself inside out. The inside and the outside, the audience and the circus performance, the reader and the text, are not only mutually dependent, but also reversible.

The very ending of the novel confirms the necessity for both of the modes of reading we have been discussing. Walser is needed as an audience to witness the wonder of Fevvers, but he simultaneously experiences his new sexual relationship with Fevvers as an encounter which totally transforms him. The coexistence of these two modes of

reading is represented once again by both textuality and sexuality. When Fevvers rises from her curtsey to the natives, Walser demands, once more, that she tell him about herself: "'What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?'" (p.291). Walser's questions re-activate both Fevvers's narrative and her sexual demands upon him: "'That's the way to start an interview!" she cried. "Get out your pencil and we'll begin!"' (p.291). Though, it is the pencil, of course, which symbolises the phallus, it is Fevvers, ironically who increases in size: 'Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut, all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner plates' (p.291).²⁷ Fevvers is able to reconstruct herself as both larger-than-life wonder, and as sex symbol; and Walser is finally able to unite both his inner and outer selves: he 'took himself apart and put himself together again' (p.294). Consequently, Walser not only experiences sex with Fevvers as a transformational encounter--the 'sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy' (p.294) marks the completion of his hatching--but he also attempts to reflect upon it: 'Smothered in feathers and pleasure as he was, there was still one question which teased him' (p.294). He reflects upon one particular problem which is, like so many of the problems in this novel, a matter of fact or fiction: this time, symbolically, Walser has 'penetrated' to the truth,

²⁷ I examine gender roles, and role reversals, in Chapter 6.

only to find that the truth was a fiction. "Why," he asks her "did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me that you were the 'only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world'?" (p.294).

Fevvers's response to Walser might also be read as a remark to all reviewers of the novel:

'You mustn't believe what you write in the papers!' (p.294)

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETING DESIRE: CENTRES AND MARGINS IN 'THE INFERNAL
DESIRE MACHINES OF DOCTOR HOFFMAN'

With Hoffman, she became more self-conscious,
having been excessively so to start with.

Lorna Sage¹

I didn't say that there was no center, that we
could get along without the center. I believe
that the center is a function, not a being--a
reality, but a function. And this is absolutely
indispensable.

Jacques Derrida²

¹ Lorna Sage, 'The Savage Sideshow' in New Review,
39/40 (1977), 51-57 (p.52).

² Cited in Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of
Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, (London:
Routledge, 1988), p.60.

The process of interpretation relies upon distinctions between what is central in and what marginal to a text; and what we select as central and discard as marginal, and the relationship between the two, is governed by reading conventions which produce the internal relations of the text: 'character,' 'plot,' and so on. Chapter 1 suggested the importance of the notion of 'centres' in Nights at the Circus--particularly narrative centres and central characters to whom readers can relate. By at first offering and then withdrawing textual compliance with the reading conventions which construct these 'centres,' Nights at the Circus reveals them to be inherently unstable. However, the end of the novel re-examines and revalorises the reader's desire for such centres. This chapter extends this discussion to demonstrate how some of Angela Carter's other fiction explores and disrupts the distinction between what is central and what marginal in a text; primarily, it considers a novel in which desire, including the reader's desire, is of prime concern. It begins, however, by discussing Carter's own central and yet eccentric literary status, and re-emphasising the mixed reception of her work. The main concern, however, will be with the ways in which Carter's interrogation of the central/marginal dichotomy questions reading conventions and how this questioning within the texts themselves affects the process of interpretation. Carter's fictions, this chapter argues, both rely upon and yet simultaneously

challenge the preconceptions which order and unify a text, and in so doing they self-consciously explore the reading process. My analysis will examine some of the seductive mechanisms at work in Carter's writing, and will involve a further analysis of the reader/text relationship, focusing particularly upon the ways in which readers themselves are written into the text as both central and marginal.

Carter, for example, uses irony as a way of destabilising our notions of desire-as-control, but at the same time, irony, in some sense, is the ultimate form of control, which is part of the mechanism by which the novel seduces its readers. This chapter deals specifically with Carter's sixth novel, The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, since, of all her fiction, this seems to me to be the one most overtly concerned with the notion of its own textual boundaries.

I

As I pointed out in the Introduction, one of the pleasures and also one of the frustrations of working on the writing of Angela Carter is the conspicuous absence of academic commentary. Although she is widely acclaimed and has been publishing for over twenty-five years, there is still little published criticism, apart from reviews, and her work has always faced a mixed reception. She launched herself successfully into the centre of the literary world in the mid-sixties with three novels; the second of which,

The Magic Toyshop, won the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize for 1967, and the third, Several Perceptions, won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1968. This 'established her, seemingly' Lorna Sage has written, 'as one of the distinctive voices of the times.' However, as Sage also points out, Carter's next and more experimental novel, Heroes and Villains (1969), marked a turning point in her career. Sage describes this change in Carter's literary status as a shift from being acclaimed to becoming 'notably, and more problematically, a literary outsider,'³ and reports Carter recalling in an interview that one reviewer, while relishing the book, said that she would not be winning any more literary prizes ('The Savage Sideshow,' p.52). The publication history of Carter's work also bears witness to this change from acceptance to rejection, from potential centrality to marginality. In an article written in the early 1980's Lorna Sage explains:

Heroes and Villains was the last of her novels published by Heinemann in England and Simon and Schuster in the United States. Since then, she has become something of a nomad, with several publishers in both countries and no single, secure arrangement. The break with Heinemann signaled the end of the brief period in which--at least in her case--'central' and 'eccentric' tastes overlapped. She became, in part deliberately, in part inevitably, a figure of the counterculture. (DLB, p.208)

³ Lorna Sage, in the Dictionary of Literary Biography (Detroit, Michigan: Bruccoli Clark, 1983), Vol.14, 'British Novelists since 1960,' pp. 205-12 (p.207 and p.206 respectively). Further references will be given in the text as DLB.

The words 'central' and 'eccentric' here are important, because Carter is always identified as an eccentric writer. In the mid-eighties, when eccentricity resumed centre stage, the publication of Nights at the Circus and Black Venus and the filming of some of her fiction as The Company of Wolves brought Carter back into fashion.

Walter Kendrick, writing for The Village Voice (October 1986, p.17), reflects that 'all at once, it's respectable to have a taste for Carter.' In 1981 Sage reviewed three paperback reissues where she both salutes and yet laments Carter's rising popularity:

It's slightly eerie to see someone as Gothic, speculative, vagrant as Angela Carter in the process, apparently, of becoming a modern classic ... I suspect that some of her fans, like me, got so used to moralising about her marginality ... that we'll be perversely reluctant to see her becoming respectable.
(Observer, 12 July 1981, p.37)

Carter has since been republished by some very 'respectable' presses, including Chatto, Virago (which has also come in from the margins⁴), Penguin and Picador, yet while most of her work is now available in Britain, it is very difficult to track down in the USA and Canada (even though all but the early novels have been quite recently

⁴ See, for example, Nicci Gerrard's Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing (London: Pandora, 1989), which contains one section appropriately entitled, 'Feminist and Independent Houses: On the Fringe with Their Foot in the Centre' (pp.20-25). This section documents the recent fortunes of feminist presses including Virago, The Women's Press, and Bloomsbury, which 'are now part of the literary establishment in a way that would have seemed impossible in the 1970's' (p.24).

reissued by Viking Penguin). Still, however, ten years after Sage's review describing Carter's increasing popularity, Carter remains marginalised. She is, her various blurbs maintain, 'One of the most original and most acclaimed novelists of her generation' (Nothing Sacred, Virago, 1982), 'Our most brilliant and ingenious of contemporary writers' (The Passion of New Eve, Virago, 1982), 'The most stylish English prose writer of her generation' ((John Mortimer) The Sadeian Woman, Virago, 1983); and it has become customary to mention her name in lists of important contemporary novelists. The French author Philippe Sollers has even incorporated her (and a 'fictional' review of The Passion) into his 1983 novel, Femmes, writing, 'UNE ROMANCIERE ANGLAISE DES PLUS ORIGINALE! ANGELA LOBSTER!'⁵ The continued absence of scholarly attention, however, suggests that her writing remains strangely excluded from the contemporary canon.

Carter is, of course, also marginalised to some degree because she is a woman writer; she is perhaps further marginalised because she does not write the kind of novel women are 'supposed' to write. In an recent interview with Ann Snitow, she has commented interestingly upon the difficulties of writing as a woman: 'It is very difficult writing about a whole culture when one is in some sense in exile from it....Women are marginalised. I sort of cope with this by deciding the margin is more

⁵ Philippe Sollers, Femmes (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p.293.

important than the page' (Village Voice Literary Supplement, June 1989, p.14). In 'Family Romances,' the first section of Nothing Sacred, and in several interviews,⁶ Carter describes writing not only as a woman but also as an 'outsider' who is 'rootless,' owing to her father's Scottish origins. In London, Carter writes, her family 'did not quite fit in, thank goodness; alienated is the only way to be, after all' (Nothing Sacred, p.16). Lorna Sage has suggested that 'Carter's nomadic habits with publishers seem to confirm her general air of displacement' ('The Savage Sideshow,' p.52). Sage has also remarked that 'Angela Carter's fiction poses precisely the question of what is central, what eccentric in contemporary British writing.' Her work takes over and subverts many established central/marginal hierarchies; for example, she subverts the 'genre'/'sub-genre' hierarchy, as Sage points out, by using romance, Gothic, pornography, detective fiction, and science fiction with the suggestion that these 'are now the appropriate and (paradoxically) central' forms (DLB, p.205).

II

I shall try to summarise the plot of The Infernal Desire Machines, but I wish to preface this summary by

⁶ See, for example, the same interview with Ann Snitow, p.16, and with Lorna Sage, 'The Savage Sideshow,' p.53.

remarking that this centre which I am about to draw out of the novel is only an illusion of a centre. Summaries of any of Carter's work are not only difficult but usually uninteresting, since--as I hope to show--the interest lies in what might be termed the 'margins' which are woven of the marvellous and the extravagant. Elaine Jordan attempts to summarise the concerns of The Infernal Desire Machines, in 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions,' but admits that 'this story is so evocative and so acute in its response to contemporary Western culture that summarizing its significance is likely to make a fool of me.'⁷ In typically Carteresque fashion, The Infernal Desire Machines self-consciously dramatises the limitations of attempts to reduce the story to a single, dominant narrative. Summaries proliferate throughout the text itself; the introductory section, for example, sketches out possible narrative backbones, which includes what Desiderio, the hero, identifies as the climax of his story. On the very first page Desiderio offers the reader the barest outline of his whole history, which proves how uninteresting a summary can be: he reports that he 'was a young man who happened to become a hero and then grew old' (p.11). Just two pages later he offers a less laconic summary:

⁷ Elaine Jordan, 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions,' in Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction, edited by Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp.19-40 (p.32).

And so I made a journey through space and time, up a river, across a mountain, over the sea, through a forest. Until I came to a certain castle. And...

But I must not run ahead of myself. I shall describe the war exactly as it happened. I will begin at the beginning and go on until the end. (p.13)

This second summary gives more information, and may even serve to tease or tantalise the reader by offering a sample of coming events, but it offers nothing substantial. Indeed, it describes a very common fairy-tale narrative outline which The Infernal Desire Machines shares with a whole wealth of other fiction, including much of Carter's own. The very fact that this particular narrative is so conventional--that is, so pre-written by us as readers--is part of the point here since it immediately draws attention to itself as narrative convention, rather than a historical report. The interruption in this passage also draws attention to the artificiality of Desiderio's narrative and his self-conscious attempts to write a linear and exact account of his life which will begin at the beginning and go on until the end. On the very same page he describes the impossibility of doing any such thing:

Sometimes, when I think of my journey, not only does everything seem to have happened all at once, in a kind of fugue of experience ... but everything in my life seems to have been of equal value. (p.13)

Desiderio's account contains many examples of running ahead of itself, the effect of which is constantly to

remind the reader of the narrative production.⁸ David Punter argues that narrative in The Infernal Desire Machines functions by the Hoffman principle of 'persistence of vision': it appears to be teleological but is riddled with the previews which Desiderio offers, which Punter refers to as 'premature ejaculation.'⁹ By revealing future events in the story, the summaries serve both to expose and to undermine the reader's dependence upon a teleological narrative. This is an example of what Linda Hutcheon, in a discussion of the post-modernist novel, calls 'using and abusing' narrative convention, where 'provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts' of narrative are offered 'in full knowledge of (and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts' (A Poetics of Postmodernism, p.57 and p.60 respectively, my emphasis).¹⁰

Returning to my own 'summary,' the novel tells of an old man, Desiderio, writing his memoirs about a war

⁸ One example of another writer who employs this technique of jumping ahead, which disrupts the chronological narrative and upsets readers' preconceptions, would be Gabriel García Márquez in One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) (London: Picador, 1978).

⁹ David Punter, 'Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,' in Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 25, no.4 (1984), 209-22 (pp.210-11).

¹⁰ Perhaps the most extreme example of this practice in Carter's work takes place in Carter's extraordinarily claustrophobic short story 'The Fall River Axe Murders' in Black Venus. This describes the events leading up to the fatal morning when Lizzie Borden murders her parents, but the 'climax,' the murders themselves, although continually signalled, never actually take place within the narrative boundaries.

between reason and imagination, and between reality and freedom. The hero, the young Desiderio, is sent on a mission to find and defeat the enemy, Doctor Hoffman, a scientist whose experiments have succeeded in perverting traditional notions of time and space, and whose machines materialise people's desires. He thereby generates hallucinations in the entire population of a city. The Minister, Desiderio's employer, is attempting to defend the city by the sheer power of his uncompromising rationality. Robert Clark has neatly defined the opposition between Doctor and Minister as that between 'the surreal-symbolist attempt to liberate humanity from the repressions of reason and history,' and the pragmatist and positivist 'whose dull, sober and safe uniformity triumphs in the end.'¹¹ Desiderio's mission sends him on a picaresque journey during which he falls in love and travels with Hoffman's daughter, Albertina, who appears in various disguises. When Desiderio finally finds and confronts the Doctor he learns that Hoffman wishes to use him as a key component in his war against reason and in his confusion Desiderio (perhaps accidentally) kills the Doctor and is then forced to kill his beloved Albertina.

Carter raises the issue of what is central and what is marginal on a thematic level in The Infernal Desire

¹¹ Robert Clark, 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' in Women's Studies--An Interdisciplinary Journal, 14, no.2 (1987), 147-61 (p.154).

Machines. One simple technique she employs to unsettle the central/marginal relationship is to contextualise what would usually be thought of as examples of such a relationship, and show that context is always variable and open to reinterpretation, and the relationship therefore reversible. For example, the Minister and Desiderio are, seemingly, central figures--the Minister 'virtually ruled the city single-handed' (p.17), and Desiderio is the Minister's chief aid--and both are centrally situated in the city, which is the very focus of the war. In the context of a meeting with Hoffman's Ambassador, however, the Minister, the city, and Desiderio are made to appear marginalised. Desiderio describes the Ambassador as 'no common agent':

He behaved like an ambassador of an exceedingly powerful principality visiting a small but diplomatically by no means insignificant state. He treated us with the regal condescension of a first lady and the Minister and I found ourselves behaving like boorish provincials who dropped our forks, slopped our soup, knocked over our wine glasses and spilled mayonnaise on our ties while he watched us with faint amusement and barely discernible contempt.
(p.32)

The Minister and Desiderio, who are accustomed to assuming a central role, are forced by Hoffman's Ambassador (Albertina in disguise) to read themselves as marginal, where s/he represents an alternative centre. They are also forced to endure the humiliation which accompanies a marginal role, which manifests itself as a sudden loss of confidence and 'boorish' provincial behaviour. In this way, Desiderio, his Minister, and the city, are shown to

be defined by their context, a context which is subject to changes of perspective. In exactly the same way, later in the novel, Desiderio has to reread his own and Albertina's identities in the light of his experience with the Centaurs; he explains:

I felt myself dwindle and diminish. Soon I was nothing but a misshapen doll clumsily balanced on two stunted pins, so ill-designed and badly functioning a puff of wind would knock me over, so graceless I walked as though with an audible grinding of rusty inner gears ... And when I looked at Albertina, I saw that though she was still beautiful, she also had become a doll; a doll of wax, half melted at the lower part.
(p.176)

Desiderio's description of himself closely resembles the way Fevvers sees herself in the Siberia section of Nights at the Circus: both Desiderio and Fevvers lose their self-confidence in their own unique identities and both consequently see themselves diminishing in size. They also regard themselves as 'unnatural,' as freaks.

Many of Carter's novels explore possible alternative realities in which central and marginal positions are destabilised; these often take the form of 'through-the-looking-glass' worlds where accepted values and conventions are inverted. 'The Acrobats of Desire' section of The Infernal Desire Machines, for example, portrays the alternative world of the fairground which Desiderio describes as 'a whole sub-universe' (p.120) existing outside time and space:

The travelling fair was its own world, which acknowledged no geographic location or temporal situation for everywhere we halted was exactly

the same as where we had stopped last, once we had put up our booths and sideshows. (p.98)

(This familiar and important symbol of rootlessness and freedom in much of Carter's fiction is fully explored when it takes the form of the circus in Nights at the Circus.) The bearded lady, the alligator man, and the other inhabitants of the fairground are completely marginalised from what Desiderio calls 'the common world' because of their 'difference' (p.98); they wonder at Desiderio's description of the city, which he refers to as 'another reality,' 'as if were an earthly paradise from which they were barred forever' (p.101). However, within the context of the inverted world of the fairground the 'abnormal' becomes 'normal,' and the so called 'freaks' who populate the fairground hold a central position.¹² Here, roles are reversed and it is Desiderio who fails to conform, since, as he explains, 'I had the unique allure of the norm. I was exotic precisely to the extent of my mundanity' (p.101). Carter shows clearly that what appears to be marginal in one context must be reinterpreted as central within another, and vice versa. This reversibility destabilises the central/marginal hierarchy by exposing it as a product of convention.

¹² This topic is the focus of Katherine Dunn's extraordinary novel, Geek Love (New York: Warner, 1990). The novel describes how a carnival couple, Lily and Al Binewski give birth to a family of freak children by experimenting with, amongst other things, drugs and insecticides. It charts the rise to power (and centrality) of Arturo, the 'Aqua Boy' whose charismatic rhetoric and thirst for power spawns a religious following of people who are intoxicated by the mixture of attraction and repulsion, and want to become 'special' like him.

Using the same relativising technique The Infernal Desire Machines questions the hierarchical notion of a social structure which distinguishes between a central 'culture' and marginalised 'subcultures.' In this novel Carter portrays a series of alternative 'subcultures' and in so doing she raises some issues of race and gender relations since the central/marginal opposition can, on several occasions, be equated with a white/non-white and/or a male/female opposition. For example, in the city, because of his ethnic and class origins--he is 'of Indian extraction' (p.16) and the son of a poor prostitute--Desiderio feels himself to be detached and marginalised from the white capitalists for whom he works. Once outside the context of the city, however, and on board the river people's barge, he assumes another identity and explains: 'I blessed that touch of Indian blood my mother had all her life cursed for it gave me hair black enough and cheekbones high enough to pass among the river people for one of their own' (p.70). In this new context, and renamed Kiku, he sees the possibility of a more central role:

If I murdered Desiderio and became Kiku for ever, I need fear nothing in my life ever, any more.... I would become officially an outcaste but, since I had signed my allegiance with the outcastes, I would no longer linger on the margins of life with a delicate sneer on my face, wistfully wishing that I were Marvell or that I were dead. (pp.80-81)

The river people, we are informed in Carter's best National Geographic style (see New York Times Book Review,

The river people, we are informed in Carter's best National Geographic style (see New York Times Book Review, 8 September 1974, p.7), have been marginalised by a series of white European settlers who have taken over Indian land, imposed European rule, and spread disease. Some of the more fortunate dispossessed Indians have been forced to take to the waterways in barges where they trade but still remain relatively hidden from and ignored by the world. Desiderio feels comfortable with these people because they appear to have broken off all contact outside their own movable communities, and to be immune to the central/marginal issue: 'Over the years, [this tribe's] isolated and entirely self-contained society had developed an absolutely consistent logic which owed little or nothing to the world outside' (p.70). They even use a language which appears to negate the problems of what is central or marginal, offering a possible alternative existence which just 'is': 'There was [no] precise equivalent for the verb "to be", so the kernel was struck straight out of the Cartesian nut and one was left only with the naked, unarguable fact of existence' (p.71).

Ironically, these people whom Desiderio describes as 'outcastes' are a people who come closest to being a caste. The river people are a distinct race, 'the purest surviving strain of Indian,' where 'those who married outside the river clans were forbidden to return to their families or even to speak to any member of the tribe again as long as they lived' (p.70). The river people are

outcasts and 'outcastes' and yet they are also a caste. These people, Desiderio learns, are not as self-sufficient as they at first appear since to remain a caste they necessarily define themselves against other castes and hence interact with 'the world outside' in a central/marginal relation. Desiderio also discovers that they have their own complex power hierarchies which marginalise him: 'More than ever I realized their life was a complex sub-universe with its own inherent order as inaccessible to the outsider as it went unnoticed by him' (p.87). Also, since race is not an issue within this community, the river people organise themselves in other central/marginal relations which, for instance, marginalise women. The women are 'ordered below' when the barges 'reached a place of any size' (p.72) so as not to be seen by 'landsmen'; they are also cut off from view from their own people since they are continually masked behind a thick layer of makeup. Desiderio describes the women as if they were mechanical people:

I found that all the women moved in this same, stereotyped way, like benign automata, so what with that and their musical box speech, it was quite possible to feel they were not fully human. (p.73)

The automaton, the puppet, and the doll, are some of Carter's favourite images used to describe women who conform to sexual stereotypes.¹³ Desiderio, however, is

¹³ This point is made very clearly in Paulina Palmer's article, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight,' in Women Reading Women

the real 'outcaste' since he belongs neither to white governing classes in the city nor does he have a place in the river people's world. He is destined to linger on the margins of life, but of course he is also the central figure, the 'hero,' of the story.

III

An important characteristic of Carter's writing which complicates the central/marginal distinction in all of her fiction, and one of the features most commented upon, is intertextuality.¹⁴ Carter has linked her writing with the Surrealist method of taking familiar things and making them strange, and she claims that she regards 'all of Western Europe as a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles...bricolage.'¹⁵ The Infernal Desire Machines exhibits some of the most obvious

Writing, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp.177-205.

¹⁴ For the moment, I am using the term 'intertextuality' in the very broad sense, defined in M. H. Abrams's A Glossary of Literary Terms, p.200, to signify

the multiple ways in which any one literary text echoes, or is inescapably linked to, other texts, whether by open or covert citations and allusions, or by the assimilation of the features of an earlier text by a later text, or simply by participation in a common stock of codes and conventions.

¹⁵ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen, 1985), p.92. Further references will be given as Novelists and page numbers will appear in the body of the text.

examples of the workings of this 'bricolage' technique, and one of the problems facing the reader is coping with the wealth of allusions which seem to both construct and destabilise the text and its reading. The novel, then, is assembled out of a plurality of texts rather like a surrealist film: the reader is continually bombarded with combinations of names from, and fragments of, other literature, Hollywood films, music, Greek mythology, the visual arts, popular culture, and more. Gina Wisker makes the point that 'Carter's literary borrowings are always overt, foregrounding both the source and the reason for the borrowing,'¹⁶ and one need only read the title or be aware of the names of most of the characters in this novel to get the intertextual flavour. The allusions appear at every level of the novel, from quotations which are clearly identified by the narrator to single words which carry echoes or memories of other texts but cannot be called quotations. An example of the former occurs when, at one point, Desiderio is provided with a suit by the peep-show proprietor (Doctor Hoffman's old Professor) which contains a quotation written by Albertina in the pocket. Desiderio describes how he

found a scrap of paper with the following quotation from de Sade written on it ...

'My passions, concentrated on a single point, resemble the rays of a sun assembled by a

¹⁶ Gina Wisker, 'Winged Women and Werewolves: How do we Read Angela Carter,' in Ideas and Production: A Journal in the History of Ideas, Issue 4: Poetics, 87-98 (p.93).

magnifying glass; they immediately set fire to whatever object they find in their way.' (p.97)

Later, when the Centaurs decide to integrate Desiderio and Albertina into the 'celestial herd' (p.190) by tattooing them with pictures of the Sacred Stallion and nailing iron shoes to their feet, Albertina seemingly makes use of this very quotation to avoid what promises to be a fatal initiation ceremony:

She raised herself up on her elbows as high as she could, and, shading her eyes with her hands, she gazed into the far distance ... I knew she was searching for her father's aerial patrols. However, I did not believe in the patrols. Yet, as she trembled, I saw it was not with fear but with hope--or, perhaps, a kind of effortful strain; she gripped my hands more tightly, until her nails dug into my palm. I remembered the scrap of paper in the pocket of the peep-show proprietor's nephew. 'My desires, concentrated to a single point...' (p.191)

To Desiderio's amazement (though he misremembers the quotation) he sees their rescuers in the distance, and, at the very moment when the first lethal incision is to be made, the Centaurs's sacred tree bursts into flames enabling both Desiderio and Albertina to escape. This is a straightforward example of a typical Carter technique where a quotation functions both on the level of discours and histoire (and thus problematises the distinction between them): the quotation both introduces intertextuality into the language of the text, and simultaneously causes action to take place within the story.

A second type of allusion, the single suggestive word, is another distinctive feature of all of Carter's

fiction: it teases readers by constantly suggesting intertextual sources but offers nothing graspable. These allusions function rather like Dr Hoffman's illusions in the city:

The great majority of the things which appeared around us were by no means familiar, though they often teasingly recalled aspects of past experience, as if they were memories of forgotten memories. (p.19)

Reviewers respond by listing endless references to other writers, artists, and musicians, in attempts to capture the style and spirit of her writing, but this only serves to show how the novels resist easy categorisation: the lists produced in one review of a particular book seldom agree with those in others. Yet there is a curious agreement between reviewers in terms of the metaphors used in their attempts to identify the genealogy of The Infernal Desire Machines: a surprising number, for example, choose to use food imagery, listing her sources as ingredients in recipes. Barry Cole entitles his piece 'Devilled Pud,' and explains:

The novel is reminiscent of so many disparate writers that I hesitate to name them (reviewer's shorthand). But Bernanos, Kafka, Dickens and Lewis Carroll make a nice and tasty pudding. (New Statesman, 21 July 1972, p.99)

Another review is entitled 'Sinister Slices' and includes this comment:

Sade, Swift, Genet, Bram Stoker, Defoe, Lewis Carroll and many more may have flavoured the linguistic mixture, but the final result is the author's own. (Times Literary Supplement, 2 June 1972, p.622)

And Barry Baker describes the novel in these terms:

A dash of Bosch, a bit of de Sade, and a pinch of Pauline Réage are the necessary ingredients for this weird tale. (Library Journal, 99 (August 1974), p.1958)

This use of cooking imagery (which is not limited to reviews of The Infernal Desire Machines) may represent reviewers' attempts to domesticate, and therefore further marginalise, Carter's otherwise unclassifiable writing (it is difficult to imagine the same imagery being used so frequently to describe a contemporary male writer's work). One result of Carter's 'encyclopedism' is that, for many readers, everything in The Infernal Desire Machines seems to suggest itself as intertextual; readers inevitably attempt to privilege some allusions above others, but the text resists this by crowding material from other texts in such excess that none can stand as central. In this way, the novel appears to dramatise Barthes's notion of intertextuality, where 'the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.'¹⁷

Carter's novel, then, claims for itself a central place and renders all the other texts marginal since they are all fragmented and recombined within the writing of this novel. Simultaneously, however, her novel appears to be situated on the margins of a host of other texts to which it refers as if they were central (hence the

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), p.146.

reader's desire to trace and identify them). The relationship of Carter's text to these other texts is a complex one: Carter's text is inside all the other texts and yet they are inside it. One of the terms Jacques Derrida uses to describe this complex relation between inside and outside is 'invagination,' which he explains as follows:

Invagination is the inward refolding of la gaine (sheath, girdle), the inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside then opens a pocket.¹⁸

The metaphor of invagination can be used, for example, to describe the function of a framing device ('la gaine'), for example a title, which is not only on the margins of a novel, that is, at the beginning, arguably before the novel has begun, but which simultaneously folds in upon itself to create a 'pocket' or centre, since it appears to offer an interpretive key to the text. Derrida's model of invagination will allow me to describe some of the processes at work when reading The Infernal Desire Machines, while at the same time my reading of Carter's novel will help to clarify my interpretation of Derrida's term. I realise that there has been considerable criticism of the use of female body parts as metaphors for literary models,¹⁹ but I also think that this metaphor is

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines,' in Deconstruction and Criticism, by Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller (New York: Continuum, 1986), pp.75-176 (p.97).

¹⁹ See for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle,' in Diacritics, 14, No.4

deliberately disturbing, and is particularly appropriate for The Infernal Desire Machines, and for much of Carter's other provocative work (see Chapter 4). In Carter's work the vagina is a symbol of desire and fear, and functions both to attract and repel. Typically, it is fantasised as vagina dentalis: the Barbarian men in Heroes and Villains, for example, are drawn toward Marianne, and Jewel rapes her, even though it is believed that 'Professor women sprout sharp teeth in their private parts, to bite off the genitalia of young men' (Heroes and Villains, p.49). Similarly Buzz, in Love, examines Annabel to check that 'there were no concealed fangs or guillotines inside her to ruin him' (Love, p.94). The whole of Carter's short story, 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe,' revolves around Edgar's fascination yet repulsion from his mother: the repulsion dates from the day he and his brother witnessed the birth of their sister. This

(Winter 1984), 19-36; Spivak, 'Displacement and the Discourse of Woman,' in Displacement: Derrida and After, edited by Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp.169-95; and Alice Jardine, 'The Hysterical Text's Organs: Angles on Jacques Derrida,' in Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.178-207. Christie V. McDonald criticises Derrida's use of the terms 'hymen' and 'invagination' in her interview with him ('Choreographies,' in Diacritics, 12 (Summer 1982), 66-76 (p.71)). He responds by explaining that although the gendered significance of the words had not escaped him, neither term simply designates figures for the feminine body. 'Invagination,' he maintains, has

always been reinscribed as a chiasmus, one doubly folded, redoubled and inversed. From then on, is it not difficult to recognise in the movement of this term a 'representation of Woman'? (p.75)

leads him to a celibate marriage where, finally, when his wife dies, he approaches the corpse and 'Taking from his back pocket a pair of enormous pliers, he now, one by one, one by one by one, extracts the sharp teeth just as the midwife did' (Black Venus, p.61). Of course, the vagina is associated not only with penetration but with the issue of menstrual blood: this is highlighted in Carter's rewriting of the Grimms' fairy tale version of 'Cinderella,' in the first part of 'Ashputtle: or the Mother's Ghost,' where the ugly sisters crush their mutilated feet into a vagina-like slipper, 'an open wound.'²⁰ One need only look at the passage in The Infernal Desire Machines describing the first in a set of important exhibits in a peep show, which represents yet another preview of Desiderio's quest throughout the novel, to get an idea of the importance of the vagina (and the vagina as a frame) as a symbol in this novel. The description of this first exhibit, is entitled 'I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE' and reads:

The legs of a woman, raised and open as if ready to admit a lover, formed a curvilinear triumphal arch.... The dark red and purple crenellations surrounding the vagina acted as a frame for a perfectly round hole through which the viewer glimpsed the moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior.

Here endlessly receded before one's eyes a miniature but irresistible vista of semi-tropical forest where amazing fruits hung on the trees ...

²⁰ Carter, 'Ashputtle: or the Mother's Ghost,' in the Village Voice Literary Supplement, March 1990, pp.22-23 (p.22).

It seemed that winter and rough winds would never touch these bright, oblivious regions or ripple the surface of the lucid river which wound a tranquil course down the central valley. The eye of the beholder followed the course of this river upwards towards the source, and so it saw, for the first time, after some moments of delighted looking, the misty battlements of a castle. (p.44)²¹

The exhibit represents the journey which Desiderio will take in search of Doctor Hoffman's castle, which lies, symbolically, at the river's source. 'The legs,' as the other exhibits make clear, are Albertina's, between which Desiderio desires to penetrate; the journey therefore, is an erotic one, driven by the desire which Desiderio's name signifies.

I would like to describe the complex relation between centre and margin by looking at a specific and special example of allusion at work in (or, indeed, not 'in') this text--the novel's epigraphs. Epigraphs in general, like all framing devices, have a double nature: they are both outside and inside the novel which they head. The epigraphs, then, are situated in The Infernal Desire Machines's margins, on the 'outside,' and as such they are a part of it, and yet excluded from it--they are part of the external frame which folds itself in to create a

²¹ This description inspires the illustration by James Marsh for the anatomically explicit cover of the King Penguin 1985 edition.

In Several Perceptions, Joseph imagines Mrs Boulder's vagina in this idealised way: 'He wanted to reach the uncreated country of fountain and forest deep inside her, deep as the serene Beulah Land where Viv once slept fleecily clad in Laguno down' (p.119).

centre. As part of the external frame, the epigraphs have the authority to function as 'keys' to the novel's contents, that is, it is their marginal positioning which paradoxically enables the epigraphs to be read as central. This, in turn, undermines the epigraph's apparent authority since if they are read inside the novel, they are subject to the context which it provides--which in Carter's writing is usually the continual possibility of irony. In this way, epigraphs function rather like the Cretan Liar who announces that all Cretans lie.

Where, then, does the text begin, with the title or on page one? Are the title and epigraphs supposed to be read solely as if chosen by Angela Carter, which would lend them a certain authority, or, since this novel is represented as Desiderio's memoirs, are we to read them as Desiderio's choice, generated from inside the text, and therefore subject to the ironies and uncertainties of the narrative voice? Whose perspective, for example, does the title represent? Who, that is, interprets Doctor Hoffman's desire machines as 'infernal,' rather than celestial? These questions remain unanswered by the text, but serve to further destabilise what at first appears to be a simple central/marginal distinction. It is also worth noting that whilst both title and epigraphs appear to be located in positions of authority at the opening of the novel, the epigraphs are situated amongst the pages of contents, dedication and preface, and are probably

completely overlooked or ignored by some readers: this increases their marginality.

What makes the epigraphs in The Infernal Desire Machines so unusual is that they dramatise their own double function and demonstrate one way in which this novel anticipates a reading procedure and includes it among the objects it describes. This is just one example of the excessive self-consciousness which makes Carter's work so distinctive. It is the second and third epigraphs which interest me here since they both account for the reader's desire for a key to the contents of the novel, whilst at the same time parodying this very desire. The third epigraph is from Alfred Jarry's Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustrall Pataphysician: 'Imagine the perplexity of a man outside time and space, who has lost his watch, his measuring rod and his tuning fork.'²² This quotation identifies and mocks man's desire to name, measure, and thereby control his surroundings. I am careful to continue the clearly gendered nature of this quotation in accordance with Jarry, and therefore with Carter, since the notion of control and mastery of texts has stereotypically been linked to a so-called 'masculine' reading process. Part of Carter's project, as I hope to

²² In Selected Works of Alfred Jarry, edited by Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor, translated by Taylor, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p.248. Jarry defines 'Pataphysics' as 'the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments' (p.193).

suggest, is to open up the possibility of alternative modes of reading, which might be associated with the 'feminine' stereotype. The quotation from Jarry can be interpreted as a timely warning to the reader, and as a reflection upon reading conventions: it identifies the reader's inevitable desire to grasp the so-called 'central' ideas which structure the text and yet mocks the need to do so. Jarry situates his man outside--in the margins of--time and space (like the epigraphs situated in the margins of the novel) since this is where he would have to be to measure them, but, of course, measurement has become impossible. This prefigures Desiderio's descriptions of several such situations in his story; for example, during the course of the war, Hoffman dissolves time and space, and his Ambassador explains to the Minister and Desiderio that this is 'for the sake of liberty':

Ambassador: The Doctor has liberated the streets from the tyranny of directions and now they can go anywhere they please. He also set the timepieces free so that now they are authentically pieces of time and can tell everybody whatever time they like. I am especially happy for the clocks. They used to have such innocent faces. They had the watermelon munching, opaquely-eyed visages of slaves and the Doctor has already proved himself a horological Abraham Lincoln. (p.33)

The second epigraph to Carter's novel is a quotation from Wittgenstein, and presents a similar paradox:

(Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of the content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one: the definition is a kind of ornamental coping

that supports nothing.) Ludwig Wittgenstein,
Philosophical Investigations²³

Wittgenstein maintains that we sometimes demand definitions for their own sake, that is, as a formal or conventional requirement. What we think we are seeking is the fundamental structure or centre, but in fact the 'definition' that we arrive at, Wittgenstein claims, is an ornamental coping, a decoration. That is, the definition, like Jarry's measurement, is a margin, it surrounds what appears to be the object or the concept. Its position of marginality paradoxically lends it authority to promise truth, yet simultaneously prevents any such thing because it supports 'nothing.'

If we read all of the allusions to other texts in The Infernal Desire Machines in terms of these quotations from Jarry and Wittgenstein, the reader's desire to define--to trace and identify source material--becomes part of the search for the meaning or centre of the text, but this meaning is revealed to be a 'conventional requirement' or an 'ornamental coping'--a surround which appears to function as a central support, but is only an illusion, since there is nothing beyond or beneath the text. This is not to undermine or trivialise the readers' requirement or desire for definitions, or keys to meaning, since the conventions which govern our reading processes precisely depend upon such a requirement and desire. As Linda

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p.85.

Hutcheon has commented, 'The center may not hold, but it is still an attractive fiction of order and unity' (A Poetics of Postmodernism, p.60).²⁴ I would argue, indeed, that this text encourages the reader to attempt to trace allusions, but it simultaneously makes the reader aware of such definitions as fiction, that is, as the products of convention rather than as 'given' or irreducible centres.

This can also be described in terms of a theoretical debate between two modes of reading which distinguish literary 'allusion' from what has become known as 'intertextuality.' The modes of reading are described in the following passage from Roland Barthes's 'Theory of the Text':

Whereas criticism ... hitherto unanimously placed the emphasis on the finished 'fabric' (the text being a 'veil' behind which the truth, the real message, in a word the 'meaning', had to be sought), the current theory of the text turns away from the text as veil and tries to perceive the fabric in its texture, in the interlacing of codes, formulae and signifiers.²⁵

Barthes's first definition of criticism refers to a mode of reading which would rely upon 'allusions' functioning as pointers to something beneath the fabric of the text, to a source or centre which will help clarify its

²⁴ Since she discusses Nights at the Circus on the following page, Hutcheon may well be quoting Carter (Nights at the Circus, p.117), who is quoting W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming'--'the centre cannot hold.' See Chapter 1, page 51, footnote 9.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Theory of the Text,' in Untying the Text A Post-Structuralist Reader, edited by Robert Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.31-47 (p.39).

'meaning.' 'Intertextuality,' however, is a feature of what Barthes calls 'the current theory of the text'; it encompasses all references to other texts--'bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc.' ('Theory of the Text,' p.39)--and it serves to draw the reader's attention to the linguistic fabrication of the text itself. In so doing, it exposes as illusion the notion, which sustains many readers of fiction, that there is something beyond or beneath the text. As I have shown, The Infernal Desire Machines simultaneously encourages both of these incompatible modes of reading.

Carter's epigraphs describe and enact their own invaginal procedure. They posit an interpretative key to the 'truth,' the 'real message' of the novel, whilst simultaneously subverting this message, because the 'key' they offer is one which denies the possibility of achieving this truth. One more example of the self-consciousness of this double gesture is that Carter/Desiderio has kept Wittgenstein's parentheses round his comment, thereby overtly signalling both its marginality or its centrality (since a parenthesis is both an aside and is embedded within a sentence). Thus, the parentheses surround a comment which is both a definition and yet no definition at all, and hence invaginate the invagination.

IV

This process of invagination which the epigraphs act out repeats itself throughout The Infernal Desire Machines on every level, as the novel continually promises and yet undermines every traditionally accepted centre, including allusions, characters, narrative and plot (hence the epigraphs do function as keys of a kind). At the same time the text thematises the problems which this raises for interpretation and includes the desires of its readers among its very processes. Some of the difficulties readers may have with this novel are acted out by the first person narrator, Desiderio, the old man recalling his youth and writing his memoirs. He explains:

I must gather together all that confusion of experience and arrange it in order, just as it happened, beginning at the beginning. I must unravel my life as if it were so much knitting and pick out from that tangle the single, original thread of my self, the self who was a young man who happened to become a hero and then grew old. (p.11)²⁶

Desiderio has been asked to pick out the central from the marginal, to interpret and record his story just as the reader attempts to interpret the text. This narrative which Desiderio is unravelling 'as if it were so much knitting' recalls one of Roland Barthes's descriptions of

²⁶ The hero of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel Nausea (1938) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) theorises about the difference between living and remembering experiences: memory, he finds, is far more manageable than life: 'I wanted the moments of my life to follow one another in an orderly fashion like those of a life remembered. You might as well try to catch time by the tail' (p.63).

reading: 'Everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath.'²⁷ Barthes's point, of course, is to deny that there is a 'single original thread,' and this reinforces the irony of Desiderio's statement. Carter's novel may also be alluding to Marlow's yarns in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.²⁸

Carter's novel self-consciously acknowledges the analogy between Desiderio reading/writing his own story and the reader reading the text when Desiderio addresses ironic comments about his narrative to the reader (a convention, of course, of the retrospective account of one's life). For example, when he admits killing Doctor Hoffman before it happens chronologically within his story--giving us, as David Punter puts it, 'the conclusion of the story ahead of its "natural" place' ('Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,' p.211)--he remarks: 'But there I go again--running ahead of myself! See, I have ruined all the suspense. I have quite spoilt my climax. But why do you deserve a climax, anyway?' (p.208).²⁹ Later, when he has killed Hoffman, struggled

²⁷ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in Image-Music-Text (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), pp.142-48 (p.147).

²⁸ Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.8.

²⁹ This passage is the origin of David Punter's 'premature ejaculation' metaphor. Both the quotation from The Infernal Desire Machines, and Punter's commentary

with and murdered Albertina, and dramatically smashed up the Doctor's desire machines, he escapes easily from the laboratory (too easily, he thinks, for a 'hero'). This dramatic scene is described in a mixture of gothic and James Bond-like adventure discourses, over-stuffed with adjectives and riddled with alliteration. The following is a typical passage:

I ran down that ice warren of white, glittering corridors, found the laboratory, went in, smashed the dancing screens with the desk, dragged pipes and wires from the walls and set fire to the papers with my gold cigarette lighter. It was the work of moments. (p.218)

His disappointment with the ease of the destruction and his escape is heralded by the last, and typically Carteresque, throw-away sentence, 'It was the work of moments,' which seems to empty out the meaning and drain the energy from the previous description.³⁰ The deflation experienced in the past, at the time of the exploit, is therefore repeated in the present, is experienced once more as narrative deflation. Furthermore, Desiderio draws

recall Tristram's self-referentiality in Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (New York: Norton, 1980), although Tristram's problem is not running ahead of himself but, rather, keeping up with himself.

³⁰ This is a technique which Gabriel García Márquez uses several times in One Hundred Years of Solitude. When, for example, José Arcadio Buendía sends details of important experiments to the government, we are told:

He sent it ... by a messenger who crossed the mountains, got lost in measureless swamps, forded stormy rivers, and was on the point of perishing under the lash of despair, plague, and wild beasts until he found a route that joined the one used by the mules that carried the mail. (pp.10-11)

an explicit analogy between himself and the reader--between his expectations of himself and what he assumes are the reader's expectations of a dramatic narrative. Hence, his sense of deflation at the ease of his escape is dramatised not only at the level of narrative, but also commented upon: 'If you feel a certain sense of anticlimax, how do you think I felt?' (p.218).

The relationship between the reader and Desiderio, like the relationship between the reader and Walser in Nights at the Circus, is not a simple allegory since, once again, the authority of the apparent guide is questioned. In The Infernal Desire Machines, the older Desiderio seems to function as an observer in the margins of the text with the authority of detachment and of age to offer metalinguistic commentary on the story of his younger self. He tries to differentiate between the two 'I's' in his story: 'I was a great hero in my time though now I am an old man and no longer the "I" of my own story and my time is past' (p.14); but the older and younger Desiderios--the two 'I's' of the text--relate invaginally: the older frames the younger, and yet the older's narrative is central to, indeed it is, the story of the younger. Therefore, both 'I's' are revealed to be part of the same construction. Put another way, just as old Desiderio is writing the story of his life, so this narrative is also the story of his writing; hence he is producing, but is simultaneously produced by, the text,

and therefore can have no detached, authoritative position. Personal identity appears to be beyond or before the text but is also shown to be part of the text's very processes: it is both inside and outside at the same time.³¹

Some examples will make this process of questioning the so-called 'central' narrator clearer. The opening words of the novel disrupt any confidence the reader might wish to have in a narrator and immediately establish an ironic tone:

I remember everything.

Yes.

I remember everything perfectly. (p.11)

But in case the reader has missed the initial irony here Desiderio then admits that he is constructing his story out of everything he can recall. It is, he claims, a story concocted from a variety of disparate and less than reliable sources: from a straightened-out version of his own memories; from literature; from what he calls 'the

³¹ Umberto Eco uses a similar model to describe the relations between the younger and older Adso in The Name of the Rose (1980) (London: Picador, 1984). In his commentary on his own novel, Reflections on 'The Name of the Rose' (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), he writes:

Adso, at the age of eighty, is telling about what he saw at the age of eighteen. Who is speaking, the eighteen-year-old Adso or the eighty-year-old? Both, obviously; and this is deliberate. The trick was to make the old Adso constantly present as he ponders what he remembers having seen and felt as the young Adso.

history books' (p.14); and from popular myth ('they told me later, when I became a hero, how I had saved mankind' (p.11)). This admission of the diverse components of his narrative is punctuated regularly by the refrain, 'I remember everything.' Throughout the rest of the novel the reader is continually reminded of this process of 'bricolage' from which the older Desiderio self-consciously constructs his narrative, which, of course, constructs his past and present self. He is, for instance, unsure about the relationship between memory and the creative imagination, and he is suspicious that the scenes he describes might be constructed out of his own fancy. For example, when Desiderio is rescued by the Doctor's mercenaries he describes their base: 'We landed in a helicopter port inside the fort itself, which I believe I had once seen in a film of the Foreign Legion' (p.195). And when Desiderio sees Hoffman's laboratory he says:

I think I must have imagined some, at least, of the décor I found in the room for it satisfied my imagination so fully I was half suspicious ... It was half Rottwang's laboratory in Lang's Metropolis but it was also the cabinet of Dr Caligari. (p.204)

He describes the 'décor' of the Doctor's laboratory as a combination of two early twentieth-century films which are both renowned for their concern with decoration rather than plot. The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, like Carter's novel, experiments with the notion of an unstable narrative frame, where the audience thinks the hero

reliable until the final scene reveals him to be an inmate of an insane asylum. Desiderio's narrative cannot distinguish between what is recalled from 'literature' or 'film' or any other quotable medium, and what is recalled from 'life,' since the text exposes what we call fact as constructed in the same way as what we call fiction and shows, again, like Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, that what we call history has much in common with what we call story. Hence Desiderio's narrative, which appeared to be a metalinguistic commentary upon, or frame around, the story of his younger self, both posits and simultaneously questions its own interpretative status.

V

Desiderio's invaginal relationship with his story thematises the reader's relationship with the text. Just as Desiderio frames his story, so readers, in the act of interpretation, frame the text, and hence are both marginal and central, outside and inside; the reader is always in 'an external position from which to elucidate the whole in which [she or he] also figures.'³² David Punter points out how readers are explicitly implicated in The Infernal Desire Machines, indeed, how Desiderio writes us into his script in the 'Introduction' (see,

³² Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p.199.

particularly, p.14): he describes the 'Introduction' section as a 'mutual fiction of the later course of the world which Desiderio weaves around himself and the reader,' which implies that 'we are supposed already to know the outcome of the story through history books' ('Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,' p.211). Developing this, I want to suggest that readers of The Infernal Desire Machines are in an invaginal relationship with a text which requires that they try to interpret invagination. The text, once again, anticipates this predicament by including figures for these reading procedures amongst the objects it describes. For example, before he leaves the city Desiderio describes how he and his fellow citizens of 'The City Under Siege' have to orientate themselves in a city full of illusions--just as the reader is trying to interpret a text full of allusions:

We did our best to keep what was outside, out, and what was inside, in ... But, if the city was in a state of siege, the enemy was inside the barricades, and lived in the minds of each of us. (p.12)

Both inside and outside at the same time, such illusions prevent Desiderio and his fellows from adopting any detached position from which to observe what is happening in the city. To live inside the city, to be a citizen, is to be involved in the disturbing processes which construct it. This is an appropriate figure for the situation of the reader of this text, who can find no secure place from

which to interpret, only the continual suggestion that there might be such a position.

