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# Sexing The Fairy Tale: Borrowed Monsters And Postmodern Fantasies

Romayne Chaloner Fullerton

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SEXING THE FAIRY TALE:  
Borrowed Monsters and Postmodern Fantasies

by

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Department of English

Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Graduate Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
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'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch. (73)

While the historical and postmodern representations of both the vagina dentata and the witch will be discussed in detail in Chapter I, at this juncture, the essential point to be made is that over time, woman has been depicted as frightening and thus as powerful because of her sexuality. For Carter, Diski, and Winterson then, the appropriation of classic fairy tale monsters as material for postmodern fantasies suggests an attempt at least to explore, if not come to terms with, the nature of monstrosity in relation to gender.

Stephen Neale in his book Genre makes several relevant observations about the female monster and the origins as well as the extent of her power. He writes that "it could well be maintained that it is woman's sexuality, that which renders them [sic] desirable--but also threatening--to men, which constitutes the real problem...and which constitutes also and ultimately that which is really monstrous" (Neale 61). Neale's analysis, like that of Barbara Creed, suggests that in the horror film, the female monster signifies the boundary between the human and the non-human. This concept of the border is also central to the construction of the monstrous-feminine in several of the novels by Carter, Diski, and Winterson. In these instances, the function of

how woman terrifies man through her sexuality. I define the postmodern, the fantastic, and folk and fairy tales to demonstrate how their characteristics are manifested in the works of Carter, Diski, and Winterson. In the second chapter, I investigate the relationship between mothers and children and suggest that the true alternative nature of a mother's power lies in her connection to both the semiotic and the narratives of folk and fairy. Since Carter, Diski and Winterson also wrote or re-wrote several popular fairy tales, the third chapter discusses these new versions and details how and why they differ from their predecessors. In the final chapter, I propose that the new fairy tale heroine is heroic because unlike her earlier counterpart, it is she who is in control of her own story.

**For Greg and Aidan**

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## Introduction

### Sexing the Fairy Tale:

#### Some Old, Some New, Some Definitely Borrowed...

Many of the novels of Angela Carter, Jenny Diski and Jeanette Winterson are dominated by female monsters, all of whom appear to have evolved from French, German, and most recently, Disney versions of folk and fairy tales. While much has been written about woman as passive victim in the classic stories, virtually no work has discussed the representation of woman as powerful monster, as she appears in her contemporary, postmodern incarnation. For in the texts of Carter, Diski and Winterson, there is a marked proliferation of witches, giants, step-(or adoptive) mothers, and half-human, half-animal characters who bear a striking resemblance to their fairy tale predecessors. In these current novels, women's construction as monstrous is, to a large extent, dependent upon other characters' perceptions of them, and as such, their definition as female monsters is neither static nor unqualified. However, the potential and often subversive power that they wield through their connection to frightening fairy tale images is one which ultimately cannot be denied.

As Barbara Creed suggests in her analysis of horror films, The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism,

Psychoanalysis, all societies have a concept of what constitutes the monstrous-feminine, "of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1). For her, the phrase 'female monster' is problematic because it can imply a simple reversal of the term 'male monster' although the monstrous-feminine horrifies in a distinctly different way. Thus, Creed argues for a new term:

As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity. (Creed 3)

The notion that woman terrifies man because of her sexuality is not new. Freud initially linked man's fear of woman to his infantile belief that the mother is castrated.<sup>1</sup> But even before Freud, ancient civilizations were making similar connections. As Joseph Campbell, examining the origins of various beliefs and myths in The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology points out, there is an age-old connection between woman's sexuality and her depiction as both castrator and witch:

there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies...which is known to folklore as 'the toothed vagina'--the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called

'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch. (73)

While the historical and postmodern representations of both the vagina dentata and the witch will be discussed in detail in Chapter I, at this juncture, the essential point to be made is that over time, woman has been depicted as frightening and thus as powerful because of her sexuality. For Carter, Diski, and Winterson then, the appropriation of classic fairy tale monsters as material for postmodern fantasies suggests an attempt at least to explore, if not come to terms with, the nature of monstrosity in relation to gender.

Stephen Neale in his book Genre makes several relevant observations about the female monster and the origins as well as the extent of her power. He writes that "it could well be maintained that it is woman's sexuality, that which renders them [sic] desirable--but also threatening--to men, which constitutes the real problem...and which constitutes also and ultimately that which is really monstrous" (Neale 61). Neale's analysis, like that of Barbara Creed, suggests that in the horror film, the female monster signifies the boundary between the human and the non-human. This concept of the border is also central to the construction of the monstrous-feminine in several of the novels by Carter, Diski, and Winterson. In these instances, the function of



the monstrous-feminine is constituted in woman's ability to initiate an encounter between the social agencies who hold power and that which threatens their stability. For Carter, Diski, and Winterson, the monstrous can be produced at the border between human and non-human: (Fevvers in Nights at the Circus, Noni in Like Mother, Dog-Woman in Sexing the Cherry, Daphne in Happily Ever After, Eve/Evelyn in The Passion of New Eve); between those who take up proper roles--gender or otherwise--and those who do not (Jordan and Dog-Woman from Sexing the Cherry, Dora and Nora from Wise Children, Daphne and Sylvie from Happily Ever After, and Frances in Like Mother); between average and gigantic (Dog-Woman, Fevvers, and Mother in The Passion of New Eve); and even between expressions of so-called normal and abnormal sexual desire (Dora and Nora, and Daphne). These concepts of crisis, potential metamorphosis and borders which are so central to the works of Carter, Diski, and Winterson can be explored and elucidated by applying the general theories of Julia Kristeva as outlined in her text, The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.

This thesis will draw on various aspects of Kristeva's theory to provide a preliminary hypothesis for an analysis of woman as monstrous in a selection of works by Carter, Diski, and Winterson. I will argue that when woman is represented as monstrous in these texts, it is almost always

in relation to her mothering, reproductive, or sexual functions and that the depictions of the monstrous are largely borrowed from folk or fairy tales. While the specifics of Kristeva's theory of abjection will be examined in detail in later chapters, it is necessary to begin this chapter with a brief synopsis of the pertinent areas of her work and its relevance for this study since such a general understanding would be both helpful and necessary for following subsequent hypotheses and arguments. As has been implied, the postmodern fantasies of Diski, Carter and Winterson, through their appropriation of folk and fairy tale motifs, are in constant dialogue with this once oral, now literary tradition. Because the conversation is problematic and the function of the fairy tale elements is often ambiguous or even contradictory, this chapter will then discuss some aspects of postmodernism and suggest how the general characteristics of this mode are manifested in the works of these three female, British authors. Since part of the postmodern method involves appropriating forms of other genres, the chapter will also examine the mode of the fantastic including its sub-classification, the fairy tale, and how these traditions are appropriated by or have impact on Carter, Diski, and Winterson.

\* \* \*

### Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

Primarily concerned with psychoanalysis and literature, Kristeva's theoretical studies can be employed to suggest a way of situating the monstrous-feminine in relation to the female figures of classic or Disney-style fairy tales and postmodern fiction. Kristeva first alludes to the notion of abjection in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. In contrast to the accepted definition of the term, for Kristeva, that which is abject is thoroughly repulsive and disgusting; it

is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so. (127)

The abject is ambiguous; it both attracts and repels, but its presence and influence are inescapable. In general terms, Kristeva is exploring the different ways in which

abjection functions within society as a means for separating the human from the non-human and the fully formed subject from one who is partially constituted. While a complete examination of her theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, I plan to draw mainly on her discussion of the construction of abjection in humans in relation to her notion of the border, the mother-child relationship, and to a limited extent, the female body.