The reader searching for the elusive meaning, or centre, of the text resembles Desiderio pursuing Albertina, whom he calls his 'Platonic other,' his 'dream made flesh' (p.215). Just as Walser in Nights at the Circus seeks not only to penetrate Fevvers's story and her clothes to discover the 'essential' Fevvers beneath (to see her body and also, symbolically, to master her sexually by penetrating to the symbolic 'centre' of her body), so the young Desiderio is driven by his desire for Albertina, which is a desire to penetrate her. As we have seen, Desiderio's journey towards Doctor Hoffman's castle was represented early in the novel by the very act of (visual) penetration of Hoffman's daughter (in exhibit 1 at the peep-show). The sexual act, however, is one which Albertina continually promises--'"Oh, Desiderio, soon! soon!'" and yet continually defers--'"Don't you see it's quite out of the question, at the moment?'" (p.204). This serves as an eroticisation of the mode of reading which seeks to penetrate behind the surface of the text, or which journeys through the novel expecting to be rewarded with the key to its meaning. Desiderio both believes in Albertina, claiming that for him 'the earth turned on the pivot of her mouth' (p.136), yet also knows that she is a construct of this very desire, since 'all the time she kissed [him] she had been only a ghost born of nothing but [his] longing' (p.140). Albertina is like the mechanical

doll in E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' who is brought to life by the hero's desire,³³ except in this case the 'heroine' knows her situation: "All the time you have known me, I've been maintained in my various appearances only by the power of your desire" (p.204).

The 'centres' described in this novel, therefore, like those in Nights at the Circus, do not 'hold.' Desiderio fulfils part of his quest and gains entrance into Hoffman's castle to the source of the illusions, only to be, literally, disillusioned.³⁴ There are no illusions within the castle, because Doctor Hoffman, like Prospero in Shakespeare's The Tempest, is immune from the effects he creates:

Ironically enough, one could not judge the Prospero effect in his own castle for he could not alter the constituent of the aromatic coffee we sipped by so much as an iota.... I had wanted his house to be a palace dedicated only to wonder. (p.200)

³³ Tales of Hoffmann, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp.85-125.

³⁴ Carter clearly invokes Conrad's Heart of Darkness by using the, by now, famous image of a nut and kernel, which stresses the importance of the shell rather than the centre:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical ... to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale. (p.8)

When Desiderio finally sees the location of Doctor Hoffman's castle he describes it as 'a sweet, female kernel nestling in the core of the virile, thrusting rock' (p.196).

Like the characters in The Wizard of Oz who finally meet the wizard, Desiderio realises that he has travelled beyond the possibilities of wonder to the very processes which create the illusions:

My disillusionment was profound. I was not in the domain of the marvellous at all. I had gone far beyond that and at last I had reached the powerhouse of the marvellous, where all its clanking, dull, stage machinery was kept.
(p.201)

Hoffman himself, at the very heart of his castle, is similarly empty. 'He was stillness. He seemed to have refined himself almost to nothing. He was a grey ghost sitting in a striped coat at a very elegant table' (p.200). Doctor Hoffman's coat, like Buffo the clown's make-up in Nights at the Circus, appears to have nothing beneath it, only 'an absence. A vacancy' (Nights at the Circus, p.122). Desiderio fears that fulfilling his 'quest' with Albertina will prove equally unsatisfactory: 'I was already wondering whether the fleshly possession of Albertina would not be the greatest disillusionment of all' (p.201). He, of course, kills her before this particular 'anticlimax' can take place, thus denying what he calls 'his proper destination' (p.220).

However, at the same time as it exposes the illusory nature of these 'centres,' the novel also stresses the importance of the desire for such illusions. Life without desire, Desiderio finds, is life without direction and without a driving force, where 'everybody is relatively contented because they do not know how to name their

desires so the desires do not exist' (p.207). Desiderio, however, is not contented because he remembers the object of his desire. Desiderio believes he will never see Albertina again:

I identified at last the flavour of my daily bread; it was and would be that of regret. Not, you understand, of remorse; only of regret, that insatiable regret with which we acknowledge that the impossible is, per se, impossible. (p.221)

But he also believes no such thing, and writes his memoirs in an attempt to reincarnate, or reconstruct, by reinterpreting, Albertina, and his memoirs are motivated by the desire for her which was never satisfied but was also never destroyed by disillusionment. She, therefore, is both inside and outside, the product and the addressee of his writing, and, symbolically, the memoirs are dedicated to her (where the dedication itself functions as both a frame and a centre):

I, Desiderio, dedicate all my memories
to
Albertina Hoffman
with my insatiable tears. (p.14)

For Desiderio there can be no compromise between believing and not believing in his 'centre,' only a radical undecidability which motivates the process of writing. Albertina's imminent presence at the end of the novel--the last words are, 'Unbidden, she comes' (p.221)--marks the end of writing (since there is now no reason to write) and Desiderio's death, since she is his 'necessary extinction' (p.215): 'What a fat book to coffin young Desiderio'

(p.221). The 'she,' may of course not refer to Albertina at all, but to death itself, or, more likely, the two are synonymous. The sexual connotations of 'she comes,' also suggests a final consummation of the sexual act for which Desiderio has been longing, though of course, it is she and not he, who 'comes.'

Desiderio's journey towards Albertina in this novel is complemented by a parallel sub-plot, in 'The Erotic Traveller' section, which recounts the story of the Count, a parodic figure who represents, Elaine Jordan explains, a combination of 'Sade and Nietzsche, dressed up as Dracula' ('Enthralment,' p.34). The Count journeys toward his centre: this is a journey, like Desiderio's, which is towards both another character but also towards himself. Like the reader journeying through the novel, drawn on by the promise of centres but aware of these centres as constructs, the Count gravitates towards, and yet flees from, a negative image of himself. This other self takes the form of a black pimp who pursues the Count after he strangles a prostitute in New Orleans, and whom the Count knows is his own creation. When they finally come face to face the Count complains to the pimp (alluding to T. S. Eliot and Baudelaire³⁵): "'You are my only destination

³⁵ T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land,' Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.65: 'You! hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable--mon frère!' Eliot is quoting Baudelaire from Les Fleurs du Mal. Carter has also used this quotation in her short story 'The Quilt Maker,' where she feminises it to, 'ma semblable, ma soeur' (in Passion Fruit: Romantic Fiction with a Twist,

... You altered my compass so that it would point only to you, my hypocritical shadow, my double, my brother" (p.159). It is the sheer force of the Count's simultaneous belief and yet disbelief in himself (the disbelief is materialised as a belief in his negative self) which motivates his travelling. The Count, like Desiderio, finally meets his own centre, his own negative self (though the roles of negative and positive become interchangeable), and these two selves annihilate one another. The meeting, then, is annihilatory, but what is important, as the Count had always maintained, was the journey towards such a meeting: 'The journey alone is real' (p.123).³⁶

The novel, then, continually encourages the reader to search for the centres which it exposes as constructions, teasing the reader with parodic versions of her or his own desires. The Minister describes what Doctor Hoffman has done to the city and, I would argue, what Carter has done to the text:

Minister: All he has done is to find some means of bewitching the intelligence. He has only induced a radical suspension of disbelief. As in the early days of the cinema, all the citizens are jumping through the screen to lay their hands on the naked lady in the bath-tub! (p.36)

edited by Jeanette Winterson (London: Pandora, 1986), pp.117-138 (p.137)).

³⁶ Two figures in other novels by Carter have adopted a similar motto. Morris in Shadow Dance (p.36), and Fevvers in Nights at the Circus (p.279) both appear to believe that 'To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.'

Like the bewitched citizens of the city, readers of The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman are encouraged to leap through the surface of the text to lay their hands on the naked truth which supposedly lies behind it (a further indication of the eroticisation of the reading process). The readers' invaginal relation to the text positions them as both marginal and central, simultaneously believing and not believing in centres. And it is this radical 'suspension of disbelief' (where 'radical' does not suggest something which is complete or irreversible, but, rather, something which is irreducibly oxymoronic) which creates an insatiable desire for an elusive centre, which, in turn, motivates a potentially endless process of interpretation. The end of Desiderio's writing is both marked, and simultaneously brought about, by a reprieve, a consummation, and death; the novel suggests, however, that there is no such satisfaction or termination for the reader: "Nothing," said the peepshow proprietor, "is ever completed; it only changes" (p.99).

The Infernal Desire Machines uses the invaginal model to undercut all attempts to master the text: all attempts--and the gendered metaphors are apposite--at what might be called a 'phallic' reading. It uses a model of invagination to show the impossibility of, yet the inescapable desire for, such a reading. Therefore, in so far as my reading appears to offer a key to reading this novel, it is phallic; but in so far as it enacts the

unmasterability of the text, it offers still another example of the invaginal relation between reader and text.

All of Carter's novels offer similar, if sometimes less explicit, challenges to reading conventions. The coherence of her work since her first publication cannot simply be explained in terms of any one linear or organic model, but some features remain constant--such as her obsessive eclecticism and the resulting wealth of intertextual allusions; the revaluing and superimposition of 'sub-genres'; the mingling and counterpointing of realist detail and disturbing fantasies; the exploration of notions of identity and gender as social constructs; and especially, in connection with all of the above, a self-reflexive fascination with the problems of interpretation. All of her novels seem to me to explore the possibilities of, and open up, what I shall refer to as an alternative and productive 'reading space,' which promotes new ways of reading intimately linked with and yet subversive of familiar conventions. The spatial metaphor is both inspired by, and also describes, the vagina and vaginal space which has characterised this chapter. However, these alternative modes of reading do not simply shift the marginal, in this case, the feminine, to the centre; rather, they make use of the central/marginal's paradoxical and doubled positioning to challenge accepted notions of both genders and their hierarchical relationship. Furthermore, Carter's use of

this body metaphor can be read as part of her own discourse of gender bending: it allows her fiction to celebrate femininity, and yet at the same time demythologises any notion of an essence upon which a such celebration depends. Chapters 4 and 6 will discuss the ways in which Carter's fiction both exploits and explodes patriarchal appropriation of the female body. The vagina and vaginal space closely resemble the circus ring in Nights at the Circus where both the performing space and the audience which surround it are equally important, reversible, and mutually dependent. Throughout the remainder of this thesis, I will be attempting to describe how Carter's novels open up such a 'reading space,' although, since it is generated simultaneously inside and outside the texts, it remains ungraspable--one might even say illusory. This is perhaps one reason why academic critics have such difficulty writing about or placing Carter's work.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHARACTER OF ANGELA CARTER'S 'CHARACTERS': 'THE MAGIC TOYSHOP,' 'HEROES AND VILLAINS,' 'LOVE,' AND 'THE PASSION OF NEW EVE'

When reading a novel, or writing one for that matter, we maintain a double consciousness of the characters as both, as it were, real and fictitious, free and determined, and know that however absorbing and convincing we may find it, it is not the only story we shall want to read (or, as the case may be, write) but part of an endless sequence of stories by which man has sought and will always seek to make sense of life. And death.

David Lodge¹

'Your survival as a character and mine as an author depend upon us seducing a living soul into our printed world and trapping it here long enough for us to steal the imaginative energy which gives us life.'

Alistair Gray²

The essence of naturalist fiction is plausibility; in order to create the willing suspension of disbelief, the writer is forced to allot his or her characters lives that are the most plausible, not the most like life, which, since it is not the product of the human imagination, holds infinite surprises.

Angela Carter³

¹ David Lodge, How Far Can You Go (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.240.

² Naster's speech to Lanark in Alistair Gray's Lanark: A Life in 4 Books (1981) (London: Granada, 1982), p.485.

³ Angela Carter, 'Afterword' to Love (revised edition), p.116.

Carter's fictional texts, like Hélène Cixous's theoretical text, 'The Character of "Character",' ask and develop the question, 'What does "character" name?'⁴ This is a question which has not yet received a great deal of discussion amongst literary theorists of the present generation; Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan, for example, points out that 'the elaboration of a systematic non-reductive but also non-impressionistic theory of character remains one of the challenges poetics has not yet met.'⁵ The term 'character' usually defines those personages whose 'lives' the text describes, who appear to exist before and beyond the boundaries of the text, and who are therefore in some way knowable. Many readers rely upon this notion of character as a stable and reassuring reference by which to orientate themselves through a novel and by which they are confirmed in their own sense of a secure self-identity.

Hélène Cixous writes:

By definition, a 'character,' preconceived or created by an author, is to be figured out, understood, read: he is presented, offered up to interpretation, with the prospect of a traditional reading that seeks its satisfaction at the level of a potential identification with such and such a 'personage.' ('The Character of "Character,"' p.385).

The 'traditional reading' is an inheritance from the kind of nineteenth-century 'realist' novel Henry James

⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Character of "Character,"' in New Literary History, 5 (1974), pp.383-402 (p.383).

⁵ Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (London: Methuen, 1983), p.29.

describes as seeking a 'direct impression of life.'⁶ The ultimate realist premise would be a one-to-one correspondence between literature and reality, though, George Levine maintains,

no major Victorian novelists were deluded into believing that they were in fact offering an unmediated reality; but all of them struggled to make contact with the world out there, and, even with their knowledge of their own subjectivity, to break from the threatening limits of solipsism, of convention, and of language.⁷

The aim of realist novelists, then, was to produce the illusion of reality, and to convince their readers that this was a reading of life. Levine maintains that realism 'implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there' (The Realistic Imagination, p.6). To 'get beyond language,' therefore, the realist text had to deny its very status as representation, and therefore deny the material nature of the text as marks on a page, and the

⁶ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction,' in The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends, edited by David H. Richter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp.422-33 (p.425). The term 'realist' is used here to describe the work of a number of novelists in the nineteenth century (and since). I am using the term in full consciousness of its reductiveness: clearly the output of nineteenth-century novelists was far more varied and innovative than could be encapsulated in a single adjective. However, the term can stand as a shorthand for a set of assumptions about the aims of novelists and the practices of readers which were shared in varying degrees in this period, and also underlie most popular fiction today. (My use of the past tense should not be taken to suggest that realistic fiction is not a widespread mode in the present.)

⁷ George Levine, The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction From Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.8.

status of the narrative as conventionalised articulation, in order 'to let the identity of things shine through the window of words.'⁸

The nineteenth-century realist novel tended to place character at the centre of meaning. It focused upon the 'individual experience rather than collective tradition as the "ultimate arbiter of reality"'⁹ in its attempt to depict the lives of ordinary people rather than an idealised or conventionalised version of events; but it refused to acknowledge the conventionality of such a strategy. Levine suggests that such a 'refusal' was 'essential to the convention itself. It supported the special authenticity the realist novel claimed by emphasising its primary allegiance to experience over art' (The Realist Imagination, pp.17-18). For example, George Eliot's insistence both in and out of her novels that she was inclined towards the creation of imperfect characters is well known; she deliberately chose to create anti-romantic and anti-heroic characters, stressing the importance of the ordinary, thereby inviting readers to regard her fiction as more 'real' than that of her predecessors.

⁸ Colin MacCabe, Theoretical Essays: Film, linguistics, literature (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985), p.35.

⁹ Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p.15.

The realist tradition is closely related to the novelist's sense of audience, since by portraying a personal and individual experience of life, the novel invites its readers to treat the characters as living people rather than as textual constructions.¹⁰ Such a reading, Hélène Cixous claims, 'leads one to assume a "depth," a truth that is hidden but discoverable' ('The Character of "Character,"' p.385). Derek Attridge, in an article entitled 'Joyce and the Ideology of Character,' comments upon the reading conventions which enable us to achieve such a transcendental reading:

As readers conversant with a given literary tradition at a given moment in history (in which the realist novel continues to play a dominant role), we deploy a battery of interpretive techniques to produce characters as we read, but in order for these techniques to be effective, they must be occluded in an illusory experience of unmediated access to knowable human nature.¹¹

Many realist novelists, then, attempted to reflect upon the world by presenting the reader with what appeared to

¹⁰ In The Realistic Imagination, Levine argues that the major Victorian novelists 'share a faith that the realist's exploration will reveal a comprehensive world.... Its relation to reality may be mediated by consciousness, but it is authenticated by the appeal of consciousness to the shared consciousness of the community of readers' (p.18).

¹¹ Derek Attridge, 'Joyce and the Ideology of Character,' in James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth, edited by Bernard Benstock (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), pp.152-57 (p.153). In The Realistic Imagination, George Levine maintains:

The history of English realism obviously depended in large measure on changing notions of what is 'out there,' of how best to 'represent' it, and of whether, after all, representation is possible or the 'out there' knowable. (p.6)

be 'unmediated access' to the truths of human nature. The power this illusion generates, George Levine maintains, resides in both 'a pleasure in knowing life, and a pleasure in the power to seduce an audience into believing it has seen life too' (The Realistic Imagination, p.21). Henry James points out the difficulties of producing even the most momentary illusion, but then goes on to claim that to break such an illusion constitutes 'a betrayal of a sacred office,' and 'a terrible crime':

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and his trusting friend are only 'making believe.' He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. ('The Art of Fiction,' pp.423-24)

This chapter analyses the ways in which Angela Carter's work, while exploiting all the 'traditional' resonances of character, exposes and challenges reading conventions which promote such a reading, and looks at how four of Carter's novels examine and redefine what character 'names.'¹² The issues raised here are, to some degree, common to all of Carter's fiction, and I have chosen to look at several quite early novels, The Magic

¹² I shall discontinue the inverted commas around the word character, but they can be assumed throughout my text when I am referring to the myth of character, since this term, and what it signifies, is in question.

Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, and Love, in the first three sections; this is followed by an analysis of the function of names in The Passion of New Eve in Section IV. Section V considers the position of the reader in relation to the construction of character across Carter's work as it both 'uses and abuses,'¹³ does not dispense with but exposes, a realist notion of character. Also important in terms of Carter's fiction, are the ways in which her novels expose and use idealised notions of the realist novel which have filtered into popular fiction (including the 'Mills and Boon' variety) and classic Hollywood narratives. In effect, her novels superimpose techniques which have been described as realist upon both the more self-conscious eighteenth-century techniques (allusions to Fielding, Sterne and Swift recur frequently in Carter's work) and also upon twentieth-century modernist techniques which decentre and destabilise the notion of character.¹⁴ They do this in order to capitalise upon the reader's desire

¹³ Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988). 'Uses and abuses' is a catch phrase Hutcheon uses throughout her text: 'Postmodernism,' she claims, 'is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges' (p.3).

¹⁴ I am using the term 'modernist' in the commonly accepted sense, as referring to the techniques of Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Stein. (Though of course, this involves immense simplifications.) For readings of modernist experiments with character, see, for example, Attridge, 'Joyce and the Ideology of Character,' pp.152-57, and Daniel Ferrer, 'Characters in Ulysses: "The Featureful Perfection of Imperfection,"' pp.148-51, in James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth.

for a transcendental reading where characters appear knowable, yet simultaneously subvert the very process of recognition.¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism neatly describes this process:

What postmodernism does is to denaturalise both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response, while retaining (in its typically complicitous critical way) the historically attested power of both.¹⁶

Typically, Carter's fiction self-consciously dramatises the ways in which character is, and has been, both written into and read into a text; and, in the course of this process, it also raises many questions about what Hélène Cixous has called 'the nature of fiction' ('The Character of "Character,"' p.383). Cixous maintains that we use the same fictional codes, the same reading conventions, to read life and fictional texts; that is, we read ourselves and other people in the same way as we read character, and vice versa. Vladimir Nabokov makes this point brilliantly, via Humbert Humbert, in Lolita (ironically, of course, since Humbert Humbert is himself a self-

¹⁵ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in her chapter 'Story: characterisations,' in Narrative Fiction, suggests a similar strategy in order to develop 'an integrated theory of character' (p.42). She outlines the incompatibility of what she calls 'mimetic theories (i.e. theories which consider literature as, in some sense, an imitation of reality) [where] characters are equated with people,' and 'semiotic theories [where] they dissolve into textuality,' and asks 'should the study of character be abandoned, or should both approaches be rejected and a different perspective sought? Can such a perspective reconcile the two opposed positions without "destroying" character between them' (p.33).

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989), p.34.

consciously constructed fictional character who addresses the readers saying, 'Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me').¹⁷ 'I have often noticed,' he says,

that we are inclined to endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the reader's mind.... Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone through between the book covers, his fate is fixed, in our minds, and, similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. (p.279)

Cixous argues that by demystifying the notion of character, which Nabokov's irony does so beautifully,

the question of the nature of fiction comes to the fore, as well as the examination of subjectivity--through fiction, in fiction, and as fiction: where the term 'fiction' should not be taken simply ... as part of a pair of opposites, which would make it the contrary of 'reality.' ('The Character of "Character,"' p.383.)

To question the notion of character, therefore, is also to question and disrupt the way we read and construct ourselves and others.

I

How, then, does Carter explore the notion of character in The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains and Love? On one level, it is almost possible to read the characters in these novels as if they were knowable,

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (1959) (London: Corgi, 1961), p.136.

'living characters ... in significant relationships'¹⁸: it is therefore almost possible to relate to them, and also to relate their stories (though, as I have already pointed out, summaries of Carter's novels are notoriously difficult). The Magic Toyshop is Carter's second novel, published in 1967. It is the story of a fifteen-year-old girl, Melanie, and her younger brother and sister, whose comfortable middle-class life is suddenly shattered when their parents are killed in a plane crash and they are adopted by their toymaker uncle who lives in a seedy London suburb. The sudden shift of location includes a whole change of lifestyle for the children, and, as one reviewer comments, 'the shock is well conveyed of the physical change from hot daily baths and middle-class cosseting to the burping geyser and not a book in the house' (Times Literary Supplement, 6 July 1967, p.593). Uncle Philip is the archetypal demon puppeteer whose odd creations and life-size puppets command all of his affection while he abuses the rest of the household. This household consists of his Irish wife Margaret, who was struck dumb on her wedding day; her brothers Finn, a painter, and Francie, a musician.¹⁹ They are joined by

¹⁸ See T.S. Eliot's introduction to Djuna Barnes's novel, Nightwood (1937), (New York: New Directions, 1961). Eliot is attempting to classify Nightwood, and explains that 'unless the term "novel" has become too debased to apply, and if it means a book in which living characters are created and shown in significant relationships, this book is a novel' (pp.xi-xii).

¹⁹ Aunt Margaret plays the flute, with Francie on fiddle and Finn playing the spoons and dancing (pp.49-52).

Melanie and her brother Jonathon, who works for his uncle building model ships, and their baby sister Victoria. The plot is constructed around Melanie's attempts to define and redefine herself as she copes with the tragedy of her parents' death, her own adolescence and awakening sexuality, and her growing relationship with the Irish trio, who dance and play music, like toys in a deserted nursery, when Philip is away. Melanie gradually and unwillingly falls in love with Finn, her reluctance stemming partly from the fact that Finn bears no resemblance to the 'phantom bridegroom' of her fantasies (generated by reading women's magazines belonging Mrs Rundle, her parents' house-keeper).

Heroes and Villains was published just two years later, in 1969. It is set in the future, in the aftermath of a world war, where the survivors are grouped into three classes, Professors, Barbarians and Out People. The last class are outcasts from humanity, they are 'wilder than beasts' (p.54), and their bodies show the most overt signs of the effects of war: their 'human form [had] acquired fantastic shapes.... Few had the conventional complement of limbs or features and most bore marks of nameless diseases' (p.110); they haunt the margins of both the professorial and barbarian camps, and hence haunt the margins of the story. Marianne, the heroine, is a history professor's daughter, who belongs to a community of

There is also an Irish woman called Maggie, who plays a tin whistle in a band, in Carter's earlier novel, Several Perceptions.

scholars, farmers and soldiers who live a disciplined and heavily ritualised life within a steel and concrete settlement surrounded by 'a stout wall topped with barbed wire' (p.3). There are different Barbarian tribes, who make regular raids on her settlement for supplies and who fascinate Marianne--'she liked the wild, quattrosyllabic lilt of the word, Barbarian' (p.4)--especially after one of them kills her brother as she looks on. Marianne's mother subsequently dies from grief, and some years later Marianne is made an orphan (like Melanie), when 'in a fit of senile frenzy, the old nurse killed her father with an axe and then poisoned herself with some stuff she used for cleaning brasses' (p.15). Marianne, always a rebel, defects from the claustrophobic confines of her community when she helps a Barbarian--Jewel--escape, and finds herself swept away with him. The shift from the Professors' community to the harsh life among the Barbarians also recalls the shift of location in The Magic Toyshop. Marianne is shocked by the change of culture and by the poverty and ignorance of the Barbarians, and after a failed attempt to escape, she is even more shocked to find herself first raped by Jewel and subsequently forced to marry him. Marianne and Jewel's marriage ceremony is concocted and presided over by Doctor F. R. Donally,²⁰ a fellow professorial exile, Jewel's 'tutor,' and self-

²⁰ This may be a sly allusion to Dr F. R. Leavis, whose dominance in the field of literary criticism coincided with Carter's student years.

appointed ruler over the Barbarian tribe. Marianne becomes more attached to Jewel, and Donally begins to lose control over his pupil, until finally Jewel and a now pregnant Marianne evict him from his place in the Barbarian tribe. Jewel is later called upon to rescue his estranged tutor who, Donally's son claims, has been ambushed by professorial soldiers, but Jewel is shot and killed in action. Marianne, realising a rising ambition, prepares to take over the leading role.

Love is one of a trio of Carter's seemingly more realist novels; it was written and set in 1969. Carter claims that it is 'a modern-day, demonic version of [Constant's] Adolphe,' which she has 'macerated ... in triple distilled essence of English provincial life.'²¹ It describes the lives of two brothers Lee and Buzz, and the effect on their relationship of the intrusion of a third person, Annabel, who later becomes Lee's wife. Lee and Buzz, we are informed, were raised by an aunt, after their mother went mad. Lee works his way through grammar school and University to become a comprehensive school teacher, whilst Buzz, who 'steadfastly refused to learn anything useful,' (p.12) is an aimless drifter. Lee takes in the emotionally disturbed Annabel, an art student just recovering from one attempted suicide, but Buzz's unannounced return from North Africa, and jealousy of his brother's relationship, creates a volatile and complex

²¹ Angela Carter, 'Afterword' to Love (revised version), p.113.

situation. The novel traces the growth of the three-way relationship, which is punctuated by Lee's affairs, Annabel's consequent suicide attempts, and fights between the brothers.

The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains and, to some degree, Love, all decentre the traditional notion of character, which is why it is only 'almost' possible to relate to the characters in these novels. They challenge the notion of a realist reading, expose the reading conventions which structure such a reading, and, in the process, they question the very possibility of transcendence; however, they simultaneously suggest the very thing they seek to invalidate. In order to describe this process, though, it is necessary to draw a distinction between what I shall call 'identities' and 'characters.' 'Identities' will refer to personages in texts as they are seen, and created by, other personages; 'characters' will refer to fictional personages created by an author--which may or may not appear 'believable' to the reader. (I use 'personage' as a neutral term covering both.) Identities are the result of the process whereby the personages within the world created by the fiction constitute (or 'recognise') one another; 'characters' are the result of the process whereby the reader uses the evidence of the text to constitute (or 'recognise') personages. Within the tradition of criticism of realist writing, the first process is assumed to be a representation of the way real people relate to one

another (though critics in that tradition would regard it more as 'recognition' than construction), whereas the second process frequently gets overlooked. The term 'character' as usually employed in criticism covers both of my terms 'identity' and 'character': thus, for example, a critic of Middlemarch may discuss Dorothea's relationships with certain of the other characters who live in Middlemarch, and also examine George Eliot's technique in creating the character Dorothea. It can do this because both are assumed as a matter of unproblematic knowing. Carter's novels, as we shall see, force us to become conscious of the difference between identity and character, only to dissolve this very difference by revealing both to be constructs. Another way of putting this might be that in the realist tradition--for example, George Eliot's Middlemarch--the novelist strives to create the illusion that everything is 'identity' (within the world of the novel, within the world of the reader, and in the act of reading), whereas, in Carter, as in a modernist text (an extreme example would be James Joyce's Finnegans Wake), everything is shown to be 'character' (that is, a conventionally-constructed, non-knowable entity). Importantly, though, in Carter's work, this is not a simple displacement of one term by another--all 'character-as-construction' rather than all 'identity'--since Carter does not totally abandon the notion of identity. Her work questions the very notion of

knowing, whilst simultaneously acknowledging and capitalising upon the power of the desire to know.

Another way to clarify this distinction between identity and character, and demonstrate why it is necessary to posit such a distinction, is to look briefly at the work of a couple of other contemporary writers. Within the world portrayed by Fay Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She Devil,²² for example, identity is shown to be constructed and therefore changeable: Ruth, the heroine and 'She Devil,' reconstructs both her physical and mental identity. We are not, however, invited to question our own reading of 'natural' characters. Of course, any staging of the construction of identity is likely to remind the reader of his/her own activity as reader of character, but the text does not dramatise or thematise this activity and we can always be confident as readers that this character--supernatural as she may appear--is 'real.'²³ In contrast to this we might consider David Lodge's novel How Far Can You Go which shows characters to be artificial: the narrator, for instance, continually intervenes to describe how certain

22 Fay Weldon, The Life and Loves of a She Devil (London: Coronet Books, 1984).

23 Another example is J. M. Coetzee's Life & Times of Michael K (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983), in which K 'becomes' what others make him (for example, he becomes 'Michaels' in the hospital). Coetzee's later novel, Foe (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), however, has far more in common with Carter's work: it not only examines identity but also invites us to question our own reading processes.

characters are being formed in the writing process. At one point he hesitates between different names for one of his characters, 'Let her be called Violet, no, Veronica, no Violet, improbable a name as that is for Catholic girls of Irish extraction' (p.15). Identities within the fictional world, however, appear to be independent, and 'natural.' It might also be argued that Lodge's technique calls attention to the construction of character in order to force consideration of how we read identity, but, again, this is not proposed overtly. Such a novel self-consciously reflects upon interesting questions about how we read fiction but it does not necessarily raise questions about how we 'read' each other. Carter's text, I shall argue, self-consciously dramatises both of these things. It raises questions about the notion of identity (in the world of the novels and in our world), and also explores the ways in which fictional characters are both read and written into a text. The following two sections will discuss identity and character separately.

II

Within the fictional world depicted by The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, and Love identity is announced as an artificial construction. In all three of these novels the personages are shown, very obviously, to be playing roles which they seem to have either freely adopted or have had imposed upon them by other

personages.²⁴ The former, those in power, appear to control the script in which everyone, including themselves, is written. Cixous, discussing character, claims that, in much modernist fiction, character is not done away with, but is

unmasked: which does not mean revealed!
[because there is nothing beneath.] But rather denounced, returned to his reality as simulacrum, brought back to the mask as mask.
('The Character of "Character,"' p.387)

In the worlds portrayed by The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, and Love, indeed, in all of Carter's fiction, identity is 'unmasked,' that is, it is shown to be a series of roles or appearances, with no 'real' identity lurking behind; as Donally warns Marianne: 'MISTRUST APPEARANCES, THEY NEVER CONCEAL ANYTHING' (p.60).²⁵

Elaine Millard claims that Melanie's 'quest for self definition is at the centre' of The Magic Toyshop.²⁶ The first part of the novel certainly focuses upon the ways in

²⁴ Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She Devil also reveals the artificiality of role playing. Ruth is conscious of the way the world reads her as a stereotypically ugly woman, and conscious of the artificial roles that she is therefore forced, by society, to play. She therefore, for example, goes to a separatist women's camp in order to lose weight because the roles she plays in men's company prevent her from dieting.

²⁵ The narrator in Sartre's Nausea (1936) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) comes to the same conclusion: 'Things are entirely what they appear to be and behind them...there is nothing' (p.140).

²⁶ Sara Mills, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spaul, and Elaine Millard, Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.135.

which Melanie attempts to construct her self by acting out a series of different roles gleaned from literature, particularly fairy stories, art, and women's magazines. At the opening, Melanie is 'trying on' roles in front of a mirror as she tries to account for the changes in her adolescent body; and her self-identity is created out of the way she sees herself in a combination of these roles:

She also posed in attitudes, holding things. Pre-Raphaelite, she combed out her long, black hair to stream straight down from a centre parting and thoughtfully regarded herself as she held a tiger-lily from the garden under her chin, her knees pressed close together. A la Toulouse Lautrec, she dragged her hair sluttishly across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet.... She was too thin for a Titian or a Renoir but she contrived a pale, smug Cranach Venus with a bit of net curtain wound round her head and the necklace of cultured pearls ... at her throat. After she read Lady Chatterley's Lover, she secretly picked forget-me-nots and stuck them in her pubic hair. (pp.1-2)

Melanie tries to turn herself into a desirable sex object in her own eyes, which takes the form of a 'gift-wrapped,' woman-as-commodity, image of herself in her mirror:

She used the net curtain as raw material for a series of nightgowns suitable for her wedding night which she designed upon herself. She gift-wrapped herself for a phantom bridegroom taking a shower and cleaning his teeth in an extra-dimensional bathroom-of-the-future in honeymoon Cannes. Or Venice. Or Miami Beach. (p.2)

The main romance at this point in the novel is Melanie's romance with herself: she is in love with her own, self-created, image, and, in her fantasies, believes herself to be this image. When she tries on her mother's wedding

dress, for example, she appeals to her mirror, like the narcissistic Queen in Snow White, to tell her if she is indeed beautiful:

She opened her mother's wardrobe and inspected herself in the long mirror. She was still a beautiful girl. She went back to her own room and looked at herself again in her own mirror to see if that said different but, again, she was beautiful. Moonlight, white satin, roses. A bride. Whose bride? But she was, tonight, sufficient for herself in her own glory and did not need a groom. (p.16)

Her romance with herself, however, is interrupted by her parents' death; judging herself responsible, Melanie smashes the mirror in order to destroy herself, since for Melanie, the image in the mirror is herself:

She went into her bedroom. She met herself in the mirror, white face, black hair. The girl who killed her mother. She picked up the hairbrush and flung it at her reflected face. The mirror shattered. Behind the mirror was nothing but the bare wood of her wardrobe.

She was disappointed; she wanted to see her mirror, still, and the room reflected in the mirror, still, but herself gone, smashed.
(pp.24-25)

Once relocated to London, however, Melanie is struck by the absence of mirrors ('There was no mirror in [her bed]room' (p.44), and 'There was no mirror in the bathroom' (p.56)); she only sees her reflection in a distorting 'witches ball' (p.169) and in Finn's eyes, but otherwise becomes dependent upon the ways in which others see her. It is now Uncle Philip, the archetypal patriarch, who writes the script to which the other personages must conform: he is the puppet-master who

pulls all of their strings.²⁷ Soon after her arrival Melanie finds herself caught up in the rigid household rituals dictated by her Uncle: 'She was a wind-up putting-away doll, clicking through its programmed movements. Uncle Philip might have made her over, already. She was without volition of her own' (p.76). Uncle Philip also attempts to maintain control over Finn, and breaks him as if he were a toy so that all of Finn's 'lovely movement was shattered' (p.132), and 'he no longer moved like a wave of the sea. He creaked, indeed, like a puppet' (p.148). Philip choreographs Melanie's seduction by Finn--he instructs them to rehearse Melanie's role in the puppet play, 'Leda and the Swan,' expecting the role to turn into a reality--but Finn sees through his scheme at the last moment, and explains to Melanie:

'It was his fault' he said. 'Suddenly I saw it all, when we were lying there. He's pulled our strings as if we were his puppets, and there I was, all ready to touch you up just as he wanted.' (p.152)

Finally, at the scene of the 'real' play, Uncle Philip succeeds in staging Melanie's rape. And it is at this point that Melanie's inability to distinguish clearly between her 'real' identity--which, as I have already shown, she reads as a combination of roles--and the

²⁷ Like Uncle Philip, Honeybuzzard, in Carter's first novel, Shadow Dance, makes Jumping Jacks which resemble the people in his life he would like to control. Finally, he makes a Jumping Jack version of Ghislaine, a former girlfriend whom he abused, commenting to Morris that '"She always did jump when I pulled her string, poor girl"' (p.127): he then lures her to her death.

'artificial' role of Leda which she is forced to play, proves to be her downfall. When the swan first appears on the stage Melanie is amused:

It was a grotesque parody of a swan; Edward Lear might have designed it. It was nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings. It was dumpy and homely and eccentric. She nearly laughed again to see its lumbering progress.
(p.165)

Melanie, however, loses her grasp of the distinction between what is fact and what fiction, and finds herself passively becoming just as artificial, or as real, as the swan. The rape, therefore, is 'real,' even if it is only real as fiction:

All her laughter was snuffed out. She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this staged fantasy, anything is possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality itself and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers. The swan towered over the black-haired girl who was Melanie and who was not. (p.166, my emphasis)

Role playing and the importance of appearances are also stressed in Love, where the personages within the world of the novel are often described as play-actors. For example, the aftermath of the party marking Lee and Annabel's wedding, at which Annabel watches the spectacle of Lee and Carolyn's erotic liaison on the balcony and then attempts to kill herself in the bathroom, is described in advance as if it were a drama:

Afterward, the events of the night seemed, to all who participated in them, like disparate sets of images shuffled together anyhow. A draped form on a stretcher; candles blown out by a strong wind; a knife; an operating theatre;

blood; and bandages. In time, the principle actors (the wife, the brothers, the mistress) assembled a coherent narrative from these images but each interpreted them differently and drew their own conclusions which were all quite dissimilar for each told himself the story as if he were the hero except for Lee who, by common choice, found himself the villain. (p.43)

Annabel and Buzz live, and interpret events, in their own private world, acting out roles in their own scripts.

Annabel, for example, sees 'only appearances' (p.36); she lives in her nightmarish fantasies, which expand to incorporate Lee and Buzz, where everybody and everything exists solely in terms of her mythology:

She suffered from nightmares too terrible to reveal to him, especially since he himself was often the principle actor in them and appeared in many hideous dream disguises.... She had the capacity for changing the appearance of the real world which is the price paid by those who take too subjective a view of it. All she apprehended through her senses she took only as objects for interpretation in the expressionist style and she saw, in everyday things, a world of mythic, fearful shapes. (pp.3-4)²⁸

Similarly, after Buzz steals his first camera, we are informed that, 'the flat was given over entirely to the cult of appearances,' and Buzz sees everything as in two dimensions. He

used the camera as if to see with, as if he could not trust his own eyes and had to check his vision by means of a third lens all the time so in the end he saw everything at second hand, without depths. (p.25)

Lee, however, thinks of his life as a series of cast-off roles which seem to have been constructed for him. He

²⁸ She resembles the narrator in Sartre's Nausea, who, because of his acute awareness of everything, can sometimes make no distinction between his inner self and external objects.

has, for example, a series of artificial smiles which he adopts for different situations (p.19). His actual appearance appears to become affected by the way others see him:

Looking in the mirror, he saw the face of a stranger to any of them with features which had been filtered through his wife's eyes and subjected to so many modifications in the process that it was no longer his own. (p.26)

More self-conscious than The Magic Toyshop or Love, Heroes and Villains not only thematises role-playing as critical to the shaping of identity, but also portrays it as a topic of discussion between the personages. For example, just as Uncle Philip dictates the lives of those in his household, so Donally is writing and directing the script for the Barbarian tribe which he has adopted. Unlike Philip, Donally's direction very obviously includes his own identity. Donally is not only portrayed as constructing his own and others' identities, but also as describing to Marianne how he has to construct the very conventions which produce the illusion of his power. He compares himself to Marianne's father, complaining: "He didn't have to create a power structure and fortify it by any means at his disposal. He was sustained by ritual and tradition; both of which I must invent" (p.63). On the one hand, Donally appears to suggest that the post-apocalyptic world the Barbarians inhabit is a world outside convention, where he can act out the role of God, and give himself the power to create others. On the other hand, Donally explains to Marianne that God is dead

(p.93), and describes the overtly conventional models for his own versions of 'ritual and tradition,' which fashion the basis of his 'power structure.' This power structure takes the form of a newly crafted religion, although it is 'new' only in the sense that it is a reworking of old forms, in which he and his followers have hierarchical roles to play. Donally readily admits to Marianne:

I still use most of the forms of the Church of England. I find them infinitely adaptable. Religion is a device for instituting the sense of a privileged group, you understand; many are called but few are chosen. (p.63)

In this world, Donally suggests, there is no such thing as 'real' identity, hence he emphasises the need for roles: it is "a hypothetical landscape of ruin and forest in which we might or might not exist" (p.93). It is 'hypothetical'; therefore everything has to be assumed or supposed, nothing is known. Identity is a rational creation, Donally claims, not a natural phenomenon; and he rewrites the Cartesian cogito: 'I THINK, THEREFORE I EXIST; BUT IF I TAKE TIME OFF FROM THINKING, WHAT THEN?' (p.98). Identity is unknowable, multiple, and unreliable, since it is revealed to be a series of roles which are always open to change. There are, the text suggests, only appearances, only the 'mask as mask,' and Marianne finally admits:

I shall be forced to trust appearances. When I was a little girl, we played at heroes and villains but now I don't know which is which any

more, nor who is who, and what can I trust if not appearances? (pp.124-25)²⁹

Donally capitalises upon the changeable nature of identity and uses it to create himself as he would like to be.³⁰

The very technique, however, which exposes identity as artificial in all of these novels also suggests the converse. Ironically, it is the very terms 'mask' and 'role,' used to describe identity in the fictional world, together with the notion of disguise, which encourage personages to assume an alternative, knowable identity lurking behind what appear to be masquerades. All three novels describe a series of staged events in which this process is evident. One of the most powerful is Marianne and Jewel's wedding ceremony in Heroes and Villains, where role-playing is openly announced and both Marianne and Jewel are dressed 'in character' for the performance:

There were gold braid and feathers in Jewel's hair and very long earrings of carved silver in his ears. Darkness was made explicit in the altered contours of his face. He was like a work of art, as if created, not begotten, a

²⁹ Ruth, in Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She Devil, has come to a similar conclusion. In a consultation with her plastic surgeon he claims, "'I can stop you looking old, but you will be old.'" and she replies, "'No. Age is what the observer sees, not what the observed feels"' (p.203).

³⁰ In this way Donally resembles Ruth in The Life and Loves of a She Devil. Ruth turns herself into her rival, the beautiful, elegant, and successful writer of romantic fiction, Mary Fisher, whose place she usurps. She can change her identity, but, it appears, she cannot, and does not want to, transform her patriarchally induced values. She takes on a powerful role but does this not in order to break out of, but to conform to, the conventions which label her 'ugly' self a 'She Devil.'

fantastic dandy of the void whose true nature has been entirely subsumed to the alien and terrible beauty of a rhetorical gesture. His appearance was abstracted from his body, and he was wilfully reduced to sign language. He had become the sign of an idea of a hero; and she herself had been forced to impersonate the sign of a memory of a bride. But though she knew quite well she herself was only impersonating this sign, she could not tell whether Jewel was impersonating that other sign or had, indeed, become it, for every line of his outlandish figure expressed the most arrogant contempt and it was impossible to tell whether or not this contempt was in his script. (pp.71-72)

This passage is narrated from the point of view of Marianne, who consciously perceives the roles they are playing as part of Donally's 'script.' Jewel is described as if he were totally artificial: he had become the sign of an idea of a hero, 'like a work of art, as if created not begotten' (the biblical reference recalls Donally's part in Jewel's construction). The masquerade, however, is so obviously artificial that it necessarily points to something behind itself which is more 'real,' which does not involve role-playing. Jewel is described as if he had a 'true nature,' an essence of Jewel, which could be 'entirely subsumed to ... a rhetorical gesture.'

Similarly, Marianne sees Jewel in terms of a simile, 'like a work of art, as if created, not begotten' which suggests that this is not what is 'really happening,' as if she believes there is a more 'real' world outside the script they are now performing. Marianne is aware of the script as a script, and believes that, whilst impersonating 'the sign of a memory of a bride,' she inhabits another, 'real,' world. Jewel, however, appears to make no such

distinction: he may, she thinks, have 'become' his role; and, once again, the very notion of becoming implies a more natural state from which he is transformed into the present artificial one.

The same effect is achieved by the descriptions of Marianne's continual attempts to see behind the mask of Donally's role-playing, as if trying to locate his 'real' identity: "'Where do you come from, why are you here? Why didn't you stay where you belonged, editing texts or doing research?'" (p.62). She assumes that he has a past, or 'real,' identity which predates his present role: but Marianne can only guess at this past, and assume that there was one. She has, of course, to hypothesise, and invent a series of possible past identities for Donally, which are, once again, roles, and her hypothesising becomes obsessive: "'You must have been a Professor of Literature, once'" (p.50), "'Maybe you were a Professor of Music, once'" (p.61), "'I suppose you might have been a Professor of Sociology, once'" (p.62), and "'perhaps he had been a Professor of History'" (p.71). But Donally remains unplaceable, and ungraspable: "'I prefer to remain anonymous,'" (p.93) he claims.

Donally's own role as script writer and creator of other identities suggests to his fellow personages that whilst he acts out roles in his own script, he is something other than a construction. He is more like God. Donally appears to be a special case, different from the other characters in the novel, and I shall return to a

discussion of the sources of his power in Section V of this chapter.

III

All this self-conscious role-playing within the world of the fiction is bound to raise, for most readers, the question of how we relate to the personages established by the language of the text. Having once become aware of the difference between identity and character, then, the two categories can once more be equated, since at the same time as we witness personages consciously acting out roles or creating their own, obviously artificial, identities, we are constantly reminded that these very personages are fictional characters, and, as such, that they are textual constructions. Furthermore, while the personages in the world of the text are dramatising the ways in which character is written and read into the text, they are also representing the ways in which people in the world outside the text fabricate and relate to one another. At this point, then, the distinction between reading identity (whether it happens within the world of the novel or the world of the reader) and reading character breaks down. The two processes which in the tradition of realist criticism might be regarded simply as 'knowing' or 'recognition'--personages in the novel come to 'know' one another's identities; readers come to 'know' the characters--are clearly exposed by Carter's work as

constructions, already-written roles. That is, identity and character reinforce one another in the realist novel--as matters of knowing--and they also reinforce one another in these novels, but as matters of construction.

This is clearly dramatised in both The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains, where all of the examples that I have cited above in exploration of the dual function of 'identity' are equally applicable to an analysis of 'character.' In each case the reader is encouraged to assume a 'reality' even while it is being undermined. That is, both novels assert, again and again, that they are not transparent mediums through which the reader has direct access to human nature, but that both the reading of character and the constitution of identity (inside and outside the novel) are the artificial products of convention, even while creating convincing (or almost convincing) characters. The account of these novels' self-conscious concern with the notion of identity (both within the novel and within our world), necessarily reminding the reader of his/her own activity as a reader of character in and out of fiction, could be used to describe the work of many other twentieth-century writers (Fay Weldon, for example, comes to mind). What makes Carter's fiction especially interesting, however, are the self-conscious ways in which her novels do this while constantly announcing their own fictional status.

Love is the exception here, since although the narrative does continually draw attention to the

conventions from which identity and character are constructed, these constructions are associated with madness rather than seen as a part of normal mental processes. Both The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains set out to prove that there is nothing beyond appearances (whilst still relying upon their reader's desire to penetrate beyond the surface). In one sense Love has similar aims since the two-dimensional becomes the norm after Annabel has Lee's heart tattooed on his chest:

He raised his arm and no shadow fell for Annabel had taken out his heart, his household god, squashed it thin as paper and pinned it back on the exterior, bright, pretty but inanimate.
(p.74)³¹

Annabel's desire, early in the novel, to 'reduce [Lee] to not-being' (p.35) is thus materialised. However, because this two-dimensional vision is associated with madness--with Annabel and Buzz--it fails to convince; it still suggests that there is a saner, more 'real' world beyond Annabel's grasp and hence reinforces a distinction between what is real and what is not. Love is one of Carter's more realist novels, and twenty years later she is able to write an afterword, in the style of George Eliot, which takes the form of a reasonably convincing, if self-conscious, description of the continuing lives of her

³¹ Jeanette Winterson uses a similar image in The Passion (1987) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988). In Carter's novel, the removal of Lee's heart is symbolic, though he begins to believe in its materiality. In The Passion, Villanelle seems literally to lose her heart to her female lover, and has to go to great lengths to steal it back.

characters (except, of course, Annabel), as if they had an existence beyond the novel and were, in 1989, 'edging nervously up to the middle age they thought would never happen' (p.113).