Abjection, then, can apply to a metaphorical or physical state, to a person, or to a set of circumstances. In all instances, the term refers to that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). For Kristeva, the abject has radically subversive potential because it is "the place where meaning collapses" (2), the place where 'I' am not. Because this 'not I' threatens life itself, it must be "radically excluded" (2) from the living subject, jettisoned away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates self from not self. But while the subject must exclude the abject, that which lies beyond this constructed border must still be tolerated because that which threatens to destroy life also continually defines and delineates it. Kristeva explains the notion of abjection in various ways. For instance, she

suggests that food loathing "is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2). But food can only be considered as abject if it signifies a border between distinct territories or entities. In this example, Kristeva sees the skin on the top of a glass of milk as a sign or metaphor which suggests a separation of her world from that of her parents; it is a sign which she finds repulsive (3).

All substances which are created by the human body, but are superfluous to it, are also abject: faeces, blood, urine, pus, and so on. The human body must protect itself from such bodily wastes while it continually defines itself as a living thing because it constructs itself as such in relation to this border. So the abject is not a quality in and of itself; rather, it is a relationship to a boundary and represents what has been "jettisoned out side of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (40). The abject is what challenges identity; it is neither good nor evil, subject nor object, but something which threatens the distinctions themselves. Kristeva implies that every society is founded on the abject: each must construct limits and expel the antisocial because the abject threatens the unity of that society by calling into question the very boundaries upon which it is built and maintained.

On a more personal level, abjection manifests itself in the continual struggle to separate from the maternal body.

Kristeva posits that in this sense, abjection confronts humans

with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting [sic] outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (13)

At this early pre-linguistic point in a child's development, he or she tries to separate from the mother, but feels such a task is impossible. As children grow, however, the necessity of such a separation becomes paramount: children must construct their mothers as abject in order to facilitate the separation from the mother's realm, that of the semiotic, and take up their place in the father's order, the symbolic.

Kristeva views infants as beings across whom physical and psychic impulses flow ceaselessly and rhythmically. This flux is slowly regulated by constraints of both family and society. At the child's earliest stage, however, the flow of impulses is centred entirely on the mother. It is this disorganised, prelinguistic group of gestures, sounds, and so on which becomes the foundation of the semiotic realm, an area which remains active beneath the mature linguistics of

the adult. She calls this material 'semiotic' because it functions like an unorganised signifying practice. As the child matures, the semiotic becomes regulated and the entrance to this psychic space is barred by the logic, the coherent syntax, and the rationality of the adult. It is this realm that Kristeva calls the 'symbolic.' Once grown, people usually only become aware of the semiotic realm in dreams when images are processed in seemingly illogical fashion. But Kristeva believes that the semiotic can also be reached through the language of poetry. Here, as in dreams, the primary processes of rhythm and sound pattern are also liberated from the unconscious. While the symbolic tries to maintain its mastery over the semiotic, it can never be entirely successful, and the revolutionary power of this latter realm, here equated with the maternal, remains firm. For all humans, the developmental process is never completely concluded and, as will be discussed in greater detail with respect to the creation of poetic language in Chapters I and III, humans repress their connection to the semiotic and are capable of drawing on this realm to attempt a new form of communication apart from what Kristeva considers to be the masculine, patriarchal rule of the symbolic.

Some aspects of Kristeva's theories about abjection and the feminine body are also relevant to my arguments about

witches (Chapter I), giants (Chapter III), and the general nature of heroism (Chapter III). In her discussion of rituals of defilement in relation to the Indian caste system, Kristeva draws a distinction between maternal authority, which is later extended to the feminine body in general, and paternal law. She suggests that because the child learns about "the self's clean and proper body" (72) from the mother, and since this exercise of maternal power is carried out without guilt or shame, there is a "fusion between mother and nature" (74). But as the child matures, the father and his symbolic realm initiate a "totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire etc. come into play--the order of the phallus" (74). Virtually all the texts of Carter, Diski, and Winterson represent the monstrous-feminine in a way which can be related to Kristeva's notion of the maternal authority and the self's clean and proper body. This is because in Kristeva's view, the image of a woman's body, through its inherent maternal functions, constantly acknowledges its "debt to nature" (102) and consequently signifies the abject. This notion of the material female body is central to my hypotheses not only about the construction of mother/child relationships and commonly accepted notions of femininity, sexuality and heroism, but also with respect to an origin for creativity,



specifically for writing and will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

\* \* \*

The Relevance of the Postmodern and the Fantastic  
For Diski, Carter, and Winterson

Over the course of this thesis, I will show how Carter, Diski, and Winterson use fairy and folk motifs to reveal the problematic boundaries between Western society and its myth-making authorities. The novels of these three authors are often subversive, revealing the ideological underpinnings of various social, cultural, historical, and literary representations. As feminist writers, these women are interested in raising the political consciousness of their readers, and their texts, like those of their folk and fairy tale predecessors, can sometimes be didactic in presenting their views. While the potential for change is presented in these postmodern texts, it is almost never unqualified and is rarely sustained. Part of the difficulty is inherent in language and novelistic form: postmodern works, in order to deconstruct or parody earlier motifs, must necessarily ground themselves in problematic historical forms and

language and the fairy tale aspects which are appropriated by Carter, Diski, and Winterson are, as will be discussed, contentious for numerous reasons.

Attempting to define the postmodern is, in some sense, an oxymoronic gesture because central to this artistic and philosophical credo is a questioning of meaning and how it is generated. In general, critics agree that postmodernism's slippery, shifting definitions are appropriate to the type of literature to which it applies. Broad and varied though the theories may be, there are essentially two critical approaches which are relevant to this discussion: that of the 'catalogue' which defines postmodernism by listing the common characteristics of representative works, and that of 'focus' which selects and defines postmodern artifacts by assessing what the author considers their dominant characteristics. The former approach is typified by the theoretical writings of Linda Hutcheon, and the latter by those of Brian McHale. Both these methods of textual analysis are pertinent and helpful in examining how and why the texts of Diski, Winterson, and Carter are postmodern.

Linda Hutcheon, in The Politics of Postmodernism, writes that in trying to define the term 'postmodern,' one often says what it is by saying what it is not. According to Hutcheon, this is an appropriate condition because this mode

is inherently contradictory, and as Rosemary Jackson points out in Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, its primary trope (like that of fantasy) is the oxymoron. Examples of this device are rife in the works of Diski, Carter, and Winterson, but one of the most obvious is the name of a central character in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry: Dog-Woman. This character is an enormous, raucous, impoverished woman living in the slums of London in the seventeenth century. She explains to the reader in the second chapter that although she had a name, she cannot remember what it is; she quips, "They call me the Dog-Woman and it will do" (11). As the hyphenated term implies, the character is both dog and woman; because of the order in which the words are joined, she could be seen as slightly more 'doggish' than 'womanish.' However, the point is that there is an intentional confusion created by the author and this confusion has an impact on the reader and even on the other characters within the novel: is Dog-Woman a beast or a human? The confusion is not literal; that is, she appears in human form and is gendered female, but her actions can be interpreted as sometimes brutal, sometimes humane. Her name highlights the fact that people are far more brutal than animals: people kill for fun; animals do not. By joining the words 'dog' and 'woman' together, Winterson indicates that the reader ought to consider these

categorizations. Dog-Woman, however, exists on the border between these two states of being and she is not always brutal. On numerous occasions, she is filled with love for her son Jordan, and with compassion for her elderly neighbour. Again, however, the confusion between the categories exists because nothing can be more filled with love and loyalty at particular junctures than a dog. Winterson uses the oxymoronic name, 'Dog-Woman,' to interrogate what this character is by what she is not--to define or redefine notions of what constitutes beastly, admirable, loyal, loving behaviour, and even heroism. This strategy raises questions about the problematics of language and labels and draws attention to the relativity of interpretation.