In The Magic Toyshop the distinction between what is real and what artificial is challenged, and the distinction between identity and character breaks down, when the roles which Melanie imagines for herself appear to take on a life of their own. At one point Melanie superimposes gothic fairytale upon familiar household images in order to read her new surroundings at Uncle Philip's:

Bluebeard's castle, it was, or Mr Fox's manor house with 'Be bold, be bold but not too bold' written up over every lintel and chopped up corpses neatly piled in all the wardrobes and airing cupboards, on top of the sheets and pillowslips. (p.83)³²

But later the image from 'Bluebeard' materialises and Melanie thinks she sees a severed hand in the dresser drawer:

From the raggedness of the flesh at the wrist,
it appeared that the hand had been hewn from its

³² In The Fairie Queene (London: Longman, 1977), Book 3, Canto xii, stanza 54, Spencer writes:

And as she lookt about, she did behold,
How ouer that same dore was likewise writ,
Be bold, be bold, and euery where Be bold ...
At last she spyde at that roomes vpper end,
Another yron dore, on which was writ,
Be not so bold; whereto though she did bend
Her earnest mind, yet wist not what it might
intend.

arm with a knife or axe that was very blunt.
Melanie heard blood fall plop in the drawer.

'I am going out of my mind,' she said aloud.
'Bluebeard was here.' (p.118)

The very detail with which this scene is described suggests its 'reality.' Conversely, the reference to Bluebeard reminds the reader of the artificial way Melanie is forced to read her surroundings, and the subsequent materialising of the image draws the reader's attention to the fictional status of the text itself. This, of course, is dramatised more forcefully during the description of the rape scene, where neither Melanie nor the reader can determine for sure whether Melanie's rape was 'real.' It may have been 'real' as fiction for both Melanie and the reader, where fiction is the reality.

Both the 'Bluebeard' incident and the rape scene in The Magic Toyshop exemplify what is perhaps the most explicit way in which most of Carter's work reminds the reader of the fictionality of both 'identity' and 'character': that is, they announce the dependence of both upon other works of literature. As I suggested in Chapter 2, intertextuality in Carter's work functions on many different levels. In the second section of The Magic Toyshop Melanie can only identify the incomprehensible and frightening things around her by association with familiar, often literary, models. The identities that are created in the worlds of The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains are modelled upon literature; and, likewise, the characters we read, we are reminded, are fictional, since

they are shown to be constructed out of literary allusions. Both the notion of role-playing and the dependence of these roles upon literary models is made explicit in the text; and both prevent a realist reading of character.³³ Like Daniel Ferrer describing Joyce's Ulysses, we can say that in Carter's novels, 'everywhere, the overwhelming intertextuality dissolves the appearance of a unified subject' ('Characters in Ulysses' pp.149-50). The implication is not only that all our reading of characters is modelled on our reading of other fiction, but that our reading of each other is modelled on our reading of fiction too, as Nabakov suggests.

When Melanie enters her Uncle Philip's home in The Magic Toyshop, it is as if she had stepped into the inverted world beyond the mirror which she broke. In this 'through-the-looking glass' world Melanie cannot read her surroundings literally, but can only identify herself, her family, and her surroundings by comparing them to literary models within her frames of reference. In the first section of the novel Melanie chose to construct her identity, visually, from a number of famous paintings;

³³ In The Rise of the Novel, Ian Watt, worrying about this kind of practice, writes:

It is surely very damaging for a novel to be in any sense an imitation of another literary work: and the reason for this seems to be that since the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience, attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger his success.
(p.14)

later in the novel, however, she adopts mainly literary models. In effect, Melanie compensates for the lack of mirrors in her new home by reflecting the incomprehensible things around her in a linguistic mirror: she reflects her new surroundings in a series of similes. On the trip to London, Melanie realises that she 'had never known an orphan before and now here she was, an orphan herself. Like Jane Eyre' (p.32). When she wakes up the following morning the first thing she sees is the strange wallpaper: 'Melanie opened her eyes and saw thorns among roses, as if she woke from a hundred years' night, la belle au bois dormant, imprisoned in a century's steadily burgeoning garden' (p.53). She compares Finn to an Edward Lear poem in an attempt to account for his dirtiness: 'He had taken off his paint-stiffened apron but there was blue paint in his hair and his hands were blue, like those of the Jumblies who went to sea in a sieve' (p.96). And she recognises, alluding to Alice In Wonderland, that Uncle Philip's false teeth signal his presence in the house: 'On a smeared glass shelf, a full set of false teeth grinned faceless, like a disappeared Cheshire cat, from a cloudy tumbler' (p.56). Similes account for nearly everything, from the old dog who has 'an uncanny quality of whiteness, like Moby Dick' (p.83), to the approach of winter: 'The nights drew in earlier and earlier, clothed in sinister cloaks of mist like characters by Edgar Allan Poe' (p.93). I have described these similes as if they all emanated from Melanie's consciousness, since the

narrative perspective appears to be hers (although they are also rather sophisticated for a fifteen-year-old-girl who has discarded Lorna Doone (p.2) in favour of Mrs Rundle's women's magazines); but this is problematised by the complex narrative viewpoint. The novel is narrated in the third person, but appears to switch in and out of Melanie's consciousness (this is the same technique as Carter uses in Nights at the Circus, where the third person narrative is often mistaken for Walser's voice), hence it is often difficult to specify whether particular literary allusions stem from Melanie's imagination or are part of the larger textual framework. What is clear, however, is that identity and character in this novel are both dependent upon these literary models, where the excessive use of similes and the unstable narrative function to remind the reader of the fictional status of this text.

Heroes and Villains works in a similar way, making explicit and recurrent references to, for example, Swift's Gulliver's Travels and the book of Genesis. Donally, whose role models include only figures of authority, finds the inspiration for his 'power structure' not only in religion but also in literature. Donally imagines himself superior to the race of people with whom he has chosen to live, and invokes the role of Gulliver, as he appears in Book 4 of Gulliver's Travels. He would like to cast both Marianne and Jewel in similar roles, and he appeals to Marianne's sense of ambition: "Domiciled as you are

among the Yahoos, you might as well be Queen of the midden" (p.61). Jewel, he claims, "could be the Messiah of the Yahoos" (p.93), or, as a last temptation to Jewel before his eviction from the their company, he claims he could make Jewel "the King of all the Yahoos and all the Professors, too" (p.126).

Brooks Landon interprets Heroes and Villains in terms of a 'reconstructed Edenic myth' and identifies Donally's role as a revised Satan: 'A stuffed snake the symbol of his power, Donally tries to play the devil to Marianne's Eve, but inversely: since she has knowledge, he offers her unreason.'³⁴ Donally, however, imagines himself not as Satan, but as God the creator (although he denies this ambition to Marianne when she suggests it, replying "'I'd rather choose to be the holy spirit'" (p.93)). Jewel is Donally's Adam, and cannot forget the role prescribed for him, since the Doctor has literally inscribed the reference on Jewel's skin:

He wore the figure of a man on the right side, a woman on the left and, tatoood the length of his spine, a tree with a snake curled round and round the trunk. This elaborate design was executed in blue, red, black and green. The woman offered the man a red apple and more red apples grew among green leaves at the top of the tree, spreading across his shoulders, and the black roots of the tree twisted and ended at the top of his buttocks. The figures were both

³⁴ Brooks Landon, 'Eve at the End of the World: Sexuality and the Reversal of Expectations in Novels by Joanna Russ, Angela Carter, and Thomas Berger,' in Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature, edited by Donald Palumbo (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.61-74 (p.69).

stiff and lifelike; Eve wore a perfidious smile....

'You can never take all your clothes off,' she said. 'Or be properly by yourself, with Adam and Eve there all the time.' (p.85)³⁵

Unfortunately, Donally explains to Marianne, God's work, in a post-apocalyptic world, is not easily accomplished (this might also be interpreted as an ironic comment on the problems of authorship, and the creation of character in a post-realist novel):

'I am trying to invent him [Jewel/Adam] as I go along but I am experiencing certain difficulties,' complained Donally. 'He won't keep still long enough. Creation from the void is more difficult than it would seem.' (p.94)

The literary and mythic allusions in both The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains, however, have a double function. Like the roles they construct, the allusions

³⁵ Joseph, in Several Perceptions, says the same thing--'You can't ever take all your clothes off' (p.119)--to Mrs Boulder with regard to her wrinkles.

Tattoos are a familiar motif throughout Carter's fiction, almost a trade mark. She explains some reasons for her fascination with the art of tattooing in the 'People as Picture,' section of Nothing Sacred (pp.33-38). Particularly memorable examples from her fiction are the 'wild man' who 'was covered with an intricate interlaced pattern of blue-and-red tattooing' in The Donkey Prince, p.21; the heart which Annabel forces Lee to have tattooed on his chest to signify that 'he wore his heart on the outside' in Love, pp.69-70; the 'fox hunt with the fox disappearing down his hole' which Viv's mother's father used to exhibit, in Several Perceptions, p.123; and the elaborate descriptions of the Centaurs' bodies in the Infernal Desire Machines who undergo ritual tattooing. In The Passion, the 'copy of Leonardo's "Last Supper"' on the chest of the Colonel of the Children's crusade, which ripples when he walks and breathes, and 'gave an uncanny appearance of almost-movement to the faces of Christ and his disciples' (p.154) bears the closest resemblance to Jewel's tattoo. All symbolise, often ironically, the character's role, or their idea of their role.

are an important element of the text's illusion-making machinery which encourages a realist reading of character as knowable. That is, whilst pointing to character as fictional construction, consisting of superimposed literary roles, the allusions also bring with them their own recognisable properties which suggest a depth and significance outside the text, and which promote the possibility of a realist reading. What I have called a 'double function,' then, is dependent upon a crucial paradox: in order to be recognisable and therefore to appear 'real' and knowable, the character must conform to a conventional role; as Derek Attridge maintains in his article on character in Joyce: 'the notion of character ... [is] predicated upon transcendence,' and depends 'not only on consistency and therefore recognizability (or, we might say, iterability) within a text, but also on consistency and recognizability across texts, and across history' ('Joyce and the Ideology of Character,' p.153). However, to the extent that allusions are made too explicit, and therefore announce fictionality, realism is threatened. The reader may, for example, relate to, or depend upon, Marianne as a character to guide him or her through the text. Marianne can be interpreted as a reading figure: she is portrayed as a spectator, always 'the audience' (p.16), remote and detached from much of the action. She attempts to assimilate the elements of her own construction and refuses to conform to either the Professors' or Donally's ideas of what she should be, by

retaining a rational scepticism regarding both. Mrs Green comments, "'You're an odd one, aren't you. You can't have fitted in'" (p.67), and Marianne appears to escape the masquerade which everyone else is playing out. Her suitability as a reading figure for the reader to identify with, however, is in part due to her similarity to several nineteenth-century heroines. The opening of the novel, as Lorna Sage has noticed, 'parodies the opening of Jane Austen's 1816 novel Emma'³⁶ and Richard Boston, in the New York Times, places the openings of Heroes and Villains and Emma side by side:

The first sentence of the book--'Marianne had sharp, cold eyes and she was spiteful but her father loved her'--is like the beginning of a Jane Austen novel ('Emma,' for example: 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich...was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father.' (13 September 1970, p.62)

Marianne is also instantly recognisable as a particular type of nineteenth-century rebel heroine.³⁷ Boston also calls our attention to the similarities between Marianne and Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's Mill on the Floss: 'Marianne herself is a rebellious girl, rather like Maggie Tulliver in "The Mill on the Floss," and like Maggie she cuts off all her long hair so that she looks like a

³⁶ Lorna Sage, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol.14, 'British Novelists Since 1960,' (Detroit, Michigan: Brucoli Clark, 1983), p.207.

³⁷ Marianne is also recognisable within Carter's work, as a detached, spectator figure: the precursor of Desiderio in The Infernal Desire Machines, and Walser in Nights at the Circus.

boy.'³⁸ In this way Marianne's role is already written: and the very fact that she is both recognisable within the novel as a consistent character, and recognisable across literary history as a type of nineteenth-century heroine, both promotes and yet threatens a realist reading. This is illustrated within the text: Marianne assumes that she is a detached observer, but there are moments when she is forced to reconsider her own identity, when she wonders whether she is simply acting out a preordained role in somebody else's script. Out for a walk by the river, Marianne comes across Precious, Jewel's youngest brother, watering his horse. He has his eyes closed and appears to be dreaming, and Marianne suddenly realises: 'She could not conceive what dreams the Barbarian's dreamed, unless she herself was playing a part in one of their dreams' (p.65).³⁹

Heroes and Villains, then, capitalises upon the ambiguous functions of role playing and intertextual allusions to simultaneously challenge and urge a

³⁸ In the same review Boston also claims that Marianne 'escapes from her own people to join [the Barbarians], just like a little girl in a 19th-century story running away to join the gypsies. And like one of D. H. Lawrence's middle-class virgins confronted for the first time by representatives of the working class, Marianne is at the same time appalled by the Barbarians' poverty, ignorance and lack of hygiene, and fascinated by their vitality and virility.'

³⁹ This may allude to Jorge Borges's 'The Circular Ruins,' in Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings (New York: New Directions Books, 1964) pp.45-50.

'traditional' reading of character. At the same time it draws in other texts in order to thematise this very issue. The relationship between art and nature--at the heart of any consideration of character--is a constant theme in Heroes and Villains, and Carter's text relies upon two texts, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theories of the noble savage and Shakespeare's The Tempest, which are both concerned with this dichotomy, in order to enact a 'discussion' of the issue. Carter describes one of the aims of Heroes and Villains in the interview with John Haffenden, saying that this novel 'is a discussion of the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and strangely enough it finds them wanting.'⁴⁰ At the same time, Carter's novel shows personages within the world of the text who are also concerned with the same art/nature dichotomy, discussing and acting out roles from these two source texts. Richard Boston points to a wealth of literary allusions in Heroes and Villains, and places these allusions in the context of the novel's concern with art and nature:

This is not to suggest that Angela Carter has written one of those irritating spot-the-literary allusion works of fiction. What she has done is to take her images from a variety of sources, and assemble a fable that discusses the roles of reason and imagination in a civilized society. Marianne rejects the sterile rationality of the Laputan Professors, but she is also aware of the monsters that are brought forth by the sleep of reason. (The title of

⁴⁰ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, (London: Methuen, 1985), p.95, my emphasis.

Goya's print is quoted.) (New York Times Book Review, 13 September 1970, p.62)⁴¹

Allusions to Rousseau and Shakespeare's The Tempest are announced clearly by Carter's text, thereby making the fictional status of the text explicit, and promoting the notion of character as 'artificial,' as construction. Carter also rewrites and reshapes her source material in its new context in a way which highlights the unstable, variable, and therefore unknowable quality of literary allusions. References to Rousseau are introduced early in the novel: his writing is obviously important to Marianne's father, who is writing a book 'on the archaeology of social theory' (p.8). The narrator describes the Professor of History's failing eyesight, explaining how 'Marianne would have to read his books aloud to him. Rousseau for example' (p.8). Later in the novel, when Donally is attempting to impose Rousseau's theories on the Barbarian village, he boasts: "'coaxed from incoherence, we shall leave the indecent condition of barbarism and aspire towards that of the honest savage"' (p.63). He has been shaping Jewel into the role of Rousseau's 'noble savage,' though he also intends to keep control over his creation. He offers Jewel a taste of art, culture, and power, but attempts to retain the natural, savage qualities of his pupil (and Jewel's

⁴¹ Interestingly, Boston's review shows how acknowledging intertextuality does not necessarily lead to a sense of constructedness. He uses his references to allusions in the service of a moralizing, humanizing, totally traditional reading.

subservience) by keeping his pupil illiterate: "'Our Jewel is more savage than he is barbarous; literacy would blur his outlines, you wouldn't see which way he was going any more"' (p.62).⁴² When Marianne asks him why he has not taught Jewel to read, he explains: "'Self-defence, in the first instance ... On the second count, I wanted to maintain him in a crude state of refined energy.'" And Marianne replies, "'What, keep him beautifully savage?'" (p.62).⁴³ Thus the notion of the 'noble savage,' which is an explanatory hypothesis, is taken by Carter's text and by Donally as a literary role model for the post-holocaust Barbarian. In itself this criticises Rousseau's hypothesis--if it were valid, then Donally's activity would be impossible.

⁴² This could also be a reference to Levi-Strauss's 'A Writing Lesson,' in Tristes Tropiques, translated by John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), pp.286-297. 'A Writing Lesson' concerns the Nambikwara Indians; it is a meditation on the powerful significance of writing as a corrupting tool which facilitates 'the enslavement of other human beings' (p.292).

⁴³ Carter also used the term 'barbarian' in Several Perceptions to describe Joseph's disgust with books. His slogan also recalls Donally's grafitti:

'This is the time of the barbarians,' said Joseph, a typical barbarian, kneeling on the floor of the alcove where the dictionaries were kept and burning books with matches, applying the flame and watching with fierce joy as each page trembled and blackened; then he chalked upon the near-by wall the following slogan: SUPPORT YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSASSIN and went home to screw Charlotte. (p.4)

The Wild Men in The Donkey Prince, published soon after Heroes and Villains, are also described as barbarians.

Boston compares Heroes and Villains to Shakespeare's

The Tempest:

There is a magician with a forked beard, scarlet on one side and purple on the other. Like Prospero in 'The Tempest' he is able to summon a table full of food 'as from thin air.' He keeps his half-idiot son chained up and beats him (Caliban?), and explicitly suggests to Marianne that she must feel like Miranda. (The New York Times, September 13 1970, p.62)

It is Donally, in the role of Prospero, who casts Marianne in the role of Miranda: "Marianne," he said warmly. He gestured round the room and company, smiling. "However, you must feel more like Miranda" (p.50). Donally has entered this scene just in time to prevent her from being gang-raped by the Bradley brothers who could also represent a collective Caliban. Donally has taken over the leadership of the Barbarian tribe and usurped the brothers' former power, just as Prospero has taken over from Caliban as ruler of the island, and then kept him 'in service.'⁴⁴ It is not Caliban, however, who constitutes the 'brave new world' for Miranda, but the creatures of the 'civilised' world.

The allusions to Rousseau and The Tempest also function as part of the illusion-making machinery; they appear to clarify the meaning of characters's roles and promote a transcendent reading. Most of the references to both the theories of Rousseau and The Tempest occur in dialogues, in which those who use literary allusions are

⁴⁴ William Shakespeare, The Tempest (Arden edition) (London: Methuen, 1964), I (ii) 286.

educated and those who remain uneducated also remain closest to nature. Hence when Marianne comes across Precious watering his horse, she 'gasped':

for the rider looked just as if he had come from the hands of original nature, an animal weaker than some and less agile than others, but, taking him all round, the most advantageously organized of any, pure essence of man in his most innocent state, more nearly related to the river than to herself. (p.65)

Whilst the self-conscious use of allusions points to the artificial nature of the roles and to the fictionality of the text, it also gives meaning to the status of all intertextual allusions, where allusions, no matter what their content, symbolise art.

IV

The Passion of New Eve is another in Carter's series of picaresque tales. Susan Suleiman describes it as 'a heterogeneous combination of mythic realism, science fiction and allegory, with elements of Bildungsroman, a picaresque tale, a quest romance, and a Hollywood love story.'⁴⁵ Evelyn, who narrates the story in retrospect, was once a young, self-centred, male chauvinist, English academic. At the opening of the novel Evelyn is indulging in nostalgia: he is a fan of the now outdated movie star,

⁴⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, '(Re)writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism,' in The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives, edited by Suleiman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.7-29 (p.25).

Tristessa, whose films, are 'having a little camp renaissance at midnight movie festivals' (p.8), and he is reliving his adolescence at one of these events, before flying off to New York to begin a new job. Upon arriving in the New World from the Old, instead of the 'clean, hard, bright city' (p.10) he had imagined, Evelyn encounters 'a dying city' (p.37), shrouded in 'Gothic darkness' (p.10), taken over by radical women, blacks and an ever increasing number of rats. Here he meets a young black prostitute called Leilah, whom he uses and abuses, and with whom he quickly becomes bored, especially when he realises that she is pregnant. He abandons the city, and he abandons Leilah 'safely' incarcerated in hospital after a back-street abortion that nearly kills her. Evelyn flees to the desert for 'pure air and cleanness' (p.38), where he hopes to find 'that most elusive of all chimeras' (p.38), himself. In the desert, however, he is captured by a woman called Sophia and taken to Beulah, an underground community of Amazons, whose emblem is a broken phallus, and whose living goddess, 'Mother,' a skilled plastic surgeon, has constructed herself into 'the concrete essence of woman' (p.60). Mother has 'made herself,' and flung a 'patchwork quilt stitched from her daughter's breasts over the cathedral of her interior, the cave within the cave' (p.60). Mother rapes and then castrates Evelyn, transforming him into the New Eve, a perfect specimen of biological woman, and the realization of his own masturbatory fantasy. Mother plans to

impregnate Eve with his own sperm, collected after his rape, but Eve escapes into the desert, only to fall prey to Zero the poet. Zero is self-styled 'Masculinity incarnate' (p.104), who hates humanity, and privileges his pigs over his seven slave-like wives (eight, when Eve joins them). Eve is unceremoniously raped, and subsequently educated into the realms of women's oppression at its most extreme. Zero is obsessed with Tristessa, whom he believes has caused him to be sterile, and he spends his time ranging over the desert in a helicopter in search of the secret hideaway to which she has retired. When Zero and his wives do find and penetrate Tristessa's glass mansion, they find her lying in her own coffin in 'THE HALL OF THE IMMORTALS' (p.119), a waxworks of Hollywood stars; they also discover that s/he is a transvestite who had 'been the greatest female impersonator in the world' (p.144). Zero and his wives force Tristessa and Eve into a grotesque travesty of a marriage ceremony--'a double wedding--both were the bride, both the groom' (p.135)--and also force a consummation, but the married couple manage to escape in Zero's helicopter, leaving all behind them in chaos and destruction as Tristessa's revolving house spins out of control. Marooned in the desert, out of fuel, Eve and Tristessa make love, only to be interrupted by 'the Children's Crusade' (p.159), who shoot Tristessa and take Eve, now pregnant with Tristessa's child, along with them. Eve escapes once more, and finally leaves the desert.

S/he discovers her/himself in the heart of civil war in California, but is reunited with Leilah, now Lilith, a feminist guerrilla, who leads Eve back to Mother deep in a womb-like cave by the sea, the symbolic place of both death and rebirth.

Names play an important part in the construction of character, and the names of characters in Carter's fiction are always distinctive, nowhere more so than in The Passion of New Eve. This novel's self-conscious concern with its own material status as language can be seen by looking at the way it experiments with names. Like the roles and literary allusions discussed in The Magic Toyshop, Love, and Heroes and Villains, many of the names in Carter's novels have a double function, encouraging a realist mode of reading, but continually reminding the reader that names are unstable and variable because they are part of the linguistic process. Names in a novel traditionally set up a network of referentiality within the text where each character seems recognisable and, therefore, in some way knowable. Daniel Ferrer, in 'Character in Ulysses,' describes the convention of naming fictional characters as 'the association of a number of characteristics with a proper name,' where 'the noun acts as a magnet which attracts them and organises them'

(p.148).⁴⁶ Proper names (in the 'realist' mode), are indispensable for the whole concept of 'knowing,' since they imply a singular and unique referent. These names, then, function as representations of a whole wealth of meaning, and by denying their own status as writing, as articulation, they appear to make the character present and knowable to the reader. Carter's text, however, whilst capitalising on the realist function of names, also reminds us that names are constructed in writing, that they are constructions of language, and are, consequently, infinitely variable.⁴⁷ To be readable and recognisable names must be coded, they are therefore always capable of change and they have no essence. Characters' names in The Passion exemplify this point very clearly, since, as I shall demonstrate, they are transformed, multiple, assumed, or shared, never fixed or stable.

In The Passion, as in Carter's earlier novels, the distinction between identities within the world of the text and characters, the text's constructions, is

⁴⁶ Ferrer draws this definition from Roland Barthes's S/Z (1970) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), in which Barthes writes,

The proper name enables the person to exist outside the semes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely. As soon as a Name exists (even a pronoun) to flow toward and fasten onto, the semes become predicates, indicators of truth, and the Name becomes a subject. (p.191)

⁴⁷ See Jacques Derrida's Signéponge/Signsponge, translated by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), particularly pp.118-21.

continually broken down; in this novel, both are shown, self-consciously, to be linguistic constructions of the same kind. The novel continually draws attention to itself as language by dramatising how the personages within the textual world of the novel consciously see themselves and others as linguistic constructs. This idea is perhaps most clearly presented in the case of the main protagonist, who is allotted, or allots him/herself, since he/she is the first person narrator, many names: Evelyn, Eve, Eva, and 'I.' Evelyn's body is transformed from male to female, and this transformation, the text suggests via Evelyn's narrative, is conditioned, and even precipitated, by the functioning of language. Hence, we are not allowed to forget that Evelyn is constructed out of language, and hence can be reconstructed. Mother, Evelyn explains, has cut off his 'decorative appendage' (p.60), and trimmed both his body and his name. It was, he says, 'The plastic surgery that turned me into my own diminutive, Eve, the shortened form of Evelyn' (p.71), and, 'Perhaps, I thought, they had utilised my tender body because they couldn't resist the horrid pun of my name, with all its teasing connotations' (p.73). It is perhaps because of the pun of his name, Eve(lyn) explains, that his whole character can be transformed. Hence, we are made aware of the material status of names in fiction as language, since it is because they are constructs of language, and can therefore be read as, for instance, a pun, that names can be transformed; and since the bodies of these characters

are also created in language, they are susceptible to the same transformation.

Carter pushes the interrogation of the construction of character in language one step further in The Passion by dramatising how the distinction between character and identity breaks down when they are exposed as part of the same construction. In the world portrayed by Carter's text, there is an important difference between the name 'Tristessa,' which represents a fictional character, and the other names which represent identities. The name 'Tristessa' is announced as a fiction; it is a stage name, and is presented as such, with no pretence of reality. This, of course, immediately suggests the concealment of an 'original' name, and although we are not offered an alternative, Evelyn does suggest that one exists, admitting that he 'never knew his real name' (p.144). 'Tristessa' represents both a film image and a movie star and both are portrayed as artificial constructions: s/he consciously describes the process of his/her construction when s/he recalls her/his story for Evelyn: 'He described the symbolic schema to which he attached the label, Tristessa ... He had been she; though she had never been a woman, only ever his creation' (p.152). The description of a 'symbolic schema' with 'label' 'attached' fits snugly into Ferrer's account of characterisation; it reminds us not only that this is a fictional character, but that this is how fictional characters are formed.

The name 'Tristessa' is used to describe a character who, we are repeatedly advised, 'could make only the most perfunctory gestures towards real life' (p.7). Tristessa is 'as beautiful as only things that don't exist can be' (p.6), s/he is 'a sleeping beauty who could never die since she had never lived' (p.119), and she exists only as the creation of a close collaboration between Hollywood 'movie moguls ... make-up artists ... drama coaches' (p.144), and the imagination of a transvestite who shares the name: 'Tristessa had no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status, only an iconographic one' (p.129). The character of Tristessa therefore exists only as a representation: s/he is shown to be constructed out of images, and is therefore unknowable, and ungraspable. S/he was, Evelyn explains, 'not flesh itself but only a moving picture of flesh, real but not substantial' (p.8), which left 'only traces of silver powder on the hands that clutched helplessly at [her] perpetual vanishings' (p.110). To imagine a real life for Tristessa outside her text, away from the cinema screen, Evelyn warns, is to destroy her. When Evelyn is sent a photo of her out of 'character' his disillusionment begins:

I'd dreamed of meeting Tristessa, she stark naked, tied, perhaps to a tree in a midnight forest under the wheeling stars. To have encountered her on a suburban golf-course? Or Dido in the laundromat. Or Desdemona at the ante-natal clinic. Never! (p.7)

Paradoxically, however, so long as the fact of her contradiction is not stated, that is, before Evelyn is sent the MGM photograph, Tristessa appears knowable. She joins a line of recognisable mysterious women, and is 'knowable' because she is 'unknowable': Evelyn and the audience feel they know her in her very mystery:

Tristessa had long since joined Billie Holliday and Judy Garland in the queenly pantheon of women who expose their scars with pride, pointing to their emblematic despair just as a medieval saint points to the wounds of his martyrdom. (p.6)

Readers may recognise Tristessa as a particular Hollywood stereotype (Greta Garbo and others), in the same way that they recognise Marianne as Maggie Tulliver and Emma. Hence the allusion serves both to encourage a realist reading, since Tristessa conforms to the stereotype, but also to prevent such a reading, since she is self-consciously 'denounced' as a stereotype.

The name Tristessa also represents the identity of the transvestite who acts out the role of film star. That is, the text dramatises what is concealed behind its own dramatisation of a fictional character. And once again the novel illustrates how identity and character are shown to be part of the same construction, since Tristessa the transvestite is shown to be inseparable not only from the construction Tristessa the film star--'he had been she' (p.152)--but also inseparable from Tristessa the film image. All are shown to be constructed out of the language of film, that is, projected images. When Evelyn

and Tristessa find themselves alone together in the desert, Evelyn claims: 'The habit of being a visual fallacy was too strong for him to break; appearance, only, had refined itself to become the principle of his life. He flickered upon the air' (p.147).⁴⁸

Names in The Passion also function like literary allusions, or indeed, are literary allusions. This again promotes a dual reading. The name Tristessa, for example, is the title of a novel by Jack Kerouac which describes what is believed to be the author's own 'nighttime adventures in the slums mixing bourbon and morphine, surrounded by people he didn't know well, never really at ease, yet caught in his romantic fantasies about Tristessa.'⁴⁹ Kerouac's descriptions of Tristessa, however, a Mexican prostitute and morphine addict, recall Carter's Leilah. Evelyn perhaps bears an ironic resemblance to Kerouac himself, whom the foreword to Tristessa by Aram Saroyan describes as 'the American hero in looks and deeds'⁵⁰ and who was famous for his obsession

⁴⁸ Carter uses almost the same image in Shadow Dance to describe Henry Glass after his wife has committed suicide. He 'seemed to flicker as he walked, like a silent film, as if his continuity was awry' (p.111). She uses it once again at the end of Several Perceptions to describe Kay: 'He wavered as he walked as if he were a piece of trick photography and might suddenly disappear altogether, so discreetly the air would not even be disturbed by his passage' (p.152).

⁴⁹ Ann Charters, Kerouac (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), p.224.

⁵⁰ Jack Kerouac, Tristessa (1960) (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978), 'Foreword,' p.4.

with travelling. Evelyn recalls his flight from New York toward the desert as if he were a hero from Kerouac's On the Road: 'Down the freeways in fine style, like a true American hero, my money stowed between my legs' (p.37).

All recognisable proper names necessarily bring with them their own qualities which appear to be identifiable and refer outside the text. Names, therefore, are part of the illusion-creating mechanisms since they appear to have a history beyond the text; and their very recognisability suggests that they are also knowable. Names in The Passion, such as Eve, Sophia and Lilith, also summon up a vast cultural and literary history (it is ironic that Eve, the symbol of the 'Fall of Man,' is represented in this novel as a 'Playboy center fold' (p.75)); and the names Mother and Zero symbolise particular powerful stereotypes. The novel at once uses the symbolic nature of these references to promote a realist reading and puts them in question by a variety of techniques, which include drawing attention to the names as language. The text, for example, shows how names are capable of becoming common nouns, so for instance, Zero can be read as zero, Mother as mother, and Tristessa as tristesse. Tristessa's name, Evelyn claims, is also onomatopoeic: 'Her name itself whispered rumours of inexpressible sadness; the lingering sibilants rustled like the doomed petticoats of a young girl who is dying' (p.122); and, towards the end of the

novel, Eve(lyn) realises that 'Mother is a figure of speech' (p.184).⁵¹

Disguise and role-playing once again play an important part in The Passion, but whereas in the earlier novels Carter exposed identity as a series of roles--'denounced' the 'mask as mask' (Cixous, 'The Character of "Character,"' p.387)--The Passion, whilst revealing the roles personages play, is also much more concerned to point out and illustrate roles and disguises in language. Personages within the textual world of The Passion consciously describe the linguistic links between their names and their roles. Leilah, for example, has several names: she appears in the last part of the novel as Lilith, and also possibly as Sophia: 'Lilith, also known as Leilah, also, I suspect, sometimes masquerading as Sophia or the Divine Virgin' (p.175). Evelyn also calls her 'Leilah, Lilith, Mud Lily' (p.29). This multiplicity of names and the ease with which they are changed immediately draws the reader's attention to the

⁵¹ All of Carter's work draws attention to the significance of names. In Love, for example, Lee immediately identifies Annabel, by her name, as a member of the middle-classes; 'Annabel' and 'Lee' may well allude to Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'Annabel Lee' which describes the sheer power of love over death (cited in The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol.1 (New York: Norton, 1979), pp.1225-26); Annabel Leigh, also referred to as 'Miss Lee' (p.175), is Humbert Humbert's first love in Nabokov's Lolita. Other obvious examples occur in The Infernal Desire Machines where Desiderio is the hero of a novel concerned with desire, Doctor Hoffman alludes to E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Albertina may recall Proust's elusive heroine 'Albertine' (Albert/Albertina reappears in Nights at the Circus as the hermaphroditic freak at Madame Schreck's).

name as representation, as language. The name Leilah, Lilith claims, was a disguise in language, "'I called myself Leilah in the city in order to conceal the nature of my symbolism"' (p.174).⁵² But behind the disguise is only another disguise, since the highly symbolic names Lilith and Sophia represent a role, not a 'real,' knowable character. Leilah/Sophia/Lilith's changes of name represent a series of artificial roles with nothing concealed behind them. These roles, we are reminded (since to disguise a name is also to disguise a role), are constructed out of language. However, the illusion-making machinery works on, and these names and roles, because they are portrayed as disguises, continue to point to some other concealed and knowable identity lurking behind them.

v

All of Carter's novels discussed in this chapter reveal the power of reading conventions which result from/in the desire of the reader for whole, unique characters to whom they can relate. I have demonstrated how Carter's writing draws the reader into the text by exploiting reading conventions which rely upon recognition, almost satisfying the reader's demand for a 'traditional' reading of character, and I have also

⁵² Both Lee and Buzz in Love have changed their names in order to erase their past history (see pp.9-10).

demonstrated how these texts simultaneously show that such demands are unrealisable, thus exposing the reading conventions which we use to produce a realist reading as conventions, and revealing their power. Even Love, as my epigraph from the 'Afterword' establishes, self-consciously points out the conventions which make characters plausible, though not like 'life.'

Readers desire knowable characters to enable them to read themselves reflected as knowable characters, or rather, identities, as Derek Attridge argues:

every time we apprehend a character in a literary text, we are reassured of our own self-boundedness, self-consistency, and uniqueness; our own knowability and undividedness; our own existence independent of history, social construction and ideology. ('Joyce and the Ideology of Character,' p.153)

But, these novels contend, the notion of character as unified, whole, and knowable is a myth.⁵³ It is a myth, moreover, which is dependent upon the reader's relationship with the text, since, without the reader's belief, or willing suspension of disbelief, in the illusion of 'living' characters, the term character would refer to something quite different. Suspension of disbelief produces a 'traditional,' or transcendent, reading of character, which, as I discussed at the opening of the chapter, 'guarantees the position of the subject

⁵³ The view of character as myth, Jonathan Culler notes in Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p.230, is held by structuralists as well.

exactly outside any articulation [and therefore outside convention]--the whole text works on the concealing of the dominant discourse as articulation--instead the dominant discourse presents itself exactly as the presentation of objects to the reading subject' (MacCabe, 'Realism and the cinema,' p.47).

Many of Carter's novels demystify this process and dramatise the reader's construction of character by showing how, in the world portrayed by the text, identity is brought into existence and 'naturalised.' Just as readers construct character in a way which enables them to see themselves reflected as 'independent of history, social construction and ideology,' so personages, or groups of personages in the novels, are shown constructing others, and in doing so, constructing themselves (and at the same time naturalising that construction). Reader and character are revealed in a binary relationship where both are dependent upon one another for definition.

Donally, for example, who appears to be different from the other personages in Heroes and Villains by being outside convention--self-sufficient, in control of the creation of his own identity--is not only shown, as I have demonstrated, to be constituted by other literary texts, but also shown not to be completely free to choose the roles he plays. His identity is created in binary opposition, that is, in a conventional hierarchical power structure, with the Barbarian tribe. The role he casts for himself, and which confirms him in the identity to

which he aspires (as a god-like, natural ruler of the tribe), is dependent upon others acting out the roles he creates for them. Similarly, Zero's identity in The Passion is constructed in binary opposition with his wives. Both sides of the opposition--Donally and the Barbarians, Zero and his wives--are mutually dependent: without a following of people who believe in their power Donally and Zero (whose name says it all), would be nothing (both are like Tinkerbell in Peter Pan). Donally and Zero create their own myth, by creating their own religion and their own following, 'But this myth depended on their [followers'] conviction; a god-head, however shabby, needs believers to maintain his credibility' (The Passion, p.99). Donally and Zero, these novels illustrate, are constructing characters around them, in whom, so long as these characters continue to conform to their given roles (so long as the characters believe in the myth), they can also suspend disbelief and see themselves reflected as characters. That is, they can see themselves confirmed as identities which are dominant, unique and apparently outside construction. Whilst the opposition remains in place, the dominators maintain the illusion of both power and autonomy. The followers, in turn, believe themselves to exist only in the roles which Donally and Zero have portrayed for them: they could all say, like Eve and Zero's other wives: 'So he regulated

our understanding of him and also our understanding of ourselves in relation to him' (The Passion, p.97).⁵⁴

Donally's dominant position as a Professor amongst Barbarians is also accounted for in terms of the same conventional hierarchical power structure. The conventions which construct and continually reinscribe identity not only define personages but also the separate and unique identity of each community. The Professors, of whom Donally is a representative, are in the dominant position, writing the script for the Barbarians. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the game the professorial children play: 'The children played Soldiers and Barbarians; they made guns with their fingers and shot one another dead but the Soldiers always won. That was the rule of the game' (p.2). The game describes a hierarchical model of patriarchal war: it is a binary opposition where each side struggles for power and control over the identity of the other. In this binary relationship the Professors and Barbarians are mutually dependent since each one needs the other in order to define itself, as Marianne's father explains to her:

'They [the Barbarians] hunt, maraud and prey on us for the things they need and can't make themselves and never realise we are necessary to them. When they finally destroy us, if they finally destroy us, they'll destroy their own

⁵⁴ This point will be more fully exemplified by a discussion of the dominator/dominated opposition with regard the conventional Man/Woman relationship in a patriarchal society. This is an important issue in The Passion of New Eve which I shall discuss at length in the following chapter.

means of living so I do not think they will destroy us. I think an equilibrium will be maintained. But the Soldiers would like to destroy them, for the Soldiers need to be victorious, and if the Barbarians are destroyed, who will we then be able to blame for the bad things?' (Heroes and Villains, p.11).

Neither side is self-sufficient, but the Professors are the side in power, and they are therefore in the position to write the rules of the game, and project an identity for the Barbarians which confirms their own autonomy. The Barbarians also see themselves reflected, but this time in the gaze of the other, where their place is inscribed for them (like Zero's wives). The Barbarians, in effect, are characters the Professors produce--'Sometimes I dream I am an invention of the Professors' says Jewel (Heroes and Villains, p.82)--and hence they must dress up in make-up, rags, and furs (Marianne describes Jewel as a 'marvellous, defiant construction of textures and colours' (p.147)) in order to fulfil their role of 'hobgoblins of nightmare' (p.5). But the Professors are also produced by the Barbarian's belief in their power. Once again, the opposition remains in place, and appears natural rather than conventional, as long as the opposing forces suspend disbelief, since the suspension of disbelief maintains the status quo. For example, Jewel knows that the roles the warring forces play are only roles and yet, for the duration of a battle he willingly suspends disbelief. Marianne watches him don his battle dress and the following interchange take place:

'When the Soldiers see you coming, they will think you are the devil incarnate, riding a black horse.'

'They are the devils, with their glass faces. One cannot escape the consequences of one's appearance.'

'It is the true appearance of neither of you.'

'But it is true as long as one or the other of us wants to believe it.' (p.145)

Both Heroes and Villains and Love also dramatise what happens to identity when a person refuses to believe in another's existence. Marianne and Jewel function in a binary opposition where, after their marriage, Marianne is in the position of power and regulates Jewel's understanding of himself. In her attempt to deny that what she is experiencing is real, she also denies Jewel 'an existence outside the dual being they made while owls pounced on velvet mice in the forest' (p.88):

In daylight or firelight, she saw him in two dimensions, flat and effectless ... all [his] activities were no more than sporadic tableaux vivants or random poses with no thread of continuity to hold them together. (p.89)

Jewel, meanwhile, exists only as her two-dimensional construction, since he can define himself only in his relationship to her:

[He] silently approached her during the butchery hour and daubed her face with his bloody hands, an action she construed immediately and immediately despised, as if he were helplessly trying to prove his autonomy to her when she knew all the time he vanished like a phantom at daybreak, or earlier, at the moment when her body ceased to define his outlines. (p.89)

Similarly, towards the end of Love Annabel wonders whether Lee exists 'at all when she was not beside him to project

her idea of him upon him' (p.79), and Lee appears to lose his shadow.

Donally, in Heroes and Villains, enters into commerce with the Barbarians, the Professors with the Barbarians, and Zero, in The Passion, with his wives, just as the reader in a traditional reading of character, Hélène Cixous maintains, enters into 'commerce' with the text:

On condition that he be assured of getting paid back, that is, recompensed by another who is sufficiently similar to or different from him--such that the reader is upheld, by comparison or in combination with a personage in the representation that he wishes to have of himself. ('The Character of "Character,"' p.385, my emphasis)

Carter's novels illustrate that this self--that Donally, the Professors, Zero, and the reader see reflected--is not a 'real' self, but a fictional self that they desire to see reflected: self as dominant, as ruler, as 'masculinity incarnate' (The Passion, p.104), in control, and most important of all, as an autonomous, unique being.

Readers of Carter's novels, as we have seen, are continually reminded that character is a cultural construct, and a construct of writing and reading; and that it can have no pretension to reality. But the language of fiction has the effect of persuading the reader of its unmediated access to reality, and gives the illusion of something which pre-exists, before and beyond the text. It is at this point that the reader is drawn by the extremely powerful force of fantasy, to a 'willing suspension of disbelief.' Readers know, and as I have

shown, they are continually reminded, that the characters are not 'real,' but nevertheless they are invited to read them as if they were, and hence see themselves reflected as dominant, autonomous, and knowable. It is this enormously powerful habit, when readers know that a character is an illusion, that for the moment of illusion they are willing to suspend disbelief--always bearing in mind, of course, that at any point they can withdraw, can step out of the illusion into rationality (or what appears to be the 'real' world outside the text).

Carter's novels exploit the power of their readers' desire to read character in a way which enables them to comprehend their selves as unique and knowable, but at the same time the novels warn, as Cixous warns, that if we read character in this way, we, too, will be playing out a role:

So long as we do not put aside 'character' and everything it implies in terms of illusion and complicity with classical reasoning and the appropriate economy that such reasoning supports, we will remain locked up in the treadmill of reproduction. We will find ourselves, automatically, in the syndrome of role-playing. So long as we take to be the representation of a true subject that which is only a mask, so long as we ignore the fact that the 'subject' is an effect of the unconscious and that it never stops producing the unconscious--which is unanalysable, uncharacterizable, we will remain prisoners of the monotonous machination that turns every 'character' into a marionette. ('The Character of 'Character,' p.387)⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Marionettes are a favourite, indeed an obsessive motif in Carter's fiction, often with close ties to Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman.' The marionette in

What Carter's novels signal to the reader is that if we read character only in 'traditional' terms, we all become marionettes. We may appear to be reassured of 'our own existence independent of history, social construction and ideology' ('Joyce and the Ideology of Character,' p.153), when in fact, we, too, are only constructions, continually reinforcing false universals, myths of character, and established power structures.

The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains, Love, and The Passion of New Eve propose several important theoretical points. First, they appear to privilege a modernist mode of reading, which exposes character as a cultural construction, and invalidates any notion of essence. This mode of reading focuses on appearances, that is, it focuses upon, and makes the reader aware of, the text's status as fiction and characters' construction in language. At the same time, though, Carter's novels continue to valorise, whilst criticising, a 'realist' mode of reading character in order to comment upon the ways we read each other and the ways we read the world. By encouraging both of these incompatible modes of reading, Carter's 'post-modernist' texts suggest, not that reality is unrepresentable, but that the very codes which the modernist reading exposes are reality. Carter is not simply suggesting that everything is coded, but that there

Hoffmann's story comes to life when the hero falls in love with her and believes her to be real.

is no distinction between what is coded and what is real; therefore, in order to appear to know anything, we have to rely upon certain reading conventions which do make some distinctions, whilst retaining the awareness that these distinctions are not fixed or universal. Her novels are structured around these two poles.

Carter's fiction may not change reading conventions by exposing them, but it may change the reader's understanding of his/her position as reader. By showing how we construct ourselves in the same way as we construct character, and by exposing the power structures which are dependent upon this mode of reading, Carter has created not so much a model as a working theory with which to comment upon the world, and challenge other power structures which rely upon the dominator/dominated hierarchy. This theory has obvious political ramifications, particularly with regard to feminism, and the following chapter will return to The Passion of New Eve in order to discuss this issue.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHARACTER OF 'WOMAN' AND THE QUESTION OF PORNOGRAPHY
IN 'THE PASSION OF NEW EVE' AND 'THE SADEIAN WOMAN'

'Women' ... suffer from an extraordinary weight
of characterisation.

Denise Riley¹

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which
involve one another. I am sure of that--the
quality and its negation are locked in
necessity. But what the nature of masculine and
the nature of feminine might be, whether they
involve male and female ... that I do not know.

Angela Carter²

¹ Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the
Category of 'Women' in History (London: Macmillan, 1988),
p.16.

² Angela Carter, The Passion of New Eve, pp.149-50.

At the end of the previous chapter I suggested that the ways in which Carter's novels challenge reading conventions governing the status of character generate a 'working theory' which has the potential to reflect upon the world and to challenge particular political institutions which rely upon the dominator/dominated duality. This chapter will focus on how The Passion of New Eve extends the argument regarding the cultural construction of character by using the same techniques to explore and expose a related construction, that of 'femininity.' I will complement my reading of The Passion with frequent references to Carter's non-fictional text, The Sadeian Woman, especially with regard to an exploration of the question of pornography in Carter's work, and pornography's role in feminist politics. However, I wish to identify myself with Lorna Sage's position in regard to this text:

It would be misleading ... to suggest that the politics are separable from, or prior to, the image making and image breaking of the fiction. Nevertheless ... The Sadeian Woman['s] ... forceful and cruelly explicit reading of the codes of pornography may help to provide a context in which the strategies of her fiction can be better understood.³

Carter's use of what many critics have defined as pornographic material, and the descriptions of violent sex which recur throughout her work, have caused considerable

³ Lorna Sage, Dictionary of Literary Biography, 14, 'British Novelists Since 1960' (Detroit, Michigan: Bruccoli Clark, 1983), pp.205-12 (p.212).

controversy, which will be documented in the second half of this chapter.

Just as Carter's novels ask 'what does character "name"?' so, The Passion foregrounds a central feminist question, which is, for example, the starting point for Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, The Second Sex, 'what is a woman?'⁴ Carter discusses her own interest in the 'questioning of the nature of [her] reality as a woman' in her article, 'Notes from the Front Line,' where she describes The Passion as an 'anti-mythic novel' and 'a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity.'⁵ In order to begin to answer this question Carter's novel explores a basic distinction which underlies contemporary feminist theory, the distinction between biological sex

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (1949) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.15. It is worth comparing Carter's work to the fiction and theoretical writing of Monique Wittig, who claims, in her article 'One is not Born a Woman,' (a title taken directly from de Beauvoir's The Second Sex), in Feminist Issues, 1, No.2 (Winter, 1981), 47-54, that 'what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man' (p.53). Wittig wants to abolish the very notion of 'woman.'

⁵ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line,' in On Gender and Writing, edited by Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983), pp.69-77 (p.70 and p.71). Several critics have commented upon the ways in which Carter's work, in particular The Passion, questions accepted notions of 'femininity' and several choose Carter's comments from 'Notes from the Front Line' article as a means of introduction. See for example, Gina Wisker, 'Winged Women and Werewolves: How do we Read Angela Carter,' in Ideas and Production: A Journal in the History of Ideas, Issue four: Poetics (1986), 87-98; and Susan Rubin Suleiman, '(Re)writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism,' in The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives, edited by Suleiman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.7-29.

and culturally constructed gender. Carter describes this distinction clearly in The Sadeian Woman, where she describes women's oppression as a cultural, and therefore changeable, condition:

There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but, separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioural modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals. (The Sadeian Woman, p.6)⁶

Carter argues that what defines us as either masculine or feminine is a set of culturally defined codes, 'only partially derived from' the distinct biological differences between the sexes, which have been 'translated' into 'universal' truths. The Passion is an attempt to examine the social fictions which define gender, and hence which regulate our lives. It also explores the very process of translation by which social codes function as universal truths, and lose their status as codes. The Passion portrays Woman; that is, it presents a series of recognisable gender stereotypes which

⁶ Carter shares this belief with Wittig, who, in 'Paradigm,' in Homosexualities and French Literature, edited by George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) pp.114-21, argues similarly:

The fundamental difference, any fundamental difference (including sexual difference) between categories of individuals, any difference constituting concepts of opposition, is a difference belonging to a political, economic, ideological order. (p.115)

society has defined as Woman;⁷ it uses and stresses the seductive power of these stereotypes which appear to be dictated by 'universal truths,' but it simultaneously prevents us from relating to these characters not only by denouncing them as artificial constructions but also by showing that they are totally unrealistic role models which could only have been constructed by and for men. Ricarda Schmidt summarises The Passion as a novel in which 'women's subjectivity is shown to be de-formed by the social power of patriarchal stereotypes of femininity';⁸ this novel exploits the power of these stereotypes, in the same way as it exploits the power of 'realist' notions of character, in order to expose myths of femininity and also shows how these myths have been created and perpetuated.

The Passion's procedures closely resemble a theory put forward by Denise Riley in her book, 'Am I that Name?' Riley argues that:

It is compatible to suggest that 'women' don't exist--while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed'--since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did.... Such challenges to 'how women are' can throw sand in the eyes of the founding categorisations and attributions,

⁷ Like the term 'character' in the previous chapter, the term 'woman,' and whatever the term signifies, is the issue under debate. I shall use Woman with a capital 'W' to refer to the accepted universal definition of what a woman 'should be,' as defined by patriarchal culture and dependent upon a belief in an essential femininity; and woman, lower case, to denote individual women, their sense of self-identity, and their experiences.

⁸ Ricarda Schmidt, 'The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction,' in Textual Practice, 3, no.1 (Spring 1989), 56-75 (p.73).

ideally disorientating them.' ('Am I That Name?' p.112)⁹

Riley also admits the risk involved in this strategy, 'that the very iteration of the afflicted category serves, maliciously, not to undo it but to underwrite it.' She insists, however, that 'a category may be at least conceptually shaken if it is challenged and refurbished, instead of only being perversely strengthened by repetition' ('Am I That Name?' pp.112 and 113 respectively). This is a risk, of course, that Carter's texts take again and again, and one which has raised serious criticisms from feminist critics, as Gina Wisker points out:

She aims to expose the social and cultural myths which condition and control us. That she adopts the content and form of many of these myths in the demythologising process is both her strength and, for some readers, her weakness. ('Winged Women and Werewolves,' p.88)

I

The myth of Woman asserts that the female body determines what Woman is. Carter's novel does not avoid

⁹ Riley extends the argument which revolves around the word 'Woman,' to include 'women,' arguing 'that we can't bracket off either Woman, whose capital letter has long alerted us to her dangers, or the more modest lower-case "woman", while leaving unexamined the ordinary, innocent-sounding "women"' (p.1). 'Women,' she claims is 'a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation' (p.2).

or dismiss the problems posed by the material nature of distinct male and female bodies in determining gender;¹⁰ by describing two sex changes, both from male to female, The Passion includes a discussion about whether it is biological difference or cultural construction which defines femininity. One of the aims of this novel is to reveal, by means of exaggeration and parody, the heavy burden of metaphor and imagery imposed upon the female body to show not that any essential womanliness is located there, but that the very ways in which we read our bodies are coded.¹¹ For example, Mother castrates Evelyn and turns him into Eve, 'a perfect specimen of womanhood' (p.68). His sex change, which Sophia refers to as 'psycho-surgery' (p.68), is in two parts. The first part involves two months of plastic surgery which transform 'him' into 'her,' biologically, but this is insufficient

¹⁰ Carter is arguing against a school of feminism which relies upon the body as a sign of the essential differences between men and women. For many feminists what has always been lacking is a due recognition of the specificity of women's bodies, and women's experience of their bodies. One recent and excellent book on this subject is Diana Fuss's Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (New York: Routledge, 1989). Many contemporary novelists also depend upon the specificity of the female body, especially the maternal body, in order to define women. Emma Tennant's Alice Fell (1980) (London: Picador, 1982) and Fay Weldon's Puffball (1980) (London: Coronet Books, 1981) both make pregnancy and childbirth a central issue where women are associated with 'Mother nature.'

¹¹ Monique Wittig attempts to accomplish the same goal by refusing to use the female body as a metaphor. See Dianne Griffin Crowder, 'Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing,' in Contemporary Literature, XXIV, No. 2 (1983), 117-44 (p.119).

in itself, and has to be followed by psychological 'programming' to instil stereotypical 'feminine' qualities. The programming, then, is designed to enable him/her to 'adjust to [his/her] new shape' (p.72), or, in other words, to read his/her new body. The dramatisation of the separation of biological sex and the conventions by means of which this sex is read allow the text to comment ironically upon, among other things, the cultural media which constantly project particular images of women. The programming involves, for example, the screening of role models for Eve which include some of Tristessa's movies depicting the pain and suffering of womanhood, and videotapes of

every single Virgin and Child that had ever been painted in the entire history of Western European art, projected upon my curving wall in real-life colours and blown up to larger than life-size, accompanied by a sound track composed of gurgling babies and the murmuring of contented mothers. (p.72, my emphasis)

The sheer excess of this description highlights the absurdity of the project (if Eve(lyn) sees all of these s/he will see more than has ever been seen by any individual of either sex), but it also emphasises our culture's obsession with images of women. These images are from both 'high' and 'low' culture, their colours, we are informed, appear correct but their size is grossly exaggerated. The images of Virgin and Child, for example, are 'blown up larger than life-size,' an expansion which not only parodies their artificial status as symbols, but also stresses the impossibility of ever measuring up to

such unreasonable role models. Another video tape, featuring 'non-phallic imagery such as sea anemones opening and closing; caves, with streams issuing from them; roses, opening to admit a bee; the sea, the moon' (p.72), both exposes and parodies the way in which the female body is commonly read as fragmented, where the part, the vagina, synecdochically represents the whole. This part is extracted from the body, enlarged and simplified and then presented as the most significant aspect of woman.¹² The example also exposes the imagery traditionally associated with the vagina; Carter describes the significance of such imagery in The Sadeian Woman: 'From this elementary iconography may be derived the whole metaphysics of sexual differences--man aspires; woman has no other function than to exist, waiting' (The Sadeian Woman, p.4). Our reading of biological sex, or our reading of the body, this novel maintains, is completely determined by cultural coding. Hence, like Denise Riley, The Passion claims that, '"the body" is never above--or below--history' ('Am I That Name?' p.104).

Mother, Sophia tells Evelyn, believes that 'a change in the appearance will restructure the essence' (p.68), but Eve(lyn)'s new body, without his/her willing suspension of belief in the social codes which define it, does not transform him/her into a woman. Eve(lyn) is only

¹² Carter uses these very words to describe how woman is represented in graffiti, in The Sadeian Woman, p.4.

too aware of the difference between his/her body and sense of self, and also realises that this might be a common condition: 'Although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations' (p.101).¹³ This also, of course, causes a problem for the critic who cannot simply use the names Eve or Evelyn, or a single pronoun: all of these need to be qualified, since Eve(lyn) is a split subject, man and woman, and therefore neither man nor woman.

Tristessa also represents a divided identity, whose body is male but whose sense of self personifies the myth of culturally constructed femininity. Tristessa, Susan Suleiman claims, 'has the physical appendages of maleness even while continuing to manifest the famous signs, and beauty, of her quintessential femininity' (The Female Body in Western Culture, p.27). Lilith informs Eve that, many years before, Tristessa had begged Mother to change his

¹³ David Punter emphasises the misery attaching to this division of the female self in 'Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,' in Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 25, No.4 (1984), 209-22:

What, it seems, the new Eve does is experience, on behalf of the world, the wrench and dislocation which is at the heart of woman's relationship with herself in a world riddled with masculine power-structures: inner self forced apart from the subject of self-presentation, an awareness of hollowness, and disbelief that this self-on-view can be taken as a full representation of the person alongside the bitter knowledge that it will be, that at every point the woman is locked into the metaphysical insult of the masculine gaze.
(p.216)

biological sex, 'to match his function to his form' (p.173), an operation which Mother declined to perform. However, Tristessa eventually finds it unnecessary even to disguise his/her male body:

'At first,' he said, 'I used to conceal my genitals in my anus. I would fix them in position with Scotch tape, so that my mound was smooth as a young girl's. But when the years passed and my disguise became my nature, I no longer troubled myself with these subterfuges. Once the essence was achieved, the appearance could take care of itself.' (p.141)

This example suggests that there both is, and yet shows that there cannot be, an essential femininity. The 'essence' of Woman that Tristessa describes is obviously not something located within the female body, since Tristessa's body is male, but is, s/he claims, a disguise which 'became' natural. This point is reinforced when, just before his death at the hands of the Children's crusade, Tristessa's physical disguise is removed. Evelyn explains: 'Before my eyes, even though they'd shaved him and scrubbed the white paint from his face, in all his pared-down integrity of a death's head, he changed into his female aspect' (p.156). Beneath what appears to have been a disguise, however, is only further evidence of disguise. Tristessa's art--his/her disguise and performance--becomes his nature, and hence the art/nature distinction breaks down; and the text simultaneously suggests that there is a natural, essential, femininity, which Tristessa personifies, and yet shows that what might

be thought to be essential is impossible, since it is real only as convention.

Evelyn, therefore, can have a female body but not be a woman; and Tristessa can have a male body, but on the movie screen can appear to be the perfect Woman, since s/he signifies a perfect realisation of what patriarchal convention expects a woman 'should be.'

II

The Passion confronts and explores the power of the cultural codes which divide humans into two distinct 'castes,' man and woman. In order to do this it portrays several versions of what, in a patriarchal world, is recognised as Woman. The text exhibits the power of the myth of Woman by offering explanations of how and why this myth exists, and how difficult it is to break out of the status quo. It portrays three different exemplifications of Woman: Tristessa, Leilah and Eve, are all women whose identities have been defined exclusively by men.¹⁴ The remainder of this chapter is divided into two main sections, one on Tristessa, the other on Leilah, with a brief transition via an analysis of Zero in between (I

¹⁴ This functions as a fictional dramatisation of the theories of images of women by American feminists; relevant work includes Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (London: Virago, 1977), Mary Ellmann's Thinking about Women (London: Virago, 1979), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

shall discuss Eve further in the next chapter). Both Tristessa and Leilah represent explorations of Woman as constructs of male desire, and both exemplify the degradation of Woman; there are, however, important differences between them.

Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion. Woman? Ah!
(p.6)

In the world portrayed by The Passion Tristessa personifies the essence of Woman, defined exclusively by male fantasies:

That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of 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. (pp.128-29)

Tristessa represents Woman as mysterious object of desire, but an object which is unavailable.¹⁵ She¹⁶ encompasses several contradictory stereotypes, and, as such, represents the very ambiguity of Woman that is written into the myth: she is both Woman as 'Madonna,'

¹⁵ Tristessa appears to be modelled upon Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich who, Marjorie Rosen claims, in Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream (New York: Avon, 1973), shared 'that special enduring fame which they gained as enigmatic incarnations of all that is mysterious to man--all that he wants to conquer, subjugate, and destroy. Divinely untouchable, often unworldly, their allure lay in their denial of that humdrum destiny reserved for woman' (p.169).

¹⁶ I shall refer to Tristessa as 'she' and Evelyn as 'he' even though they are biologically the opposite.

'"The most beautiful woman in the world"' (p.5), to be looked at but never touched, yet is also Woman as 'Whore,' who functions in 'the celluloid brothel of the cinema, where merchandise may be eyed endlessly but never purchased' (The Sadeian Woman, p.60). Ricarda Schmidt points out Tristessa's likeness to de Sade's Justine, where both are symbols of 'self-pitying suffering, a masochism that corresponds to male sadistic pleasure' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.61). Schmidt also recalls that Tristessa's last name, de St Ange, corresponds to a character in de Sade's Philosophie dans le boudoir, Madame de Saint-Ange, the product of male fantasy' who 'teaches Sadism, just as Tristessa's suffering taught sadism to young Evelyn' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.64). Tristessa is portrayed as a product of the male gaze, constructed via a reflection in both a mirror and a movie screen: she describes how she became Tristessa, saying, 'She invaded the mirror like an army with banners; she entered me through my eyes' (p.151); and she is literally a projected image on the cinema screen, reflecting what her audience want to see (p.118).

Tristessa, as I have argued in the previous chapter, makes no pretence to reality, and the name 'Tristessa' names not a person but a construction. She is real only as a projection of fantasy--'You had turned yourself into an object as lucid as the objects you made from glass; and this object was, itself, an idea' (p.129)--and as film--'You came to me in seven veils of celluloid and

demonstrated, in your incomparable tears, every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity' (p.71). It is only because she relinquishes her connection with reality that Tristessa can realise the impossible role model of Woman. She is like the marionette, Lady Purple, in Carter's short story 'The Loves of Lady Purple,' who 'could become the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive.'¹⁷ Lady Purple is 'a metaphysical abstraction of the female' (p.30), and Linda Hutcheon has identified her as one who 'does not so much imitate as distill and intensify the actions of real women,'¹⁸ and this is equally applicable to Tristessa. Similarly, Eve(lyn) wonders aloud to Tristessa, 'How could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you?' (p.129). Even Tristessa's body is totally fantasised, bearing no trace of the physical (it does not matter, for instance, that she is 'more than six feet tall' (p.123), and she does not have to hide his genitals).¹⁹ The text

¹⁷ Angela Carter, Fireworks (revised edition), p.27.

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989), p.32.

¹⁹ Isabel Allende portrays a similar transvestite character called Mimi in the novel Eva Luna (1988) (New York: Bantam Books, 1989). Mimi is a (soap opera) actress who undergoes a limited amount of plastic surgery but, out of financial necessity, has to retain his/her male sexual apparatus. Later in his/her life, when offered the money to complete the sex change operation, s/he refuses because s/he had become, male appendages and all, man's perfect woman. Her male lover claims:

'She is the absolute female. We all have something of the androgyne about us, something male, something female, but she's stripped

literalises the notion of a fantasy body: for example, when Evelyn finally meets Tristessa in her glass house in the desert, he describes her as

nothing so much as her own shadow, worn away to its present state of tangible insubstantiality because, perhaps, so many layers of appearances had been stripped from it by the camera--as if the camera had stolen, not the soul, but her body and left behind a presence like an absence that lived, now, only in a quiet, ghostly, hypersensitivated world of its own. (p.123)

Within the fantasy world of the cinema, Tristessa does not need to undergo a biological sex change, merely to take a different position in the same set of codes.

The power of the classic Hollywood movie, and therefore Tristessa's power, is based on the audience's complete acknowledgement of its artificiality, and this acknowledged artificiality appears both to frustrate and yet to facilitate the audience's experience of the film. It frustrates it by confirming that there can be no physical relationship between the projected images and the 'real' bodies of members of the audience; and yet it facilitates the relationship because it encourages the audience to suspend disbelief and abandon themselves to the world of fantasy (whilst retaining the knowledge that it is a fantasy). This, of course, assumes that there are two distinct worlds: a fantasy world of film which, like Tristessa, is a completely artificial construction, and the world of fact, a 'real' world outside the movie, into

herself of any vestige of masculinity and built herself splendid curves. She's totally woman, adorable.' (p.254)

which the audience step, freely, once the movie has run its course. For example, part of Tristessa's appeal is erotic, but her audience can make no pretence to possess her body physically--since her body, as I have shown, is so obviously a fantasy--they can only encounter her in her world. Indeed, Evelyn admits that he 'only loved her because she was not of this world' (p.8). This explains his desire to meet her in a fantasy, 'stark naked, tied, perhaps to a tree in a midnight forest under the wheeling stars' (p.7), and his horror at the picture he is sent by MGM of a 'real' Tristessa playing golf.²⁰ Evelyn emphasises the distinction between the temporary fantasy world of the film and the 'real' world, away from the movie screen, when he addresses Tristessa in the following terms:

You were an illusion in a void. You were the living image of the entire Platonic shadow show, an illusion that could fill my own emptiness with marvellous, imaginary things as long as, just so long as, the movie lasted, and then all would all vanish. (p.110)

The audience, then, are conscious of the artificiality of the fantasy world of the film; what they are not conscious of, however, is that the fantasy is an

²⁰ Carter makes a similar comment in The Sadeian Woman about Marilyn Monroe:

In herself, this lovely ghost, this zombie, or woman who has never been completely born as a woman, only as a debased cultural idea of a woman, is appreciated only for her decorative value.... She is most arousing as a memory or as a masturbatory fantasy. If she perceives herself as something else, the contradictions of her situation will destroy her. (p.70)

ideological construction which fulfils all gender stereotypes. For example, the audience suspend disbelief in Tristessa because she is totally artificial--'Her allure had lain in the tragic and absurd heroism with which she had denied real life' (p.7)--but also because she so completely conforms to the codes which define Woman. This is an extension of my argument regarding character in the previous chapter: The Passion problematises the notion of sexual difference as natural and absolute. Hélène Cixous, in her article on 'character,' argues that, 'Through "character" is established the identification circuit with the reader: the more a "character" fulfils the norms, the better the reader recognises it and recognises himself.'²¹ Through the 'identification circuit' with Tristessa (a character who fulfils all the 'norms'), the audience feel the satisfaction of both knowing Tristessa and hence knowing themselves. What the audience do not realize is that they are projecting their own fantasy on to Tristessa, since she is a literal example of the projection of male desires, and they can only do this as long as she is pure artifice and has none of the specificity of a real woman. The 'self' that Tristessa reflects for the audience, then, is a fantasised self: Michael Ignatieff's description of the late Greta Garbo, perhaps puts this most clearly:

²¹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Character of "Character,"' in New Literary History, 5 (1974), 383-402 (p.385).

She was the mirror of our illusions, casting back upon us our best images of ourselves.... In the company of Garbo's image, everyone could return to some instant they felt themselves to be beautiful or handsome.'²² (my emphasis)

Evelyn describes how he went towards Tristessa 'as towards my own face in a magnetic mirror' (p.110), where the magnetic pull emphasises the seductive qualities of stereotypes which offer the illusion of sameness, and draw the audience towards them. The Passion claims, therefore, that the codes with which the audience construct Tristessa are the same as the codes with which the audience construct themselves and their gender--male or female.

Similarly, the aim of classic Hollywood films, like the aim of many nineteenth-century 'realist' novelists, discussed in the previous chapter, was to offer the illusion of direct access to reality; both mediums often appear to escape representation only because they are completely ideological constructs. The film world, then, may appear to be 'true' to the audience, even though they know that it is not real; and it is this paradox which allows the totally artificial world of the film to appear to elucidate the fragmented 'real' world outside. In this

²² Michael Ignatieff, 'Garbo--the mirror of our illusions' (Obituary), in the Observer, 22 April 1990, p.17.

Several critics mention the similarity between Tristessa and Garbo. See for example, Paddy Beesley's review of The Passion, 'Be Bad,' New Statesman, 25 March 1977, p.407, where he describes Tristessa as a 'Garbo-like screen goddess'; L. B. Mittleman in World Literature Today, 52 (Spring 1978), 294; and Susan Rubin Suleiman, in The Female Body in Western Culture, claims 'the cultural referent for Tristessa is obviously Greta Garbo' (p.25).

way, the film world appears to be more real than reality, and to penetrate to the heart of the mystery, and miseries, of 'life.' Both worlds, then, both fact and fantasy, can be shown to be constructed out of the same codes--indeed, The Passion suggests that there are only codes, and, therefore, that these codes are reality--but the novel appears to suggest that unless the codes are self-consciously acknowledged as codes, the distinction between fact and fantasy will appear unproblematic, and the illusory world, which is constructed out of male desire, will continue to dominate.

Jean-François Lyotard explains this process, in a discussion of current trends in literature, painting and the cinema, in The Postmodern Condition. He compares literature and film and stresses film's superiority 'whenever the objective is to stabilize the referent' and preserve the codes which deny the status of the projected image as image, in order to appear to give direct access to 'reality.' By doing this, it enables the viewer

to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others--since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them. This is the way the effects of reality, or if one prefers, the fantasies of realism, multiply.²³

²³ Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.74. Lyotard also comments upon the fate of artists who do, like Carter, attempt to challenge the 'rules,' perhaps denying the therapeutic process. This comment may also suggest reasons for Carter's lack of popularity:

The Passion dramatises this very process of 'communication' between Tristessa and her audience. Tristessa functions as a symbol of Woman, and of universal sorrow for a universal audience.²⁴ She appears to speak for people, effecting a mutual catharsis, where the audience perceive her passionate sorrows as their own, or theirs as her own:

Our Lady of the Sorrows, her face whiter than her shroud, offered her unmerciful captor a tribute of the concentrate of all the tears that had been shed in red-plush flea-pits on five continents over the sufferings she had mimicked with such persuasiveness they had achieved a more perfect degree of authenticity than any she might have undergone in real life, since half the world had seen those sufferings and found them atrocious enough to weep over. Unless she, all unknowing, had become the focus of their own pain, the receptacle of all the pain they

As for the artists and writers who question the rules of plastic and narrative arts and possibly share their suspicions by circulating their work, they are destined to have little credibility in the eyes of those concerned with 'reality' and 'identity'; they have no guarantee of an audience. (p.75)

²⁴ Carter reworks material from The Passion (and other novels) in her short story, 'The Merchant of Shadows,' in London Review of Books, 26 October 1989, pp.25-27. This story portrays a slightly different version of this same symbol of sorrow: a famous, but now retired Hollywood star (the story contains a similar sexual 'masquerade' (p.27)), who 'always carried her tragedy with her, like a permanent widow's veil giving her the spooky allure of a born-again princesse lointaine' (p.26) (Tristessa is also described as the 'princesse lointaine' (The Passion, p.7); therefore the nameless 'heroine' in 'The Merchant' can be seen as a born-again Tristessa). In Nothing Sacred, Carter writes:

The cabaret singer in her sequin sheath which shrieks 'Look at me but don't touch me, I'm armour-plated' survives as an image of passive female sexuality, the princesse lointaine (or, rather, the putain lointaine). (p.89)

projected out of their own hearts upon her image and so had wept for themselves, though they imagined they wept for Tristessa, and, in this way, had contrived to deposit all the burdens of their hearts upon the frail shoulders of the tragedy queen. (p.122)

What constitutes this sense of self in which the audience are confirmed by identifying with a purely ideological construct? First, each member of the audience is confirmed in a dominant relation to Tristessa. Since the fantasy world is totally artificial it therefore has no place for the non-artificial. The audience have to choose either the fantasy world or the 'real' world; there is no compromise position in between. Hence, by suspending disbelief, they choose to enter the world of fantasy. Paradoxically, the audience choose to allow themselves to be dominated, swept away, only because they know that they are ultimately dominant, and can step out of the fantasy into the 'real' world at any moment.²⁵ The viewer therefore feels in control, s/he is the puppet-master, and Tristessa fills a passive role, that of the marionette.

Second, but closely related to my first point, the audience is manoeuvred into the position of the male gaze. Just as Tristessa's body is shown to be pure fantasy, so the body of the viewer, in relation to Tristessa, is also abstracted and coded as totally artificial. No matter the biological sex of the member of the audience, in relation to Tristessa, the embodiment of Woman, all members of the

²⁵ Michael Ignatieff, in his Observer Obituary for Greta Garbo, comments that 'men could dream of pursuing her without embarrassment or humiliation, since by definition they could not possess her.'

audience are constructed as instances of an equally mythical 'Man.' Contemporary film theory, especially with regard to the classic Hollywood movies of the 1930's and 1940's--` of which Tristessa's movies are supposed to be an example--has made this point forcefully. Annette Kuhn claims, for example:

To possess a woman's sexuality is to possess the woman; to possess the image of a woman's sexuality is, however mass-produced the image, also in some way to possess, to maintain a degree of control over, women in general. In this situation the female spectator of images of women has until recently been faced with a single option--to identify with the male in the spectator and to see woman, to see herself, as an object of desire.²⁶

By identifying with Tristessa each member of the audience reinscribes and reinforces the ideological codes which construct gender stereotypes. These codes, I shall argue, are not brought to consciousness by classic Hollywood movies; therefore what appears to be a cathartic process of identification and self-knowledge only serves to strengthen the ideological structures within which it is constructed.

What I have referred to as the 'cathartic' qualities of Tristessa's films, Lyotard would label 'therapeutic' (The Postmodern Condition, p.74). Lyotard subsequently refers to purely artificial ideological constructs, those which represent the most complete submission to convention, as 'pornographic':

²⁶ Annette Kuhn, The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p.11.

Those who refuse to reexamine the rules of art pursue successful careers in mass conformism by communicating, by means of the 'correct rules,' the endemic desire for reality with objects and situations capable of gratifying it. Pornography is the use of photography and film to such an end. (The Postmodern Condition, p.75)

The Passion's descriptions of how Tristessa's Hollywood films function also describe how pornography, in the usual sense of the word, functions. (Lyotard's broad definition of 'pornography' would include within its parameters the more commonly accepted sense of the word). Pornography, like Tristessa's films, assumes a male reader, or situates the reader in the position of the male gaze. Similarly, both pornography and classic Hollywood films rely upon purely artificial images, and on the acknowledgement that these images are artificial. This acknowledgement of artificiality, once again, both frustrates and yet facilitates the fantasy process. First, it appears to frustrate, or prevent satisfaction because, as Carter maintains in The Sadeian Woman, 'however much he [the reader/viewer] wants to fuck the willing women or men in his story, he cannot do so but must be content with some form of substitute activity' (p.14). That is, Carter argues, the limitations of both pornography and the film are signalled if the viewer/reader is sexually aroused, since he is therefore reminded of his own physical body which cannot be satisfied by interacting with the fantasy body. Carter writes in The Sadeian Woman:

In pornographic literature, the text has a gap left in it on purpose so that the reader may, in imagination, step inside it. But the activity

the text describes, into which the reader enters, is not a whole world into which the reader is absorbed and, as they say, 'taken out of himself'. It is one basic activity extracted from the world in its totality in such a way that the text constantly reminds the reader of his own troubling self, his own reality. (p.14)

The Passion suggests this interpretation when Evelyn refers to Tristessa as the 'most haunting of paradoxes, that recipe for perennial dissatisfaction' (p.6).

However, paradoxically, the novel appears to suggest that it is these very limitations of fantasy experience which encourage the viewer/reader to suspend disbelief, and which therefore facilitate a satisfying fantasy experience. This recalls Walser, the sceptical reporter in Nights at the Circus, who

was astonished to discover that it was the limitations of [Fevvers's] act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable--that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief. (p.17)

Similarly, Evelyn, at the opening of The Passion, comments upon the bad quality of the film he is watching, but also explains (addressing Tristessa) that this film, which constantly announces itself as old film, makes Tristessa more convincing:

The film stock was old and scratched, as if the desolating passage of time were made visible in the rain upon the screen, audible in the worn stuttering of the sound track, yet these erosions of temporality only enhanced your luminous presence since they made it all the more forlorn, the more precarious your specious triumph over time. (p.5)

Rather than exposing the codes which construct the viewer/reader's fantasy experience, then, the limitations encourage the 'substitute activity,' or masturbatory

fantasy. (In some ways this activity may be thought of as superior to intercourse since it has none of the limitations or threats of the real, that is, a woman's body with its own specificity. Annette Kuhn writes:

The spectator's fantasy is given free rein: in one sense, there is no risk of disappointment--he is quite safe because it is only a picture and the woman in it will never, in real life, turn him down or make demands which he cannot satisfy. (The Power of the Image, p.42))

That is, by making the viewer/reader aware of the physical reality of his body and hence signalling the fantasy as fantasy, the film or text only reinforces the already acknowledged artificiality of the fantasy process.

My interpretation of The Passion, therefore, to some extent contradicts Carter's argument in The Sadeian Woman, where she claims that the desires of the reader of pornography 'are short-circuited by the fantastic nature of the gratification promised by the text, which denies to flesh all its intransigence' (p.15). Carter also, and contradictorily, argues that pornography functions as a 'safety valve' (The Sadeian Woman, p.19), and it is this function which the experience of Tristessa's films fulfil so perfectly. Indeed, The Passion appears to me to argue that satisfaction and dissatisfaction produced by film or pornography are intimately related, since if it weren't for the dissatisfaction produced by the fact that physical intercourse cannot take place, there would be no possibility of satisfaction from the masturbatory fantasy.

Hence, Tristessa's films and pornography do offer a 'whole world into which the reader is absorbed, and ... "taken out of himself,"' since they do not signal any self-conscious awareness of the codes from which they, and their audience, are constructed. The masturbatory experience is totally self-centred, and, since it does not have to take into account the 'otherness' of the other, it goes uninterrupted, and is completely satisfying (hence its 'therapeutic' value). Tristessa represents such a masturbatory fantasy: she has none of the specificity of a real woman, since she is a passive image, and hence poses no threat to the fulfilment of the fantasy, and to the reinscription of the myth of Woman. Tristessa's films, then, like pornography, serve 'to reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas' (The Sadeian Woman, p.18) in patriarchal society. I would also argue that in The Passion Carter does not privilege pornographic representation over other forms of sexual representation; rather, I would agree with Annette Kuhn when she argues:

A deconstruction of pornography ... insists that pornography is not after all special, is not a privileged order of representation; that it shares many of its modes of address, many of its codes and conventions, with representations which are not looked upon as a 'problem' in the way pornography is. (The Power of the Image, p.22)

The Passion suggests that some other forms, in this case Hollywood movies but by implication all forms of mass media productions which conform totally to stereotypes,

may actually, because of their ubiquitousness and seeming ordinariness, be more dangerous than pornography.

III

The Passion also dramatises the possibility of using the power of the codes which construct gender against themselves, if the distinction between fact and fiction were to be dissolved or shown to be untenable. Zero, for example, believes that during 'a revival of Emma Bovary,'²⁷ Tristessa was able to function independently of her fantasy world, and intervene in the 'real' world with

²⁷ This is another example of the self-consciousness of Carter's writing, where intertextual elements reflect the issues discussed in the text: Flaubert's Emma Bovary is a novel concerned with a fantasising woman; it demonstrates what happens when the distinction between fact and fantasy breaks down.

The Passion might be read as a commentary upon the similar critical responses to the novel form in the late eighteenth century and to Hollywood films in the twentieth century, specifically as they affect a predominantly female audience. Terry Lovell in Consuming Fiction (London: Verso, 1987), has compared the two, claiming that during the period 1790 to 1820:

The literary credentials of the novel were at their lowest point.... The moral panic it occasioned in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was merely the first of a series which occurred whenever a new cultural commodity made its debut. It was repeated in the twentieth century over cinema and television, both of which were attacked as culturally debased and as tending to corrupt. (p.8)

her 'real' body.²⁸ Zero believes that, in doing so, she 'blasted his seed,' rendering him sterile:

Tristessa's eyes, eyes of a stag about to be ghalloched, had fixed directly upon his and held them.... He'd felt a sudden, sharp, searing pain in his balls. With visionary certainty, he'd known the cause of his sterility. (p.104)

The distinction between fact and fantasy is dissolved in Zero's imagination²⁹ and the fantasy is no longer contained safely within the world upon the screen. Zero is unable to distinguish between fact and fantasy because he is not a typical but an exceptional member of the audience: he comprises the complete repertoire of the codes which define the myth of Man. Tristessa, then, is his double, she is the Femininity incarnate to his 'Masculinity incarnate' (p.104), and, like The Count and the black pimp in The Infernal Desire Machines, one is terrorised by the other: in this case Zero is powerfully

²⁸ Zero associates Tristessa with another female stereotype, that of the witch or sorceress who can cast a spell over men. Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, writes, 'Woman is dedicated to magic. Alain said that magic is spirit drooping [sic] down among things; an action is magical when, instead of being produced by an agent, it emanates from something passive' (p.196).

Marjorie Rosen, in Popcorn Venus, p.169, writes 'On screen, the most passive women of all cast shadows as mythological Circes. Garbo and Dietrich.'

²⁹ See also the figure of the Shaman in Nights at the Circus, who 'made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing. It could be said that, for all the peoples of his region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism' (p.260).

drawn toward Tristessa and yet repelled.³⁰ Michael Ignatieff, in his obituary on Greta Garbo, claims that 'Fans secretly despise the thing they adore, for the very fact that it prostitutes itself to their admiration,' and Zero's fascination with/hatred of Tristessa seems to me to present this fan-idol relationship taken to extreme. Zero, therefore, does not suspend disbelief in Tristessa since there is no element of disbelief in his relationship to the fantasy: he believes that the film image of Tristessa has an independent, 'real' existence. Zero is threatened by Tristessa, and similarly, his suspicions are aroused by Eve, who not only has a perfect body, but also 'began to behave too much like a woman' (p.101). Neither of these powerful, apparently perfect examples of Woman, reflect his own sense of a dominant self. Zero worries that Eve 'might be too much of a woman for him,' and he calls Tristessa 'Queen of Dykes' (p.101).³¹ In this way,

³⁰ Doubles are a recurrent motif throughout Carter's work. Paulina Palmer, for example, in 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight,' Women Reading Women's Writing, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp.179-205, (pp.184-85), points out the way in which the many doubles in The Magic Toyshop challenge the notion of unified character.

³¹ This is not only true for gender relations: see for instance the baby in The Infernal Desire Machines, whose smile was "'too lifelike"' (p.19). Elaine Jordan, in 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions,' in Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction, edited by Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp.19-40 (p.32), points out the importance to The Infernal Desire Machines of Freud's meditation on 'The Uncanny' provoked by E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman,' both of which focus on the suspicion of whatever is too lifelike. The idea recurs again in Nights at the Circus to account for Walser's reaction to Fevvers's trapeze act:

the novel makes clear that the convention is that the convention of Woman should not be perfectly realised in the 'real' world. Built into the myth of Woman is a rule that the role models the images of Women portray should be unrealisable; it is the very impossibility of conforming to the so-called 'ideal' which keeps women in their oppressed place. Tristessa does epitomize the very myth of Woman, but appears to be safely contained within the fantasy world of film, over which the audience assume control. In other words, so long as the distinction between fantasy and fact is maintained, however powerful or perfect Tristessa appears, she always assumes a passive role. In this way Hollywood films pretend to offer women power but keep control over this power. When the distinction between the fantasy world and the 'real' world is put in question, however, the power of the stereotype Woman poses a threat to the very structures within which it is constructed. Hence, Zero is not confirmed in a dominant role by his relationship to Tristessa, and he does not see himself reflected as Man, since, in his imagination, she has escaped the safe confines of the screen.

In his red-plush press box, watching her through his opera-glasses, 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 over-literal winged barmaid before him. 'She tries too damn hard,' he scribbled. (pp.15-16)

IV

Sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations. (The Sadeian Woman, p.20)

In its portrayal of Evelyn's relationship with Leilah The Passion extends the usual sense of pornography to show how pornographic codes structure a particular sexual relationship in the world portrayed by the text. Carter takes on the role of what, in The Sadeian Woman, she has called a 'moral pornographer,' who, amongst other things, uses 'pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes' (The Sadeian Woman, p.19). Hence, Leilah and Evelyn's relationship can be read as a fictionalised version of her theoretical argument:

When pornography abandons its quality of existential solitude and moves out of the kitsch area of timeless, placeless fantasy and into the real world, then it loses its function of safety valve. It begins to comment upon real relations in the real world. Therefore, the more pornographic writing acquires the techniques of real literature, of real art, the more subversive it is likely to be in that the more likely it is to affect the reader's perceptions of the world. (The Sadeian Woman, p.19)³²

The Passion uses Evelyn and Leilah's relationship to show how the unchallenged ideological codes which are posited

32 Paulina Palmer, in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1989), suggests that Margaret Atwood's Bodily Harm (1981) (London: Virago, 1983) adopts a similar strategy. Atwood's heroine Rennie is exposed to a collection of sadistic pornography, and later in the novel, 'comes to perceive its applicability to herself' (Palmer, p.90).

and reinforced by Evelyn's Hollywood Cinema experience carry over into his 'real' relationships, and affect the way Evelyn reads women and himself. In doing so, the novel comments upon more general social relations.

Evelyn and Leilah's relationship is described in pornographic terms. Their relationship in the world created by the fiction is therefore mirrored by the reader and text relationship, since readers, like the audience of one of Tristessa's movies, are invited to suspend disbelief and enter a fantasy world of what has been characterised, by several critics, as pornographic fiction, always bearing in mind, of course, that they can step back into what appears to be a 'real' world outside the text, at any point.

First, however, it is important to point out the controversy caused by Carter's use of pornography in her writing, and to put this into the context of a much broader feminist debate over the issue of pornography. Pornography has recently been accorded a privileged role in feminist debates about women's oppression, but, as Michele Grossman comments, it 'has more often served to deepen rather than heal the existing rifts between feminists committed to theorising the complexities of gender and sexuality.'³³ Grossman's article takes much of its evidence from a volume called Caught Looking:

³³ Michele Grossman, "'Born to Bleed": Myth, Pornography and Romance in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber,"' in The Minnesota Review, 30/31 (Spring 1988), 148-60 (p.150).

Feminism, Pornography and Censorship,³⁴ which was compiled by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (F.A.C.T.). This is a book which combines a series of feminist essays on pornography with a collection of explicit visual imagery, and which itself represents a challenge to potential censors. It provides, Grossman explains, 'compelling evidence of the lack of consensus among contemporary radical feminists on the vexing question of whether pornography can and should be produced, consumed and enjoyed by women' ('"Born to Bleed,"' p.150). Perhaps one of the first, and certainly one of the most influential, books to use overt pornographic quotations 'to demonstrate the fascist potential of heterosexual relations'³⁵ was Kate Millet's Sexual Politics. Millet, like Carter, uses pornography to exemplify the sheer power of gender stereotypes.

The pornographic elements in Carter's work, as Gina Wisker has pointed out, cannot be ignored, since they are 'so excessive, so foregrounded' ("Winged Women and Werewolves," p.97). Indeed, much of the criticism of Carter's work available to date discusses this issue. Most, though not all, of the articles refer specifically to Carter's rewriting of fairy tales in The Bloody

³⁴ Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1988).

³⁵ Lynne Pearce, 'Sexual Politics,' in Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading Sara Mills, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spaul and Elaine Millard (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.18. The whole chapter assesses Millet's influence upon the feminist movement, pp.15-50.

Chamber; they also, however, rely heavily on Carter's theoretical writings in The Sadeian Woman, and are often equally applicable to The Passion. The critics who champion Carter's use of pornography claim, as she does, that it forms a vital part of what she has called a demythologising process: Gina Wisker, for example, defends Carter's strategy, arguing that its 'usage aids the exposé of pornography which lies behind cultural and social myths' ("Winged Women and Werewolves," p.97). Carter has written that 'Pornography, like marriage and the fictions of romantic love, assists the process of false universalising' (The Sadeian Woman, p.12), and Michele Grossman, also relying upon the figure of marriage, maintains that Carter's texts, whilst not denying or underestimating the potency and pleasure of both myth and pornography, 'embody Jane Gallop's principle of feminist "infidelity": "Infidelity is not outside the system of marriage, the symbolic patriarchy, but hollows it out, ruins it, from within"' ("Born to Bleed," p.153).

There is no doubt, however, that Carter's use of pornography is deeply disturbing, and many commentators find it too dangerous a tool. Annette Kuhn explains some of the problems:

The capacity of pornography to provoke gut reactions--of distaste, horror, sexual arousal, fear--makes it peculiarly difficult to deal with analytically. In the first place, the intellectual distance necessary for analysis becomes hard to sustain: and also feminist (and indeed any other) politics around pornography

tend to acquire a degree of emotionalism that can make the enterprise quite explosive. Any feminist who ventures to write about pornography puts herself in an exposed position, therefore. (The Power of the Image, p.21)

The argument levelled against Carter's use of pornography resembles that raised by Denise Riley with regard to the definition of the category of 'Women,' that any use of pornography is necessarily an acknowledgement, which serves, 'maliciously, not to undo it but to underwrite it' ('Am I That Name?' p.112). Patricia Duncker opened the debate in 1984 with an astute, elegant, highly critical, and now much quoted article, 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers.'³⁶ Duncker's argument focuses primarily on Carter's attempts 'to extract the latent content from the traditional [fairy] tales, and use it as the beginnings of new stories'³⁷ in The Bloody Chamber. Some of her comments about pornography are equally applicable to The Passion, and at the opening of her article she summarises the novel and cites it, along with The Sadeian Woman, as a precursor of The Bloody Chamber. Duncker maintains that Carter's use of pornography serves only to reinforce rather than challenge the 'realities of male desire, aggression, [and] force' and the complementary 'reality of women, [as] compliant and submissive' ('Re-imagining the Fairy Tales,

³⁶ Patricia Duncker, 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers,' in Literature and History, 10:1 (Spring 1984), 3-14.

³⁷ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen, 1985), p.84.

p.8). Perhaps the most powerful and controversial assertion in the article is that Carter's heroines, particularly those in the stories 'The Company of Wolves,' and 'The Tiger's Bride,' portray, 'beautifully packaged and unveiled ... the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography' (p.7). This argument has been taken up by other critics with regard to all of Carter's fiction. Robert Clark's argument, in 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' is premised upon the notion that the ideological power of pornography is 'infinitely greater than the power of the individual to overcome it,' claiming, between parentheses, that 'The noose cannot be used to abolish death by hanging.'³⁸ Clark suggests that 'critical pornography' does not simply reinforce the deeply sexist codes which it propagates, but also reinscribes the myth which promotes sexuality to

the acme of pleasure and origin of authentic significance, while surrounding the experience with limits and prohibitions, the purpose of which is to prevent the realization that without prohibition the prohibited is insignificant.
('Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' p.153)

Avis Lewallen also believes that Carter (and, interestingly, the anti-pornographer Andrea Dworkin, who might be thought of as Carter's antithesis) mistakenly privileges one aspect of sexual representation. Lewallen maintains:

³⁸ Robert Clark, 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' in Women's Studies--An Interdisciplinary Journal, 14, no.2 (1987), 147-61 (p.153).

I would not argue that pornographic representation is not important, but would say it must be placed within the context of all forms of sexual representation. Some of these forms such as advertisements which utilize pornographic images, may, by the very fact of their seeming 'naturalness,' be more pernicious.³⁹

I have already shown, of course, how The Passion exposes Hollywood film as just such a powerful form of 'pornography.'⁴⁰ Lewallen reiterates Duncker's arguments, claiming that Carter fails to escape the binary oppositions which she uses but condemns, particularly the 'Sadeian framework' of 'fuck or be fucked,' but also maintains that, while finding Carter's 'ultimate position ... politically untenable,' she feels that Duncker has overlooked Carter's irony 'which both acknowledges patriarchal structure and provides a form of critique against it' ('Wayward Girls but Wicked Women?' p.149 and p.147 respectively).

Several critics also raise another interesting point regarding the dangers inherent in the use of pornographic representations. Paulina Palmer claims that by making the female heroes of The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains victims of sexual harassment and rape, Carter

runs the risk of tainting her fiction with the attitudes associated with popular genres which exploit the topic of sex and violence for the purpose of titillation, reproducing the

³⁹ Avis Lewallen, 'Wayward Girls but Wicked Women? Female Sexuality in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber,' in Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in film and Literature, edited by Gary Day and Clive Bloom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp.144-58 (p.145).

⁴⁰ See p.229 above.

chauvinistic cliché that female pleasure is dependent upon submission and victimisation. ('From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman,' p.188, my emphasis)

Clark compares the effect of Carter's reiteration and privileging of pornographic models to 'the deep logic of a society that makes largely useless commodities appear desirable by first enticing and then restricting access to them' ('Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' p.153). And Lewallen objects to the packaging of the collection of short stories, Wayward Girls and Wicked Women, where she claims that Carter's name, as editor, in league with a sexy cover picture, are part of the seductive, and deceptive, marketing practice which 'signify sexuality as the subject under scrutiny.'

It is the cover, in what it reveals about the marketing practices of a feminist publishing house in relation to the supposed expectations of its readership, that is especially interesting. Sexy covers and titles sell books, even to women. ('Wayward Girls but Wicked Women?' p.144)⁴¹

Similar objections were raised to the hard cover British edition of Black Venus which features a miniature painting of a nude, mounted as a pendant, with the glass smashed, lying upon black velvet. And the author herself claims to have been offended by the cover of the most recent

⁴¹ Nicci Gerrard, in Into the Mainstream (London: Pandora, 1989), stresses the importance of the image of both author and book in today's market:

Book design, promotion and publicity no longer simply announce the book; they sell it. Most feminist presses have recently been as effective as their mainstream competitors at carefully creating the image that will sell the book. (p.40)

American edition of The Sadeian Woman (Pantheon), which features a masked woman in a black corset, with her nipples just in view. She is carrying a whip and wearing black high-button boots.⁴² Carter has also commented, however, even 'sexy covers' and packaging has failed to sell many books: 'Novels of mine would resurrect themselves with naked women and tentacular monsters on the cover, but that didn't do the trick.'⁴³ To use pornographic models, then, even in the demythologising business, is a dangerous business, where writers become known for the possible titillation which their work may provide,⁴⁴ and Carter risks being dubbed, as she was by Amanda Sebastyen in a review of the Institute of Contemporary Arts 1987 exhibition, 'the high priestess of postgraduate porn.'⁴⁵

⁴² In an interview with John Engstrom in The Boston Globe, 28 October 1988, p.62, Carter is reported as saying, 'When I saw that cover I thought, "So much for the integrity of the American left."'

⁴³ Angela Carter, '"Fools are my theme, Let satire be my song,"' Vector, 109 (1982), 26-36 (p.29).

⁴⁴ Interestingly, one of the early covers of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex featured a nude woman, and may well have been purchased by many readers because of its provocative packaging. Similarly, Lynne Pearce, in her chapter, 'Sexual Politics,' in Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading, suggests that the quotation of some of the most pornographic scenes from the work of Henry Miller and Norman Mailer in Kate Millet's book Sexual Politics 'could also have had something to do with the book's instant popular recognition' (p.18).

⁴⁵ 'The Mannerist Marketplace,' in New Socialist (March 1987), 34-39 (p.38).

The risk Carter takes by using pornography, then, is great, but if the ideological codes which construct the social myths of Woman and Man are brought to consciousness and challenged, then Carter will have succeeded in harnessing not only the power of pornography, but also the equally impressive power of the anti-pornographers, in her 'demythologising business' ('Notes from the Front Line,' p.71).