Angela Carter's novel Nights at the Circus also exploits the centrality of the oxymoron: Fevvers, the central character, is an aerialist who has founded her career, her fame, and her identity on being (or at least, appearing to be) both woman and bird. Another character in the novel, the American journalist, Walser, succinctly cites the necessity of Fevvers' oxymoronic state:

For, 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. (Carter, Nights 17)

Fevvers' very being undermines itself by its *impossibility* of being and the notion of what constitutes existence is questioned. But more than this, Walser's statement carries an implicit criticism of a society which values sight above all other faculties, and which insists on privileging the text's and Fevvers' slogan, "Seeing is believing" (15) above all other manners of apprehension. It is, paradoxically, the audience's desire to "see" the truth which allows Fevvers to create herself as she wishes to be seen and allows her to exist on the boundary between belief and disbelief.

In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism, through its commitment to duplicity or doubleness, tries to denaturalize the major underpinnings of human existence. In other words, postmodern art points out that the things which women and men have taken for granted as 'natural' are, in fact, constructs. As such, these pervasive structures are not above being revealed and questioned. Such constructs include government and its various agencies, family, sexuality, and even reality. As will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter focus on these constructs (and others) to reveal their human-made

existence. They do this to suggest that the reader's attitudes towards belief, authority, biology, and so on, are specific and cultural, not universal, and these authors use the ironic mode of postmodernism to question the nature of the underlying assumptions, to expose the reader's biases, and eventually, to challenge the prevailing authorities.

Although some debate has centred on whether or not the postmodern mode is essentially political, I agree with Linda Hutcheon that it cannot really be otherwise because it appropriates images and stories which are not 'neutral', and then parodies them for its own purposes. The focus is on the system of representation which does not purport to reflect society or reality (as literary realism tried to do), but rather grant or create meaning within a particular milieu. But as Hutcheon points out,

there is a paradox involved...On the one hand, there is a sense that we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of visual and narrative representations, and on the other hand, we also seem to be losing faith in both the inexhaustibility and the power of those existing representations. And parody is often the postmodern form this particular paradox takes. By both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of

representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalize them...loosening the glue by which labels used to adhere to the products of convention. (8)

Part, then, of Diski's, Winterson's, and Carter's relation to postmodernism is found in their parodies of numerous fairy tale motifs. Their appropriation and reconstruction of various aspects of these stories will be discussed at length in later chapters, but for immediate clarity, an example here will serve to illustrate the point.

The two main characters in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry are Dog-Woman and her adopted son, Jordan. Central to the story is Dog-Woman's size; she is enormous--so big, in fact, that she "heard a voice compare [her] to a mountain range" (Winterson, Sexing 25) and she catapulted an elephant out of sight by sitting opposite the beast on a huge balance. As Karen Rowe in "Feminism and Fairy Tales" points out, women--or more correctly, heroines--in fairy tales are usually diminutive and helpless; these (and incredible physical beauty) are their defining characteristics, and it is precisely upon these 'qualities' that their virtue and merit within the story rests (346-7). Analysing the tales according to structuralist principles, Vladimir Propp also notes that the heroine's primary function within these traditional stories is to be rescued (Morphology 54). It is

precisely these characteristics with which numerous feminists take issue. Marcia Lieberman in "Some Day My Prince Will Come" warns that fairy tales "serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles" (185). While some critics like Alison Lurie have tried to defend the reading of fairy tales on the grounds that there are stories which do not depict women and girls as passive, helpless, and superficially beautiful, Lieberman points out that the majority of people are not familiar with these works; they simply have not been published or widely circulated. As a result, readers are generally most familiar with what Lieberman calls the Disney passive heroine type (186). Thus the source for women's power in these tales generally is tied to their beauty. As Lieberman says, "Being powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly. The moral value of activity thus becomes sex-linked" (187). In Sexing the Cherry, Winterson relies on the reader's awareness of the traditional fairy tale heroine and she creates Dog-Woman to parody the stereotype. The result is a character who challenges boundaries, who can be both heroine and ugly, both female and physically powerful. As will be discussed in Chapter III, Dog-Woman's, and other heroines', successes thus mock the traditional fairy tale representation.

While contemporary readers may shrug off the possibility of being influenced by old stories with rigid,



stereotypical presentations of women, Karen Rowe points out that some women may still fall prey to subtle paradigms through identification with the heroine. Thus, Rowe suggests that subconsciously, women may transfer from fairy tales to real life

cultural norms which exact passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female's cardinal virtues. In short, fairy tales perpetuate the patriarchal status quo by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed inescapable fate. (Rowe 346)

Such objections make it obvious that the fairy tale source for postmodernism is not neutral but problematic, and thus the novels of Winterson, Carter, and Diski cannot help but be political in their general orientation. These authors rely on the reader's awareness of these historical-traditional representations of the fairy tale heroine and they construct many of their female characters as opposites to their historical models while constantly presenting these women as heroines. This gap between stereotype and parody is often a great source of humour, but it is also the gap which urges the reader to admit the falsity of the concept of the 'original heroine.' While all ideas are obviously constructs, some of these constructs are given validity in texts while others are not. In the fairy tale tradition, one

idea is presented about what women are. But in the novels of Winterson, Diski, and Carter, there are numerous and often contradictory notions; although all these notions are constructs, they are also equally constructed as alternatives. These and other issues relating to the representation of feminine and heroic qualities will be examined in detail in Chapters I and III.

This constant questioning of cultural, literary, and political assumptions and their representations is an intrinsic part of the postmodern credo and underlying this attitude is a challenge to the notion of a shared or universal meaning. This is not to say that concepts like truth, reality, or even 'heroine-ism' do not exist; postmodern works simply say that these are no longer unproblematic issues assumed to be self-evident and self-justifying or reliant upon any prior tradition for definition. Thus, postmodern works must self-consciously draw attention to their existence as representation and acknowledge that they are interpreting their referents even as they use and re-use them. In Jenny Diski's novel, Like Mother, the narrator is a baby called Nony (short for 'non-entity'), who has no brain. Still, she tells the reader that she "invents" him/her for her own benefit. She says that it is essential for her to create an audience because "I have to have someone who can listen to the language I don't have.

I need you to imagine the world I have no commerce with" (18). The reader has a textual representation--a 'reader-character' within the text--who voices any possible complaints or doubts that the (external) reader might have.

The text, then, is paradoxical: the story is told by a being unable to think or talk, and yet the story is told. The novel thus questions not only the reader's notion of being and non-being, but what can and cannot be told and how. Nony puts it well:

I think stories are gaolers. They make both the teller and the listener their prisoner, incarcerated by the requirements of the narrative, by the need for coherent explanation. I didn't invent you so that I could give you an explanation of Mother, I just wanted to tell you who she was. I don't want to construct a pile of events that assume more importance than life itself. Stories have a life of their own. And look what's happened already. Now there are three of us. You, me, and the story. (25)

Like Mother constantly draws attention to itself as construct and this is an intrinsic part of postmodern strategy: these works exploit the power of various literary conventions (in this instance, that narrators do have a voice, that they have something to say, that there is a

boundary between narrator and audience that is not acknowledged, and so on) while simultaneously relying on the reader's knowledge of these conventions; in order for the parody to be effective, the reader must recognize what the 'original' is. And it is this gap which forces readers to acknowledge these boundaries and examine their underpinnings.