The character Leilah represents an exploration of Woman as an available object of male desire. Evelyn assumes that he literally acts out his perfect erotic fantasy and finds sexual fulfilment with a prostitute called Leilah, but the text shows that the name Leilah, like the name Tristessa, does not name a person but a construction of Evelyn's desire. For Evelyn, Leilah represents Woman as cultural commodity, Woman as 'consumable' (therefore, less than human), both in the sense of available for sale and being available to eat: what Evelyn first notices, in the drug-store, are her 'tense and resilient legs' which he compares 'the legs of racehorses in the stable' (p.19), and later he describes how 'she systematically carnalised herself and became dressed meat' (p.31).⁴⁶ Leilah represents Woman as sex

⁴⁶ Eve(lyn) refers to his/her own female body in similar terms: before s/he is forced into his/her marriage bed with Tristessa, s/he describes how 'Betty Boop and Emmeline took hold each one of my ankles and spread my legs wide, so that the moist, crimson velvet with which I had been scrupulously lined was exhibited to

object: she is a whore, 'the slut of Harlem' (p.175), but she also represents Woman as 'victim' (p.28). She is Woman as man's possession, 'Leilah, the night's gift ... the city's gift' (p.25), and she has been, Evelyn believes, 'doubly degraded, through her race and through her sex' (p.37).⁴⁷

The force of this particular stereotype is produced because Leilah fulfils the fantasy expectations of pornography: she represents Woman as glorified vagina. Commenting upon images of women in hard core pornography, Annette Kuhn explains:

The woman in the picture, says this type of pornography, is anonymous: or rather her identity resides in her sex--not in her clothes, nor in her face, nor indeed in any other part of her body. The vagina in the picture stands for the enigma of the feminine.... Pornography conflates femininity with femaleness, femaleness with female sexuality, and female sexuality with a particular part of the female anatomy. (The Power of the Image, p.39 and p.40)

Leilah is systematically reduced to her sexual function, and the novel dramatises the synecdochic process where the 'part,' the vagina, comes to represent her whole body. At the same time, Carter's text situates the reader in the

them all like meat' (pp.136-37). This is a recurrent image in Carter's work, see for example, one of Carter's versions of 'Beauty and The Beast,' 'The Tiger's Bride,' in The Bloody Chamber, where Beauty is described as 'the cold white meat of contract' (p.66). Carter describes her view of the differences between flesh and meat in detail, in The Sadeian Woman, pp.137-41.

⁴⁷ Carter uses the same words in The Sadeian Woman to describe a 1960's joke where God is revealed to be both female and black. Carter comments that 'the Supreme Being was doubly devalued, by virtue of Her sex and Her race' (p.111).

position of the male gaze, because we as readers witness Evelyn witnessing Leilah witnessing her transformation into a product of patriarchal society. The text offers only Evelyn's, the narrator's, point of view, which is that of the voyeur. The description functions like multiple reflections in Leilah's cracked mirror, where the mirror is patriarchy's, and therefore Evelyn's, text, and the text of The Passion functions as the reader's mirror:

To watch her dressing herself, putting on her public face, was to witness an inversion of the ritual disrobing to which she would later submit her body ... she watched me watching the assemblage of all the paraphernalia that only emphasised the black plush flanks and crimson slit beneath it. (p.30)⁴⁸

Leilah is also situated in the position of the male gaze, voyeuristically viewing herself being watched. She gradually puts herself together--disguises herself--into the image that the male gaze desires. She watches Evelyn watching her 'slip on another pair of the sequinned

⁴⁸ Carter's interest in mirror images, and the way figures, particularly women, see themselves reflected can be seen across her fiction. Carter has also written a small booklet introducing a collection of postcards of Frida Kahlo's work, and one of the obvious attractions of Kahlo for Carter is the way the artist repeatedly represents her own reflection in the many self-portraits. Kahlo appears to be the opposite of Leilah who sees herself as she thinks others see her: the artist see herself unmediated by anyone else's gaze. In Images of Frida Kahlo (London: Redstone, 1989), Carter writes:

I think it was the process of looking at herself that engaged her. Because the face in the self-portraits is not that of a woman looking at the person looking at the picture; she is not addressing us. It is the face of a woman looking at herself, subjecting herself to the most intense scrutiny, almost to an interrogation. (p.2)

knickers that function as no more than a decorative and inadequate parenthesis round [her] sex' (p.29), 'the assemblage of all the paraphernalia' that reduce her to an object: to the 'profane essence' of so-called Woman. The more clothes she puts on, Evelyn claims, the more she becomes this essence, an essence which is represented by the vagina--'the black plush flanks and crimson slit beneath' (p.30). Leilah's 'public face,' then, is in fact her pubic face.

It is clear from the above example, that Evelyn is not concerned with any sense of a 'real,' physical body. The myth of Woman that pornography iterates does not rely upon the force of the female body upon the imagination, but the force of the imagination upon the body. Hence the 'real' body disappears (or loses any reality it might have had) and becomes only something to serve male desire. But the myth still portrays the body as dominant, even though the body is overshadowed by the fantasy of the body. Evelyn, of course, is not aware of this, and believes that he possesses Leilah sexually, that is, that he possesses her body: when he first sees her in the drugstore, he claims, 'As soon as I saw her, I was determined to have her' (p.19), and he subsequently believes that the city 'delivered' her to him for his 'pleasure' and his 'bane' (p.27), and even that she gave herself to him (p.26). However, he only appears to possess Leilah, because--since he never knows her--possession is impossible: 'I could hardly understand a word she said,' he declares, 'but I

was mad for her and threw myself upon her' (p.26). Eve(lyn), at the end of the novel, consciously acknowledges that this character, whom he called Leilah, could only have existed in his imagination: 'She can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the projection of the lusts and greed and self-loathing of a young man called Evelyn' (p.175). Hence, the name Leilah does not represent a physical body, but only Evelyn's masturbatory fantasy (which is also, ironically, how he sees himself when, later in the novel, Mother has transformed him into Eve: 'I had become my own masturbatory fantasy' (p.75)). Evelyn's particular fantasy has been generated by Tristessa's portrayal of Woman as victim: he remembers his sadistic reaction to her movies, recalling 'the twitch in [his] budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in [him]' (p.8). The vagina which Evelyn penetrates is therefore less a physical vagina than the product of his imagination, and the self-consciously literary and pornographic language confirms this: 'My full-fleshed and voracious beak tore open the poisoned wound of love between her thighs, suddenly, suddenly' (p.25).

Since Leilah represents Evelyn's masturbatory fantasy, which is totally narcissistic, and negates Leilah's specificity as a real woman, it takes no account of her 'otherness.' He believes, for example, that she is the 'born victim' (p.28) that he imagines her to be; that she is a toy with which he can play violent games, or a

pet which he can subject to punishment, which he can leave tied up all day long, and which fouls the bed (pp.27-8). Evelyn therefore believes that he can walk out on her at any point, just as he could walk out of a Tristessa movie. When he grows bored with his fantasy he assumes that he can dispose of it: 'Nothing was too low for me to stoop to if it meant I could get rid of her' (p.33). There is, then, no place within the fantasy for Leilah's idea of herself; she can only see herself in terms of his fantasy, a point which is underscored by the fact that we only know about her from Evelyn's viewpoint. That is, since she is situated in the position of the male gaze, his desire also appears to be her desire.⁴⁹ Evelyn's reading of how Leilah sees herself, then, is completely determined by the codes of pornography: she not only sees herself as a fragment of herself, but also reads this part of herself in specifically coded terms. Built into the myths of 'masculine' and 'feminine,' Carter maintains, in The Sadeian Woman, is the belief that 'Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but Zero [hence Carter's use of the name in The Passion], the sign for nothing, that

⁴⁹ Michele Grossman, in 'Born to Bleed,' comments on the ways in which The Bloody Chamber 'is in many ways an exploratory challenge to a feminist cultural imagination that often denies or disguises complicity in being victimised by its contradictory desires' (p.148); this comment, I believe, is equally applicable to The Passion. The problem of women's 'willing' submission to male dominance is the subject of a brilliant book by Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and The Problems of Domination (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). It is also the theme of Jenny Diski's novel Nothing Natural (1986) (London: Minerva, 1990).

only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning' (p.4). The Passion dramatises the codes which structure the stereotype. Evelyn casts Leilah as his negative, his 'other': she is, he informs us, 'a perfect woman; [who] like the moon ... only gave reflected light' (p.34). Her negativity is symbolised by her skin colour and her fragmented body: 'She was black as my shadow and I made her lie on her back and parted her legs like a doctor in order to examine more closely the exquisite negative of her sex' (p.27).⁵⁰ Leilah is portrayed in binary opposition with the male public for whom she strips and performs (including Evelyn), and therefore she acts out the role she believes they expect her to play. Her role is one which Luce Irigaray would identify as a 'masquerade,' it is 'what women do ... in

⁵⁰ This could be described as a fictional dramatisation of some of the theories of French feminists, particularly Luce Irigaray, who see Woman as man's 'other,' or mirror image. Toril Moi summarising Irigaray in Sexual/Textual Politics (London: Methuen, 1985), says:

The woman, for Freud as for other Western philosophers, becomes a mirror for his own masculinity. Irigaray concludes that in our society representation, and therefore also social and cultural structures, are productions of what she sees as a fundamental hom(m)osexualité. The pun in French is on homo ('same') and homme ('man'): the male desire for the same. (p.135)

Paulina Palmer, in Contemporary Women's Fiction, quoting Luce Irigaray, describes femininity as 'a type of masquerade with woman trapped in the role of mimic "acting out man's contraphobic projects, projections and productions of her desire"' (p.16) (Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman translated by Gillian C. Gill (Cornell University Press, 1985), p.53.).

order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up theirs.⁵¹ She, like Zero's wives in this novel, believes in the role cast for her, since her sense of self is regulated totally by the male gaze. Evelyn therefore believes that she believes that, without men to define her, she is nothing, the zero which her sex denotes, and she therefore sees her self-value reflected in terms of the men in her life. This self-value takes the form of Evelyn's love--'She had mimicked me, she had become the thing I wanted of her, so that she could make me love her' (p.34)--and the economic gain in the form of 'a great many dollars tucked in the top of her stocking' (p.30), which she collects from her public performance. In Evelyn's eyes, then, Leilah becomes the object of patriarchal desire (which, according to patriarchal convention, is also her desire): she becomes what she performs, which is a mirror of Evelyn's illusions, casting back upon him his best images of himself.

What, then, constitutes Evelyn's best image of himself? Evelyn enters into commerce with Leilah, just as Donally enters into commerce with the Barbarians in Heroes and Villains, and, I suggest, the reader with the text, in order to confirm his sense of self, and his sense of what

⁵¹ Luce Irigaray, 'Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un' (Paris: Minuit 1977), p.131. Quoted by Stephen Heath in 'Joan Riviere and the masquerade,' in Formations of Fantasy, edited by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986) pp.45-61 (p.54).

a man 'should be.' For Evelyn, Leilah represents Woman as commodity, and she confirms his position as socially dominant consumer.⁵² Evelyn's reading of Leilah as a glorified vagina consequently, and reassuringly, confirms him as glorified 'cock': 'She dropped her fur on the floor, I stripped, both our breathing was clamorous. All my existence was now gone away into my tumescence; I was nothing but cock' (p.25). Evelyn's 'best' image of himself, therefore, takes the form of a dominant, stereotypical male; it confirms Evelyn as the master in a sadistic, master/slave relationship, which his early exposure to Tristessa's movies has taught him is the 'normal' male condition.

Evelyn suspends disbelief in the fantasy Leilah of his imagination, and the division between his belief and yet disbelief is literalised in the text by his portrayal of two Leilahs: 'The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah' (p.28). Once again, Evelyn displays the narcissism of his fantasy: any individual specificity which Leilah may have represented is annulled by Leilah-as-fantasy--'she brought

52 In The Sadeian Woman Carter describes pornography as that which 'turns the flesh into word' (p.13); this link between the flesh and words highlights another link, between literature and meat--since both are consumables. Carter claims that 'the reader, the consumer, enters the picture; reflecting the social dominance which affords him the opportunity to purchase the flesh of other people as if it were meat' (p.14).

into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection' (p.28).

Evelyn, of course, only ever sees one of himself; the illusion created by the male gaze is necessarily an illusion of oneness, because the illusion is what man wants to see in order to read and know himself. The artificial Leilah so completely fulfils Evelyn's fantasy, and fulfils the stereotype, that, by identifying with her, he appears to know both her and know himself. That is, he sees himself reflected in Leilah, as whole, and unique, independent of history, social construction and ideology: 'So, together, we entered the same reverie, the self-created, self-perpetuating, solipsistic world of the woman watching herself being watched in a mirror' (p.30). Evelyn and Leilah appear to exist in a fantasy world cut off from 'reality,'⁵³ which is dramatised by Evelyn's descriptions of their immunity from the violence of New York:

But such was the pentacle in which she walked that nobody seemed able to see her but I and, as if I, too, had become part of her miracle, I walked unmolested, also, although the dark

⁵³ Once again, Evelyn and Leilah's relationship appears to be a dramatised version of a theory she puts forward in The Sadeian Woman, where she claims that:

The pornographer, in spite of himself, becomes a metaphysician when he states that the friction of the penis in orifice is the supreme matter of the world, for which the world is well lost; as he says so, the world vanishes. (p.16)

pageant of the night unrolled around me in the usual fashion. (p.22)⁵⁴

The immunity comes to a sudden end once the relationship is over, and as Evelyn tries to leave Manhattan, less than fifty yards from the car park, he 'was set upon by young blacks' (p.37). Evelyn experiences a similarly narcissistic moment of complete artifice in his relationship with Tristessa:

For the most fleeting instant, this ghostly and magnetic woman challenges me in the most overt and explicit manner. The abyss on which her eyes open, ah! it is the abyss of myself, of emptiness, of inward void. I, she, we are outside history. We are beings without a history, we are mysteriously twinned by our synthetic life. (p.125)

Ironically, of course, Evelyn is precisely not outside ideology or history since he too is only a reaffirmation of culture and stereotypes. Like Tristessa's audience, Evelyn has entered into his own fantasy world, in which he is a totally artificial ideological construction and not individual at all. Importantly, Carter's novel shows that in the process of reducing Leilah to her sexual function, Evelyn reduces himself, and both become mythic abstractions. Carter comments in The Sadeian Woman:

The nature of the individual is not resolved into but is ignored by these archetypes [that is, mythic Man and Woman], since the function of the archetype is to diminish the unique 'I' in favour of a collective, sexed being which cannot, by reason of its very nature, exist as

⁵⁴ This recalls Marianne in the opening chapter of Heroes and Villains, who walks among the ruins outside the Professor's barricades but remains unmolested by the Outpeople. She, like Evelyn, appears to have no notion of Otherness, except as the Professors have constructed it in order to confirm their own unique identity.

such because an archetype is only an image that has got too big for its boots and bears, a fantasy relation to reality. (p.6)

(Carter uses the word 'archetype' in a way that shows that it is not universal, but arises from specific social conjunctions.) The Passion shows how such apparent universals function, but simultaneously exposes them as cultural constructions.

The Passion therefore dramatises the severe limitations of both gender stereotypes. Evelyn is trapped by his own reading of Leilah; and ironically, Evelyn comments, 'I was lost the moment I saw her' (p.19). He thinks of himself as the hunter, stalking his prey in his fantasy; yet he realises that the binary opposition which structures their relationship is reversible, and he becomes her prey: 'I dropped down upon her like, I suppose, a bird of prey, although my prey, throughout the pursuit, had played the hunter' (p.25). Even the reversibility of the hunter/hunted relationship, however, is written into the stereotype, so that Evelyn can blame Leilah for seducing him, in order to maintain the position of power. It does not, therefore, challenge the status quo.

The novel is also self-consciously commenting upon the dangers of readers reading and reproducing the status quo, where, by identifying with particular characters, they may also find themselves reduced to sexual stereotypes: trapped in their own illusion of what they

think they should be, or, as Cixous warns, 'locked up in the treadmill of reproduction' like a marionette ('The Character of 'Character,' p.387). The narrative in The Passion, by incorporating pornographic imagery to describe Evelyn's fantasy, might also be categorised as a masturbatory fantasy. It, too, announces itself as artificial: the devices of intertextuality, excessive use of adjectives and figures, and what Paulina Palmer has called the 'baroquely ornate passages describing the erotic "masquerades" Tristessa and Leilah perform, advertise the fictionality of the text' (Contemporary Women's Fiction, p.19). The problem and also the power of the pornographic elements in The Passion can be located in a double response to such writing. Does the reader have an erotic response to the images portrayed? Or, is the reader aware only of the stereotype as a stereotype. Carter argues in The Sadeian Woman that 'all art which contains elements of eroticism ... [is] writing that can "pull" a reader just as a woman "pulls" a man or a man "pulls" a woman' (p.17). The reader of The Passion, as already discussed, is often written into the position of the male gaze, a voyeuristic position, by the male narrator.⁵⁵ This single point of view reflects the

⁵⁵ This is both reinforced and complicated when Evelyn's narrative addresses Tristessa directly, as it does at the opening of the novel, and continues to do, intermittently, throughout. Readers may feel that they are sucked into the Evelyn/Tristessa fantasy, or perhaps that they are being given access to a private correspondence. This narrative technique might function to remind readers of the fictionality of the text, or

narcissistic fantasy which structures the narrative. (Later in the novel, of course, the reader learns that what at first appears to be a male narrator, narrating his story in retrospect, may indeed be female, or hermaphroditic. This obviously undermines the notion of the male gaze and the problematises the novel's use of so-called pornographic elements; see Chapter 5 for further discussion of this issue.) The novel, then, appears to exploit the seductive capabilities of pornography, just as it uses some of the illusion-creating techniques traditionally associated with the nineteenth-century 'realist' novel (though the use of pornography is much more dangerous and disturbing). Hence, it might appear that to the degree that Leilah arouses the reader's erotic fantasies, she escapes representation (that is, she appears to be presented, unmediated, as an available female body). But, as we have seen in the examples of characters which appear to exist beyond the text, the most powerful representations are precisely those which do fulfil stereotypes, and hence reinforce the reader's sense of self. Evelyn is aroused by Leilah because she is artificial, and because she conforms to the conventions, and, similarly, the reader may find the description erotic for exactly the same reasons. In this way, Carter's text is mimicking the ways that pornographic texts work.

might, ironically, be part of the novel's seductive apparatus. The retrospective narrative, which appears to be dedicated to (indeed, speaks to) a transvestite (though, by desire, female) lover from the past, resembles that of The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman.

However, when Carter comments upon the seductive qualities of erotic art to 'pull' a reader, she continues: 'All such literature has the potential to force the reader to reassess his relation to his own sexuality' (The Sadeian Woman, p.17). The pornographic elements in The Passion could also have this double function: they could be used both to seduce the reader, but could simultaneously, and self-consciously, be used to make him/her aware of the process of seduction, and hence to announce the stereotype as a stereotype. An important difference, however, between the analysis of character, an analysis of pornography, and an analysis of how the codes which structure pornography affect real relationships, is how self-consciousness is signalled. It is possible to demystify character as a cultural construct by exposing it as artificial, but one of the dangers of working with pornography as a tool, as I showed by the analogy with Tristessa's films, is that it thrives on artificiality. To show that pornographic images are artificial constructions is only to reinforce them, just as the ideological codes which structure Hollywood film are not brought to consciousness by the knowledge that the characters in the film are not real. This also appears to be true of the last analysis in this chapter.

For example, to note the artificiality of Leilah's getting dressed-up, made-up, and constructing a disguise, might appear to suggest a destruction of the illusion of Woman as sex-object, but, since it is part of a

pornographic fantasy, it serves only as a recognition and reiteration of the stereotype. Leilah is shown to be a purely artificial construction acting out a role which Evelyn consciously describes as only 'a fiction of the erotic dream into which the mirror cast me' (p.30, my emphasis), but, once again, Woman as artificial is part of the stereotype. The mirror too, and the voyeur are integral parts of the convention. Annette Kuhn, commenting upon glamorous Hollywood film stars and contemporary cosmetic advertising, makes several points which are particularly appropriate to the image of Woman which Leilah represents:

A good deal of the groomed beauty of the women of the glamour portraits comes from the fact that they are 'made-up', in the immediate sense that cosmetics have been applied to their bodies in order to enhance their existing qualities. But they are also 'made-up' in the sense that the images, rather than the women, are put together, constructed, even fabricated or falsified in the sense that we might say a story is made up if it is a fiction.... [it] promotes the ideal woman as being put together, composed of surfaces and defined by appearance. It is here that the glamour tradition in all its manifestations may be seen to occupy a place dangerously close to another tradition of representation of women, from myth to fairytale to high art to pornography, in which they are stripped of will and autonomy. Woman is dehumanised by being represented as a kind of automaton, a 'living doll': The Sleeping Beauty, Coppélia, L'Histoire d'O, 'She's a real doll!' (The Power of the Image, pp.13-14)

This quotation also suggests ways in which Leilah resembles other characters across Carter's work, which are all linked together by the motif of the 'living doll,' the puppet, or what Paulina Palmer, (quoting Hélène Cixous)

has called the 'coded mannequin' (see 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman').

The use of pornographic codes to read a 'real' relationship--between Evelyn and Leilah--however, posits two levels of artifice: an acknowledged artifice which implies a hidden but available material body which is possessable; and an unacknowledged artifice, which relies upon the artificial nature of the body at stake in pornography, which is a product of fantasy. For example, Evelyn describes Leilah's transformation in the mirror as an acknowledged artifice, as if she were transforming herself from something 'natural' into something 'artificial.' But this very transformation is shown to be a totally coded process, which is all part of Evelyn's fantasy. Evelyn explains, 'The more clothed she became, the more vivid became my memory of her nakedness,' (p.30): nakedness, then, is not a physical nakedness, but a fantasised and artificial one. Hence, the text shows, but Evelyn is not made aware (unacknowledged artifice), that Leilah 'before' and Leilah 'after' are equally coded. It also shows that pornography relies upon the illusion of a distinction between art and nature. The rupture of pornographic codes takes place, and self-consciousness is signalled, at the point of difference between these two notions of the body. In other words, the rupture occurs when the unacknowledged artifice has to be acknowledged. In The Passion this is signalled by Leilah's pregnancy, abortion, and subsequent haemorrhage (pp.34-35), which

shatters the pornographic illusion of Woman as purely a sex-object. The available, consumable body, which Leilah represents to Evelyn, is a flesh and blood body: one which falls pregnant, and which undergoes a disastrous abortion. This flesh-and-blood body, however, is not non-coded, or essential, since in a different stereotype, Woman as mother, Leilah's pregnancy would serve only as a confirmation. The codes of pornography, however, have no place for this new stereotype, and hence the pregnant Leilah has no place in the world of Evelyn's fantasies: 'As soon as I knew she was carrying my child, any remaining desire for her vanished. She became only an embarrassment to me. She became a shocking inconvenience to me' (p.32). In this case, therefore, the pornographic stereotype is shattered because it has become self-contradictory.

It is in this way that The Passion attempts to denounce the codes which structure pornography as codes, and to rupture the process of seduction which it simultaneously encourages. To do this, however, The Passion must maintain a very delicate balance between the seductive and the disturbing qualities of its pornographic elements: where the possibility of seduction is continually posited, just as the possibility of a transcendent reading of character is posited, but the self-consciousness of the text prevents the seduction from taking place. Carter's use of pornography, therefore, may function as part of the demythologising process by

shocking readers into an awareness of the codes and conventions which do seduce, and exposing these codes as false universals. The pornographic elements in this novel may also make the reader aware of the codes which construct their own sexuality, and, by denouncing these codes as codes, open up possibilities for redefinition and change. For some readers and critics, however, as I have shown, this demythologising process fails to convince, and for them The Passion reads as a reactionary, indeed, dangerous text, where the pornographic elements serve only to reinforce the status quo. Making the distinction 'between a text which constitutes a serious consideration of the topic' of pornography and 'one that is an exercise in pornography' (Paulina Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.189) is clearly problematic; Carter's ambiguous work does not attempt to resolve this issue. The balance, as I have said, is a very delicate one, and, as Gina Wisker concludes, in 'Winged Women and Werewolves,' 'it is finally a complex problem of readership' (p.97).

The Passion, then, implies that sexual difference, like identity, is a totally coded, cultural construction; and that there is no essential womanliness outside these codes. Therefore, like Denise Riley in 'Am I That Name?' the novel follows a strategic politics and acts 'as if' the stereotype of Woman described an unchangeable reality (and the novel shows that the codes and conventions which structure sexual difference are a part of reality); but at

the same time shows how, precisely as a system of stereotypes, the reality is always changeable. The novel self-consciously relies upon reading conventions, such as those which govern pornography, the 'realist' novel, or classical Hollywood films, and attempts to make these conventions explicit as conventions, in order to demystify the false universals which govern sexual politics.

CHAPTER 5

THE LIBERATION OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT?--I:

'THE MAGIC TOYSHOP,' 'HEROES AND VILLAINS,' AND 'THE
PASSION OF NEW EVE'

The alchemists have a saying, 'Tertium non data': the third is not given. That is, the transformation from one element to another, from waste matter into best gold, is a process that cannot be documented. It is fully mysterious. No one really knows what effects the change. And so it is with the mind that moves from its prison to a vast plain without any movement at all. We can only guess at what happened.

Jeanette Winterson¹

¹ Sexing the Cherry (1989) (London: Vintage, 1990), p.131.

Angela Carter's fiction presents many central female characters. Perhaps the best known, certainly the best documented, are the heroines of the short stories in The Bloody Chamber, where Carter rewrites a number of fairy stories from a female perspective. In a later collection, Black Venus, she writes the lives of both fictional and historical heroines focusing on the (until now) silent women. The title story, for example, reconstructs the life of Jeanne Duval, Charles Baudelaire's 'Black Venus.' Clare Hanson neatly sums up this story's focus on Duval:

As a historical figure she is always defined against Baudelaire and subordinate to him. Carter attempts to reverse these priorities and places Jeanne at the centre of her story, as subject, while Baudelaire becomes Jeanne's object, viewed by her with affectionate derision.²

Carter has also edited two volumes of stories: the first, Wayward Girls and Wicked Women, is a collection of short stories by women, all of which focus on female characters who do not conform to patriarchal norms. The second, The Virago Book of Fairy Tales, her most recent book, published at the end of 1990, again focuses on female characters. In the introduction, Carter writes:

These stories have only one thing in common--they all centre around a female

² Clare Hanson, 'Each Other: Images of Otherness in the Short Fiction of Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys and Angela Carter,' in Journal of the Short Story in English, 10 (Spring 1988), 67-82 (p.78). Linda Hutcheon, in The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989), p.145, writes, 'The woman to whom history denied a voice is the subject of Carter's 'Black Venus'--as she was the object of Baudelaire's 'Black Venus' poems.'

protagonist; be she clever, or brave, or good, or silly, or cruel, or sinister, or awesomely unfortunate, she is centre stage, as large as life--sometimes ... larger. (The Virago Book of Fairy Tales, p.xiii)

Then there are, of course, the heroines of her novels, some of whom I will discuss in detail in this chapter. A question which this particular focus in Carter's work raises, and which is obviously of prime importance to a study of her work, is what constitutes a liberated female subject? Does such a thing exist to be portrayed? or how can it be constructed?

Many of Angela Carter's heroines are rebellious girls or women who challenge patriarchal notions of what Woman 'should be'; they are women "'who know about life"' (Wayward Girls and Wicked Women, p.xii).³ Several of these female characters have been labelled by critics as New Eve figures. This title seems appropriate since Carter's work is riddled with references to Christian mythology as she attempts to emphasize and at the same time challenge, by rewriting, the particular power of the Eve myth which patriarchal society uses to construct Woman.⁴ Angela Carter's New Eves all fall (some several

³ Carter is misquoting the final line of Luo Shu's story, 'Aunt Liu,' 'I believe she is living still and with all my heart I wish her well, for she understands life,' pp.328-34 (p.334).

⁴ The power of the Eve myth to shape contemporary culture is a concern in the work of many major feminist writers, for example, Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, translated by H. M. Parshley (1949) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp.112-13 and p.173; and Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1969) (London: Virago, 1977), p.52. John A. Philips, in Eve: The History of an Idea (San

times) but their Falls often appear to lead to better existences, outside the patriarchal confines of 'Paradise.' Instead of being expelled from their Fathers' houses, these Eves liberate themselves.

Carter must, of course, provide these Eves with God figures, representatives of patriarchy to struggle with and escape from. These characters take the form of particular kinds of villain--mad doctor/scientist/puppet master--for example, Uncle Philip in The Magic Toyshop, Donally in Heroes and Villains, Dr Hoffman and the Minister in The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, Zero in The Passion, the Shaman in Nights at the Circus. In the interview with John Haffenden, Carter claims:

My villains are usually mad scientists, but I really don't know why, since I've got nothing against science as such. The toy-maker, the puppet master, is the ideal villain...and the vicar in Heroes and Villains.⁵

Her work does not, of course, comment on science 'as such,' but the popular images of science. Each attempt by women to escape from these villains can be interpreted as

Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), writes that the myth of Eve

remains deeply imbedded in both male and female ideas about the nature and destiny of women, and the attitudes it has engendered are embodied in the psychology, laws, religious life, and social structures of the Western world--not to mention the most intimate of human activities. Eve is very much alive and every member of Western society is affected by her story. (p.172)

⁵ John Haffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen, 1985), p.95.

an attempt to flee from patriarchal 'paradise'; however, their escapes are seldom simply successful or celebratory experiences. What appears to be important, however, is the belief in the possibility of escape, and the process of liberation itself. This process is repeated over and over throughout all of Carter's fiction; and each attempt at liberation from a set of pre-established codes is necessarily complemented by the exposure and subversion of the patriarchal institutions the codes uphold.

I

Eve in The Passion is, of course, the most obvious example of a New Eve figure, though several of Carter's other heroines also fit the bill. In the interview with John Haffenden, for example, Carter points to Melanie in The Magic Toyshop, saying that Melanie and Finn, at the end of the novel, are 'escaping like Adam and Eve at the end of Paradise Lost.... two people alone, about to depart from a garden' (Novelists in Interview, p.80). It is important to note that Carter does not refer to rewriting the book of Genesis, but, rather, to source material which is already a displacement, that is, to what is already a rewriting, or a 'justification of the ways of God to man.'⁶ Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost, as Carter makes clear in the same interview, is a significant literary

⁶ Merritt Y. Hughes's introduction to John Milton's Paradise Lost (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p.xviii.

source for her work.⁷ Carter explains her attempt to portray her own interpretation of the 'Fortunate Fall':

I got it wrong, of course, because the theory of the Fortunate Fall has it that it was fortunate because it incurred the Crucifixion, an idea which I think only an unpleasant mind could have dreamt up. I took the Fortunate Fall as meaning that it was a good thing to get out of that place. (Novelists in Interview, p.80)⁸

The toyshop represents 'a secularized Eden' (Novelists in Interview, p.80) and Uncle Philip represents God the Father, an oppressive, misogynist ruler. Philip Flower sits at the table in 'patriarchal majesty,' drinking from 'his own, special, pint-size mug which had the word "Father" executed on it in rosebuds' (p.73); '"He can't abide a woman in trousers"' (p.62), and '"He likes, you know, silent women"' (p.63). At the end of the novel, when Philip returns home to find his wife and Francie in an incestuous embrace--'his wife in her brother's arms' (p.196)--he sets the whole building on fire. Melanie and Finn escape from Uncle Philip's rage and from the toyshop in which they have been imprisoned (Melanie, at this point, is wearing trousers). The novel, however, has very

⁷ In the Haffenden interview Carter also claims, 'If fairy tales are the fiction of the poor, then perhaps Paradise Lost is the folklore of the educated' (p.85).

⁸ In an interview with Carter, 'Myths and the Erotic,' in Women's Review, 1 (November 1985), 28-29, Anne Smith, quoting Carter, writes:

As a medievalist in her academic life, she naturally found herself 'spending a lot of time thinking about the Fall', and 'obviously' she says, 'I couldn't see what they'd done wrong... How come it's always sexual transgression?' (p.28)

carefully prepared for, and undercut in advance, this symbolic liberatory flight by showing that Melanie and Finn's relationship is limited by the same patriarchal codes which governed life with Uncle Philip. In 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman,' Paulina Palmer points out 'Carter's recognition of the part played by the family in reproducing structures of male dominance and female subordination' in The Magic Toyshop, and she very usefully documents how the novel makes it clear that Finn and Melanie are similarly trapped.⁹ Palmer describes two different scenes, the first when Finn and Melanie wake in bed together (though they are not necessarily the 'lovers' that Palmer claims: Finn is described in terms of a frightened boy, and Melanie the adult who comforts him after he has chopped up and buried Uncle Philip's swan puppet); the second scene describes breakfast without Uncle Philip:

While in bed with her lover Finn, with her little sister Victoria playing in the room, she has a sudden disquieting sense that she and Finn 'might have been married for years and Victoria their baby' [p.177]. Involuntarily, she finds herself slotted into the roles of wife and mother. In a similar manner Finn, occupying the place usually taken by Uncle Philip at the breakfast table, is greeted by Victoria as 'Daddy' [p.183]. In rebelling against his uncle's authority, he discovers himself usurping his position. ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' pp.183-84)

⁹ Paulina Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight,' in Women Reading Women's Writing, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp.179-205 (p.182). Palmer discusses Heroes and Villains and The Passion of New Eve in similar terms.

While Finn assumes patriarchal authority, then, Melanie can only see herself reflected in his terms: 'She sat in Finn's face; there she was, mirrored twice' (p.193); both Melanie and Finn, it is suggested, will be subject to the very conventions from which they appear to have escaped.¹⁰ The eye trope recurs throughout Carter's fiction, and nearly all of the heroines of her novels at some point see themselves reflected in their male lover/lover-to-be's eyes; that is, they see themselves reflected in patriarchal terms, as objects. In The Passion, for example, Eve, like Marianne, sees herself reflected twice in her lover, Tristessa's, eyes, and the reflection gives her back the image of a stereotypical consumable woman: Eve sees 'the soft, bruisable flesh of my innocent face an open invitation to the marauder just as the ripe peach invites teeth' (p.125). Similarly, at the end of Nights at the Circus, when Fevvers rediscovers Walser, he appears

¹⁰ Elaine Jordan, in 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions,' Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction, edited by Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990) takes issue with Robert Clark's article, 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' in Women's Studies--An Interdisciplinary Journal, 14, No.2 (1987), 147-161. In the process, she disagrees totally with my, and Palmer's, reading of the ending of The Magic Toyshop:

In the end Melanie and Finn escape to confront a future which is open, unwritten, potentially quite different. It is the opposite of 'The Loves of Lady Purple', from Fireworks (1974, 1987), where the puppet woman destroys the puppet master only to re-enact his scenario because she knows and can construct no other. The Magic Toyshop has to do with overcoming the Oedipal and cultural incentives which make 'the threat of rape...continually enticing [Clark, p.150].' (p.29)

to see her in his terms and not in hers: Fevvers panicked because she 'felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes,' when 'instead of Fevvers, she saw two perfect miniatures of a dream' (p.290).¹¹

The Eve figures can often be used to generate a Utopian or affirmative reading of Carter's fiction, since they represent the many opportunities to start afresh which continually shape and motivate her picaresque narratives. The rest of this chapter will consider the Eve figures in Heroes and Villains and The Passion of New Eve. It will also chart the development of Eve figures in Carter's work, summarising the varying critical responses which they have provoked, and showing how Carter's earlier fiction prepares the way for the celebratory heroine, Fevvers, in Nights at the Circus. The complexity with which the figure of Fevvers is handled will be discussed in detail in the next and concluding chapter.

II

Heroes and Villains appears to be another version of The Fortunate Fall, where Marianne escapes from her father's oppressively patriarchal village, and goes to live with the Barbarians. However, Marianne's 'escape,' like that of Melanie and Finn in The Magic Toyshop, may

¹¹ Carter has taken a trope which is frequently used in Renaissance poetry to represent fulfilled and mutual (patriarchal) love, and turned it into an image of objectification and entrapment.

well be a shift from one false Paradise to another. The Professor's camp in Heroes and Villains is described overtly and ironically as another of Carter's secularized Edens, this time surrounded by barbed wire (p.3). Like a fairy-tale princess, Marianne lives 'in a white tower made of steel and concrete' (p.1), as if waiting for a prince to rescue her. Marianne's 'Prince Charming,' takes the form of Jewel, a Barbarian, wounded and hiding in a shed, after a raid. It is unclear who rescues whom, since at first Marianne goes to Jewel's aid, but then, although 'she had wanted to rescue him [she] found she was accepting his offer to rescue her' (p.18). Once outside the vicinity of the Professorial village Marianne finds herself in a new garden, this time accompanied by an Adam figure: the forest

seemed the real breath of a wholly new and vegetable world, a world as unknown and mysterious to Marianne as the depths of the sea; or the body of the young man who slept, it would seem, sweetly, in her lap. (p.22)

Two critics, David Punter and Brooks Landon, agree that Marianne's attempt to liberate herself, by leaving the Professors to join the Barbarians, is a move which signifies little change. Punter points out that life among the Barbarians is just as restrictive as life among the Professors,¹² and Landon interprets Marianne's first bid for freedom as abortive since she 'discovers that life

¹² David Punter, The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day (London: Longman, 1980), p.398.

among the Barbarians, while Hobbesian (that is, "nasty, brutish, and short"), is not significantly less boring than life among the Professors'¹³.

Just as Marianne was trapped in her tower in the Professorial village, so, when she flees to the Barbarians, she sees the threat of being trapped by Jewel. Being trapped is described as another Fall, and seen in terms of another permutation of the eye trope: 'Jewel opened his eyes and stared at her. Trapped in his regard so closely and suddenly, she briefly experienced a sensation of falling' (p.23). Jewel explains to Marianne that the Barbarian tribe is organised by 'a patriarchal system' (p.90), and both Jewel, who becomes her husband, and Donally, who 'perversely reminded her of her father' (p.53), attempt to reduce her to an object--attempts which include rape and forced marriage. Like a fairy tale princess, Marianne exchanges one repressive patriarchal community, where attempts were made to define her in terms of her father and the codes of the Professorial community, for another, where attempts are made to define her in terms of a surrogate father and husband. Rory P. B. Turner very neatly describes this situation, where 'as objects, valuable objects, women's lives tend to transpire

¹³ Brooks Landon, 'Eve at the End of the World: Sexuality and the Reversal of Expectations in Novels by Joanna Russ, Angela Carter, and Thomas Berger,' in Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature, edited by Donald Palumbo (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.61-74 (pp.67-68).

as movements from one conditional role in relation to men to another, from daughter to wife and mistress.¹⁴

One of the most powerful themes in Heroes and Villains, however, describes Marianne's struggles to resist stereotypical roles. During her childhood Marianne avoids conventional roles by refusing to conform; she resists being easily categorised in terms of her father and she misbehaves in ways which are childish but significant: 'Marianne tripped up the son of the Professor of Mathematics and left him sprawling and yowling in the dust, which was not in the rules' (p.3). Instead, she mimics a male role by symbolically cutting off all of her hair 'so she looked like a demented boy' (p.15). Once she has escaped from the Professors to the Barbarians, she refuses to become another of Donally's creatures, or to be defined in terms of Jewel.

It is this rebellion against definition that critics celebrate as a feminist victory. Lorna Sage suggests that Marianne represents a 'new order,' and 'possibly the new

¹⁴ Rory P. B. Turner in 'Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus,' in Folklore Forum, 20, Nos.1/2 (1987), 39-60 (p.42). Paulina Palmer's also makes this point in her comments on the family in 'From "Coded Mannequin,' p.182. See also the epigraph Jack Zipes uses from Andrea Dworkin's Woman Hating, in Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion (New York: Methuen, 1988), p.170, which describes the different effects of fairy tales on boys and girls. Zipes's footnote 1, p.192, contains an extensive list of feminist articles which consider that fairy tales reflect patriarchal concerns.

order will be a matriarchy.'¹⁵ David Punter identifies Marianne as a 'New Woman' figure (to be compared, he suggests, with similar female figures in the work of Wilkie Collins and Bram Stoker),¹⁶ and he describes the novel as 'a multivalent parody: of class relations, of relations between the sexes, of the battle between rational control and desire' (The Literature of Terror, p.397). This battle, Punter argues, is also a conflict within Marianne herself, and one which, she gradually realises, grants her a position of power among the Barbarians:

They [the Barbarians] may play at being violent but Marianne grows, precisely through her female experiences, through her first-hand knowledge of repression, into a force far more effective than they, more pragmatic and less bound by ritual and superstition. In the end, both male-dominated worlds look like different aspects of the same nursery.

There are, obviously, no heroes and no villains; only a set of silly games which men play. (The Literature of Terror, p.398)

Marianne, Punter argues, realises her power because of her knowledge of repression (as a woman in patriarchal society). By the end of the novel, he maintains, she is liberated from both of the male-dominated worlds, which until this point have attempted to shape and rule her.

¹⁵ Lorna Sage, Dictionary of Literary Biography, 14, 'British Novelists Since 1960' (Detroit, Michigan: Bruccoli Clark, 1983), pp.205-12 (p.208).

¹⁶ David Punter, The Literature of Terror, pp.397-98, and p.401, footnote 11. He is referring to Marian in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White (1860) and Lucy in Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897).

She is liberated because she is aware of the pitfalls of both of these worlds, which rely on playing out 'silly [war] games' for self-definition.¹⁷

Brooks Landon isolates a phrase from Heroes and Villains which identifies Marianne as an Eve figure, and uses it to name his article 'Eve at the End of the World' (Heroes and Villains, p.124). Picking up on Punter's location of Marianne 'in the gothic tradition of the "New Woman,"' Landon produces an even more optimistic argument which celebrates 'Marianne's radical departure from the female stereotype associated with the Edenic myth' (p.69 and p.70 respectively). He describes the novel in terms of a reconstruction of this myth, and argues that it attempts to remythologise the image of the woman in the garden. Finally, Landon claims, enthusiastically, that Marianne becomes a completely independent, Utopian New Woman, freed from patriarchal codes:

In Carter's post-lapsarian garden ... Marianne neither tempts nor can be tempted, is neither victim nor victimizer. As a new Eve she is reflective, self-sufficient, unfearing; she needs no Adam, and her actions and attitude drain Donally's familiar icon [the snake] of all power. (pp.69-70)

And, 'Carter's Marianne does become "Eve at the end of the world," but an Eve to whom patriarchal mythology has nothing to say' ('Eve at the End of the World,' p.70).

¹⁷ I have discussed the Barbarians' and Professors' mutual dependency and its importance in creating a sense of identity in the last section of Chapter 3.

Marianne appears to these critics to represent the possibility of positive change. She embodies the freedom associated with the rebel, the figure outside convention, and as a rebel, she personifies what Paulina Palmer has identified as 'the representation of femininity as a problematic, disruptive presence within the phallographic social order.'¹⁸ Landon describes her disruptive function, explaining that 'Although she does not actually change the tribal structure, her arrival obliquely leads to Donally's expulsion and somehow plunges the cynical Jewel into ever more fatalistic depression' which eventually leads to his death. Landon also describes the threat Marianne poses to the status quo:

On marrying Jewel, Marianne becomes at once a member of the tribe and the element of unpredictability its rituals and roles cannot assimilate. That she can both desire and despise Jewel threatens him; that she is intelligent, unsuperstitious, and uncorruptible threatens Donally, the maniacal, renegade Professor who had ordered her rape and her marriage. ('Eve at the End of the World,' p.68)

As I have already argued, however, in Chapter 3, the role of rebel is already stereotyped, and already written. Once again, the codes from which Marianne appears to have escaped are already in place, since Eden and its opposite are mutually dependent: like the Professors and the Barbarians, Heroes and Villains, each is constructed in

¹⁸ Paulina Palmer, Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), p.75. Palmer is describing a feature which she claims is common to all of Carter's work, and elaborates the argument with a discussion of The Magic Toyshop.

relation to the other. There is no place outside convention, only a necessary belief in such a place.¹⁹

Marianne also represents, as Punter suggests, a freedom associated with knowledge: she is conscious of her own position and of the games of role playing in which she is, however unwillingly, forced to participate. She may be forced to act in Donally's script, but she retains a rational distance. For example at her wedding ceremony to Jewel she finds herself obliged 'to impersonate the sign of a memory of a bride' (p.72), she does not become the role assigned to her. Because of her conscious knowledge of the roles assigned her Marianne is able to struggle against becoming the stereotype 'object' which they portray.

She appears, for example, to avoid definition in terms of father or husband by remaining detached from them both. Even when Jewel rapes her, she retains her autonomy by remaining as uninvolved as possible, and angry:

She did not make a single sound for her only strength was her impassivity and she never closed her cold eyes ... She stared at him relentlessly; if he had kissed her, she would have bitten out his tongue. (p.55)²⁰

¹⁹ These possibilities for change, glimpsed in this novel's experimentation with the disruptive notions of unpredictability and the capacity to resist assimilation (even though these qualities are undermined in the novel), are developed more fully in Carter's later fiction. They are especially important to the construction of Fevvers in Nights at the Circus.

²⁰ See also Palmer's comments on the rapes of both Marianne in Heroes and Villains and Melanie in The Magic Toyshop in 'From "Coded Mannequin"':

Marianne's detachment is signalled by the comparison she draws between Jewel raping her and a Barbarian stabbing and killing her brother, to which she acted as audience. By drawing the connection between the rape and the stabbing the novel stresses the violence of this sexual act. The two events are linked again when Marianne later recognises Jewel as her brother's killer. She felt, we are told,

only an angry disquiet, as if he had broken into her most private place and stolen her most ambiguously cherished possession. Her memory was no longer her own; he shared it. She had never invited him there. (p.80)

The memory which Jewel violates is not a fond memory of a loved brother, but of his killer: 'She recalled with visionary clarity the face of the murdering boy with his necklaces, rings and knife, although the memory of her brother's face was totally blurred' (p.10). Interestingly, this violation of her mental space appears far more disturbing to Marianne than her physical rape. During the latter, she remains rationally detached, but by penetrating her mental space, Jewel has in some way taken possession of her rational self, which is the mark of her difference from the Barbarians.

Melanie and Marianne are portrayed as courageous and resourceful individuals. They respond to the 'terrible violation of privacy' [Heroes and Villains, p.90] which the sexual encounters to which they are subjected involve, not with tears or masochistic pleasure but with anger and indignation. (p.188)

The Barbarians might be interpreted as inhabiting a 'through-the-looking-glass' world, where gender stereotypes are reversed. In a profile of Carter, Lorna Sage comments:

Probably the most striking consequence of accelerating the dissolution of traditional mores is that sex-roles come out reversed. Beautiful boys, called things like Jewel and Precious ('The Barbarians used whatever forenames they found lying about, as long as they glittered and shone and attracted them'), are described caressingly and coolly as sexual objects.²¹

It is the Barbarian men, it seems, who are specimens to be admired and exhibited. Jewel's object status, as Sage points out, is first signalled by his name: 'He was a curiously shaped, attractive stone; he was an object which drew her' (p.82). And Marianne describes him as a male version of a female stereotype, 'like a phallic and diabolic version of female beauties of former periods' (p.137). In his role as object, then, Jewel is continually described, or describes himself, in terms of the eye trope (see also pp.122, 124, 137, 147). He can only see himself as he is reflected in other people, and, indeed, as he reflects himself in language:

'Who do you see when you see me?' she asked him
...

²¹ Lorna Sage, 'The Savage Sideshow,' in New Review, 39/40 (1977), 51-57 (p.52). In the later interview section of this article, Carter is quoted as saying:

One of the things I was doing then unconsciously [in Heroes and Villains] and am now doing consciously is describing men as objects of desire. I think a lot of the ambivalence of response I get is because I do this. (p.55)

'The map of a country in which I only exist by virtue of the extravagance of my own metaphors' (p.120).

Elaine Jordan thinks that 'Marianne incarnates Carter's will as a storyteller to "do it back," to represent a man as the object of a woman's desire' ('Enthralment,' p.30). The oppressive subject/object binary opposition is continually challenged across Carter's fiction, often by placing a man in the object position so that he might experience the role of the other. For example, half way through Love, after Annabel has a heart tattooed on Lee's chest, he becomes her object:

He acknowledged that she was far cleverer than he and began to fear her a little for he could not alter her at all, although she could change him in any way she pleased.

And now Annabel had docketed him securely amongst her things. (p.71)²²

Similarly, Joseph, in Several Perceptions, finds himself objectified, this time by his reflection in his psychiatrist's (an authority figure's) glasses, 'His own face repeated twice was all the message he received' (p.67)--another version of the eye motif. In The Passion, when Evelyn first arrives in the matriarchal world of Beulah, he finds conventional codes inverted, and admits, 'I never realised before how degrading it is to be the object of pity' (p.65). This technique is exploited to the full in Nights at the Circus where Fevvers struggles

²² Lee realises his object status when he 'could no longer pretend that he had rescued her [Annabel]' (p.70); as we have already noted, the same undecidability as to rescuer and rescued occurs in Heroes and Villains.

to remain both object and subject, but the tables are turned on Walser, who is turned into an object. In her interview with John Haffenden, Carter claims:

Yes, he [Walser] does become an object, and it's amazing how many people find it offensive when you do that to a chap. What happens to him is exactly what happens to another, though a much nastier person who runs away with a music-hall artiste and is forced to personate a rooster--do you remember?--in The Blue Angel. But nobody forces Jack Walser to behave as a human chicken ... it's life. (pp.89-90)

Heroes and Villains, however, also shows that although Marianne appears to escape convention, she cannot do so. The 'through-the-looking-glass' world of the Barbarians appears to offer an alternative mode of being to Marianne, but finally both the Professors' and Barbarians' worlds are shown to be only reflections of each other with no alternative world outside convention. Marianne's father commented to her early in the novel: "I know you'd rather not live here but there is nowhere else to go and chaos is the opposite pole of boredom" (p.11).