Jeanette Winterson takes the idea of articulating the inarticulable by the inarticulate to an extreme in Sexing the Cherry. She highlights the text's existence as representation without using words at all: she titles several of the narrative sections with drawings of fruit. The novel opens in the early seventeenth century and Jordan's sections are marked with a sketch of a pineapple while Dog-Woman's are 'named' with a banana. In the last section of the novel, about three hundred years have passed and the narrative now takes place mostly in the present. But by an unexplained coincidence, there exist in contemporary time two characters who bear a striking resemblance to Jordan and Dog-Woman--Nicholas Jordan and the unnamed environmentalist. Like the earlier Jordan, Nicholas loves boats and is interested in what constitutes a hero. In addition, they share a name. The environmentalist describes feeling as if she were Dog-Woman; that is to say, she describes having feelings and having an appearance which are

very similar to those of Dog-Woman in the first part of the novel. The environmentalist, like Dog-Woman, was also very large; however, as she aged, she lost weight. But, "When the weight had gone I found out something strange: that the weight persisted in my mind. I had an alter ego who was huge and powerful, a woman whose loyalties are fierce and few..." (Sexing 125).

Nicholas Jordan's and the environmentalist's narratives are also marked with visual representations of fruit; however, both Nicholas' pineapple and the unnamed woman's banana are severed. The representation is a paradox: the narratives and the images both are and are not connected. Clearly, the text does suggest a linkage. However, if the reader perceives the two time frames, and hence the two pairs of narratives, as linked, then he or she must acknowledge that at least partially, it is a joining that he or she created. Such is the only logical explanation or conclusion if the reader bases this finding upon his or her own experience of realistic narrative time: characters living in the seventeenth century are not still living in the twentieth. The narrative pictures themselves are representations, but these drawings, like a word to its referent, are only linked perceptually. While Jordan's seventeenth-century narratives are marked with a pineapple, his modern counterpart's are marked with a sliced pineapple.

But any connection between either the historical and the contemporary narrative, or between the picture as representation of narrative and narrative as representation of truth is a connection made largely in the mind of the reader. Part of the function of these images is to draw attention to their existence as representation--to their constructedness. And beyond this lies the postmodern notion that narrative itself is not natural; it is human-made. By forcing the reader to acknowledge the arbitrary connection between Jordan's narrative and that of Nicholas Jordan through the pineapple, Winterson implicitly suggests that the same difference exists between language and its referents, and her words in Sexing the Cherry and those of the source works like fairy tales.

Brian McHale in Postmodernist Fiction extrapolates Roman Jakobson's theory of the 'dominant' to aid him in his quest for a meaningful investigation and definition of the postmodern. McHale outlines the numerous problems with postmodernism, beginning with the confusion surrounding the term itself and its explicit reference to its own historicity. McHale's answer to the definition dilemma is to look at what each text is foregrounding, to examine what sorts of issues it raises. Thus, the definition depends, to some extent, on focus and perception. From this, he theorizes that modernist texts tend to have an

epistemological dominant. That is, they tend to be about the problems of knowing and will usually ask questions like "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it and with what degree of certainty?....What are the limits of the knowable? And so on" (9). In contrast, the dominant of the postmodern work is ontological. Quoting Thomas Pavel, McHale defines ontology as "a theoretical description of a universe" (27). He expands this definition to include a potential plurality of universes, and also to include *possible* and *impossible* universes, and thus expands the realm of inclusion to the fairy tale. McHale writes that postmodern fiction, then, will employ strategies which

engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls 'postcognitive': 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance, What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of

existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?;

How are the worlds structured? (10)

Thus equipped with McHale's thesis, the catalogue of postmodern features that critics like Hutcheon set up can also be seen as a grouping of narrative strategies which foreground ontological issues.

By using the fairy tale motifs in their fiction, Carter, Winterson, and Diski can compare two distinct universes (usually the 'timeless' world of fairy with that of the present) and point up the limits, boundaries, biases and the essential constructedness of both worlds. But more than this, they can interrogate aspects of the 'real' world by the implicit comparisons with that of the acknowledged fantastic. In the works of Diski, Carter, and Winterson, there emerges a different set of narrative strategies, but a shared interest in the questions which McHale poses. All these novelists blur the distinctions between fairy tale and reality in order to lead the reader toward an acknowledgement of his or her own confusion about which world it is in which he or she lives. The strategy insists that readers acknowledge boundaries, or construct boundaries and then question these very lines. The objective is to make readers less rigid in their concept of what constitutes reality, what constitutes truth, and upon what basis one decides what is right, wrong, and so on.



Obviously it would be an impossibility for humans to live in a totally relativistic universe. While postmodernism does not suggest an outlook of total relativity, its texts do encourage readers to understand and consider *why* they think they way they do. Thus in Jenny Diski's novel, Happily Ever After, several worlds collide and interrogate the nature of moral obligations. Young Divya lives with her mother, a woman completely unable to look after her own needs, much less those of her daughter. Divya's social worker, Jock, feels responsible for Divya and realizes that she is both unhappy at present and that her future looks equally bleak. After giving the girl a day filled with all her favourite activities, he murders her to protect her happiness. From Jock's perspective, his choice to end her life is not morally wrong because he does not see how Divya can both live in the real world *and* be happy; such a state can only exist in never-never land: in one's imagination, in words, or in stories. These worlds are not real for Jock, although they are of immense importance to other characters in the novel and do constitute some aspects of their realities.

For novels such as this, the worlds--all worlds within the texts--are constructed of words and McHale argues that "worlds" and "words" have diametrically opposed ontological status. He further posits that postmodernism draws attention

to words at the expense of worlds and thus makes words "more 'present' or 'real' than the worlds they project..." (Postmodernist Fiction 148). The objective of this foregrounding of style is not simply to efface either world, but rather to point up and expose the tension that exists along the boundary between the two worlds and even between word and world, in this instance, between fairy tale and reality. Such postmodern strategies are necessary so that readers do not forget that universes are determined, created, generated, limited, and maintained by language. According to McHale's thesis, this situation is the reverse of the modernist strategy where the reader is encouraged to think that the fictional world somehow generates its own words and its own style (157). By using the language and structure of the familiar fairy tale in a text which is ostensibly about any number of real themes, Carter, Diski, and Winterson can constantly remind the reader of the constructs of both worlds and can use language to reveal the fantastic aspect of both or either world(s).

McHale claims a strong affinity between the genre of postmodernism and that of the fantastic. He suggests that postmodernist fiction "co-opts the fantastic genre in much the same way that it has co-opted science fiction, developing the fantastic genre's inherent potential for ontological dialogue into a vehicle for a postmodernist

poetics" (Postmodernist Fiction 79). A large number of the texts of Diski Winterson, and Carter display elements of the fantastic. As Tzvetan Todorov in his germinal study, The Fantastic points out, literary structures, and hence genres, are located on abstract levels separate from the texts themselves. Therefore, a work manifests a certain genre (12), or to extrapolate, manifests some aspects of several overlapping genres. For Todorov, the questioning by the reader and a central character of whether what is occurring in the narrative is reality or dream, truth or illusion, is at the heart of the definition of fantasy. This hesitation between fact and imagination is crucial:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov 25)

This strategy is common in almost all the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter; however, it is most clearly represented and articulated in Carter's Nights at the Circus.

The plot revolves around the winged acrobat, Fevvers--

seemingly half bird, half woman--as in part one of the novel, she narrates the supposed events of her life to the American journalist, Walser. It is Walser with whom the reader must identify in the hesitation between real and imaginary, for Fevvers' slogan encompasses the choice, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter, Nights 7). As a journalist, Walser is the representative of the laws of observable phenomena, of those who rely upon verifying facts with what can be seen. And yet, as Fevvers' adoptive mother Lizzie often points out, you can see Fevvers' wings. She also notes a tiny scar on Fevvers' foot to demonstrate the verity of Fevvers' vignette about being attacked by a man wishing to sacrifice her in his quest of an elixium vitae. "'Oracular proof,' said Lizzie, smothering a yawn. 'Seeing is believing'" (83). But it is very difficult to believe in the existence of someone or something which, in one's own experience of life and the scientific laws which supposedly govern it, cannot exist. From Walser's point of view, and implicitly from that of the reader, a human and a bird simply could not produce an offspring, so Fevvers cannot exist; but she does. According to Todorov's definition, this narrative situation is classic:

"I nearly reached the point of believing" that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity

would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is the hesitation which sustains its life. (31)

Todorov argues that both a central character and the reader must choose between the two interpretations: "The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated" (31). Walser is the reader's voice of reason because he articulates the doubts about Fevvers that readers may have, but cannot express within the text. Ironically, Walser's unwilling suspension of disbelief makes that of the reader all the more willing.

In order for the narrative to open up the possibility of disorder, that is, to raise the spectre of the existence of something which does not correspond to the accepted and acknowledged scientific structures, the text must begin from a base within the dominant cultural order. Thus, Carter can set the introduction of the unreal against the category of real--itself a category which fantasy interrogates by its difference. Walser, his notion of story--a biographical piece about Fevvers, his position as journalist, even his nationality--American, all occupy the ruling sphere of reality. Carter, from the outset, introduces elements of fantasy and fairy tale to call into question both Walser's notions of reality, and implicitly, those of the reader. But

while fairy tales use the formulaic 'Once upon a time' to cue the reader that what follows is not 'true' in any real sense of the word, fantasy accomplishes the same thing by virtue of its narrative mode.

Rosemary Jackson acknowledges a large debt to Tzvetan Todorov in her book, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion. She discusses fantasy as being a mode which exists across various historical periods and results in different texts' manifesting similar structural and thematic concerns. She then suggests that from this mode, a number of related genres emerge and combine to produce numerous types of fiction in different historical situations:

Borrowing linguistic terms, the basic model of fantasy could be seen as a language, or langue, from which its various forms, or paroles, derive. Out of this mode develops romance literature or 'the marvellous' (including fairy tales and science fiction), 'fantastic' literature (including stories by Poe, Isak Dinesen, Maupassant, Gautier, Kafka, H.P. Lovecraft) and related tales of abnormal psychic states, delusion, hallucination, etc. (7)

Here a few objections could arise. To call the works of Diski, Winterson and Carter 'fantastic', then, is to suggest that they could manifest similar or even identical

structural and theoretical characteristics to a fantasy written in some other period.

At first glance, for example, there might seem to be few similarities between Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Winterson's Sexing the Cherry. However, according to Jackson's theory, the strategy and objective of the works is essentially the same. But equally important is the fact that the strategy and objective of fantasy happens to coincide with that of the postmodernist ethos. Jackson writes that

fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'....it tells of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence. (4)

Postmodern texts, like fantastic ones, attempt to challenge the prevailing authorities, to disrupt and dis-order the status quo and to open up, even for the brief duration of the text, the possibilities which lie outside the accepted

social constructs.

Diski, Winterson, and Carter are interested in exposing the falsity of the dominant social order. In their novels, they attack, among other things, bureaucracy, all levels of government, organized religion, concepts of the nuclear family, and morality. These authors need to incorporate aspects of the fantastic into their works because it is through the introduction of the seemingly impossible or unbelievable that the limits of possibility and belief are exposed, tested, and even re-evaluated. In order to compare the two universes or worlds, one can only be described in relation to the other, so the pair are inextricably bound: "Since this excursion into disorder can only begin from a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the 'real'--a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference" (Jackson 4).

Fantasy, then, offers writers freedom from the constraints and conventions of realistic fiction, and as such, has a revolutionary potential. Although the mode has a history of being ignored or snubbed because of its supposedly escapist tendencies, the works of Carter, Winterson, and Diski are definitely not guilty of avoiding difficult themes. Critics like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis



have also suggested that fantasies construct alternate and perhaps morally superior worlds to the world of reality. Again, this is not so with Diski, Carter, and Winterson. They are not motivated by a desire to escape the present or to offer a clearly better alternative; instead, they juxtapose the fantastic with the real in order to criticize and expose injustice.

Jackson argues that fantasy is produced within and determined by its social context; as such, these texts cannot really be analyzed apart from their background and historicity. Fantasy, she writes, "attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3). While I agree with her assessment, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to compare Diski, Winterson, and Carter on such grounds. However, what can be compared and analyzed is the manner in which these texts manifest and reveal this loss, and part of the authors' strategy to make this apparent lies in their use of fairy tale motifs.

\* \* \*

Some Background on Folk and Fairy Tales

As implied at this chapter's outset, Diski, Winterson, and Carter appropriate various structural and thematic characteristics from well-known, traditional fairy and folk tales. The novels they write are not simply re-writings of these stories (although such things are, at present, being written), nor are they wholly new fairy tales such as writers like Tanith Lee, Sara Henderson Hay, or Jack Zipes produce. Their novels are, for the most part, postmodern fantasies which 'borrow' elements from fairy tales because they are the products, the outward manifestations, of numerous myth-making authorities. By appropriating these characteristics and parodying them, they reveal the ideological underpinnings of different social, cultural, historical, and literary representations. Essentially, this strategy draws attention to the illusions of the traditional tales by demonstrating that they have been structured according to the subordination of women (Zipes, Prince xi). But equally important is the fact that their appropriation by Winterson, Diski, and Carter draws attention to the numerous illusions which continue to structure and underlie contemporary and 'real' situations. Part of the intent of this thesis is to examine these appropriations, their purpose and function, in subsequent chapters. First, however, it is essential to have an understanding of both the terms of the discussion, and the appeal of this genre to

Carter, Diski and Winterson.

The terms 'folk', 'fairy tale' and even 'myth' are often used interchangeably in innumerable critical sources. In fact, the name folk tale is most correctly applied to those stories which are not written down, which remain in the realm of the oral, not the literary. As Jack Zipes, J.R.R. Tolkien, Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek note, the folk tale was the precursor to the stories now called fairy tales. According to Zipes, the folk tale was an oral narrative form cultivated by common people to express the way they saw nature and their social order; it was a statement of their wish to satisfy their needs and wants, but one which was generally depicted in the symbolic realm (Spell 4). When the stories made the transition from an essentially oral mode to a written or literary one about the middle of the seventeenth century, they ceased to be called folk tales and became fairy tales. But as J.R.R. Tolkien points out in "On Fairy Stories", the word 'fairy' is something of a misnomer because the tales are not really about fairies, or elves; rather, they are about

Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faerie contains many things beside elves and fays...it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine

and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (14)

In essence, his argument suggests that the fairy story is about the realm of possibility and of potential transformation. For Diski, Carter, and Winterson, this is an important function because their novels attempt to enact this possibility. And as Tolkien points out, "Fairy stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded" (39).