In both worlds Marianne can be interpreted as an object of exchange. Her father, for instance, had planned to marry her to another of her race (pp.10-11), and Jewel and Donally struggle for control of her. When Donally is expelled from the Barbarians he entreats Marianne to go along with him. Marianne has to choose between leaving with Donally or staying with Jewel: 'Jewel watched her between his fingers. She was caught between the beams of their eyes and vacillated' (p.132). When she does succumb

to her relationship with Jewel she becomes momentarily a stereotypical object, 'She hung round his neck, herself another necklace' (p.121). Marianne is shown to be dependent upon Jewel, just as the Professors are dependent upon the Barbarians, as the subject is to the object, for her sense of identity. Landon is mistaken, then, to claim that Marianne as Eve needs no Adam. Apart from the fact that without an Adam, the very notion of Eve as a social stereotype would cease to exist, when Jewel leaves her at the end of the novel Marianne loses her sense of detachment and her sense of reason:

When she could see him no more, she was surprised to find herself dislocated from and unfamiliar with her own body. Her hands and feet seemed strange extensions which hardly belonged to her; her eyes amorphous jellies. And she was not able to think. (pp.148-49)

Throughout most of the novel, however, Marianne refuses to see herself as an object by retaining her 'reason' and rejecting both Jewel or Donally's attempts to define her:

Though the rest of the tribe had long since abandoned this pursuit, the Doctor continued to watch her. The cracked mirrors of his dark glasses revealed all manner of potentialities for Marianne, modes of being to which she might aspire just as soon as she threw away her reason as of no further use to her. (p.107)

Once aware of her pregnancy, however, Marianne is disturbed by the realization that

she and her Jewel were, in some way, related to one another [and] she was filled with pain for her idea of her own autonomy might, in fact, be not the truth but a passionately held conviction. (p.132)

(Note that the pronoun 'her' before Jewel still places him in the object position.) She realizes, then, that she is not completely detached from Jewel, and therefore not outside of convention, as she had imagined. The convention is, however, that conventions should not be acknowledged as conventions. If she were to recognize her dependency upon Jewel, if she were to accept that 'he was necessary to her,' Marianne realises, she would then be entering into unknown, and potentially liberatory territory, because 'that constituted a wholly other situation which raised a constellation of miserable possibilities each one indicating that, willy, nilly, she would be changed' (p.134). But Marianne is not a revolutionary; she remains firmly rooted in the known. She resolves to retain her apparent distance, because she understands that even if there is no place outside convention, she can still function as if there were such a place, since 'might not such a conviction serve her as well as a proven certainty?' (p.132). Ironically, then, it is her awareness of the child she is to give birth to which promotes Marianne's retreat into convention. Rather than functioning as a symbol of regeneration or rebirth, the forthcoming child signifies the very opposite, and only reinforces the status quo.

The ending of Heroes and Villains, like the endings of all Carter's novels, is open and ambiguous. I am tempted to accept Carter's own description of Heroes and Villains as a 'dystopian' novel (Novelists in Interview,

p.95), and claim that any celebratory elements in this dénouement are balanced, or even eclipsed, by an exposé of the repetition of history and the inescapability of convention. Marianne, for example, the novel appears to insist, is doomed to duplicate Donally's role. She appears fated to repeat the tyrannical leadership of a Professor among the Barbarians, and therefore to repeat the same codes and the same means of repression, regardless of her gender. She is obviously capable of using her 'first hand knowledge of repression' as Punter argues, but this appears only to fuel her rising ambition, thus cancelling out the possibilities for change suggested throughout the novel. Is Marianne a New Eve, or is she simply, as Donally suggests at their very first meeting, when he uncovers 'a grinning medieval skeleton who carried a stone banner engraved with the motto: AS I AM, SO YE SHALL BE' (p.63), a replica of himself?²³ The reference to death obviously cannot be ignored; it appears to suggest the inevitability of the course of Marianne's life, in Donally's footsteps. It may also be meant to characterise the nature of the life she will choose for herself; she regards life amongst the ever more discipline- and ritual-obsessed Professors as a sort of

²³ Carter uses this phrase again in her short story 'The Quilt Maker,' in Passion Fruit: Romantic Fiction with a Twist, edited by Jeanette Winterson (London: Pandora, 1986), pp.117-38:

Oh, the salty realism with which the Middle Ages put skeletons on gravestones, with the motto: 'As I am now, so ye will be!' (p.123)

death and compares their camp to a 'grave' (p.15). From their very first meeting Donally's and Marianne's similarities are stressed: for example, when Marianne asks him why he joined the Barbarians, he answers as she might have done if posed the same question: "'I was bored," said Donally. "I was ambitious. I wanted to see the world"' (p.62). Marianne, however, keeps her distance and her difference, and when 'Donally tries to play the Devil to Marianne's Eve' ('Eve at the End of the World,' p.69), and tempts her with the promise of power (by calling upon Swift), she attempts to remain detached by refusing to ally her ambition with his:

'Domiciled as you are among the Yahoos, you might as well be Queen of the midden. Don't you know the meaning of the word "ambition"?'

She shook her head impatiently. (p.61)

Near the end of the novel, however, immediately after Donally's expulsion from the Barbarian tribe--indeed, as soon as he is out of sight--Marianne finds herself, willy nilly, usurping his place. Like Lady Purple in Carter's short story, who usurps power from the puppet master, sucks the air from his lungs and drinks his blood, and liberates herself only to make 'her way like a homing pigeon, out of logical necessity, to the single brothel,'²⁴ so Marianne retreats back to what she knows

²⁴ 'The Loves of Lady Purple,' in Fireworks, p.38. Similarly, Alice, in Emma Tennant's novel Alice Fell (1980) (London: Picador, 1982), struggles not to become an automaton, and not to conform to the wills of the people around her. At the end of the novel, she is brought back from London by her father to marry her

best. This is in contrast, for example, to the girl in 'The Tiger's Bride' (in The Bloody Chamber collection) who acknowledges her own female desires, breaks with the past, and sends her 'clockwork twin' (p.60) back to her father to act her part (p.65). Marianne recognises her predicament instantly 'when she realized she had begun to think in such circuitous slogans as Donally might paint on his wall' (p.132). She appears doomed not only to repeat the 'traditions' Donally invented but also to repeat his linguistic conventions. Soon afterwards, during an interaction with Jewel's brothers, Marianne 'felt the beginnings of a sense of power' (p.144). Finally, coming round from a faint caused by news of Jewel's death, and informed that the Bradley brothers intend to leave her behind, she calls on the ritual power of fear, which Donally has explained to her in detail (p.63) in order to take control:

'Oh, no,' she said. 'They won't get rid of me as easily as that. I shall stay here and frighten them so much they'll do every single thing I say.'

'What, will you be queen?' [asks Donally's son]

'I'll be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron' (p.150)

childhood friend William. 'The marionettes of childhood.... danced Alice's future, over cobbles always wet from rain in that bad summer' (p.122), however, and the novel suggests the inevitability of Alice return to her life of prostitution in London, where she 'belongs' (p.118). Alice fell as a child, and it appears therefore that she will keep on falling, again and again.

In effect, she gives in to temptation and bites deep into the apple (ambition) which Donally, as Satan, had offered her.²⁵

Far from proposing change, then, this ending appears to exhibit only a reaffirmation of patriarchal structures. Marianne intends to carry on Donally's practices, and it is with 'a rod of iron,' a very conspicuous phallic symbol, which Marianne intends to rule. Marianne's preference for phallic symbols is indicated earlier in the novel when she and Jewel visit the sea and come across a submerged town. Jewel expects her to identify with the grotesque figure of 'a luxuriously endowed woman' (p.138), but Marianne is immediately drawn to a second building, the lighthouse, 'a white tower [which] glistened like a luminous finger pointing to heaven' (p.139). The lighthouse represents Marianne's patriarchal background amongst the professors, as the narrative makes clear:

To Marianne, it looked the twin of the white tower in which she had been born and she was very much moved for, though neither tower any longer cast a useful light, both still served to warn and inform of surrounding dangers. Thus this tower glimpsed in darkness symbolized and clarified her resolution; abhor shipwreck, said the lighthouse, go in fear of unreason. Use your wits, said the lighthouse. She fell in

²⁵ Marianne uses this image to describe Jewel when 'in his eyes she thought she saw the birth of ambition': she says to him, '"If I took off your shirt, I think I would see that Adam had accepted the tattooed apple at last"' (p.146). It is interesting to note that Jewel's tattoo depicts Eve offering the apple to Adam, not Satan offering it to Eve. The fall of woman has already taken place, and it is woman who is the potentially disruptive presence.

love with the integrity of the lighthouse.
(p.139)

Marianne will not strive for the unknown and will not bring about change, but will live by known patriarchal rituals and traditions of the past.

In this novel, then, Carter exposes and demystifies the feminist argument for women's equality which depends upon women mimicking men. Marianne, as we have seen, does not become an object, but in her attempt to become a female subject she manages only to switch gender roles and conform to patriarchal codes as if she were a man (which her status and education as a Professor's daughter, or ruling class, enables her to do). Carter's novel describes this as a reactionary stance which does not provoke fundamental changes since it does not challenge but only conforms to convention.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that Marianne's reactionary victory at the end of the novel should provoke such celebratory responses. The depiction of a woman in power, who, the novel suggests, appears to offer no challenge to convention, but who in fact only strengthens the oppressive and hierarchical codes which structure her society (strengthens them more, perhaps, since she appears to challenge them by the very fact of being female), seems to be a very comfortable and non-threatening conclusion in patriarchal terms.

Annabel, in Love, is also portrayed as a woman in power, and she gains this power by an 'almost sinister

feat of male impersonation.'²⁶ Halfway through the novel Annabel switches roles with Lee, not only assuming power in their relationship and reducing him to an object, but also by taking over his character, as if sucking the life out of him: 'She counterfeited,' for example, 'the only spontaneous smile he had and took it away from him, leaving him no benign expressions left for himself' (p.78). There are several allusions to Annabel's vampiric capacities, but, ironically, it is Lee who is portrayed as having no shadow (p.74). Where Marianne's rise to power in Heroes and Villains is described in terms of rationality, Annabel's appears to be the product of unreason, of madness, which finally leads to her suicide. In the end, however, as Marianne's father warned, "'chaos is the opposite pole of boredom"' (Heroes and Villains, p.11), and both of their positions are shown to be part of the same construct. Marianne and Annabel become two of Carter's notorious puppet figures ('coded mannequins') with convention pulling their strings: Marianne is destined to act out her Professorial role, and Annabel is literally described as 'no longer vulnerable flesh and blood, she was altered to inflexible material' (Love, p.104).

²⁶ Carter uses this phrase to describe her own writing of the novel, in the Afterword to the revised edition of Love, p.113.

III

Just as Landon and Punter identify Marianne in Heroes and Villains as a New Woman figure, so Eve in The Passion of New Eve is usually regarded as a more thorough exploration of this same theme. Critics of the novel, however, are disappointed or confused by a paradox in The Passion: it appears to promise the definition of a liberated female subject--a New Eve--and yet explicitly seeks to displace and satirize the very notion of identity. It is ironic that critics of a novel which is so clearly concerned with its own demythologising processes, in a bid to expose the patriarchal construction of femininity and thereby challenge the very notion of the subject, still appear to expect it to portray some sort of alternative representation of woman, that is, the very thing it seeks to subvert. And yet, as we have seen, this is an irony which is courted by the novel: Chapter 3 argued that The Passion not only shows why such an affirmative female subject cannot exist within patriarchal convention, it also raised the possibility that such a thing might exist (with the implication that it would exist outside patriarchal society if there is an outside--we have seen that Heroes and Villains suggests there is no such thing).

Critics' problems with this novel raise an important issue which affects all criticism of feminist literature, and causes particular arguments with regard to this novel:

what constitutes an affirmative feminism? It seems to me that critics of The Passion are mistaken if their only ideas of affirmative feminist action involve the depiction of an alternative feminine consciousness. Rita Felski uses Elaine Showalter's term 'gynocritical' to identify this type of feminist criticism, which attempts 'to ground a feminist aesthetic in women's experience,' whether defined as essential characteristics or as the consequence of 'female socialization.'²⁷ Felski also points out the limitations of 'gynocritics,' and in doing so raises concerns which are important in Carter's work:

This kind of gynocritical position typically operates with a conception of patriarchal ideology as a homogeneous and uniformly repressive phenomenon masking an authentic female subjectivity, rather than conceding that ideology needs to be understood as a complex formation of beliefs, structures, and representations which shapes and permeates the subjective sense of self of both men and women. (Beyond Feminist Aesthetics p.27)

It is clearly not possible to judge the value of The Passion as feminist literature simply by asserting that it fails to offer an affirmative representation of the female subject, since such a positive representation of Woman would conform to the very kind of 'ideology' which this novel is seeking to unpack. However, as I will show, The Passion does acknowledge and explore the emancipatory

²⁷ Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p.25. Felski is summarising the work of important American feminist critics, work which began with Kate Millet's Sexual Politics and Elaine Showalter's A Literature of their Own.

potential of the desire for, or the struggle towards, a symbolic, affirmative, and alternative female consciousness, whilst at the same time engaging in a demythologising process, exposing the 'complex formation of beliefs, structures and representations' which shape the subjectivity of both sexes--an activity which can also be interpreted as affirmative.

The 'New Eve' in the title is the most obvious signal that the novel is concerned with a New Woman figure. The words 'New Eve' appear to signify the possibility of a new start for the world--a rewriting of the first chapter of the book of Genesis and a different representation of Woman's role in the Fall. The importance of New Woman figures in Carter's work in general, her previous rewritings of the notion of a Fortunate Fall in The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains, and the fact that this is a novel clearly concerned with questions of gender,²⁸ would support such a reading of the title. The Passion is also a novel which charts a series of new beginnings: at the opening Evelyn is preparing for a complete geographical change and a new job: he is moving from England to America, from 'the Old World to the New World' (p.37), to make a new start in life teaching in a New York university. Each shift in Evelyn's location is marked by a 'Fall' and charts what appears to be new chance to start

²⁸ Ricarda Schmidt, 'The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction,' in Textual Practice, 3, No.1 (Spring 1989), 56-75 (p.61), writes, 'Carter makes gender the decisive theme in The Passion of New Eve.'

afresh. The most important shift occurs when Evelyn is turned into a female version of himself.

However, The Passion also appears to belong to a negative school of feminist thought, more concerned with a process of what Ricarda Schmidt calls 'the unmasking of patriarchal symbols of femininity as creations of male desire, as images that correspond to no essence' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.64). At the same time as suggesting an autonomous female consciousness, The Passion also exhibits the impossibility of doing any such thing, and exposes the notions of Woman we have as patriarchal constructs which have no ontological status. Several critics appear to have taken note of the 'New Eve' mentioned in the title, which suggests the creation of a New Woman, yet not one takes account of the first two words, 'The Passion.' The Passion of New Eve is an ambiguous title which can be interpreted in terms of both the Old and the New Testament. That is, it can also be read as a rewriting of the Passion of Christ, a history of suffering in order to atone for the sins of Man. New Eve can therefore be identified as a counterpart to Christ--often referred to as the New Adam²⁹--whose

29 The New Testament Virgin Mary has traditionally been labelled a Second Eve (see John A. Philips, Eve: The History of An Idea, p.131), and this idea is also woven into Carter's text: Sophia tells Evelyn, 'You will be a new Eve ... And the Virgin Mary, too. Be glad!' (p.70). It is important to note, however, that the model of Mary, and the notion of virgin birth, in The Passion, are part of Mother's strategy, and are not necessarily connected with this New Eve's fate. Mary has been established, in a patriarchal society, as a model for how women 'ought to

suffering brings to light and atones for the 'sins' of patriarchy by illuminating the subordination and manipulation of women. This is a reading of The Passion as a retelling of the original interpretation of the 'Fortunate Fall,' or felix culpa. In this way, the novel accounts for the suffering which promotes the demythologising or dismantling of hierarchical concepts underwriting patriarchal society, in order to prepare for a fresh start. It is possible to read all of the individual Falls described in this novel in this palindromic fashion. As Schmidt very clearly documents, the novel challenges many accepted symbols of Woman,³⁰ destroying the false 'truths' of the old and the 'known,' in order to create a New Woman.

Paulina Palmer is one of the disappointed critics. She recognises and praises the necessary negativity inherent in The Passion's critique of patriarchal notions

be' (Philips, p.145), and this has angered many feminists. They claim that the power of the myth resides in its representation of an impossible state, as Barbara Hill Rigney summarises in Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982):

Mary Daly and Marina Warner share the conviction that the paradox of Mary lies in her concurrent virginity and motherhood, a state impossible to emulate and therefore punitive in its fiction as a model for women. (p.37)

She is referring to Mary Daly's Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p.62, and Marina Warner's Alone of All her Sex (New York: Knopf, 1976), p.59.

³⁰ See Schmidt's very clear and detailed description of the unpacking of these symbols of femininity, pp.61-67.

of 'Woman,' but at the same time she forcefully argues the pragmatic and political value of the portrayal of an affirmative female consciousness as an alternative to patriarchal structures. In her article 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman' Palmer argues that the 'demythologising' process taking place in The Passion gets the upper hand and precludes any positive representation of the feminine or representations of the sort of social change which she feels is essential to challenge the patriarchal status quo (p.179).³¹ In a complementary argument, in Contemporary Women's Fiction, Palmer complains that The Passion sets out, but fails, to portray a distinctive and positive representation of femininity:

Carter's aim is to write 'a feminist tract about the creation of femininity'. However, by revealing female characters to be either biologically male (as with Eve and Tristessa) or to possess instrumental 'masculine' attributes (as with Leilah) she does the very opposite. She effectively erases femininity from the text. This novel, in fact, contains no positive representations of the feminine. (p.19)

Palmer omits to register the change of name from Leilah to Lilith, and the transformation of identity which such a name change signifies. She therefore describes Leilah, rather than Lilith, as a 'feminist freedom fighter' who is merely impersonating a male role. It is Lilith, as Palmer

³¹ Palmer also criticises The Magic Toyshop and Heroes and Villains for their lack of themes relating to female specificity. Palmer endorses Terry Lovell's view, cited in 'Writing Like a Woman: A Question of Politics,' that 'Successful political struggles always depend on their ability to connect with utopias--with the belief and hope that things might be better' ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.181).

described earlier, who possesses 'the instrumental qualities of leadership--independence and a capacity for action and aggression--traditionally regarded as masculine' (Contemporary Women's Writing, pp.18-19). This does not, however, challenge Palmer's claim that The Passion appears to offer no representations of authentic female subjectivity at all.

Robert Clark, in 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' also finds that The Passion fails to produce the promised goods:

Carter's insight into the patriarchal construction of femininity has a way of being her blindness: her writing is often a feminism in male chauvinist drag, a transvestite style, and this may be because her primary allegiance is to a postmodern aesthetics that emphasizes the non-referential emptiness of definitions. Such a commitment precludes an affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being. Only in patriarchal eyes is femininity an empty category, the negation of masculinity. Beyond patriarchal definitions of women there are female definitions, and then feminist definitions based upon a radical deconstruction and reconstruction of women's history.³²

Clark, from a more overtly essentialist position, is arguing for the same things as Palmer. He feels that the novel is too concerned with its own demythologising processes to offer an alternative feminine identity which is based upon a women's authentic experience, that is 'an affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being' (my emphasis). He

³² Robert Clark, 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' in Women's Studies--An Interdisciplinary Journal, 14, No.2 (1987), 147-61 (p.158).

praises the novel's depiction of 'femininity as a male construct' ('Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' p.158), but argues that this should not prevent the novel from offering alternative visions of women which are 'beyond patriarchal definition.' Because Carter limits herself to demythologising conventional and patriarchal notions of woman and does not attempt to rebuild an alternative vision, Clark argues, her writing serves only to reinforce the status quo: 'The recurrent figure of the puppet or automaton seems a metaphor of the writing as a whole, a dance to the puppet master's tune' ('Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' p.159).³³

David Punter raises similar issues to Clark and Palmer, but from a different angle. He interprets The Passion as the depiction of a struggle between symbolization--'writing, the formation of the new self, the representation of Woman within woman'--and the forces of history--'guns blazing.'³⁴ However, the novel troubles him:

³³ Elaine Jordan's arguments in 'Enthralment' are structured around a critique of Clark's article, and she specifically comments upon this passage:

Clark's appeal to the authentic experience of real women is an attempt to articulate a static and exclusive Marxism with the most restrictive forms of feminism, whose positive definition of what women are or should be trap us in traditional definitions. (pp.33-34)

³⁴ David Punter, 'Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,' in Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 25, No.4 (1984), 209-22 (p.215).

As a male reader, I find myself the victim of illusions. Although I am aware that Carter is a woman, and although that extratextual consciousness is incarnated within the text in her obvious proximity to Leilah/Lilith, I nonetheless find that the first-person narrative of Evelyn/Eve appears to me throughout, no matter what the overt sex at the time of the Messiah, as a masculine narrative. When Evelyn becomes Eve, my experience is of viewing a masquerade; I read Eve still through the male consciousness (Evelyn's) of what he has become. It is as though Evelyn forms a barrier, a thin film which stretches between Carter and Eve at all points; and thus I too am forced to tread that line, to respond as a male to the residual male in Eve. (p.218)

Here, in an otherwise cogent critical account of The Passion, Punter makes a surprisingly naive connection between the gender of the reader, the author, and the characters in the novel. He is troubled by his sense that Eve's narrative reads as if produced by a 'male consciousness,' and presents this as a problem arising out of his own maleness. He intimates that Angela Carter, as 'extratextual consciousness,' must necessarily be associated with a particular character in the novel, and maintains that this 'consciousness' cannot belong to Eve, because 'Evelyn [a male consciousness] forms a barrier' between them. He clarifies this assertion and compounds the gender linkage by associating Carter with Leilah: Carter as a woman writer, this suggests, can only be represented in the novel by a female character (the only 'obvious proximity' between Carter and the character Leilah/Lilith appears to be their sex, and Punter has just made the point that 'Carter is a woman'). From this perspective, if we were to agree with Punter's connection

between author and character and were tempted to try to identify Eve as Carter's 'extratextual consciousness,' or as a New Woman, we would surely have to accept Clark's claim that Carter's writing only serves to uphold the status quo since it is 'a feminism in male chauvinist drag' ('Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' p.158).

Punter's main point, however, is a valid one: the narrative voice does appear to be masculine, even when we know that its source has undergone a sex-change operation. The biological gender of the reader is, however, not the issue, since, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the novel attempts to locate all readers in the position of the male gaze, whilst also problematising this placement. It is therefore not difficult to account for critics' anxiety when certain elements of Evelyn's stereotypically male chauvinist character are never purged from the narrative voice of Eve(lyn)'s retrospective account, especially if the novel is read as promoting Eve as a New Woman figure (or as Carter's textual emanation).³⁵ What needs to be pointed out, however, is that the novel self-consciously comments upon the specific problem which Palmer, Clark and Punter raise concerning the gender of the narrator.

The gender of the narrator in The Passion is an important and disturbing issue which remains unresolved. Susan Suleiman comments, 'Evelyn's story--which unlike

³⁵ This is one of the reasons why, in Chapter 4, I refer to Eve as 'he' and Tristessa as 'she.'

Orlando's, is narrated retrospectively in the first person, thus immediately rais[es] the quintessentially modern question: who speaks?'³⁶ The retrospective account resembles the old Desiderio's narrative in The Infernal Desire Machines, which I discussed in Chapter 2, but the older Eve(lyn) is never introduced as a character, and his/her indeterminate gender adds further complications. In the first part of the novel the narrative voice appears to be that of a male chauvinist--of Evelyn, in fact--whose attitude toward women is not only derogatory but sadistic. For example, at the cinema, during the opening pages, he describes his companion and sums up his relationships with women in general:

As far as I can remember, this girl had grey eyes and a certain air of childlike hesitancy. I always liked that particular quality in a woman for my nanny, although sentimental, had had a marked sadistic streak and I suppose I must have acquired an ambivalent attitude towards women from her. Sometimes I'd amuse myself by tying a girl to the bed before I copulated with her. Apart from that, I was perfectly normal. (p.9)

The content of this description speaks for itself and the tone is detached, self-confident and throwaway, as if the girls he 'copulated' with were themselves disposable. Only once Evelyn has been incarcerated at Beulah and transformed into Eve are we made aware that the narrative

³⁶ Susan Suleiman, '(Re)writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism,' in The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives, edited by Susan Suleiman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.7-29 (p.25).

voice, which has been telling the story in retrospect, is perhaps female. The novel, however, never finally insists that Eve completely becomes a woman: after his/her sex change operation Eve's psycho-surgery proves unsuccessful and, when Eve escapes into the desert, s/he insists: 'I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman' (p.83). As the narrative progresses it is suggested that the gap between Eve's psychological and physical self decreases--while with Zero, Eve claims ambiguously that 'I had become almost the thing I was' (p.107)--yet as Eve escapes the desert s/he still feels like 'Eve and Adam both' (p.165). Even after the cave journey the now-pregnant Eve's gender remains problematic. What is made clear, however, is that even by the end of the novel, Eve remains socially unassimilable: Lilith offers him/her the choice between being transformed back into a biological man, or social exclusion: 'She gave me my exile, since I did not want my old self back' (p.188). Eve, however, does not accept her/his exile and the novel suggests further adventures following on from the series charted within its pages--'I began to wonder if I might not in some way escape' (p.188).³⁷--as if Eve and the action continued beyond the novel. It is, however, Eve(lyn)'s 'difference' from both sexes, and detachment,

³⁷ The word 'escape' could also refer to death, but, if death is portrayed at the end of the novel, it is described in terms of an adventure.

generated by his/her complex gender status and the unspecified time lapse between the events of the story and their telling, which appear to stabilise the narrative. This apparent stability enables readers to judge Evelyn in the way that I have done, and encourages readers to assume shared values of common decency which invite disapproval of Evelyn. The shared disapproval, however, is also disturbing, because it can be read as if it were scandalous: that is, it also appeals to a predominantly male audience as both shocking but also titillating material.

This complexly gendered narrator, however, whose 'experience came through two channels of sensation, her own fleshly ones and his mental ones' (pp.77-78), also performs an important part of the demythologising machinery of this novel. The dual gender element of the narrative is a fundamental part of the demythologising process because, as Punter points out, it undercuts the authority of the male point of view: 'The structures of hermaphroditism operate within the perceiving subject itself, so that the gaze is dislocated at source' ('Supersessions of the Masculine,' p.209).³⁸ Punter, then, identifies the narrative perspective as hermaphroditic, whereas Clark identifies it as

³⁸ The footnote attached to this statement points to the work of Jacques Lacan, specifically The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, edited by J. A. Miller, translated by A. Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) pp.67-119.

transvestite. I would hesitate to give it either of these titles, with all their complex connotations; indeed, no single term seems adequate. Carter's technique destroys the possibility of single focus: all perception is blurred, disrupted and made strange. This is a surrealist technique, and it is shown very clearly at work, for example, when Evelyn first meets Mother in Beulah. Everything is made strange for Evelyn, and he has to change the way he reads himself, when he realises that in Mother's world his penis no longer symbolizes his mastery of the situation: 'It was nothing but a decorative appendage ... Since I had no notion how to approach her with it, she rendered it insignificant; I must deal with her on her own terms' (p.60). Because Evelyn is forced to give up his male point of view, he is forced to acknowledge it is not a universal standpoint. I am using 'point of view' in two different ways here, both as male opinion, and also to denote the narrative perspective. These two different points of view are often thought synonymous, but Evelyn, and therefore the reader, is forced to acknowledge their difference when he is forced to realise the possibility of other ways of reading. In this way the narrative perspective dramatises Carter's argument, discussed in the previous chapter, which reveals the enormous power of, but simultaneously demystifies, the apparently universal male point of view by exposing it as a patriarchal construct.

Typically, this argument can be described most clearly in terms of a paradox. On one hand, The Passion offers glimpses of alternative perspectives, which include the possibility of affirmative hermaphroditic or matriarchal viewpoints.³⁹ The novel portrays many of these alternative perspectives as visions of the future of America: the country is in the midst of civil war where patriarchal order and control have collapsed and a whole collection of 'marginal' groups are fighting to take power and reshape society according to new conventions. These groups include, for example, a take-over by Mother's matriarchal guerrillas, who are succeeded by the feminist freedom fighters represented by Lilith at the end of the novel. There are also the boys of the 'Children's Crusade' (p.159) who aim to reinscribe patriarchal order, and are travelling west across the desert to wage a 'Holy War' against all the 'marginal' groups, 'Blacks, Mexis, Reds, Militant Lesbians, Rampant Gays, etc etc etc' (p.161).

It is these glimpses which, as I will show by describing both the hermaphroditic and matriarchal visions explored by the novel, critics seize upon, and which help suggest that this novel sets out to portray an affirmative and alternative future. On the other hand, however, each alternative viewpoint is also self-reflexively criticised

³⁹ As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, an important idea running through all of Carter's work is that of seeing things from new, often women's, perspectives.

within the novel and exposed as a patriarchal construction. Indeed, this novel appears to offer a critique of all possible positions, which, as critics have pointed out, necessarily precludes any possibility of a final concrete alternative answer. It also shows that within patriarchal convention, there can be no concrete alternative versions of femininity; it is this last point which the novel dramatises so powerfully by effacing femininity from the text. This, of course, makes the position of the critic very difficult since it becomes impossible to tie the novel down to any one position, or even any two. The task of criticism is also difficult since, as I shall outline below, very often the problems outlined by the critics have been prefigured by the novel itself.

Ricarda Schmidt and Paulina Palmer both identify the New Woman figure which emerges during the course of the novel as an androgynous or hermaphroditic answer to the problems of patriarchy. Schmidt claims that 'androgyny flickers up as a vision of a way out of the present gender division' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.73), and Palmer writes: 'Carter presents the trans-sexual Evelyn/Eve to us as the ideal feminist, the perfect woman constructed according to an androgynous blueprint' (Contemporary Women's Writing, p.19, my emphasis). Both critics, however, associate the hermaphroditic answer to patriarchal domination as a 1970's trend, and both outline

and document the deficiencies of the concept.⁴⁰ Ricarda Schmidt describes the importance of the symbol of hermaphroditism in the novel: she argues that Eve's vision at the end of her cave journey, of 'a miraculous, seminal, intermediate being whose nature [she had] grasped in the desert' (The Passion, p.185) was glimpsed earlier in the novel during the love-making of Tristessa and Eve in the desert, when they 'made the great Platonic hermaphrodite together' (The Passion, p.148). She claims:

They fill the desert's vast emptiness with the mirages of all their conceptions of femininity and masculinity. They project them upon each other and merge them into the imaginary wholeness of a hermaphroditic being in their love-making. ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.64)⁴¹

However, Schmidt is disturbed by the traditional gender roles adopted by Eve and Tristessa in this scene, roles which are reinforced in the language used to describe it, which 'still equates active pursuit with masculinity and docile submission with femininity.' Schmidt finally concludes that 'hermaphroditism still adheres to the phallogocentric rule of the One and denies difference' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.66).⁴² Palmer finds

⁴⁰ See Ricarda Schmidt, 'The Journey of the Subject,' p.66, and Paulina Palmer Contemporary Women's Fiction, pp.19-20.

⁴¹ Schmidt goes on (p.75, footnote 21) to criticise David Punter's argument in The Hidden Script: Writing and the Unconscious (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p.42, where he describes the 'lifeless mating of Eve and Tristessa.'

⁴² Julia Kristeva makes a similar comment when arguing for the dismantling of the opposition man/woman,

nothing to celebrate in the presentation of what she calls 'trans-sexuality.' She criticises the male to female trans-sexual 'as a threat to women's liberation,' and argues that the male to female trans-sexual is 'not a woman at all but an anomalous hybrid created by a patriarchal culture with the aim of usurping woman's place and power' (Contemporary Women's Fiction, p.20).⁴³

Carter does appear to play with the notion of androgyny, or at least a Tiresian knowledge of both genders, as a possible alternative vision of the future: Eve describes him/herself sardonically as 'the Tiresias of Southern California' (p.71). Carter recounts in an interview in Spare Rib (November 1985, p.37) that The Passion started off with a radical mis-remembering of the myth of Tiresias. Her mis-remembering concerns the final part of the story when Tiresias claims that women take greater pleasure in sexual intercourse than men. Carter mis-remembers Juno's (Hera's) response, saying that instead of blinding him she was 'so furious that she turned him back into a woman again ... and it's always

in 'Women's Time,' Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 7, No.1 (1981), 13-35. She claims that she is 'not simply suggesting a very hypothetical bisexuality' since this 'would only, in fact, be the aspiration toward the totality of one of the sexes and thus an effacing of difference' (p.34).

⁴³ For evidence, Palmer draws upon Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp.67-68, 71-2; and Janice Raymond, The Transsexual Empire (London: Women's Press, 1980).

seemed to me that this was perfectly just punishment.⁴⁴ However, the novel also self-consciously problematizes the notion of hermaphroditism, and dramatises the very criticisms offered by both Palmer and Schmidt. The quotation describing the love-making of Tristessa and Eve, for example, which Schmidt chooses in order to show how stereotypical gender roles are maintained, reads as follows:

when you [Tristessa] lay below me ... I beat down upon you mercilessly, with atavistic relish, but the glass woman I saw beneath me smashed under my passion and the splinters scattered and recomposed themselves into a man who overwhelmed me. (p.149)

This could also be interpreted as the novel's own self-reflexive criticism of the hermaphroditic model. This passage shows the reversibility of gender roles--Eve and Tristessa take 'turn and turn about, now docile, now virile' (p.149)--but whilst the splintering and reconstructing process described suggests the creation of something new, Tristessa and Eve are only 'recomposed' into recognisable gender roles and remain trapped within convention. This is a critique of the model of

⁴⁴ In Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces (New York: Routledge, 1988), Catherine R. Stimpson offers five definitions of androgyny, one of which may be useful for interpretations of The Passion. This describes a 'physical hermaphrodite,' a 'mythical and mystical being,' which

may symbolize balance, reconciliation, and the unity of such binary opposites as female and male, earth and sun, dark and light, cold and hot. Or, it may symbolize wisdom, a creature able to grasp the totality of experience of both sexes. (p.54)

hermaphroditism which Catherine R. Stimpson has described very clearly in Where the Meanings Are:

The androgyne ... must ultimately face a logical dilemma. It may endorse freedom of erotic preference, but it cannot support freedom of sexual role. By definition, the androgyne demands the blending and merging of masculine and feminine roles ...

The androgyne still fundamentally thinks in terms of 'feminine' and 'masculine.' It fails to conceptualise the world and to organize phenomena in a new way that leave 'feminine' and 'masculine' behind. (pp.57-58)

Similarly, The Passion clearly reveals that whilst Eve plays out a stereotypical female role, s/he also becomes aware of the masochistic and self-annihilatory impulses which construct it. S/he becomes both object and stereotypical 'consumable' woman:

I looked down at my slow limbs; they were already dusted with sand, like a fine, golden powder and I thought, how delicious I look! I look like a gingerbread woman. Eat me. Consume me.⁴⁵

Here we were at the beginning or end of the world and I, in my sumptuous flesh, was in myself the fruit of the tree of knowledge; knowledge had made me, I was a man-made masterpiece of skin and bone, the technological Eve in person. (p.146)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Perhaps one of the most striking novels concerned with the notion of woman as consumable is Margaret Atwood's novel The Edible Woman (1969) (London: Virago, 1980). Marian, the heroine of the story becomes anorexic, and unable to consume any food. She breaks her fast only at the end of the novel when she has baked a cake shaped and decorated as a woman, which her boyfriend refuses to eat; then, disturbingly, but also liberatingly, she begins to eat it herself.

⁴⁶ Carter uses this image again to describe the relationship between Jeanne Duval and Baudelaire in 'Black Venus': 'She is not Eve but, herself, the forbidden fruit, and he has eaten her!' (p.15). However, on the

Evelyn is consumable both as gingerbread woman and as forbidden fruit. Eve describes her/himself here, not as a New Eve, but as a 'man-made' product, in other words s/he spells out clearly her constitution as a synthetic patriarchal construct.

This self-consciousness is also signalled in the novel by means of the much-repeated trope of reflecting eyes. Tristessa tells Eve not to look at him/her, that is, to avoid the binary roles where one sex is reflected in (defined by) the other. But Eve is unable to take this advice, plays out the stereotype, sees her/himself reflected in Tristessa's eyes, and becomes the object s/he sees in the reflection: 'I did not close my eyes for I saw in his face how beautiful I was' (p.151).

Schmidt and Palmer's other criticism, that androgyny necessarily privileges one gender over the other, is also prefigured and dramatised within the novel. After Tristessa has been murdered in the desert, Eve finds that she has temporarily become Tristessa (the symbol of everything a woman 'should be'):

I was free to run away, to run back to the grave in the sand, to lie down upon it and there to waste away from sorrow. I was very much struck by the emblematic beauty of this idea; to die for love! So much had I become the mortal, deathward-turning aspect of Tristessa. (p.162)

Hence, one side of the hermaphroditic being that Eve and Tristessa became is shown to dominate the other: as if

same page, the narrative describes how Duval also eats Baudelaire: 'Black Helen's lips suck the marrow from the poet's spirit' (p.15).

Eve has been 'consumed' by, and become, the patriarchal notion of the ideal Woman.

Most critics recognize that The Passion demystifies not only patriarchal convention but its antithesis, the matriarchal alternative. Paulina Palmer reads for signs of 'positive' celebrations of women's relationships and women's communities ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.190), and is therefore disappointed by Carter's satirical description of Mother's 'matriarchal guerilla fighters,' including Lilith. Gina Wisker claims: that 'the Great Mother is as much a parody as the supersexist Zero in The Passion of New Eve.'⁴⁷ Elaine Jordan describes Mother as 'inversely phallic, female to the nth degree'; this, she claims, is Carter's 'critique of women's "feminine" behaviour, and of some [separatist] feminist programmes' ('Enthralment,' p.36). Ricarda Schmidt, in her very polished and convincing analysis of this novel, states that 'A return to the mythical times of matriarchy is rejected as a dead end' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.73).⁴⁸ Schmidt explains how Carter satirises biological

⁴⁷ Gina Wisker, 'Winged Women and Werewolves: How do we read Angela Carter?' in Ideas and Production: A Journal in the History of Ideas, Issue 4: Poetics (1986), 87-98 (p.89).

⁴⁸ Earlier in the same article, Schmidt points out similarities between two would-be rulers, Mother in The Passion and Dr Hoffman in The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman:

Like Dr Hoffman in the former novel, Mother wants to make something imaginary concrete and

essentialism (which Clark believes is indispensable to the feminist cause), and the female separatist option (which Palmer appears to take seriously).⁴⁹ The Amazons, she writes, 'celebrate femininity as motherhood, the architecture of their city is modelled on the womb. Their fight against patriarchy is expressed in the emblem of the broken phallus' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.62). Beulah, Mother, and her followers all appear to be situated totally outside of patriarchal convention, and yet, as the novel shows clearly, they are defined totally in terms of the very conventions they claim to reject. Mother's 'feminist freedom fighters,' for example, whilst celebrating femininity, are defined in terms of male aggression (which is what Palmer objects to)--their training

involved not only target practice and work with explosive devices, nuclear hand-weapons and limited range missiles but bayonet charges, the taking of fortified positions by assault and charges through barricades improvised from thorns and spikes. (p.79)

Similarly, Eve, their 'ideal woman' (p.78), is expected to model herself upon hundreds of male artists' depictions of the Madonna and Child, and all of Tristessa's movies which

real; and like him she wants to end historical time. In this attempt both figures are unmasked as tyrannical. (p.63)

⁴⁹ In her non-fictional article, 'The Language of Sisterhood,' in The State of the Language, edited by Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp.226-34, Carter outlines some of her objections to separatism, claiming that 'there is a fictive quality about the notion of a universality of "women only" experience' (p.231).

represent the ultimate in patriarchal conformity (p.72). This ironic argument is supported by the novel's use of intertextuality to describe Beulah and its inhabitants, which not only relies upon texts by men, but texts which are particularly concerned with gender issues. The very name of the underground hideaway, Beulah, recalls, for example, the writing of John Bunyan and William Blake. Schmidt points out that both of these poets represent a 'male vision of conciliatory femininity and of sexual union of man and woman,' and 'Blake's daughters of Beulah ... exist only in relation to the male, for the male, and in man's imagination' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.62).⁵⁰ Schmidt also stresses the importance of humour in this novel, and, citing examples from the extraordinary rituals with which Mother surrounds herself, she describes how the novel avoids taking the matriarchal alternative to patriarchy too seriously: 'Mother's glorification of the womb, female space, biological essentialism (which stands for one position within the women's movement in the 1970's), is satirized in its involuntarily comic self-pronunciation' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.63).

Both the hermaphroditic and the matriarchal alternative visions of the future, which appear to be outside convention, are therefore shown, ironically, to be

⁵⁰ Schmidt makes specific references to John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p.155, and William Blake's 'Milton,' and 'A Vision of the Last Judgment,' in The Complete Writings of William Blake, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random House, 1958), pp.418, 493, 516 and 614.

constructs of the very conventions they appear to negate. The same might be said of criticism of the novel itself. This criticism may appear to be detached and outside the novel, but is, of course, rooted within the novel itself. This is dramatized in The Passion and is signalled by the novel's self-conscious prefiguring of critical problems, which forms part of the demythologising process. There is no utopian space outside of convention from which to challenge patriarchal society, and no place outside the novel from which to criticise, only the suggestion that such a place exists; moreover, the very notion of such a space outside convention is itself conventional.

Given the demythologising and self-reflexive nature of this novel, the only way in which it can suggest the possibility of a New Woman figure is through paradox. Critics argue that the process of demythologising which appears to dominate the novel precludes the possibility of creating such a figure, yet I would argue that it is this very process which makes the existence of an alternative and affirmative feminine consciousness more thinkable. The demythologising process itself is thematised in the novel as a rewriting of the Passion of Christ; it can be read as a cleansing or purifying process which prepares the way for a new beginning.

This is a novel, then, which celebrates the possibility of change via death and resurrection. There is an alchemical metaphor which recurs throughout the

novel, representing this particular process of transformation: it describes many instances of dissolution into a chaos that contains the possibility of restructuring. Baraslav the alchemist has informed Evelyn: 'We must plunge into this cauldron of chaos, we must offer ourselves to night, to dark, to death. Who may not be resurrected if, first, he has not died?' (p.14, see also pp.16, 44, and 150). The alchemical metaphor suggests transmutation from one state to another. It suggests dissolution into chaos, but, just as Baraslav turns red powder, mercury, borax and nitrate into gold (p.14), so the recurring alchemical metaphor also implies the possibility of transforming something common into something new and precious. Eve's creation, for example, is described as just such an alchemical transmutation: Beulah is 'a crucible' (p.49), Mother is 'queen of the crucible' (p.61), and Eve, partly created in the 'reflected light' (p.72) of Tristessa's movies, is turned from a stereotype male chauvinist into a singular being. Baraslav's defines 'Chaos' as:

'the earliest state of disorganised creation, blindly impelled towards the creation of a new order of phenomena of hidden meanings. The fructifying chaos of anteriority, the state before the beginning of the beginning.'
(p.14)⁵¹

⁵¹ Robert Clark, in 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' can see no positive explanation for the valorisation of chaos at the end of the novel:

It is scarcely any wonder that the end of the novel resorts to images of the Earth Mother that Carter derided in The Sadeian Woman [p.5] and

And this is echoed at the end of the novel when Eve claims, 'Here we were at the beginning or end of the world' (p.146). This state of anteriority could be said to represent a clean slate or blank page which 'embraces all opposing forms in a state of undifferentiated dissolution' (p.14). (This is another example of the 'tabula rasa' image which recurs across Carter's work.)

The process of demystification is thematised in the narrative as a process of dissolution, and it takes on several forms. It can be interpreted as one long Fall, or a series of different Falls, towards knowledge and also towards chaos.⁵² As Ricarda Schmidt claims, the long Fall takes the symbolic form of a descent into a labyrinth,⁵³

culminates in incomprehensible political chaos.
(pp.157-58)

52 These symbolic Falls include the change in Evelyn's life when he 'falls' for Leilah. He tastes of the forbidden fruit Leilah has to offer (Leilah may represent either Satan or 'Old Eve'), 'I kissed her. Her mouth had a strange flavour, like that of those mysterious fruits, such as the medlar, that are not fit to eat until they are rotten; her tongue was incandescent,' and he leaves his own apartment to move in with her, since:

I felt all the ghastly attraction of the fall. Like a man upon a precipice, irresistibly lured by gravity, I succumbed at once. I took the quickest way down, I plunged. I could not resist the impulsion of vertigo. (p.25)

There are many other examples: Eve almost falls when he meets Tristessa and looks into his/her eyes (p.125); s/he falls when forced to consummate the double marriage to Tristessa, after which Eve claims 'I got off the bed and looked for some rag to cover my nakedness because I had grown suddenly ashamed of it' (p.138); and falls once again in the cave at the end of the novel (p.183).

53 The image of labyrinths through which characters journey is another favourite of Carter's. See for example, Several Perceptions, in which Anne leads Joseph

and Evelyn's narrative is punctuated with references to this journey:

DESCEND LOWER. YOU have not reached the end of the maze, yet. (p.49)

I have not reached the end of the maze yet. I descend lower, descend lower. I must go further. (p.150)

And this Fall/journey is also portrayed as one of introspection:

Descend lower, descend the diminishing spirals of being that restore us to our source. Descend lower; while the world, in time, goes forward and so presents us with the illusion of motion, though all our lives we move through the curvilinear galleries of the brain towards the core of the labyrinth within us. (p.39)

It can be interpreted as a journey into the centre of Evelyn's 'brain-maze of interiority' (p.56) and also the womb.⁵⁴ It takes the concrete form of descending the labyrinth of Beulah--which is also identified as both womb (p.52) and brain (p.58)--and the journey into the cave at the end of the novel--which becomes both Mother and Eve's womb.

home one night: 'Her hand was a clue leading him through a labyrinth' (p.101). It is used again in Love to describe Lee, Buzz and Annabel's destructive relationship: 'In the sequence of events which now drew the two brothers and the girl down, in ever-decreasing spirals, to the empty place at the centre of the labyrinth they had built between them' (p.101). It is also used to describe the forest into which the children venture in 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest,' in Fireworks (p.53).

⁵⁴ By identifying the womb and brain so closely, the novel is exposing what Mary Ellmann, in her wonderful book, Thinking about Women (1968) (London: Virago, 1979), p.12, calls, 'the most popular route of association ... between the female reproductive organs and the female mind.' In The Passion, however, the stereotype is made strange by Eve(lyn)'s dual gender. Her body is female but his mind appears to remain male.

The process of dissolution/Fall/journey also takes the form of a regression through time: 'Time is running back on itself' (p.183), to a pre-Oedipal state before gender differentiation, that is, to the mother/child relationship before intervention by the Father.⁵⁵ In Beulah Eve returns to a pre-Oedipal state of auto-eroticism where s(he) is both the subject and the object of his/her own desire:

She [Mother] beckoned me towards her, unbuttoned the front of her white coat, took me to her breasts and suckled me. Then I felt a great

⁵⁵ Sylvia Bryant, in 'Re-Constructing Oedipus Through "Beauty and The Beast,"' in Criticisms: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts, 31, No.4 (Fall 1989), 439-53, describes a similar process taking place in Carter's short story 'The Tiger's Bride' from The Bloody Chamber. She identifies the 'girl's desires' in this story as 'pre-Oedipal, almost pre-ideological' (p.448). Clare Hanson, in 'Each Other,' claims the same about one of the Black Venus stories:

In 'The Cabinet of Edgar Alan Poe' aspects of sexuality and sexual identity are explored in ways which transcend gender, and gender prejudice. Perhaps this is simply because Carter explores in this story areas of experience which predate our acquisition of a sexed, gendered identity. (p.81)

Interestingly, Freud wrote a letter to Jung in which he links the Eve and the Oedipal myths via the mediation of the idea of Mother incest (a powerful image in The Passion), and the notion of reversal. Freud writes (The Freud/Jung Letters (1974), edited by William McGuire, abridged by Alan McGlashan (London: Picador, 1979) (17 December 1911)):

There is something very strange and singular about the creation of Eve. Rank recently called my attention to the fact that the Bible story may quite well have reversed the original myth. Then everything would be clear; Eve would be Adam's mother, and we should be dealing with the well known motif of mother-incest, the punishment for which etc. (pp.251-52)

peace and a sense of reconciliation. It seemed the breasts I suckled could never be exhausted but would always flow with milk to nourish me and my relation to the zone of mother had not changed and could never change for Little Oedipus had lived in a land of milk and kindness before his father taught him to how to stab with his phallus and baby's relation to the breasts bears no relation to his or hers. (p.75)

Only in her/his relation to Mother does Eve(lyn) feel able to cope with his/her state of undifferentiation. The cave journey marks a final return to Mother's womb and finally a state of undifferentiation between Eve and Mother: and therefore Eve once more gives birth to herself:

A brackish and marine smell now fills my nostrils, the odour of the sea within me.