Like Jackson's definition of fantasy, these oral narratives began as an attempt to compensate for a lack or loss. They were symbolic depictions of social realities and although they were generally taken as make-believe stories with no direct reference to particular communities or historical conditions, such is not the case. Zipes, in Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales, writes that contemporary fairy tales have maintained these functions:

The original autonomous power of the folk tales, their aura, which has been carried over to the fairy tales, was a social one, for they sought to celebrate humankind's capacity to transform the mundane into the utopian as part of a communal project. Today this fantastic projection of such

utopian impulses has been cast under the magic spell of commodity production. That is, the original magic of the tales has itself been transformed to compensate for the social injustices we encounter day in and day out in a world that curtails our individual autonomy through repressive bureaucratic and administrative systems. ("Introduction" xi)

Zipes could be writing about the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter. They, like their historical counterparts, offer a subversive art form, a type of counter-culture to disrupt the status quo and to satisfy the desires of those not in positions of authority.

But how can fairy tales on the one hand be seen as manifestations of the myths of the authorities and on the other as subversive, rebellious out-croppings of the underprivileged? The answer lies in the manner in which the stories evolved from folk to fairy, from oral to literary. As Zipes outlines thoroughly in his book, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, the tales date back to the megalithic period. They were stories which had no known author and were simply passed from one story-teller to the next. At this time, the tales were probably concerned with the problems of the peasants, and embraced lessons such as "might is right," or that the patient, the long-suffering, will win out in the

end. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, members of the middle class believed that these stories had commercial merit: Charles Perrault decided to write some down for the entertainment of his king; the Brothers Grimm decided to write some down in the interests of creating German nationalism.

It is not by accident that these tales were selected, written, changed, and circulated by a middle-class to whom they did not belong. The intentions of the new 'authors' for the tales were widely different from those of the underprivileged from whom they had originated. But during the Victorian period, these stories became the brunt of much criticism because of their violence, brutality, and amorality. The tales did not seem to uphold the Victorian ethos of rejoicing in order, industry and cleanliness. Despite the government's attempts to curtail their publishing, they continued to circulate amongst both adults and children in the form of copy books. But not all were against the fairy tales. Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, for example, were in support of the fantastic and what they saw as its liberating aspects. As the tales evolved from the oral to the literary world, their 'collectors,' people like Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Andrew Lang, rewrote the stories to try to suppress the imaginary and symbolic representations of revolution (Zipes, Spell 30-35). However,

Zipes maintains that they were never wholly successful because many of the tales still have some subversive qualities, and offer hope in resistance to oppression.

For the purposes of the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter, the fairy tale genre has two contradictory avenues of appeal: the counter-cultural perspective offered in the folk tale history, and the images of repression, subservience, and injustice offered by the authorities in the literary fairy tale. First, the historical tradition of a literature of subversion, one which challenges the conventional authorities and asserts the power of the smaller individual, is congruent to Carter's, Diski's and Winterson's feminist and contemporary ideology. They, like their early oral ancestors, tell stories about those who are oppressed and are victims of injustice. For writers who question the notion of origins and who want to raise the issue of what is and is not created, the tradition of the folk tale also offers an historical model of possibility; as Hallett and Karasek point out in Folk and Fairy Tales, critics really have no idea of how old the fairy tales are or where any of them originated:

We are thus confronted with the realization that the only authentic version of a folk tale is an oral version--and since one telling will necessarily differ from the next, we must confer

authenticity equally on all tellings... (2)

Because Carter, Diski, and Winterson are often writing stories which may contradict the classic versions, and because they are trying to give an authenticity to the stories of those who have not had much voice in the making of literature, the levelling aspect of the traditional tale is a liberating notion. Also, as Alison Lurie points out in "Fairy Tale Liberation", in the lesser-known fairy tales, there is a small but interesting tradition in which women are not subservient, passive, or idly beautiful. For Carter, such heroines re-define the possibilities for the present because, as she says in The Old Wives Fairy Tale Book, "That I and many other women should go looking through the books for fairy-tale heroines is a version of...a wish to validate my claim to a fair share of the future by staking my claim to my share of the past" (xvi). For her, it is partly a notion of connectedness and continuity; but it is also a notion of rupture and discontinuity.

As Zipes makes clear in both Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion and Breaking the Magic Spell, the history of the evolution of the tales suggests that once they were transcribed and appropriated by the bourgeoisie, the folk tales were changed to fit the new fairy tale ideology: Charles Perrault re-wrote them to amuse and titillate King Louis XIV; the Brothers Grimm tried to tailor their stories



to encourage German nationalism; and Andrew Lang, writing in Victorian England, tried to select and re-write the tales in such a way that they might influence the morality and manners of young British children. Here, the history of subversion becomes the history of the ruling class. And it is from this basis that Carter, Winterson, and Diski draw their ammunition. Since the seventeenth century, most fairy tales offer images and models of repression and injustice. By using these characteristics and parodying them, Carter, Diski, and Winterson can reveal the hypocritical underpinnings of these representations and expose those institutions which both manufacture and maintain order through such constructs. Although this may appear to be a rather large undertaking for a handful of contemporary novels, Jack Zipes explains that the very fictionality of such stories is the source of their power:

Paradoxically, the magic power of folk and fairy tales stems from the fact that they do not pretend to be anything but folk and fairy tales, that is, they make no claims to be anything but artistic projections of fantasy. And in this non-pretension they give us the freedom to see what path we must take to become self-fulfilled. They respect our autonomy and leave the decisions of reality up to us while at the same time they provoke us to think

about the way we live.

(Spell 18)

## Notes

1. In "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," Freud argues that the phallic phase is contemporaneous with the development of the Oedipus complex. When the male child begins to masturbate or manipulate his genitals, his behaviour usually incurs the disapproval of adults in general, but most particularly, the reproaches of his mother. According to Freud,

More or less plainly, more or less brutally, a threat is pronounced that this part of him which he values so highly will be taken away from him. Usually it is from women that the threat emanates. (662)

Initially, the boy does not believe the threat of

castration. However, his disbelief is challenged when he sees the female genitals. He is convinced of the possibility when he views a young girl who is physically similar to him except for the absence of the penis. "With this [encounter]," Freud writes, "the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect" (663). Until this point in the boy's development, the Oedipus complex offered two possibilities: he could take the place of his father and have intercourse with his mother; or, he could take the place of his mother and be loved by his father.

But Freud concludes that both these choices are eradicated with the boy's acceptance of the possibility of his own castration and his

recognition that women are castrated. Both options entail the "loss of his penis--the masculine one as a resulting punishment and the feminine one as a precondition" (663).

## Chapter One

### The Institution and 'Reality' of Motherhood: Completely Clichéd, Utterly Unspeakable, And Monstrously Powerful

In most of the novels by Jenny Diski, Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter, a significant part of the narrative is occupied with an investigation of the relationship between mother and child and how this constant (though inescapable and inseparable) pairing creates and defines both characters. But it is the child's perception of the mother which remains central regardless of the amount of narrative space the maternal figure occupies in any given story. From the point of view of both fairy tale children and those of the postmodern novel, the mother is, either constantly or in particular instances, represented as some sort of monster. In the novels of Diski, Carter and Winterson, this representation is largely borrowed from a popular fairy tale image: if mother is not completely absent from the narrative, then she is a witch, a hag, a giant, or is insane. She is that which threatens, horrifies, shocks, terrifies; she is, as will be discussed in detail, constituted in Kristeva's terms of the abject.

Mother's representation as monstrous functions as a potential source of power in these novels, but it is a power not solely limited to her position of authority over her

children. As will be examined in the first section of this chapter, the postmodern mother, like her fairy tale predecessor, can and does use her monstrosity to challenge or undermine a variety of patriarchal institutions and ideas. Paradoxically she can also work to inculcate and uphold the very notions to which she seems to stand opposed. Similarly, in the past, woman's connection to the natural world through her sexuality has served to oppress her; but this same connection to biology can, in the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter, be inverted to function as an enormous source of power. These seemingly contradictory impulses are explored in this chapter's second section. Central to my arguments is that in these postmodern texts, the presentation of the maternal is ultimately ambiguous because the strategies of Diski, Winterson, and Carter simultaneously represent motherhood as something so known as to be cliched, and so mysterious and threatening as to be nearly unrepresentable.

Resistant to limiting the definitions of the maternal to motherhood as institution, or motherhood as reproductive function, the texts also suggest a third alternative which I will analyze in this chapter's final section: motherhood as a process of narrative. Terry Caesar's hypothesis expounded in "Motherhood and Postmodernism" is that the true alternative nature of a mother's authority is a narrative one (127); but it is not one which points, as Caesar then

concludes, to a sole biological origin. Instead, the mothers found in the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter suggest an entirely narrative origin: the fairy and folk tale.

Kristeva's notions of abjection can be used to provide a preliminary hypothesis for the representation of mother as monstrous in the novels of Carter, Diski, and Winterson. Throughout this chapter, I will draw on Powers of Horror to suggest ways of situating the monstrous-feminine in relation to the maternal figure of both Disney-style fairy tales and postmodern fiction. As I have outlined previously, by 'abjection,' Kristeva is referring to that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Initially, she argues that humans define themselves as living beings by expelling a variety of bodily wastes. She then expands her theory to include how it is that children grow and mature, how they separate themselves from the semiotic realm of their mothers and enter the symbolic sphere of their fathers. Kristeva's position is that children must eventually construct their mothers as abject, as "being opposed to I" (1) in order that they may develop their own identities. Thus, the abject, whether it be represented as fingernail pairings or the maternal figure, "lies outside, beyond the set...And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2).



In these postmodern texts, the abject does have radically subversive potential within the narrative structure itself. This is because as Kristeva suggests, the construction of the abject necessarily entails an erection of boundaries and borders, but also functions to continually question these delineations:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens [sic] it--on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. (Kristeva 9)

The discussions which follow similarly focus on how the maternal is constructed as abject and how this representation both creates and challenges the border between concepts such as motherhood as institution, as biological function, and as narrative origin. Although the specific nature of abjection may change or vary slightly from text to text, the function of the monstrous remains the same: it initiates an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability--in this instance, the semiotic realm of the mother.

\* \* \*

## The Institution of Motherhood

Motherhood--the way we perform mothering--is culturally derived. Each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms, and symbols....Our particular idea of what constitutes a good mother is only that, an idea, not an eternal verity. (Thayer, "Introduction" xv)

As with most myths, the current Western version of what constitutes motherhood is so pervasive that it is scarcely considered. Yet this invisible, shifting definition has influenced and continues to affect how women interact with their children, what domestic and financial arrangements are made, who is held accountable for how the children are raised, and so on. The general terms 'mother' and 'motherhood' both connote a certain mystique. While the words can suggest the biological connection of woman to child, they can also suggest an entire myth created and fostered by a variety of institutions such as the church, the education system, and various aspects of the government. It is an undisputed fact that a woman's biological ability to mother has historically been used by these agencies to limit her involvement in spheres other than the domestic. Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born suggests that part of the myth of motherhood was invented because of patriarchy's fear

of woman's ability to reproduce. Because men did not understand the mystery surrounding the birth process and all that follows from this experience, they created a definition of motherhood which would limit her potential power: mother's top concern is always for her children; mother loves her children more than anyone or thing; the role of mother precludes any serious involvement in any other aspect of society. Concurrent with these and other related notions is that both individuals and institutions such as church and state must respect the mother-child bond, and must consider this relationship as sacred. While it is an historical fact that patriarchal authorities have used motherhood as a label to limit and segregate women, it is also true that these identical authorities can allow a mother certain rights and privileges which are sanctioned by these same institutions. To be a mother means to be a part of two contradictory impulses: on the one hand, she can be limited in her choices and other roles because she is a parent; but on the other hand, she can also 'enjoy' certain rights, privileges, and protections of society through her maternal title. Mothers, then, can sometimes work against the authorities through their appeal to the institutionalized definition of motherhood itself. So while individual mothers can act in complicity with various patriarchal authorities through their teaching and inculcating of roles, beliefs, and behaviours of a certain society, the status of motherhood

can also challenge these very authorities because society protects women by virtue of their institutionalized role.

The representations Diski, Carter, and Winterson employ in their novels are themselves 'offspring' of the maternal images found in popular North American versions of German and French fairy tales. Stories such as "Snow White" and "Cinderella" focus on the crucial period of adolescence and dramatize what both Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment and Marie-Louise Von Franz in Problems of the Feminine in Fairy Tales call archetypal female dilemmas and socially acceptable resolutions.<sup>1</sup> These tales usually create a split between the 'natural' (and therefore good) mother and the surrogate (and thus evil) step-mother. According to Bettelheim, Von Franz, and even Karen Rowe, in these particular tales, the splitting of the maternal role allows the female child to experience and work through the ambivalent feelings she has toward her mother (Rowe 212-214). These authors hypothesize that as the child struggles to mature, she still needs the support and love of a nurturing figure; yet, in order to develop an individual sense of self, she also needs to envision the maternal figure as monstrous for a time because by recreating the mother as a figure of abjection, she can then function as the necessary impetus for the daughter's maturation. The splitting of the maternal role is a symbolic one which allows the child to still feel loved by her natural mother

while challenging her mother's authority in the figure of the step-parent. Both "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty" conclude by enforcing the daughter's conformity to patriarchal institutions, such as marriage, because mothers--both biological and foster--function as primary transmitters and models for female attitudes and behaviour. But these same mothers, through their 'evil' wishes to thwart both Cinderella's and Beauty's plans for marriage, temporarily act as obstacles to the culturally sanctioned denouement (marriage and happily-ever-after). So the step-mothers of "Cinderella" or "Sleeping Beauty," like their postmodern descendants, can offer subversive potential. They offer the possibility not to succumb to the dictates of the generally-accepted scripts. However, this option is neither desirable nor available for the female characters in "Snow White" or "Sleeping Beauty" because the possibility only exists through the *step-parent*. Fairy tales make a clear distinction between biological parents (who are usually irreproachably good, but also almost always either dead or absent) and foster parents who are generally depicted as monsters. Jenny Diski's novel, Happily Ever After, provides an example of this dual-natured use of the power of the term mother and, in this instance, how it can be misused to the detriment of the child.

Part of Diski's narrative focuses on Sylvie, a mentally unstable, unemployed woman and Divya, her six-year old

child. Sylvie has a history of living on other people's couches, and has never had a permanent home in which to raise Divya, a child conceived during a brief sojourn into an Eastern mystical cult. Ostensibly because of Sylvie's financial instability, Divya was taken from her and placed in a group home. Now, however, Sylvie has (through a complicated, but personal connection to Liam, the landlord) a small flat in which she can live and she wants social services to give her back custody of her child, which, because she is Divya's mother, they do. In a very short while, however, Sylvie is taking sleeping pills, letting Divya stay home from school, and leaving the tiny apartment in total squalor. Divya's social worker, Jock, comes for a visit and is shocked at the living conditions, for the "place was not just untidy, it was filthy" (Happily 106).