The walls of meat expelled me. (p.186)

The novel draws an explicit link between this process of returning to the womb and the alchemical process. Eve's vision includes the image of a foal returning to its mother's womb: 'She herself becomes smaller and smaller until, in the alchemical vase, she becomes a solution of amino-acids and a tuft of hair, and then dissolves into the amniotic sea' (p.186).

Ricarda Schmidt describes 'the ocean,' to which Eve commits herself at the very end of the novel, as 'both a symbol of the womb and the grave' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.66). The ending of this novel describes a death scene, but also a scene of prophecy and the suggestion of resurrection, rebirth and of the regeneration of 'a new order of phenomena.' References to both death and birth are made explicit. The old woman

outside the cave at the end of the novel, for example, refers to her boat, which Eve steals, as her coffin (p.189), and Eve uses the ingot of alchemical gold 'to pay the fatal ferryman' (p.183), in order to set out on the last journey of the novel.⁵⁶ However, Eve is pregnant as she sets out across the ocean--she explains, 'I myself will soon produce a tribute to evolution' (p.186)--and the very last sentence of the novel announces the importance of this forthcoming event: 'Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth' (p.191).⁵⁷

Critics tend to characterise the ending of the novel as a death scene. David Punter picks up on an affirmative note, but attributes this to what he interprets as a liberation brought about through death:

Eve, perhaps, has achieved freedom, although not through any particular actions of her own; it is rather as though, having proved useful in the incarnation of an idea, she may now be allowed to recede from the processes of history. In this respect she is rather like those Old Testament figures who, having had their all spent in one act of supernatural service to God ... are permitted to short circuit the processes of life and death and to retire exhausted and, we may perhaps hypothesise, still only half-

⁵⁶ Schmidt, in 'The Journey of the Subject,' identifies old woman as 'a modern version of Charon,' p.66.

⁵⁷ Both Shadow Dance and Several Perceptions are concerned with the idea of rebirth. Near the end of Shadow Dance Morris feels 'as though he was acting as his own midwife at his own rebirth' (p.162), and he is thrilled when his favourite waitress (whom he imagined Honeybuzzard had scared to death) reappears: 'The suddenness of her resurrection was miraculous. Lazarus ... She was alive' (p.163). Similarly, Joseph, in Several Perceptions, imagines himself reborn after his suicide attempt, and his friend Viv calls him Lazarus (p.25).

comprehending. From her part in the continuous cycle of the desert ... Eve is allowed out to that other sand, to the far beach ... where the absolute ocean forbids further development. ('Supersessions of the Masculine,' p.217)

Schmidt's interpretation of the ending of the novel is very compelling. She identifies Eve's journey through the cave as

a visionary journey.... Eve sees evolution unfold backwards until she has a vision of the legendary bird archaeopteryx....

This bird, a combination of contrarities, symbolizes a wholeness before the separation into two different strands of evolution. ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.65)

The 'archaeopteryx,' as a vision of the future, represents 'bird and lizard both at once, a being composed of the contradictory elements of air and earth.... A miraculous, seminal, intermediate being' (p.185).⁵⁸ Schmidt also claims that the child Eve is to give birth to can be read as referring to 'the birth of a new symbol of femininity, born of the desire to overcome the traditional division of human beings into the stereotypes of femininity and masculinity' (p.67). Without recognition of the model of the Passion of Christ, though, Schmidt is unable to assimilate the images of death and birth which coexist at the end of the novel. She is confused, for instance, about the status of the first person narrator. Schmidt asks:

⁵⁸ In 'The Journey of the Subject,' p.65, Schmidt identifies the archaeopteryx with what she takes to be the novel's valorizing of hermaphroditism. Hence Schmidt's criticisms of the utopian qualities of hermaphroditism qualify her reading of the positive message at the ending of the novel.

If Eve dies in the ocean, when would she have told her story?... At the end of the novel we are left with the paradox that the narrator who very probably died must yet have survived to tell her tale.

Just in case readers have forgotten that this story is a retrospective account from some untold time in the future, the last page of the novel reminds them (in the same way that the last section of The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman does) by returning to the narrator's present:⁵⁹

And all this strange experience, as I remember it, confounds itself in a fugue. At night, dreaming, I go back again to Tristessa's house, that echoing mansion, that hall of mirrors in which my whole life was lived, the glass mausoleum that had been the world and now is smashed. He himself often comes to me in the night, serene in his marvellous plumage of white hair, with the fatal red hole in his breast; after many, many embraces, he vanishes when I open my eyes. (p.191)⁶⁰

This passage associates Tristessa with Christ, since it is Tristessa who is resurrected in Eve's dreams, bearing his

⁵⁹ Schmidt also points out the similarities between the narratives of The Passion and of The Infernal Desire Machines:

In both Hoffman and Eve we have first-person narration from the point of view of posterity. The heroes narrate their adventures in the past tense long after they have completed them. Their narratives are full of cryptic hints at events to come, insights still to be gained, and explanations in the light of experiences which take place much later in the chronology of events. (p.66)

⁶⁰ Desiderio, in The Infernal Desire Machines, describes his memories in the same terms: 'And, sometimes, when I think of my journey ... everything seem[s] to have happened all at once, in a kind of fugue of experience' (p.13). The love of his life, Albertina, also appears in his dreams only to vanish when he awakes (pp.25-26).

fatal wound. Both Schmidt and Lorna Sage describe the end of The Passion in terms of 'contradictions,' 'uncertainties,' and 'problems.' Schmidt argues that these arise because

after the destruction both of the old patriarchal symbols and of the feminist revival of the matriarchal ones, the course of the heroine's future journey cannot yet be foretold, since new symbols (of which Eve has had but a glimpse) have yet to be created on a social level.... What becomes of her remains an open question. ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.66)

Similarly, Sage comments:

The ending [of The Passion], with new Eve pregnant but really still preoccupied with giving birth to herself, seemed to me to have the problems of prophecy: we don't know what will emerge from rethinking sexual stereotypes. ('The Savage Sideshow,' p.57)

The interpretation of the novel as a rewriting of the Passion of Christ does allow these contraries to coexist; it encompasses both the death of one system and the possible birth of another. The journey/fall, then, which shapes the whole narrative, therefore maps a double process--of dissolution or alchemical breakdown into chaos but also of growth toward knowledge (Punter describes this as 'the evolution into chaos' ('Supersessions of the Masculine,' p.215)), out of which something precious might be created. Importantly, however, this 'something,' Eve and Tristessa's baby, remains only a projection at the end of the narrative, and is not born within the confines of the novel.

The baby expected at the end of the novel may be interpreted as the New Woman figure this novel appears to

promise. Schmidt, for example, claims that 'Eve believes that the child she conceived by Tristessa will signify the beginning of a new species, symbolically speaking' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.66). Robert Clark, in 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' introduces The Passion as 'Carter's most ambitious commentary on gender and gendering, the basic plot concerning the conversion of the archetypal male chauvinist Evelyn into the New Eve, a woman whose self-fertilized child "will rejuvenate the world"' ('Angela Carter's Desire Machine,' p.156, quoting from The Passion, p.77). Clark, however, fails to make a distinction between Mother's matriarchal dream of Eve as a self-sufficient being who can 'seed' and 'fruit' her/himself (p.76),⁶¹ and Eve's relationship with Tristessa. The baby, the novel makes perfectly clear, has been conceived out of doubleness, of the mating of 'two fathers and two mothers' (p.187). This child conceived

⁶¹ Eve would be self-sufficient only thanks to Mother's 'divine' intervention (via rape, a complete restructuring of Evelyn's body, followed by the projected artificial insemination of Evelyn's own sperm), which is highlighted by a parody of the Annunciation. (This also marks a difference between the New Eve and the Virgin Mary.) See Luke 1.28 and 31:

Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women....

And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

Mother announces:

'Hail, Evelyn, most fortunate of men! You're going to bring forth the Messiah of the Antithesis!' (p.67)

out of doubleness can also be read as a symbol of the many doublenesses which haunt Carter's work, and which this thesis documents. On the one hand, the unborn child represents hope for the future: it functions as a symbol of rebirth and regeneration, and suggests the possibility of an alternative consciousness outside patriarchal convention. Schmidt and Sage, as I have shown, interpret Eve's forthcoming child as a being outside convention which cannot be defined since appropriate symbols have yet to be generated. On the other hand, however, the baby's non-existence--Eve's child's birth is not articulated within the confines of the novel--forcefully reaffirms the argument that nothing exists outside convention. The existence of the child is suggested by Lilith, "'What if Tristessa made you pregnant?'" (p.187), and accepted by Eve, perhaps because Lilith's very language appears to be pregnant: 'Lilith, then, took it for granted that I was pregnant; and under her solicitous chatter, the surface of her speech, there was a ground-swell of necessity' (pp.187-88). But the birth of the baby, the birth of a concrete representative of the hope of a future beyond patriarchal convention, cannot be articulated inside Carter's novel, and therefore does not exist as a textual construct.

We can read Eve's pregnancy as a symbol of the doubleness of the reading experience of Carter's fiction, which continually suggests something beyond itself, but also undermines this very notion by showing that there is

only the novel, there are only constructions. We can also read it as both a suggestion of a Utopian being outside convention and yet also as the evidence that no such thing exists. It is possible, as I suggested earlier, to read The Passion itself as a representation of convention, where the fictional and linguistic codes signify social codes. The novel uses and exposes fictional codes as codes at the same time as it exposes patriarchal conventions as conventions. It continually suggests that the story continues and Eve's baby will exist beyond the textual confines, just as it suggests that utopian alternatives, outside patriarchal convention, exist, and yet it simultaneously demystifies these suggestions.

CHAPTER 6

THE LIBERATION OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT?--II:

'NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS'

'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--'

'It's going to be more complicated than that,' interpolated Lizzie. 'This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and then we'll discuss it.'

Angela Carter¹

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values and signs, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.

Jacques Derrida²

¹ An interchange between Fevvers and Lizzie in Nights at the Circus, pp.285-86.

² Of Grammatology, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.5.

I

Nights at the Circus is a celebratory and a visionary novel. It can be read as a culmination of all of the experiments which I have described taking place in Carter's earlier work, but it by no means functions as a conclusion. Rather, it serves both as a résumé and as a fresh beginning: it appears to offer answers to some questions but also generates many more of its own. Nights at the Circus returns to many of the important theoretical issues which Carter's earlier novels explore.

Chapter I offered an interpretation of Nights at the Circus in terms of its effect on its readers and reading conventions, asking an unanswerable, but productive, question: who is in control, the reader or the text? This final chapter presents a further reading of the same novel, this time in the light of the experiments taking place in Carter's earlier work, which I have documented.

In Chapter 2, I described The Infernal Desire Machines in terms of Jacques Derrida's model of invagination; and in subsequent chapters I described how much of Carter's work depends upon and exploits the play between what is central and what marginal, what appears to be inside, and what outside, convention. Nights at the Circus is no exception: the circus ring can be interpreted as a symbol of the vagina, functioning rather like the carnival peep-show Exhibit 1 in The Infernal Desire Machines, and the circus freaks and drop-outs who

form the personnel of the ring are marginal in 'normal' society but central in the circus.³

In Chapter 3 I described how several novels capitalise upon the superimposition of particular modes of reading, often associated with nineteenth-century 'realist' and twentieth-century 'modernist' novels, in order to expose the reading conventions which govern the construction of character and identity, and which also govern the way we read ourselves and the world. Nights at the Circus appears almost to historicise this issue: the novel is set at precisely the point of interaction of these two centuries, and this chapter will reveal how it self-consciously dramatises the different modes of reading which have become associated with each century and how they affect the construction of identity. Nights at the Circus also illustrates, once again, the many ways in which the recognition of convention as convention challenges and changes readers' understanding of their own position.

In Chapter 4, I discussed how The Passion exposes codes governing patriarchal ideology in order to demystify the false universals which organise sexual politics, whilst at the same time adopting a strategic politics, as if Woman were a reality beyond stereotypes. This paradoxical approach describes the juxtaposition of a

³ Another example of Carter's interest in the notion of 'freaks' is her introduction to a reissue of Memoirs of a Midget by Walter de la Mare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

demythologising and a celebratory reading of women's difference which enacts the superimposition of important 'French' and 'American' feminist critical positions. As this chapter will demonstrate, Fevvers in Nights at the Circus symbolises this double reading of Woman.

Chapter 5 explores Carter's investigations into the possibility of creating a liberated female subject, and Nights at the Circus is obviously a continuation and celebration of this theme. Fevvers appears to fulfil all the expectations which some feminist critics have found thwarted by Carter's previous novels. She is a symbol of liberation, of change, and of positive femininity; and the new departure for women which she represents is, in Rory P. B. Turner's words, 'consecrated by the celebration of the beginning of the 20th century.'⁴ The novel makes a clear connection between Fevvers's potential for flight and the new century: 'It is the final, waning, season of the year of Our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety nine. And Fevvers has all the éclat of a new era about to take off' (p.11). When Ma Nelson, the madame of the brothel in which Fevvers grows up, sees Fevvers's wings for the first time, she recognises the possibility of portraying Fevvers as a triumphant symbol of women's liberation in the new century:

'Oh, my little one, I think you must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in

⁴ Rory P. B. Turner, 'Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus,' in Folklore Forum, 20, Nos.1/2 (1987), 39-60 (p.58).

the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound to the ground.' And then she wept. That night, we threw away the bow and arrow and I posed, for the first time, as the Winged Victory. (p.25)⁵

Several critics have readily accepted Fevvers as a utopian New Woman figure. Gina Wisker describes her as a 'winged wonder,' who perhaps embodies 'the new woman's flight from the bondage of her roles.'⁶ Ricarda Schmidt claims that 'Fevvers is the concrete manifestation of an idea, the free woman,' and that she is 'a child of the dream of the future.'⁷ Paulina Palmer states that 'the most powerful image of liberation and transformation in the novel is Fevvers herself and her magnificent wings.'⁸

⁵ Jeanne Duval, in the title story of Black Venus, is described in the same terms as Fevvers, but as if she were Fevvers's negative. Where Fevvers is 'the new child of the century' (Nights at the Circus, p.25), Duval is described as 'the pure child of the colony. The colony--white, imperious--had fathered her' (Black Venus, p.17). Fevvers is the Cockney Venus, Jeanne Duval, the Black Venus. Fevvers is a bird woman and trapeze artist, and Jeanne is described as 'the sooty albatross,' one of 'the wonderful aerielistes who live in the heart of the storm' and who 'dare death upon the high trapeze' (Black Venus, pp.18-19). Fevvers is 'Helen of the High Wire' (Nights at the Circus, p.7), and Jeanne has 'black Helen's lips' (Black Venus, p.15). Fevvers is a New Eve figure but Jeanne is described as 'The custard-apple of her stinking Eden she, this forlorn Eve, bit' (Black Venus, p.9).

⁶ Gina Wisker, 'Winged Women and Werewolves: How do we read Angela Carter,' in Ideas and Production: A Journal in the History of Ideas, Issue 4: Poetics (1986), 87-98 (p.94).

⁷ Ricarda Schmidt, 'The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's fiction,' in Textual Practice, 3, No.1 (Spring 1989), 56-75 (pp.71 and 68 respectively).

⁸ Paulina Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight,' in Women Reading Women's Writing, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp.177-205 (p.199).

Palmer, as I have already made clear in previous chapters, is disturbed by what she feels are 'distorted' representations of femininity in Carter's pre-1978 work;⁹ Nights at the Circus, however, makes up for the deficiencies she found in The Passion and its predecessors. Palmer claims that Carter's more recent fiction combines, 'in a manner unprecedented in Carter's work, an analysis of the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures with a treatment of themes relating to psychic change and female specificity' ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.195).

Palmer opens her article by quoting an interchange between Fevvers and Lizzie which occurs toward the end of Nights at the Circus, and which I have used as an epigraph to this chapter. Fevvers, she claims, looks forward to a time when 'all the women will have wings' (Nights at the Circus, p.285), but Fevvers's 'flight of fancy remains incomplete, since her words are sharply interrupted by a cynical comment voiced by her foster mother Lizzie.' This quotation, Palmer argues 'illustrates a key area of tension in Carter's writing, by juxtaposing two

⁹ The 'post-1978' work which Palmer refers to, in 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman,' includes only The Bloody Chamber and Nights at the Circus. Of the earlier fiction, Palmer writes, 'The texts she published prior to 1978 were marred, in my opinion, by an element of distortion. This led me to read them in the manner associated with the critic Pierre Macherey, very conscious of "absences", "omissions" and "silences"' (p.180). She is referring to Macherey's A Theory of Literary Production, translated by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

antithetical impulses which inform it' ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.179). The tension, then, is between what Palmer describes as newly introduced 'celebratory' and 'utopian' elements, of which Fevvers is the embodiment, and the demythologising processes which she feels dominate Carter's earlier novels. Palmer's main concern in the article is to applaud what she sees as these new elements of celebration. She praises the imagery of liberation and rebirth connected with Fevvers, and stresses how this enables 'the opening up of areas of identity that were closed and ... the formation of alternative structures, psychic and social' ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.182). She also comments upon the novel's use of 'magic realism' in order to express the 'liberating' emotions of pleasure and wonder. She commends the new emphasis which this novel places upon productive and positive relationships between women and within communities of women, particularly Fevvers and Lizzie, Mignon's lesbian relationship with the Princess, and 'the emergence of a female counter-culture' ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.180) celebrated when the women who escape from Countess P's penitentiary head off into the tundra to found their own female utopia. Palmer stresses the challenges to patriarchal society posed by these possibilities for both personal and universal change.

However, while she very usefully documents the two 'antithetical impulses' of demythologising and celebration in Nights at the Circus, she does not--except for her

opening example of Fevvers's and Lizzie's conversation--document their interaction, maintaining instead that each 'impulse' 'is of interest in its own right.' Her article classifies Carter's pre-1978 fiction as 'analytic' and 'demythologising,' and the post-1987 fiction as 'celebratory' ('From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.179 and pp.179-80 respectively).¹⁰ What this approach points towards, but fails to stress, is the extraordinary way in which these two contradictory 'impulses' in Nights at the Circus exist in juxtaposition: in this novel, nearly all moments of celebration are accompanied by their demythologising complement. For example, the novel obviously does celebrate the liberation of the women murderers, who set out to make a completely new start for themselves outside convention: 'The white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished' (p.218). It also, however, demythologises this description of the female separatist utopia in the tundra, as indeed, it criticises all the utopian possibilities which it posits. It is clear that though the women do escape from Countess P's, their freedom is limited: they

¹⁰ In 'The Journey of the Subject,' Ricarda Schmidt draws a similar distinction between Nights at the Circus and Carter's earlier fiction:

In Circus Carter switches from the analysis of the formation of the subject, i.e. from the deconstruction of the subject as good and natural, to the construction of a fantastic subject, the free woman. (p.73)

cannot escape history and are held by their own past experiences. The women long for their children (p.218), but have no choice but to remain outside civilization because they are outside the law. Paradoxically, the novel also shows that the women cannot exist totally outside convention, since they are not self-sufficient; the comic description of their dilemma also deflates and denies the seriousness of the separatist utopian possibility. For example, the women have to ask the escaped convict (their male counterpart) to 'deliver 'em up a pint or two of sperm ... to impregnate such of them as were of child-bearing age and so ensure the survival of this little republic of free women' (p.240).¹¹ To cap this, there are Lizzie's obstreperous comments, 'What'll they do with the boy babies? Feed 'em to the polar bears? To the female polar bears?' (pp.240-41). The novel's paradoxical presentation of this separatist option has had a winning effect on some reviewers who would not be sympathetic, I suspect, to Palmer's position. Amy E. Schwartz maintains that Nights at the Circus manages 'to bypass the didacticism and the urgent tone that tended to mar so much of the first wave of serious feminist fiction' (New Republic, May 1985, pp.38-41 (p.38)), and Valentine Cunningham writes:

¹¹ Nothing like the 'parthenogenesis archetype' put forward by Mother in The Passion (p.68), or portrayed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland (London: The Women's Press, 1979), where these women might magically reproduce themselves, is even remotely suggested in this novel.

This big, superlatively imagined novel may be an extravaganza, but it refuses to be as extravagantly hostile to men's doings and tellings as some of the less well-tempered women's books nowadays are. (Observer, 30 September 1984, p.20)

It is the disturbing coexistence of the demythologising with the celebratory, one of the many powerful juxtapositions in Carter's work, which facilitates what at first appears to be impossible.¹² Nights at the Circus explores the constitution of the subject in relation to the notion of free womanhood (Schmidt, 'The Journey of the Subject,' p.56); more specifically, it presents a simultaneous breakdown of the notion of identity and yet also the creation of an extraordinary woman with wings (who is, of course, herself concerned with the question of her own existence). Clare Hanson describes how Fevvers represents an image of the inconceivable. She writes, 'It is almost impossible to find/imagine an image of women which escapes [the] masculine/feminine, positive/negative "violent hierarchy."' Perhaps Carter herself achieves this with Fevvers in

¹² Similarly, Linda Hutcheon, in The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989), describes Carter's short story 'Black Venus' in terms of the juxtaposition of two discourses--'of complicity and challenge'--which meet and clash, and result in the representation of 'the feminist politicization of desire' (p.149). 'Carter's text,' Hutcheon writes,

consistently contrasts the language of Baudelairean decadent male eroticism with the stark social reality of Jeanne Duval's position as a colonial, a black, and a kept woman.... The text is a complex interweaving of the discourses of desire and politics, of the erotic and the analytic, of the male and female. (pp.145-46)

Nights at the Circus.'¹³ Hanson is alluding to the end of 'Women's Time,' in which Kristeva argues for a 'de-dramatization of the "fight to the death"' between the sexes, in order to shift the focus of the struggle to the place of 'maximum intransigence, in other words, in personal and sexual identity itself.'¹⁴ This, I would argue, is exactly what Carter does in Nights at the Circus: the novel takes the focus away from binary gender opposition and concentrates on identity itself. It is Fevvers's own contradictory identity which empowers her with the capacity for liberation and change which her critics, both inside the world of the novel and outside the novel, so admire.

Fevvers, then, can be read as the New Woman figure which, it seems, could not be articulated in Carter's earlier fiction. Indeed, Ricarda Schmidt offers the very intriguing suggestion that Nights at the Circus be read as a continuation of The Passion in which the positive possibilities suggested at the end of the earlier novel come to fruition: Fevvers might be read as Eve's awaited child, the New Messiah and the New Eve:

Nights at the Circus is a logical sequel to The Passion of New Eve, since, in a way, the heroine Fevvers is Eve's daughter: Fevvers is the new

¹³ Clare Hanson, 'Each Other: Images of Otherness in the Short Fiction of Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys and Angela Carter,' in Journal of the Short Story in English, 10 (Spring 1988), 67-82 (p.82).

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' in Signs: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 7, No.1 (1981), 13-35 (p.34).

symbol of femininity, the contribution to evolution Eve had expected her child to be. She is the archaeopteryx Eve had envisaged, that mystical being, 'composed of the contradictory elements of air and earth (Eve, p.185).' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.67)

Schmidt's suggestion could also be supported by a list of motifs which the two novels share. For example, Lizzie tells Fevvers, 'You are Year One' (Nights at the Circus, p.198), and Eve wonders if the birth of the child which Mother intends her to have will mark 'Year One' (The Passion, p.79). Also, near the end of The Passion:

'Somebody discovered a can of red paint in a wrecked hardware store and effortfully lettered on a remaining wall the legend: YEAR ONE' (p.172).¹⁵ As I argued at the end of Chapter 5, Eve's baby is conceived out of doubleness, and Fevvers, as this chapter will describe, represents doubleness incarnate: she is the 'Queen of ambiguities' (p.81); she appears to be both fact and fiction; and she combines elements of both earth and air:

Boozy, bawdy, demotically outspoken, and mythically endowed with a pair of great wings for flights above and out of the ordinary. (Valentine Cunningham, Observer, 30 September 1984, p.20)

... partly a feminist fantasy, partly a robust and earthy 'Cockney Venus.' (John Mellors, Listener, 11 October 1984, p.30)

¹⁵ In 'Notes from the Front Line,' in On Gender and Writing, edited by Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983), pp.69-77, Carter identifies a period in the late 1960's which 'felt like Year One,' when 'all that was holy was in the process of being profaned' (p.70).

Her wings suggest that she is either a fairy or an angel, but the novels makes it clear that she is both too robust and too sexy to be either of these.

As I have shown throughout this thesis, all of Carter's work is concerned with the notion of change, but it is also deeply concerned with convention. By exposing and exploiting certain elements of patriarchal ideology, Carter's work shows again and again that conventions need to be acknowledged as conventions, rather than as universal truths, in order both to register that change is indeed possible and to enact this change. Thus, Carter's work is not concerned to create a fictional utopian world totally outside of ideology, but to make a space for change to happen, by exploiting the codes of thought that we have. It is, of course, this space which my whole thesis attempts to illuminate. At one point in the novel Lizzie lectures the escaped convict:

'What we have to contend with, here, my boy, is the long shadow of the past historic ... that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present in the first place.

'It's not the human "soul" that must be forged on the anvil of history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to change humanity. Then we might see, if not "perfection", then something a little better, or, not to raise too many false hopes, a little less bad.' (p.240)¹⁶

The passage reflects all of Carter's work, which is engaged in reinterpreting and exploiting the 'past historic' in order to demythologise patriarchal

¹⁶ Lizzie's analysis appears to be conducted in the light of a knowledge of formal French grammar.

'institutions which create the human nature of the present,' to create a vision of social change, and to question how this social change might come about.¹⁷

Leading on from this argument, the logical way to read Fevvers is not as a utopian New Woman figure of the future, who is outside convention, representing a totally new order of things (as Palmer, Schmidt and many reviewers suggest), but to read Nights at the Circus, for all its presentation of a marvellous woman with wings, as exerting pressure on the here and now. Fevvers can be interpreted as everywoman, or what women could be in the 20th century.¹⁸ Indeed, it is ironic that a novel written at the end of the 20th century should depict a vision of women's liberation at the end of the 19th century, and that this vision should still be interpreted by so many critics as a vision of the future.

I would like to claim that Fevvers can be read as a symbol of the liberatory reading space that this whole thesis is attempting to describe. All the adjectives which I have used to describe the reading space could also be used to describe Fevvers. Both are ungraspable: they cannot be fixed, they are a combination of opposites,

¹⁷ In 'Subjects and Symbols,' Turner claims that by 'scapegoating the past historic,' which, he claims, is represented by the clowns who dance themselves into oblivion, 'Carter is opening up a space for reinterpretation, and a reorientation of human nature and human relationships' (pp.52-53).

¹⁸ Clare Hanson, in 'Each Other,' writing about 'Black Venus,' similarly claims that 'Jeanne serves for Carter as an image of all women' (p.78).

located on the borderline between one state and another. Fevvers's slogan reads 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' (p.7), but this could extend to, is she inside or outside convention? is she central or marginal? is she a fraud or a freak? is she real or supernatural? is she believable or incredible? Once again, this duality and undecidability is what makes her, like the liberatory reading space, special; any attempt to tie her down to either side of any of these definitions (and many attempts are made within the world of the novel) takes away her liberatory power. Fevvers's paradoxical nature is her strength: she cannot be proved false because there is nothing graspable about Fevvers to refute. She is both completely new and unique and yet also rooted in convention.

The remainder of this final chapter will be in three sections, all of which will show how Nights at the Circus can be read as a culmination of the experiments carried out in Carter's earlier work which uses convention in order to project a vision of change. Fevvers is a vision of the possibility of change. She represents a challenge to interpretation, both in terms of the possibility of her very existence, and her symbolic value as a woman. The first section will be concerned with gender, and specifically a reading of the significance of Fevvers's body and her status as a representative woman; the second section will attempt to trace Fevvers's origins, examine the notion of identity and show how she symbolises the liberatory reading space which I have been attempting to

define; and finally the third section will return once more to the position of the reader of Carter's work.

II

In order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman--in the implausible event that such a thing existed--have to pretend she was an artificial one?

He smiled to himself at the paradox: in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world. (p.17)

Near the beginning of her long autobiographical narrative, Fevvers tells Walser how she hesitated to take her first flight from the roof of Ma Nelson's brothel, because she realised that the proof that her wings were 'real' would place her totally outside convention:

'I feared a wound not of the body but the soul, sir, an irreconcilable division between myself and the rest of mankind.

'I feared the proof of my own singularity.'
(p.34)

It is Fevvers's body, her wings and her ability to fly, which signifies her Otherness, that is, her difference from the rest of humanity. This section will suggest that Fevvers's wings, the sign of her Otherness, can be interpreted as an exaggerated sign of her difference as a woman, where her wings represent a visible metaphor for another part of woman's anatomy which cannot be seen. According to this argument, then, Fevvers's wings

represent what cannot be completely subsumed within patriarchal ideology: the difference of womens' bodies and womens' sexuality. Importantly, in this novel, it is Fevvers's body and not her political actions which mark her as a representative for all women. (Typically, Carter does build into the narrative a careful and precise web of political and historical specificity which is an integral, but supportive rather than controlling, part of the plot.¹⁹)

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, the body is a central and controversial issue in feminist criticism, and by focusing so clearly on Fevvers's body as the sign of her difference Carter is courting an essentialist convention which locates women's difference in biology. Carter is also exposing, by exaggerating, the stereotypical definition of woman as object of the male gaze, in portraying Fevvers as a freak and a spectacle. It is as if Carter is saying, if women's bodies are what makes them different, let us have a body that is really different!

¹⁹ The novel has a specific historical setting and is riddled with details from turn of the century feminist concerns. The women at Ma Nelson's brothel, for example, are described as suffragists; Lizzie, the novel suggests, was accustomed to attending the 'Godwin and Wollstonecraft Debating Society' in Whitechapel (p.241). Throughout the novel, Lizzie and Fevvers are involved in some mysterious political activities which include spying in Russia, for which they were recruited by 'a spry little gent with a 'tache [Lizzie] met in the reading-room of the British Museum' (p.292). (The pun on spy/spry makes the connection obvious.)

Fevvers's body can be interpreted as the site of her, and all women's, doubleness. Her body is always conceived of in contradictory terms; at once celebrated for its uniqueness, as totally outside convention, but also interpreted in conventional terms. Stereotypically, women in patriarchal society are both contained and yet exceed this containment because of their Otherness; that is, women are both dominated and feared, regarded both as slaves to convention and as close to nature. Nights at the Circus exploits these stereotypes to suggest that Fevvers and all the women she represents are empowered precisely because they operate on the boundary between the outside and the inside of convention. Typically, Fevvers describes her body in both celebratory and demythologising terms: she recognises it as 'the abode of limitless freedom,' and yet in the same sentence admits that this same body is subject to 'the constraints the world imposes' (p.41).²⁰ To focus on, and to celebrate, the doubleness of Fevvers's body, as this novel does, is to expose and to exploit the patriarchal codes which define what women are; it is also to celebrate the doubleness of all women as they are defined in patriarchal society and to exploit the power with which this definition invests them. What follows is a series of examples which account

²⁰ Both Palmer in 'From "Coded Mannequin,"' p.180, and Schmidt in 'The Journey of the Subject,' p.68, use the first part of this quotation to describe Fevvers as a New Woman, but both fail to register the qualifying message the rest of the sentence promotes.

for how and why Fevvers exploits conventions and carefully constructs her self in terms of contradictions.

First, as I described in the previous chapter, women have conventionally been defined in terms of polarities, for example Madonna or Whore, Angel or Monster, Housewife and Witch. In each of these examples one pole--'Whore,' 'Monster,' and 'Witch'--suggest the fear of women as Other, as not easily containable within convention (and therefore powerful). Nights at the Circus 'uses' these stereotypical definitions of women, but also 'abuses' them through excess, by portraying a figure who appears to conform simultaneously to both polarities of each stereotype. At Ma Nelson's, for example, Fevvers is known as the 'Virgin Whore' (p.55), and her body is interpreted as both divine and as monstrous: Ma Nelson interprets it as celestial--'To think we've entertained an angel unawares!' (p.25)²¹--and yet this same 'divine' body is also subject to a more 'earthly (and earthy)'²²

21 See Gabriel García Márquez's short story, 'The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings' in Collected Stories (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp.203-10. The old man with wings in this story, who is thought by many to be an angel, is also portrayed as monstrous because of his ordinariness. Part of the power of this story is that the old man cannot be placed within existing convention. The veracity of his wings is never questioned but he cannot quite be accepted as supernatural because he is so unremarkable in every other way. He convalesces in the chicken coop, as if he were a bird with a broken wing a child had rescued, and flies away when his feathers have regrown. The gender of Márquez's angel does not seem to be of major significance, as it is in Carter's novel.

22 Schmidt, in 'The Journey of the Subject,' p.67; she goes on to describe Fevvers as 'big, vulgar,

interpretation which focuses on her ugliness, and her physical ungainliness:

That grubby dressing-gown, horribly caked with greasepaint round the neck...when Lizzie lifted up the armful of hair, you could see, under the splitting, rancid silk, her humps, her lumps, big as if she bore a bosom fore and aft, her conspicuous deformity, the twin hills of the growth she had put away for those hours she must spend in daylight or lamplight, out of the spotlight. So, on the street, at the soirée, at lunch in expensive restaurants with dukes, princes, captains of industry and punters of like kidney, she was always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye and people stood on chairs to see. (p.19)

What is essential here is that Fevvers maintain the paradox. Her power lies in the fact that she is both and yet neither Madonna and Whore, Angel and Monster, and this is recognised and discussed within the world of the novel. When Fevvers's competitors, the high-wire dancers known as the Charivaris, sabotage her band rehearsal by sawing through the trapeze rope, she is put into a dangerous situation. The danger is similar to that which Fevvers describes when relating the story of her first-ever flight from the roof of Ma Nelson's brothel. The first flight proved to Fevvers her difference from the rest of humanity; a flight in the circus ring, without the suggestion that she might be cheating, would prove her singularity publically, and so mark her definitively as a freak. Walser realises this:

If she were indeed a lusus naturae, a prodigy, then--she was no longer a wonder.

gluttonous, greedy for money--but at the same time she has a pair of splendid wings.'

She would no longer 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, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged.

She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none.

As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. But what would she become, if she continued to be a woman? (p.161)

Schmidt interprets this passage as Walser's notion of Fevvers as a symbol of New Woman:

First, the new symbol must show woman as part of humanity, not raise her above it or place her below it. Second, it must ensure that woman does not have the status of an object but of a subject. Third, it must appreciate woman's difference sympathetically instead of making it a reason for estrangement. Fourth, the symbolic meaning of woman remains open. ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.70)

Schmidt's last two points are accurate, but the first two tell only half the story. Walser realizes that Fevvers's power lies in the fact that she remains a paradox, and to do this she must remain both subject and object, both Angel/Monster (at once above and below 'humanity'), and human.

Second, Nights at the Circus exploits the notion that anything new, that is, anything which does not conform to existing (patriarchal) codes, is labelled monstrous.²³

²³ This is a continuation of the exploration into the question 'What is Woman?' which I have documented in relation to other novels in Chapter 4.

Catherine Belsey claims that revolutionary women have necessarily been interpreted as monsters or demons, since to take on patriarchy effectively is also to transgress the boundaries of what is defined in patriarchal convention as a woman. Using both historical and literary examples, Belsey describes how radical women in the seventeenth century were labelled (and burned) as witches and freaks.²⁴ Anne Cranny-Francis describes how

mainstream nineteenth-century literature and its critics were equally gender-biased, with the female emancipist or feminist activist of the late nineteenth century singled out for especially virulent condemnation. The 'New Woman', as she was known, was characterised as some kind of sexless, undersexed, or oversexed monster.²⁵

Nights at the Circus presents Fevvers as a concretisation of this notion of revolutionary, or 'New Woman,' though, once again, her power lies in the paradox that she might

Clare Hanson, in 'Each Other,' describes Jeanne Duval, from 'Black Venus,' as a monstrous figure: she writes:

Jeanne Duval offers an extreme image of the woman as other--she is trebly unknown to Baudelaire as a black woman from another continent ... She is also of course obscurely threatening, associated with Eve and with the monstrous-feminine--'a woman of immense height.' She is explicitly tarred with the misogynist term 'witch' traditionally used by men to distance themselves from the latent (unknown, again) power of women ... If woman is unknown, the unknown is always feared. (pp.78-79)

²⁴ Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama (London: Methuen, 1985), p.164-191.

²⁵ Anne Cranny-Francis, Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p.4.

be a fraud. If she reveals that the monster label is warranted by the facts then she loses her potency. Lizzie, by contrast, is a more traditional revolutionary: her 'habit of lecturing the [brothel] clients on the white slave trade, the rights and wrongs of women, universal suffrage, as well as the Irish question, the Indian question, republicanism, anti-clericalism, syndicalism and the abolition of the House of Lords' (p.292) makes her an 'inconvenient harlot' (p.292), and also earns her the title of 'Witch.'²⁶

Importantly, the very labels 'Monster,' 'Witch,' and 'Angel,' are, in themselves, paradoxical, as Catherine Belsey writes:

The demonisation of women who subvert the meaning of femininity is contradictory in its implications. It places them beyond meaning, beyond the limits of what is intelligible. At the same time it endows them with a (supernatural) power which is precisely the project of patriarchy to deny. (The Subject of Tragedy, p.185)

The label 'Monster,' like the labels 'Woman' or 'Other,' whilst suggesting definition, also fails to define. The term 'Monster' appears to contain a disruption and yet the

²⁶ Jeanne Duval, in Black Venus, p.17, is also described as 'witchy.' And when Annabel in Love takes over control from her husband Lee, she also takes on the role of witch:

She guessed the institution of a new order of things in which she was an active force rather than an object at the mercy of every wind that blew; no longer bewitched, she became herself a witch (p.77).

disruption is uncontainable.²⁷ Ironically, the paradoxical significance of the label 'Monster,' when applied to revolutionary women, only serves to emphasise their similarity with all women: stereotypically, both are contained and yet exceed containment in patriarchal society. This leads to the logical conclusion, according to patriarchal convention, that all women are potential monsters (with supernatural power), and that therefore they are all potential revolutionaries.

Third, Nights at the Circus dramatizes the paradox described by Belsey's last sentence in the above quotation: it both exposes the idea that women have supernatural power as a patriarchal construct, but at the same time exploits it to the full. For example, Rosencreutz calls Fevvers 'Azrael, the Angel of Death,' 'the bright angel who will release him from the material, the winged spirit of universal springtime' (p.79); and he wishes to use her in a ritual human sacrifice to give himself everlasting life. As a symbolic Angel or goddess, of course, Fevvers is necessarily paradoxical, that is, both contained and yet uncontainable, and it is the power of this doubleness which Rosencreutz hopes to tap into. He calls her "'Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species"' (p.81).

²⁷ Rory P. B. Turner, in 'Subjects and Symbols,' accounts for Fevvers doubleness in terms of Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque (in which the notion of monstrosity plays a part). He writes: 'She is grotesque, uncontained and uncontainable.' (p.48)

Ironically, of course, it is he who has endowed Fevvers with the life-giving potential he hopes to harness. The notion of her supernatural power is his own construction, just as the 'unnatural' power attributed to non-conformist women is a patriarchal construct.

Angela Carter is not alone in choosing to expose and exploit the possibilities for liberation inherent in the definition of non-conformist women as 'monsters.' This is an important theme which has recently been explored by several contemporary British women writers who are concerned with creating revolutionary women figures, and who, like Carter, exploit the specificity of women's bodies. A brief description of two examples--Fay Weldon's The Lives and Loves of a She Devil²⁸, which was published the year before Carter's novel, and Jeanette Winterson's Sexing the Cherry,²⁹ which was published six years later--will help contextualise the experiments taking place in Nights at the Circus.³⁰ Ruth in Weldon's novel

²⁸ Fay Weldon, The Life and Loves of a She Devil (1983) (London: Coronet, 1984).

²⁹ Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry (1989) (London: Vintage, 1990).

³⁰ Another recent example is Sian Hayton's Cells of Knowledge (Edinburgh: Polygon Press, 1989), set in tenth century Scotland. It describes the confrontation of the Church and Marighal, a giant's daughter borrowed from Celtic folklore. When Marighal reveals her extraordinary strength to the monks, by benignly helping them shift some rocks, she also reveals her difference, and is ostracised. The novel tells her story through the story of the monks who hunt her down in order to destroy the threat which her specialness poses to the patriarchal order.

is labelled by her husband, Bobbo, as a 'she-devil' (p.42) partly because she stands in the way of his love affair with the angelic-looking Mary Fisher, but also because she is large and ugly--she describes herself as 'six foot two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman ... and [has] one of those jutting jaws which tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather far back into [her] face, and a hooked nose' (p.9). Ruth responds to Bobbo's name calling by assuming the role of she-devil and literalising the supernatural power with which his label invests her in order to master him and gain her revenge (p.43). Winterson's most recent, brilliant, novel also makes use of the paradoxical convention of labelling revolutionary woman as monstrous. She creates a seventeenth-century revolutionary, the apparently 'hideous' and enormous Dog-Woman (who at one point outweighs an elephant (pp.24-25)). She also portrays a twentieth-century counterpart to Dog-Woman, a nameless woman who is camping on the banks of the polluted River Thames protesting about mercury levels. This woman sees her Otherness (both as a woman and as a revolutionary woman) in monstrous terms as if she were a reincarnation of Dog-Woman: 'I am a woman going mad. I am a woman hallucinating. I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant'

The Eskimo story, 'Sermerssuaq,' which Carter has chosen to act as an epigraph for The Virago Book of Fairy Stories tells of a similarly powerful and larger than life woman.

(p.121). She also, like Fevvers in Nights at the Circus, imagines a time when all women will not be earth-bound:

So I learned to be alone and to take pleasure in the dark where no one could see me and where I could look at the stars and invent a world where there was no gravity, no holding force. (p.124)

In many ways Fevvers can be thought of as a concrete symbol of the world that Winterson's twentieth-century, nameless, heroine imagines as a child. This woman has imagined breaking out, indeed, hatching out, of patriarchal confines--'I was a monster in a carpeted egg' (p.124)--by growing enormous and bursting out of the walls of her family's house. She also describes escaping marginalisation by growing too large for conventional definition:

I wasn't fat because I was greedy; I hardly ate at all. I was fat because I wanted to be bigger than all the things that were bigger than me. All the things that had power over me. It was a battle I intended to win.

It seems obvious, doesn't it, that someone who is ignored and overlooked will expand to the point where they have to be noticed, even if the noticing is fear and disgust. (p.124)³¹

This notion of escape, however, is itself marginalized, narrated in retrospect and with irony, as a childhood recollection. We know, from Dog-Woman's experience, that to be larger than life, to be noticed with 'fear and disgust,' is also to be marginalized as monstrous.

³¹ Like Carter, Winterson is calling upon the notion of the grotesque, and Winterson makes explicit reference to her source: 'But there is no Rabelaisian dimension for rage' (Sexing the Cherry, p.124).

Fevvers in Nights at the Circus, like Weldon's Ruth, and Winterson's Dog-Woman and her twentieth-century counterpart (as she imagines herself), is depicted as larger than life, and as a freak. All the large women in these three novels are described as more than a match for the men in their lives, and the size and strength are obviously reasons for their definition as monsters. All three of these women, however, turn this stereotype around and make it work for themselves: they can also be interpreted as concrete examples of the threat patriarchal society feels large or fat women pose to the status quo, a threat which these women put to positive use.³² Both of the women in Winterson's novel are ostracised from society because of the threat their difference poses to the status quo, and their isolation renders them relatively harmless. Fevvers, however, is an emancipatory figure whose power is embodied in her doubleness. She is different from other women but also the same; she may be huge, for example, but she is shamelessly sexy. Once again, by maintaining the paradox, Fevvers escapes marginalisation and retains the power of her Otherness. Fevvers, like the other heroines described here, exploits the paradox inherent in the label 'monster,' but, unlike Ruth, who uses what might be interpreted as supernatural power (complete self-control, determination, self-confidence, ability to withstand great physical pain) in order to erase her very monstrousness

³² This is an issue taken to extreme by John Waters' famous 'Divine' films.

and to conform completely to the patriarchal definition of what woman 'should be,'³³ or Dog-Woman and her counterpart, whose social isolation only reinforces the notion of their difference, Fevvers is an advertisement for all women to become, or recognise themselves as, 'Monsters.'

Nights at the Circus emphasises Fevvers's status as a representative of all women by making a clear connection between the two things which signal Fevvers's Otherness, her wings and her female genitalia. The novel dramatizes how both wings and genitals inspire the Monster label, that is, are both contained and yet uncontainable in patriarchal terms, and how this inherent doubleness can be used to either imprison or liberate. Fevvers's imprisonment at Madame Schreck's, for example, illustrates how women can be confined by the patriarchal definition of their bodies. Female genitalia have conventionally been interpreted as a monstrous Otherness (which Carter has otherwise, and frequently, portrayed as vagina dentalis, see Chapter 2); Rosencreutz describes their significance to Fevvers:

'Yoni, of course, in the Hindu, the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down, where Terror rules...' (p.77)

³³ Ruth in Fay Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She Devil, explains to her doctor: "'I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body, and the world into which I was born, and have failed ... Since I cannot change them, I will change myself"' (p.203).

Madame Schreck's wine cellar, where the 'women monsters' are imprisoned and to which men are drawn in both terror and fascination, is a concrete symbol of the conventional notion of female genitalia. The cellar is also known as the 'Abyss' or 'Down Below' (p.61), and Fevvers announces the obvious connection:

'He's so appalled at the notion of the orifice that the poor old sod mumbles and whimpers himself to a halt, though he's no stranger to the Abyss, himself, used to come every Sunday, just to convince himself it was as 'orrible as he'd always thought.' (p.77)

In the world of Nights at the Circus, then, women who are different (who do not conform to convention) are literally imprisoned within a symbol of their difference as women. At the same time, however, the novel makes it clear that the notion of their difference is a matter of interpretation, and is a construct of patriarchal society: 'There was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them' (p.62).

Fevvers prophetic speech, which I have used as an epigraph, can now be interpreted: '"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"' (p.285). Nights at the Circus, like The Passion, is courting an essentialist argument based on the specificity of women's bodies in order to show that this definition of Woman is a construction. By the end of the novel it is not important whether Fevvers has genuine wings or not, since the interpretation of her wings, the

sign of her difference as a woman, has changed. The speech refers to a time when all women can acknowledge their capacity for liberation: when all women understand that their 'difference' is a product of patriarchy, Fevvers claims, they will be able to use this knowledge in order to escape. She suggests the need to take hold of the conventional notion of difference and exploit it to the full in order to subvert it.

Nights at the Circus charts Fevvers's progress through patriarchal society showing the power of her self-confident exploitation of convention in the way she escapes definition. Just as patriarchal society seeks to define what woman is in order to master and control, so all of the men in Fevvers's life try to grasp hold of her and define her in their own terms in order to assimilate her into their own system of understanding. Fevvers's wings, her genitals, and her story, are all presented as desirable commodities which men wish to master and control, but which remain out of reach. Fevvers's wings, for example, the sign of her difference, are the reason why so many attempt to trap her, but these same wings enable Fevvers to 'transcend[] the symbols that men create to contain her' (Turner, 'Subjects and Symbols,' p.46). Her ability to escape fixed definition is represented by her flights from those who seek to limit her to a symbolic aspect. Each time men attempt to define her as a sexual object she proves not only to be an object but also a subject. The Grand Duke, for example, wants to add

Fevvers to his collection of rare toys. He tries to reduce her to a sexual object, which the novel dramatizes by showing how the Duke intends to literally reduce Fevvers to a miniature of herself to fit into a tiny gilded cage (like the cage in her stage act) for his toy collection (p.189). He relieves Fevvers of her own toy, Ma Nelson's sword--Fevvers's patriarchal/phallic symbol, with which she imitates men (p.191). (Fevvers's sword may be a toy or imitation, but it is nonetheless sharp.³⁴)

Turner describes this scene very clearly:

This fate, to be a bird in a gilded cage, to be an object of pleasure, a toy, is a metaphor for Carter of the potential fate of women. Dazzled by wealth, they could be destined to live a sterile existence as the 'collector's item' of some man. ('Subjects and Symbols,' p.44)³⁵

However, as Ricarda Schmidt comments, Fevvers never responds passively:

In her voyage through the world of this novel Fevvers does not simply become men's passive object, for her wings ensure that she herself

³⁴ As if the connection were not obvious, the novel describes both blade and penis as weapons (this recalls the rape scene in Heroes and Villains which reminds Marianne of her brother's stabbing). Rosencreutz has Fevvers stretch out on the coffee table where she lies clenching her teeth and thinking of England. Then, she glimpses

a shining something lying along his hairy old, gnarled old thigh as his robe swung loose. This something was a sight more aggressive than his other weapon, poor thing, that bobbed about uncharged, unprimed, unsharpened ... I saw this something was--a blade. (p.83)

³⁵ Turner's whole article is concerned to show Fevvers, a symbol of all women, as both a subject and an object, and he gives many useful examples (see pp.40, 42, 43, 45, 48, 55, 57, 58, 59).

constitutes a formidable subject which others must react to. ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.68)

She uses the convention of woman as sexual object, uses her body and its 'difference' to titillate, but also turns this convention around by turning the man into a sexual object: she reduces the Grand Duke to his tumescence, just as Leilah reduced Evelyn, and uses her 'difference' as a means of escape.

III

As I have shown throughout this thesis, so much of Carter's fiction suggests origins outside the text, whether it is the continual promise of an underlying meaning, allusions which can be traced to a source, a character who appears to have an existence prior to and beyond the confines of the novel, or, as is often the case, a combination of all of these. Her fiction, however, also shows, again and again, that whilst a tracing process is important, the final result is either impossible to achieve, or settles nothing. Nights at the Circus, of course, is no exception, and one of the most powerful paradoxes is the way the novel constantly encourages a reader's desire to imagine Fevvers's life before the opening of the novel, and to imagine her origins, whilst simultaneously showing that identity is a textual construct. This section will suggest that a

reading of Fevvers can itself be interpreted as a paradigm of reading the novel in which she functions.

Like *Rosencreuz* and *The Grand Duke*, Walser attempts to grasp the essential Fevvers. At the opening of the novel, as I described in Chapter 1, Walser, who believes that facts can be known and that knowledge of them is conclusive, wants to find out the truth about Fevvers and publish it in order to fix her once and for all as a fraud. In order to define Fevvers, to discover if she is indeed freak or fraud, fact or fiction, Walser attempts to penetrate beneath both her story and her clothes, to her origins. It appears, however, to be impossible to trace Fevvers's origins:³⁶ indeed, she herself is portrayed as an origin. Lizzie explains to her: "You never existed before. There's nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One" (p.198). Fevvers's origins are not articulatable, perhaps since, as she claims, her birth was totally outside convention: "I never docked via what you call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched" (p.7). Furthermore she suggests that her parents might have been outside both culture and nature:

'Hatched; by whom, I do not know. Who laid me is as much a mystery to me, sir, as the nature of my conception, my father and my mother both utterly unknown to me, and, some would say, unknown to nature, what's more.' (p.21)

³⁶ Jeanne Duval in *'Black Venus'* is also without known origins, whether place or parentage. See particularly p.16.

Schmidt claims that Fevvers 'fantasizes a beginning for herself outside the Oedipal triangle, outside the Law of the Father, "a wholly female world" ... "governed by a sweet and loving reason" [Nights at the Circus, pp.38 and 39 respectively]' ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.67). This world would be outside patriarchal language conventions and the novel. The reference to fantasy, however, is misleading, since we are never informed what is fact and what is fiction in Fevvers's story. Schmidt, of course, does suggest an origin for Fevvers as the child of Eve from The Passion. Just as Eve's child could not be born within the confines of the earlier novel, so Fevvers's birth remains a mystery, which, it appears, cannot be articulated within the later novel, except in mythological terms. This lack of origins is symbolised by Fevvers's claim to have been hatched and therefore not to possess a navel, thus leaving no tangible trace of forebears. Walser tries to verify this fact:

‘What about her belly button? Hasn't she just this minute told me she was hatched from an egg, not gestated in utero. The oviparous species are not, by definition, nourished by the placenta; therefore they feel no need of the umbilical cord...and, therefore, don't bear the scar of its loss! Why isn't the whole of London asking: does Fevvers have a belly-button?’
(pp.17-18)

(The lack of a belly button also supports the interpretation of Fevvers as one of Carter's Eve figures.)

Typically, however, whilst the denial of Fevvers's origins is being broadcast clearly, so the possibility of discovering her ancestry is continually asserted. The

link, for example, between origins and intertextuality is drawn explicitly when Fevvers describes herself as "'Helen of the High Wire"' (p.7), the progeny of Leda and the Swan, and then describes the Titian painting of this subject hanging in Ma Nelson's house (that is, Fevvers's interpretation of the Greek myth has already been displaced by Titian's interpretation of the myth):

I always saw, as through a glass, darkly, what might have been my own primal scene, my own conception, the heavenly bird in a white majesty of feathers descending with imperious desire upon the half-stunned and yet herself impassioned girl. (p.28)

The point here is that it is a convention that Helen of Troy was hatched. Therefore, although the origin Fevvers imagines for herself is, in one sense, outside convention--she imagines herself the offspring of a swan/God and a girl--this same origin is also inside, as a purely fictional convention. Like so many things about Fevvers, then, her origins are paradoxical: the allusion to Leda and the Swan appears to offer something graspable, and yet not only is it only a myth, which is both traceable and yet untraceable, it is also suggested as Fevvers's fantasy: it only 'might have been' her primal scene. Importantly, and disturbingly, while the text may be suggesting that Fevvers has origins both inside and outside of patriarchal convention, the particular origins suggested by the allusion to Leda and the Swan are

explicitly connected to male domination by perhaps the most violent symbol of aggression, that of rape.³⁷

It is the desire to discover what lies behind Fevvers, which on one level takes the form of a search for her origins, that motivates the narrative of the novel. As I have argued in Chapter 1, within the world of the novel, Walser is trying find out the truth about Fevvers in order to master her, just as Marianne in Heroes and Villains tries continually to grasp hold of Donally's past life. In the first section of the novel Fevvers claims to be revealing the story of her life, sporadically offering Walser snippets of supposedly verifiable information to excite Walser's reporter's appetite for fact:

The girl was rumoured to have started her career in freak shows. (Check, noted Walser.) (p.14)

First impression: physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems! But soon, quite soon, an acquired grace asserts itself, probably the result of strenuous exercise. (Check if she trained as a dancer.) (p.16)

However, what suggests itself as verifiable fact turns out to be untraceable. For example, telling the story of Jenny, one of the former whores at Ma Nelson's, Fevvers and Lizzie mention her relationship with 'a gentleman from Chicago who makes sewing-machines--':

'--you don't mean--' interjected Walser.

'Indeed.'

³⁷ Also disturbing is Fevvers's interpretation of Titian's interpretation of the Leda and the Swan myth, where Leda appears a willing victim: Leda is portrayed as 'half-stunned and yet herself impassioned' (p.28).

Walser tapped his teeth with his pencil tip, faced with the dilemma of the first checkable fact they'd offered him and the impossibility of checking it. Cable Mrs--III and ask her is she'd ever worked in a brothel run by a one-eyed whore named Nelson? Contracts had been taken out for less! (pp.46-47)

The reader of the novel is drawn into a similar position since, for example, the plot appears immediately recognisable as that of a typical Victorian novel which traces the life of an orphan hero or heroine who was abandoned by his or her biological parents and adopted by strangers.³⁸ Indeed, Nights at the Circus relies upon a whole wealth of conventions from late Victorian society and literature which appear to make the novel more graspable and containable. Fevvers explains:

She who found me on the steps at Wapping, me in the laundry basket in which persons unknown left me, a little babe most lovingly packed up in new straw sweetly sleeping among a litter of broken eggshells, she who stumbled over this poor, abandoned creature clasped me at that moment in her arms out of the abundant goodness of her heart and took me in.' (p.12)

Fevvers was abandoned outside a brothel, 'at the door of a certain house, know what I mean?' (p.21), which reverses the familiar image of the church or convent steps. Given its reliance on a Victorian plot structure the reader would expect the narrative to gradually reveal the origins of the orphaned heroine, solve the mystery of her birth and reveal the 'true' Fevvers. The continual suggestion

³⁸ Paul Clay, writing for Time (25 February 1985, p.87), claims that 'The autobiography that Fevvers tells to the skeptical Walser is, except for the business about the wings, standard nineteenth-century melodrama.'

that the mystery behind Fevvers and her miraculous wings will finally be resolved is, of course, never satisfied.

Fevvers, then, appears to be without origins, outside convention, and yet also, paradoxically, rooted in convention. Just as the birth of Helen of Troy takes place outside human history, but has an effect on it, so Nights at the Circus makes the point that, even if Fevvers was conceived and given birth to outside convention (and outside the novel), when seen in relation to other characters (inside the novel), she has to be read in conventional terms. Personages within the world of the novel can only read her, and Fevvers can only read herself, in relation to others and her surroundings; similarly, the reader of the novel can only read her by utilizing a series of accepted linguistic and literary codes. The notion of identity, as I have argued in Chapter 3, can only be articulated within convention and when Fevvers imagines herself outside such parameters she also has to imagine complete loss of self-identity. For example, late in the novel, when Lizzie and Fevvers leave the musician's house, Fevvers wants to set off into the wilderness to find Walser and Lizzie complains that she is obliged to 'tag along behind ... through the middle of nowhere only because of the bonds of old affection' (p.279). Fevvers objects to Lizzie's description of their bond and explodes:

'I never asked you to adopt me in the first place, you miserable old witch! There I was, unique and parentless, unshackled, unfettered by the past, and the minute you clapped eyes on me you turned me into a contingent being, enslaved me as your daughter who was born nobody's daughter--'

But there she stopped short, for the notion that nobody's daughter walked across nowhere in the direction of nothing produced in her such vertigo she was forced to pause and take a few deep breaths. (pp.279-80)

As I have argued in Chapter I, Nights at the Circus goes to great lengths to insist that Fevvers's role as a 'Wonder' is dependent upon her audiences' suspension of disbelief, where the suspension is inspired by the coexistence of the credible and the incredible. Like both Donally in Heroes and Villains and Zero in The Passion, then, Fevvers is constructed in a symbiotic relationship with her audience. Fevvers is always dependent upon an audience to define her role, and she is defined by how they see her: 'The eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was' (p.290). Without her audience she begins to feel 'her outlines waver' (p.290):

'Every little accident has taken you one step down the road away from your singularity' [Lizzie tells her]. 'You're fading away, as if it was only always nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim. (p.280)

Unlike Marianne, in Heroes and Villains, who recognizes but refuses to accept her dependence upon Jewel, Fevvers knows that she is dependent upon Walser, and seeks him out in order to confirm her sense of herself in his eyes. Like Tristessa and Leilah, Fevvers is

constructed by, and constructs herself, as an object of the gaze of her audience. She is aware of the convention and she exploits it:

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, 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! (p.15)³⁹

And, like Tristessa, Fevvers's artificiality is emphasised without compromising her credibility: 'Her face, thickly coated with rouge and powdered so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, is wreathed in triumphant smiles' (p.18). Fevvers's difference from Tristessa, however, can be seen by looking at another example of the same metaphor of the gaze. In this example, Fevvers describes how she earned her keep at Ma Nelson's by posing, painted with wet white like a clown, as a 'living statue' of 'Victory with Wings':

I existed only as an object in men's eyes ... Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world? ... 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!' (p.39)

³⁹ Similarly, Fevvers, like Tristessa (The Passion p.6), inspires a range of commercial products (Nights at the Circus, p.8).

Both characters are constructed by male fantasy, as Gina Wisker comments with regard to Fevvers:

In Ma Nelson's homely whorehouse ... Fevvers poses as a statue, painted white. She is aware that her pose of icon of protected chastity panders to man's predilections for mastery over a creature straight from his own fantasies. ('Winged Women and Werewolves,' p.91)

Tristessa, as I have already shown, does, indeed, become her role and is sealed up in her appearance for ever, but Fevvers capitalizes upon her own doubleness. She maintains a distance between her image and some other self, which continually suggests that beneath the wet white or stage make-up there is another, more 'real' Fevvers hiding, and suggests to the reader that there is a 'real' character beyond the text.⁴⁰ Walser, of course, sits through a symbolic stripping of this stage make-up as Fevvers tells her story, but, of course, does not appear to come any closer to the 'real' Fevvers.

The complexity of Fevvers's role as a symbol of Woman is emphasised in the novel by the fact that her stage image is also double, both otherworldly and yet rooted in the market economy. She is an exaggerated example of woman as object of visual pleasure and object of exchange, except, of course, that Fevvers is not exchanged between men, but exchanges herself. Lizzie explains to her:

⁴⁰ In this way, Fevvers resembles Marianne in Heroes and Villains at her wedding, where she watched her own performance of the role of bride, dictated by Donally. The difference, however, is that Fevvers has created her own role, and that she maintains this distance throughout.

All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure of the eye, or else you're good for nothing. For you, it's always a symbolic exchange in the market-place. (p.185)

Schmidt identifies Fevvers's dependence upon public recognition of her symbolic meaning as a free woman and examines the political significance of this fact:

Fevvers discovers her excellent exchange value on the market for wonders, humbugs, sensations. The fact that Fevvers can function as a freak or as a wonder confirms the non-essentialist character of femininity. Femininity is a social construction, its value is not inherent but determined in social exchange, on the market. ('The Journey of the Subject,' p.68)

That is, Fevvers's identity, and therefore the identity of Woman which she represents, is shown to be a construct because it is revealed as open to change (change of interpretation). Identity, the novel suggests, is created out of the mutually dependent relationship--or 'social exchange'--between audience and performer, where the performer/Fevvers/Woman does have power to challenge existing definitions. This power, however, is only functional within conventional confines, which, in this case are represented by the market economy; and, within this economy, Fevvers's rise to power is signalled by a shift from the market economy taking advantage of her (at Madame Schreck's) to Fevvers herself milking the market (though not always successfully).⁴¹ The novel shows that

⁴¹ Interestingly, it is when Fevvers indulges her greed for money and uses her body as a commodity that she finds herself in dangerous situations with men. This recurrent greed motif (see for example, pp.172, 182, 186) also reinforces the notion of her as rooted in convention.

there can be no utopian space, or woman, outside of accepted ideology, since any such utopia disappears and has to be continually redefined by means of conventional codes; thus, towards the end of the novel, Fevvers fades without her audience and has to be revitalized by the 'Ooooooh!' (p.290) of wonder from Walser's adopted tribe. Tristessa's relationship with her audience, as I discussed in Chapter 4, is one of confirmation: she reflects back their best and most recognisable image of themselves. Fevvers, however, challenges her audience by exposing and exploiting their own preconceptions to make them question her identity, and in doing so, rethink their own position.⁴²

IV

Is Fevvers a New Woman figure? Fevvers, as I suggested earlier, represents what exists already, she represents the here and now. She is not the heroine of a Bildungsroman, a figure with whom we identify, and from

⁴² There is also an important difference between Tristessa and Fevvers's performance mediums, that is, a difference between Hollywood movies and the circus. In the movies, audiences willingly suspend disbelief for the duration of the film, and assume that, however involved they become, the world of the movie is fictional. Circuses, however, present acts which are supposed to be real, and are either believed or not: in the circus, certain things cannot be faked. The circus, of course, is connected with the notion of carnival, and several critics have interpreted Nights at the Circus in the light of Bakhtin's writing about the liberating aspects of the carnivalesque. Rory P. B. Turner's article, 'Subjects and Symbols,' is the most comprehensive example.

whose progress through the novel we learn, as she learns about herself (like many of Carter's other heroines and heroes). If she appears to change during the course of the novel it is because Walser's, and our, interpretation of her changes.⁴³ As Chapter 1 documented, if the novel is a Bildungsroman, its hero is Walser; each of his attempts to uncover the true Fevvers involves a challenging and productive engagement with her, which changes him. Similarly, all attempts by the reader to get to the bottom of Carter's writing (whether it be in search of meaning, character, tracing an allusion or trying to fix a notion of gender) prove a challenge to the very reading conventions which must be used in the attempt.

The shift in Walser's interpretation of Fevvers which happens during the course of the novel, and which I have described in detail in Chapter 1, is replayed in the concluding pages, by the juxtaposition of two summaries of events. Before his sexual encounter with Fevvers and the turn of the century, Walser imagines the content of the copy he intends to file for his newspaper, describing his adventures. This first version, which Walser imagines, represents a nineteenth-century interpretation of events:

'I am Jack Walser, an American citizen. I joined the circus of Colonel Kearney in order to delight my reading public with accounts of a few

⁴³ In the interview with John Haffenden, in Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen, 1985), Carter recalls with pleasure an American friend's comments upon characterisation in Nights at the Circus: 'Everyone changes throughout the novel, he wrote, except for Fevvers--"who doesn't so much change as expand"' (p.88).

nights at the circus and, as a clown, performed before the Tsar of All the Russians, to great applause. (What a story!) I was derailed by brigands in Transbaikalia and lived as a wizard among the natives for a while. (God, what a story!) Let me introduce my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser, who formerly had a successful career on the music-hall stage under the name of--' (pp.293-94)

It focuses on the power of the story itself--'What a story!'--which relates Walser's exploits and almost totally effaces Fevvers. She appears only as Walser's appendage, who no longer has an individual identity: her career has been abandoned and even her name 'Fevvers' has been erased and replaced by her husband's.

The extraordinary combination of sex with Fevvers and the turning of the century interrupt this account, produce a transformation, and result in a complete rethinking and restructuring of Walser as reader: 'Precipitated in ignorance and bliss into the next century, there, after it was over, Walser took himself apart and put himself together again' (p.294). Now he has to rewrite his story from a totally new perspective:

'Jack, ever an adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her. He got himself into scrape upon scrape, danced with a tigress, posed as a roast chicken, finally got himself an apprenticeship in the higher form of the confidence trick, initiated by a wily old pederast who bamboozled him completely. All that seemed to happen to me in the third person as though, most of my life, I watched it but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again.' (p.294).

The jump from first-person narrative in the first version of events to third-person in this second version represents a shift from one mode of reading to another. The second version stresses Fevvers's (his text's) seductive power; and Walser's self-conscious shift back to the first person, and his description of his own hatching, reveal his conscious knowledge of the change he has undergone. This account does not represent a closing down of interpretation, but rather, along with the new century, it presents a new beginning, and a redefinition of the position of the reader, which is not centred around his own identity.

The first mode of reading represents the state of affairs at the opening of the novel, where Walser anticipates a satisfactory resolution of Fevvers's motto, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (p.7). The novel does not end with a revelation of truth, however, but ends with a peal of universalising laughter, part of which may be aimed at Walser, and part at the reader for thinking that 'certainty' is what reading, and liberation, are all about. John Haffenden has interpreted Fevvers's comment 'I fooled you' (p.294) and the resulting extraordinary laughter at the end very specifically: 'I read it that she does in fact have wings, but has she played a vast confidence-trick all the while?' (Novelists, p.90). But the question of whether or not Fevvers's wings are real is not answered within the novel. The laughter which closes the novel also explodes it sky high; it can be read as a

denial of the very possibility of closure, of tying the material down to hard fact, of resolving the mystery, of achieving a definitive interpretation. But it cannot be read as a denial of the desire to do so. As Carter herself answers Haffenden:

'It's actually a statement about the nature of fiction, about the nature of her [Fevvers's] narrative....

It's actually doing something utterly illegitimate--in a way I like--because ending on that line doesn't make you realize the fictionality of what has gone before, it makes you start inventing other fictions, things that might have happened--as though the people were really real, with real lives. Things might have happened to them other than the things I have said have happened to them. So that really is an illusion. It's inviting the reader to write lots of other novels for themselves, to continue taking these people as if they were real. It is not like saying that you should put away the puppets and close the box. I didn't realize I was doing that at the time, but it is inviting the reader to take one further step into the fictionality of the narrative, instead of coming out of it and looking at it as though it were an artifact. So that's not postmodernist at all, I suppose: it's the single most nineteenth-century gesture in the novel!' (Novelists, pp.90-91)⁴⁴

In the final section of the novel, 'Envoi,' Walser's knowledge of the relativity of reality, where only matters of interpretation and perspective are important (a

⁴⁴ This quotation is also interesting as a description of character: see Chapter 3. Alison Lee, in Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction (London: Routledge, 1990) p.113, points out how the extraordinarily self-conscious Epilogue in Alistair Gray's Lanark (1981) (London: Panther, 1982) exposes and exploits similar 'Realist techniques.' Lee refers particularly to references made to Chapters forty-five to fifty, when the novel ends at Chapter forty-four.

demythologising mode of reading), is complemented by the discovery that, far from this making everything a matter of scepticism, it reveals precisely how powerful conventions are (a celebratory mode of reading). Fevvers's power over Walser (and over other male figures in the novel), lies in her story, her wings (the sign of her Otherness), and the myth of her virginity; all of which exert the gravitational pull of the unknown, the monstrous, and all of which are systematically shown to be constructions.⁴⁵ Fevvers's power attracts Walser to her dressing-room at the opening of the novel, and leads him to join the circus to follow her around the world. He wishes to master her both critically and sexually: he wishes to penetrate behind both Fevvers's story and her hymen, in order to master her monstrousness and her virginity (which is also monstrous), although, of course, to master either would be to render them non-existent, and

⁴⁵ Sexuality in some of Carter's work, particularly the collection of short stories, The Bloody Chamber, has been literalised as beastliness. There is obviously a link between beastliness and monstrousness. Sylvia Bryant, in 'Re-Constructing Oedipus Through "Beauty and The Beast,"' (Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts, 31, no.4 (Fall 1989), 439-53), for example, interprets beasts as challenges to convention, and she reads the girls who are transformed into beasts as liberatory women figures. Quoting from Teresa de Lauretis's Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.155, Bryant describes the girl in 'The Tiger's Bride' as

an alternative model for the female subject's desire, constructing what de Lauretis says feminist cinematic and written novels must: 'the terms of reference of another measure of desire and the conditions of visibility for a different social subject.' (p.448)

therefore to prove nothing, since both exist only as constructions of the unmasterable. By the end of the novel, when Walser has learnt that everything is a product of convention, Fevvers ceases to be monstrous in his eyes: hence when he does have the chance to verify whether her wings are real, or whether she has a belly button, he is no longer interested (p.292). He is still drawn towards her, however, by the power of the myth of her virginity, and by her Otherness as a woman, and it is the power of these myths, even though he is aware of them as myths, which still attracts him, and binds him, to Fevvers. Fevvers and Walser are mutually dependent for the sake of their own sense of their identities. Importantly, however, their dependency is not celebrated in marriage (as many reviewers seem to assume), but in an extraordinary coupling. They do not conform to the fairy-tale custom which Lizzie outlines for Fevvers, in which 'the Prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon's lair is always forced to marry her, whether they've taken a liking to one another or not,' all in the cause of a "'happy ending'" (p.281). Fevvers does not 'give' herself to Walser, or give up her subjectivity; Walser's and Fevvers's bond is between two people and their individuality. Turner writes:

For Walser and Fevvers, the bond is made of 'hubris, desire, and imagination,' in a word, confidence. They are each other's ideals, but they also remain idiosyncratic. ('Subjects and Symbols,' p.56)

Their coupling at the end of the novel is premised upon a reconstruction of gender identity and gender roles. Walser sees Fevvers differently, since, in his eyes, as Lizzie comments, she has turned from 'a freak into a woman' (p.283), where the notion of 'Woman' has been challenged and reconstructed. Fevvers is dominant because 'nature had equipped her only for the "woman on top" position' (p.292). Walser finds that his quest for Fevvers has radically challenged his own sense of self: 'He was as much himself again as he ever would be, and yet that "self" would never be the same again' (p.292), and he is 'busily reconstructing' (p.293) himself as a New Man.

Ironically, of course, when Walser does have sex with Fevvers she proves not to be a virgin after all. Walser asks Fevvers:

'Fevvers, only one question...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"?'

She began to laugh.

'I fooled you, then!' she said. 'Gawd, I fooled you!' (p.294)

But whilst it is clear that physical penetration takes Walser no closer to dominating Fevvers as a woman, he does discover the power of Fevvers's construction of her own virginity, which might be interpreted as a symbol of the power of all the other 'unknowns' which characterise 'Woman,' and which have lured him towards her. Whether or not Fevvers's virginity exists physically, or whether or not her wings are real, is unimportant, and does not

affect the potency of the notion of Fevvers as a winged virgin: the power of the construction operates nevertheless. And it is this power, the double power of the unknown (which appears to be outside convention, and which is common to all women), which has been shown to be a patriarchal construct (and is therefore inside convention), which Fevvers exploits to the full throughout the novel. She consciously uses it in order to attract her audience and seduce her mate, who, in turn, continually defines and redefines her as the impossible: a wondrous liberated woman with wings.

CONCLUSION

Both Fevvers and the liberatory reading space I have tried to illuminate throughout the thesis are conceived out of paradox: out of the juxtaposition, the 'intercourse,' of the two irreconcilable modes of reading--celebratory and demythologising, transcendent and textual--which Carter's fiction dramatises and which this thesis describes. The fruit of the intercourse between the two modes of reading is also necessarily double, because it represents what is known and yet what is unknown. On the one hand, the relationship results in recognition and revaluing, where all apparently graspable elements of fiction like character, identity, gender, narrative centres, intertextual origins, and meaning, are revealed as the products of reading conventions; but these

are recognised and valued as very powerful conventions, which are necessary to the reading process. On the other hand, it is this very process of recognition and knowledge which opens up the possibility that something new might be born. Once conventions are recognised as conventions, they must also be recognised as open to change. It is change which is unknown, which is unpredictable, and which is liberating. Because change is unknown, however, it is also potentially 'monstrous.' *Fevvers* represents this doubleness: she is both known and yet unknown, a representative of common 'man' and yet also, in some ways, a monster.

The liberatory reading space is similarly monstrous--it is both a product of, and produces, knowledge and the unknown (because it is a space for re-interpretation and change). Its potential might be represented by the extraordinary and universalising laughter which erupts uncontrollably at the end of Nights at the Circus:

The spiralling tornado of *Fevvers*' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. (p.295)

This is the 'ambivalent ... gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding' carnival laughter which Bakhtin has described so brilliantly.⁴⁶ It is laughter

⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp.11-12.

which 'asserts and denies ... buries and revives,' celebrates and demythologises. It is also this paradoxical, one might even say 'monstrous,' laughter which represents transformation, open-endedness, and the non-programmability of change, and it reminds the reader that we are all part of the 'giant comedy.'

In The Passion of New Eve, the women of Beulah claim that 'Space is a woman' (p.53), and Chapter 2 of this thesis draws upon Derrida's model of invagination and the metaphor of the vagina in Carter's work to begin to portray the liberatory reading space which is opened up in Carter's fiction (where 'invagination' represents an impossible space or topography). Earlier in this chapter I pointed to the connections, which Carter's fiction exploits, between patriarchal definitions of revolutionary women, and definitions of anything which appears to pose a threat to the status quo, as monstrous; and this includes any notion of a liberatory reading space. I have used these definitions, however, just as Carter's fiction uses them, in order to reveal, but also exploit, the gender bias with which patriarchal convention inscribes them. I do not wish to subscribe to an essentialist position which claims that any such liberatory reading space is a purely female space, but rather to claim that, in so far as it is a space where gender can be rethought, it is a 'feminist' space. In terms of Carter's work, the term 'feminist' signifies the exploration and exposure of the limitations of definitions of both genders. The liberatory reading

space is also one in which a liberated female subject can be imagined.

My analyses of Angela Carter's novels show what a powerful tool fiction can be in the feminist struggle. In the introduction I argue that Carter's fiction has much in common with, and indeed, may often be read as if it were, critical theory. As I suggested there, critical theory and fiction constitute two separate discourses, and yet, typically, Carter's self-conscious fiction often appears to combine the two. Carter, however, does opt primarily to exploit the potential of a fictional mode of expression, and this thesis shows that fiction, particularly the novel form (which is Carter's 'chosen form,'⁴⁷ and which is historically a feminist mouthpiece with a predominantly female readership), is potentially a more powerful tool than any theoretical treatise. First, fiction is obviously a more popular medium which reaches a wider audience. Fiction can also be read on many different levels, which facilitates the combination of story and theory; Carter explains to John Haffenden how it allows a 'mingling of adventure and the discussion of what one might loosely call philosophical concepts' (Novelists, p.87).⁴⁸ In this way fiction can popularise what might otherwise be dismissed as 'philosophical' or 'political'

⁴⁷ Interview with Kerry Goldsworthy, in Meanjin, 44, No.1 (1985), 4-13 (p.8).

⁴⁸ In the same paragraph, Carter claims that 'the idea behind Nights at the Circus was very much to entertain and instruct' (Novelists, p.87).

debate. Gina Wisker makes the point that in Carter's work, 'elaborate fantasy and material, historical engagement are not mutually exclusive: the one is a vehicle for the other' ('From Winged Woman to Werewolf,' p.91).

The crucial difference between Carter's fiction and non-fiction is a matter of the former's theatricality (which includes self-conscious dramatisations of its own concern with its own status as fiction). As I have shown throughout the thesis, Carter's fiction illuminates and explores many feminist arguments, both social and theoretical, by enacting them. Carter's fiction dramatises, criticises, and also speculates upon a variety of specific feminist alternatives. The power of the fictional medium is that it can reveal the attraction of certain political positions without totally subscribing to them, and without totally dismissing them. Within fiction Carter can posit the impossible: she creates a larger-than-life celebratory woman with liberatory wings and yet questions the very concept of identity. That is, Carter creates an ungraspable but positive and productive symbol of hope and change which, because of its construction out of paradox, represents a powerful force which cannot be easily dismissed or ignored, but has to be engaged with. Carter's fiction, as I have shown, also involves the reader in the political debate by using particular (often seductive) narrative conventions, whilst at the same time revealing its very means of seduction. This process

exposes the reader's necessary involvement with both the political and literary conventions in question, and reflects upon the way we read both fiction and the world, which may change the way we interpret our own position as readers.

Reading and writing about Angela Carter's work necessarily involves contact with what has been defined as 'monstrousness'--the possibility of change and liberation which is both exciting and yet threatening. All of her fiction, as this thesis demonstrates, self-consciously foregrounds, materialises and capitalises upon its own monstrousness. (One more reason, perhaps, why so few critics write about her work.) To read Carter's fiction, then, is to wrestle with a monster, but also, importantly, like Walser, to be invited to reinterpret, in a highly positive way, the very notion of monstrousness.

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APPENDIX

REVIEWS OF ANGELA CARTER'S WORKS

(This list is organised according to individual works by Angela Carter arranged in chronological order. Under each title reviews are listed chronologically, with the date shown as year/month/day.)

SHADOW DANCE

<u>Date</u>	<u>Journal</u>	<u>Volume</u>	<u>Page</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Author</u>
66/07/03	Observer (London)		22	Old Etonian on the Couch	Mary Holland
66/07/08	New Statesman	72	61		Edwin Morgan
66/07/15	Spectator	18	18	Sinister Street	David Golloway
66/08/04	Times Literary Supplement		701	Scarface	
66/08/24	Punch		304-05	First Novels	B. A. Young
66/09/00	Books and Bookmen	11	63		
66/11/01	Kirkus Review	34	1158		
66/11/28	Publishers' Weekly	190:2	59		Barbara A. Bannon
67/01/01	Library Journal	92	132		
67/02/03	New York Times	116	29	Shock Disarmed	Eliot Fremont-Smith
67/02/13	Newsweek	69	112, 116	Paper Puppets	S. S.
67/02/18	Saturday Review	50, No.7	36	A Gallery of Grotesques	Edward M. Potaker
67/02/19	New York Times Book Review	69	44	Grotesque	John Bowen
67/03/04	New Yorker		163		
67/07/13	Listener		57	Comfortably Surreal	Ian Hamilton
68/03/00	Choice	5	46		
85/00/00	Maatstaf	33	115		E. Portnoy
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick

THE MAGIC TOYSHOP

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67/07/06	Times Literary Supplement		593	Bizarre	
67/07/13	Listener	78	57	Comfortably Surreal	Ian Hamilton
67/09/00	Books and Bookmen	12	40	Eugene George Goes for the Gothic	Eugene George
67/12/01	Kirkus Review	35	1432		
67/12/25	Publisher's Weekly	192	56		
68/02/01	Library Journal	93	570		
"	New Yorker	44	133-44		
68/02/15	Best Sellers		446		
68/02/25	New York Times Book Review		38	Dark Fantasy	John Wakeman
68/05/01	Booklist	64	1022		
81/07/04	The Times		7d	Gothic and Everyday	Caroline Moorehead
81/07/10	New Statesman	102	16	Rediscoveries and Debuts	Judy Cooke
81/07/12	Observer (London)		37	Fables for the Modern World	Lorna Sage
81/08/21	Times Educational Supplement		19a	Connoisseur of Unreason, Champion of the Instinctual	Myra Barrs
82/05/00	British Book News		276	Some Women Writers	Margaret Crosland
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick

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68/08/01	Listener	80	152	Alice in Dropoutland	John Hemmings
"	Times Literary Supplement		817	Black Innocence	
69/01/13	Publishers Weekly	194	84		Barbara A. Bannon
69/03/02	New York Times Book Review		42	Logic in a Schizophrenic's World	Richard Boston
69/03/15	Library Journal	94	1158		
"	New Yorker	45	180		
69/05/01	Booklist	65	996		
70/10/25	Observer (London)		32		Celia Kent
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick

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69/11/09	Observer (London)		34	The Colonel's Daughters	Stephen Wall
69/11/13	Listener	82	674	Silly Woman	Stuart Hood
69/11/14	New Statesman	78	702	Organisation Man	James Fenton
69/11/20	Times Literary Supplement		1329	Facing the Past	
70/07/01	Kirkus Review	38	698		
70/09/01	Best Sellers	30	211-12		John S. Phillipson
70/09/13	New York Times Book Review		62	They Survived a Nuclear War	Richard Boston
79/07/06	Publishers' Weekly	198	55		Barbara A. Bannon
81/07/04	The Times		7d	Gothic and Everyday	Caroline Moorehead
81/07/10	New Statesman	102	16	Rediscoveries and Debuts	Judy Cooke
81/07/12	Observer (London)		37	Fables for the Modern World	Lorna Sage
81/08/21	Times Educational Supplement		19a	Connoisseur of Unreason	Myra Barrs
81/09/00	British Book News		515	Headlines and Footnotes	Neil Philip
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick
89/06/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		15	Love Among the Ruins	Dorothy Allison

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71/05/20	Listener	85	656	Unceasingly Thankful	Anita Van Vactor
71/05/21	New Statesman	81	711	Mannerists	Jonathan Keats
71/06/18	Times Literary Supplement		693	Private Lives	
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick
87/05/22	The Guardian			Mirror Images	Lorna Sage
88/05/00	Books		10		Michael Barber
89/06/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		15	Love Among the Ruins	Dorothy Allison

THE IMPERIAL DESIRE MACHINES OF DOCTOR HOFFMAN

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72/05/20	Spectator	228	772-73	The Surreal Thing	Auberon Waugh
72/05/25	Listener	87	693	Country Coloureds	Valentine Cunningham
72/06/02	Times Literary Supplement		622	Sinister Slices	
72/07/21	New Statesman	84	99	Devilled Pud	Barry Cole
73/03/00	Foundation	3	69-71	Marionettes within Metaphysics	George Hay
73/09/00	Books and Bookmen	18	138		
74/06/15	Kirkus Review	42	647	The War of Dreams	
74/07/01	Publishers' Weekly	206	75		Barbara A. Bannon
74/08/00	Library Journal	99	1988		
74/08/18	Book World (Washington Post)		3	Dreams Fantasies, A Moment of Truth with a Rhinoceros	J. D. O'Hara
74/09/08	New York Times Book Review		6-7	Fancy Fantasy: The War of Dreams	William Hjortsberg
74/09/15	Best Sellers	34	276-77		Irene N. Pompea
75/00/00	Prairie Schooner	49	174-76	The War of Dreams	Lee T. Lemon
75/01/27	AB Bookman's Weekly	55	347-49	Fiction	dolee
82/05/02	Observer (London)		30	Paperback Choice	
82/07/30	New Statesman	104	21		Harriet Gilbert
86/06/00	Fantasy Review	9	18	Transformation and Desire	Laurel Anderson Tryforos
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74/08/18	Observer (London)		28	Coming Apart at the Seams	Lorna Sage
74/08/23	Times Literary Supplement		897	Only Reflect	
74/09/05	The Times			Short Stories	
74/09/17	Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph			Fireworks that Fall and Explode	
74/09/26	Listener	92	41708	Dites and Aeroplanes	
74/09/28	The Birmingham Post			New Fiction	Anthony Masters
74/10/15	Nottingham University Gangster				Robert Graves
75/02/00	Books and Bookmen		55	Gothic Pyrotechnics	James Brockway
81/03/15	Kirkus Review		370		
81/04/03	Publishers' Weekly	219	68-9		Barbara A. Bannon
81/04/15	Library Journal	106	901		Judith T. Yamamoto
81/05/01	Booklist	77	1186		
81/06/14	New York Times Book Review	86	14,18	Stories and Novels	David Quammen
81/06/28	Book World (Washington Post)	11	5-6	Angela Carter: Tasting Sinister Fruits	Michele Slung
83/09/00	North American Review	268	68-72	Nine Story-Tellers	Richard Orodnenker
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick
87/05/22	The Guardian			Mirror images	Lorna Sage
87/08/00	Books		22	Desert Island Books	Kazuo Ishiguro
88/06/03	New Statesman	115	27	If Reading be the Love of Jenny Diski Food	
88/07/03	Guardian Weekly		29		Christina Koning

THE PASSION OF NEW EVE

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77/03/25	New Statesman	93	407	Be Bad	Paddy Beesley
77/03/26	Spectator	238	23-24	Passion Fruit	Peter Ackroyd
77/03/27	Observer (London)		29	Glass Menagerie	Lorna Sage
77/04/01	Kirkus review		368		
"	Publishers' Weekly	211	78		Barbara A. Bannon
"	Times Literary Supplement		392	Gelding the Lily	John Ryle
77/06/15	Library Journal	102	1404		Barry Baker
77/06/26	Observer (London)		29		
77/07/01	Booklist	73	1631-32		CIP
77/12/18	Observer (London)		21		Lorna Sage
78/00/00	World Literature Today	52	294	Noted	L. B. Mittleman
81/06/00	British Book News		328	The British Novel 1976-1980	Martin Seymour-Smith
82/11/25	The Times		10f		Miranda Seymour
82/12/19	Observer (London)		30	Paperback Choice	
83/01/21	Times Literary Supplement		69	Paperback Fiction in Brief	Patricia Craig
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick
87/00/00	Critical Quarterly	29/3	77	The Century's Daughters	Lyn Pykett

THE BLOODY CHAMBER

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79/05/27	Sunday Telegraph		12e	Hankies at the Ready	Janice Elliot
79/06/03	Observer (London)		36	Beauty and the Beast	Lorna Sage
79/06/14	Daily Telegraph		15a	Recent Fiction	Selina Hastings
79/07/07	Spectator	243	23		Emma Fisher
79/07/15	Observer (London)		37		
79/08/23	Listener	102	254-55	Psychic and Mental	John Mellors
79/09/00	Books and Bookmen	24	36-37	Metaphysical Fairy Stories	William Boyd
79/11/15	Kirkus Review	47	1337		
79/11/24	The Times		IID	The Times Books of the Year	Richard Holmes
79/12/09	Observer (London)		35		Lorna Sage
79/12/10	Publishers' Weekly	216	55		Barbara A. Bannon
80/00/00	Sewanee Review	88	414	Technics and Pyrotechnics	George Garrett
80/01/10	The Times		9a	Short Stories	Jacky Gillott
80/01/15	Library Journal	105	223		Judith T. Yamamoto
80/02/08	Times Literary Supplement		146	Man and Beast	Susan Kennedy
80/02/17	New York Times Book Review	85	14-15	Pleasure and Pain	Alan Friedman
80/02/24	Book World (Washington Post)		1-2	You've Come A Long Way Red Ridinghood	Carolyn Heilbrun
80/03/10	Time	115	82	Rorschachs	Paul Gray
80/03/24	The New Leader		19-20	Mixing Myth and Polemic	Joshua Gilder
80/04/00	Best Sellers	40	4	The Bloody Chamber and Other Adult Tales	Francis H. Curtis
"	Ms.	8	32	New and Recommended Books	
80/07/00	Sewanee Review	88	412-23	Technics and Pyrotechnics	George Garret
81/07/00	Ms.	10	90		Barbara Yastine

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81/07/04	The Times		7d	Gothic and Everyday	Caroline Moorehead
81/07/05	New York Times Book Review	86	19	Paperbacks: New and Noteworthy	
81/07/10	New Statesman	102	16	Rediscoveries and Debuts	Judy Cooke
81/07/12	Observer (London)		37	Fables for the Modern World	Lorna Sage
81/08/21	Times Educational Supplement		19a	Connoisseur of Unreason, Champion of the Instinctual	Myra Barrs
81/09/00	British Book News		515	Headlines and Footnotes	Neil Philip
82/03/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		18	Remainderama	Debra Rae Cohen
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THE SADEIAN WOMAN

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77/00/00	Sunday Times			Learning to live with de Sade	Donald Thomas
77/03/20	Sunday Times		39	The Stylish Miss Carter	John Mortimer
79/03/25	Sunday Times Magazine		102c	Paperbacks	Selina Hastings
79/04/01	Kirkus Review	47	420-21		
"	Library Journal	104	829		Sally Michell
79/04/05	Listener	101	496	Sadey Ladies	Patricia Beer
79/04/06	New Statesman	97	487-88	Unfair Shares	Hermione Lee
79/04/08	Observer (London)		37	Sex in the Head	John Weightman
79/04/22	The Guardian Weekly		21	This Holy Terror	Francis Huxley
79/05/15	Booklist	75	1413		
79/07/00	Books and Bookmen	24	33/36	Sade as Feminist	Raymond Durnat
79/07/29	New York Times Book Review		10	Position Paper	Richard Gilman
79/09/01	New Republic	181	31	The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography by Angela Carter	Robin Morgan
79/10/06	Nation	229	312-13	Where Ego Was...	James Sloan Allen
80/00/00	American Book Review	2:4	13	The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography	Susan Mernit
80/02/00	The Village Voice	25	35-36	The Big P	Laurie Stone
81/11/06	New Statesman	102	18	At the Mercy of Men's Dreams	Marion Glastonbury
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick

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82/10/31	Observer (London)		30	Courage of Conviction	Angus Wilson
82/11/05	Times Educational Supplement		25	The Essay, Post-Orwell	Bernard Crick
82/12/10	New Statesman	104	25	Parallel Bars	Harriet Gilbert
"	New Statesman	104	40	The Pleasures of Reading: 1982	Patricia Paulin
83/03/03	London Review of Books	5	19	In an English Market	Tom Paulin
86/10/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		17-19	Rough Magic: The Many Splendours of Angela Carter	Walter Kendrick

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84/09/27	The Times		9a	Spangles of Old Sawdust	Elaine Feinstein
84/09/28	New Statesman	108	30-31	Morning After the Night Before	Harriet Gilbert
"	Times Literary Supplement		1083	From Wonders to Prodigies	Adam Mars-Jones
84/09/30	Observer (London)		20	High-Wire Fantasy	Valentine Cunningham
84/10/00	Books and Bookmen		16	Fitful Glimpses	Kathy Stephen
84/10/04	London Review of Books	6	16-17	Stories of Black and White	Michael Wood
84/10/11	Listener	112	30	On the Game	John Mellors
84/12/00	Kirkus Review	52	1105		
84/12/21	New Statesman	110	43-44		
85/00/00	BLM Bonniers Litterara Magasin	54	38708	Sagan om Den Kvinnan	Lisbeth Larsson
85/01/00	British Book News		47		Geoffrey Trease
"	Library Journal	110	99		Dennis Pendleton
"	Saturday Review	11	79		Bruce Van Wyngarden
85/02/03	Washington Post		1,13	Angela Carter's Flights of Fancy	Carolyn Banks
85/02/24	New York Times Book Review	8	7	Come On and See the Winged Lady	Carolyn See
85/02/25	Time	125	87	On the Wings of a New Age	Paul Clay
85/05/20	New Republic	192	38-41	Wild Women, Brave Men	Amy B. Schwartz
85/09/14	The Times		14		Kathy O'Shaughnessy
85/11/00	Books and Bookmen		38		
86/03/02	Book World (Washington Post)	16	12		
86/04/13	New York Times Book Review		38		Patricia T. O'Connor
86/05/00	American Book Review		12-13	Three Ring Circus	Richard Martin
86/06/00	Fantasy Review	9	18	Transformation and Desire	Laurel Anderson Tryforos
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85/10/18	Times Literary Supplement		1169	Breaking the Spell of the Lorna Sage Past	
85/11/00	Spare Rib		36-39	From Classical Archetypes to Modern Stereotypes	Barbara Smith
"	Women's Review		28-29	Myths and the Erotic	Anne Smith
85/12/05	London Review of Books		24	Angela and the Beast	Patricia Craig
	London Review of Books		24	Angela and the Beast	Patricia Craig

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85/10/12	Glasgow Herald			Grave-Robbing Touch to Products from the Literary Laboratories	Douglas Dunn
85/10/17	Guardian		27	Hall of Mirrors	Lisa St Aubin de Teran
85/10/18	New Statesman	110	28-29	Putting on the Style	Grace Ingoldby
"	Times Literary Supplement		1169	Breaking the Spell of the Lorna Sage Past	
85/11/00	Fantasy Review	8	23	Non-Fantastic Brilliance	Chris Morgan
"	Spare Rib		36-39	From Classical Archetypes to Modern Stereotypes	Barbara Smith
"	Women's Review		28-29	Myths and the Erotic	Anne Smith
85/11/16	Spectator	255	37	Neither Obscene nor Pornographic	Miranda Seymour
85/11/20	Punch		94-5	Short Stories	
85/11/24	Observer (London)		28	Vanishing Ireland	Paul Bailey
85/12/05	London Review of Books		24	Angela and the Beast	Patricia Craig
86/00/00	Antioch Review, The	44	495		
86/01/00	Books in Canada	15	17-19	Served with a Twist	Terry Goldie
"	Illustrated London News	274	77	Darkness and Death in London	Sally Emerson
86/01/24	Times Educational Supplement		34	Bitter Sweet Collections	Shena Mackay
86/06/27	Publishers' Weekly	229	74		Genevieve Stuttaford
86/07/01	Kirkus Review	54	952		
86/08/00	Booklist	82	1661		
"	Library Journal	111	168		Marcia Tager
86/08/10	Book World (Washington Post)	16	5,14	The Cabinet of Angela Carter	Michael Bishop
86/09/07	New York Times Book Review		1,29	A Maker of Magic Souffles	Charles Newman
86/09/21	Los Angeles Times Book Review		13		Holly Prado

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86/11/00	Wilson Library Journal	61	71		Elizabeth Shostak
86/12/00	Science Fiction Chronicle	8	20		
86/12/22	New Republic	195	38-41	History and Histrionics	Jennifer Krauss
87/00/00	Hudson Review, The	40	147-48		Michael Gorra
88/01/03	New York Times Book Review	93	22		
89/10/09	Publisher's Weekly	232	83		

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86/12/00	Books and Bookmen		46		
86/12/19	Times Literary Supplement		1428	Refusing to Learn	Jo-Ann Goodwin
87/01/01	Listener	117	22-23	Bad Girls by the Score	John Mellors
89/06/00	Village Voice Literary Supplement		15-17	Bad Girls Rule	Stacy D'Erasmus

THE VIRAGO BOOK OF FAIRY TALES

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90/10/21	Observer (London)			Well Wicked Times by Word of Mouth	Lauris Morgan-Griffiths
90/10/25	The Guardian	32		Tell-tale Sisters	Paul Mansfield
90/12/16	New York Times Book Review	35			