Jock stands for authority in general and social services in particular at this juncture. It is not that he is blind to or unaware of the dangers to Divya if she continues to reside with her mother, but he is reluctant. despite the living conditions and Sylvie's attitude, to remove the child from her 'real' mother. After all, "Untidiness, dirt even, didn't matter very much, if there were emotional ties, a sense of belonging...So said the psychology component of his social work training" (107). The authority of his position and the credo of the social services ought to form a very real threat to Sylvie and

Divya's living arrangements because both Jock and the agency are functioning according to the accepted laws of the state.

However, the authority that Sylvie derives from her status as mother, although not set out in law statutes or recognized in writing by the government, is greater than that of the officials. The balance of power continues to reside with the mother in this instance, despite the fact that when Jock asks Sylvie if she still wants Divya to live with her, she reveals her own self-interest in the supposed 'mothering' role:

'I don't know,' Sylvie said dully.... 'Everything seems to have gotten on top of me. Maybe she ought to go back to the home.' There was silence again as if she were talking to herself. 'But what would happen to me? What would I do?' (109)

Moreover, what Sylvie inadvertently exposes is that she, regardless of her biological position, is no longer functioning in the role of mother; and yet, her hollow title (because of her biological connection) still protects her. Although the conversational exchange makes Jock aware of the situation, he continually hesitates to interfere because of the sanctity of the institution of motherhood; Sylvie, considered not as an individual but as a 'mother', creates a boundary which Jock fears to cross.

He then turns to Divya herself for support in leaving the arrangements as they are. When he asks her if she wants

to stay with her mother, her instant response is "yes." While the narrator explains that this affirmative answer is motivated by a number of practical considerations (no one tells her what to do when she lives with her mother), there is a greater, underlying reason:

Divya's yes had come from a mixture of obligation and a sense of how things were supposed to be....Somewhere lodged in her six-year-old head was the idea that children *should* live with their mothers, and therefore she was supposed to say yes when asked if she wanted to. Her beliefs about the proper place for children were curiously similar to current social work ideology....The thought of staying with Sylvie did not make her happy, there was merely a notion of what was fitting making it difficult to say no. It was an instinctive push towards what everyone, including Divya, regarded as normal. (110)

Divya, despite the absence of a nuclear family, or even a loving, emotional bond with her mother, has still been inculcated with the pervasive social and official myth that life with 'the mother' is normal and best; at age six, Divya already believes in the institutional authority of motherhood.

Divya is unknowingly expressing an evaluation of the mother which is consistent with those who establish the



norm. As Terry Caesar points out in her article, "Motherhood and Postmodernism," for both children and society's agencies, "a mother first of all belongs to the institution of motherhood, which is, in turn, culturally inscribed under patriarchy as a *known* thing" (125). Caesar expands from this tenet to suggest that the personal or individual experience of the mother (what she feels or thinks, how she was raised, and so on) is not a part of this inscription and is of really no importance to children at all. They are more interested in mother's *acting* like a mother. Moreover, the child's insistence on the mother's complete compliance with what the offspring consider to be the right and proper script serves to intensify the constraints of the institutional framework. This locks Divya into an untenable, but wholly sanctioned, position. She is frozen into the inescapable pattern that Kristeva outlines in Powers of Horror. While the child struggles to create an identity for herself apart and separate from her mother, necessarily casting her in the role of the abject, this attempt is superseded by the power derived from the authority of the institution of motherhood.

The attempt at separation is further complicated when Divya comes to identify herself with the role of primary caregiver because Sylvie is incompetent and needy:

When Sylvie collapsed in tears at her own inability to cope, diffident Divya found herself

obliged to put an arm around her mother and comfort her. In the short time they had been living together, Sylvie had become Divya's burden. To leave her to her own devices, not to help her get up in the morning, not to help her into bed and find her sleeping pills in the evening, would have been to desert Sylvie. (Happily 111)

The boundary which ought to exist for Divya between 'I' and 'Not I' or which should slowly come into existence between 'me' and '(M)other' is blurred and confused.

The situation is further complicated by Sylvie's own identification with the abject: both she and others around her see her as disposable. The first thing that the reader is told about Sylvie suggests identifying her with a substance which must be ejected from the body: snot. After spending the night on a friend's couch, she is "sniffing miserably" (50). Then, on her first day in her new flat, she is utterly overwhelmed by the emptiness inside and around her. As she imagines how she will live her life,

Her head filled with images of things breaking down, or needing constant renewal--machines stopped working, sinks blocked and flooded, clothes needed repair and replacement, food ran out, a mouth that had to be fed...a body to be clothed and cleaned....in between sorting out,

tidying up, renewing, going to work...For ever and ever, or until she was so old that there would be nothing left but waiting to die. (71)

Sylvie identifies herself with the 'Not I'; she struggles to have a sense of self because she has blurred the boundary, indeed at points, she has crossed the boundary between self and not self. Sylvie is one of society's throw-away people, but more to the point, she is particularly selfish. In one sense, she does identify with "I," but it is an "I" which is perceived by herself and others as garbage. The result is that she must then rely on the wholly created institution of motherhood, motherhood not as reality, but as idea, to define who she is and how she ought to act. Although her failure to live up to the expectations conceived by society and absorbed by Sylvie do serve to make her feel guilty about her lack of skill as a mother, this guilt does not motivate her to change. Instead, the threat she forms to the power of the social services, to her daughter's health and development, and to her own well-being, is very real.

Sylvie, as she suggests in her daydream of daily life, sees herself as part of a world that is falling apart and from which death is probably the only escape. Kristeva argues that the living body must protect itself from human wastes such as snot or blood by ejecting them across the imaginary border which separates self from other:

Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from

loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit--cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. 'I' is expelled. (Kristeva 3-4)

So Divya's impossible struggle to define herself as separate from a mother who believes that she is akin to waste and detritus leads Divya to her second option for creating a self: she will act as mother.

While this is the adoption of a role and not the creation of a genuine, separate self, for Divya the function that the role provides is very real; she genuinely looks after her mother and through this, she feels needed. Although this is threatening for her growth and development (she is only six years old and ought not to be looking after anyone), it is also, paradoxically, a means of self-preservation, albeit preservation of an extremely limited duration. But for Sylvie who also puts on the guise of mother, the role is simply that--a sham, or a kind of performance--because in truth, she provides for none of Divya's needs. Sylvie is monstrous because she can use her own child as a financial and emotional means to continue living herself. The role of mother simply affords her the

protection from the agency's threat of annihilation. Because they see her as a mother--a 'natural' mother--they will not remove her means of survival: the child.

While Divya's unknowing collusion with the authoritative agenda of government and social agency is understandable in one so young, it is less excusable in those adults around her who ought to see the danger inherent in the power of the myth of motherhood. Although Jock knows that Sylvie is wholly incompetent, he decides to allow Divya to remain in her custody because "It was what the conference [at social services] would want to hear, and it was what Jock the professional wanted to believe" (114). As a professional, Jock will not distance himself from official policy and upholds the morally and socially sanctioned privilege of the mother. It is only at the end of the novel when Jock acts as an individual that the authority of this view is challenged. Until then, the novel suggests that being a mother can allow one to operate outside the realm of what is usually deemed acceptable by appealing to the power of the institution of motherhood, itself a mythic creation authorized by the usually more powerful institutions of church and state.

The authority derived from the institution of motherhood also forms a central part of the narrative in Diski's novel, The Monkey's Uncle. Part of the story is about Charlotte who has just lost her daughter, Miranda, in

a tragic accident. Still living is Charlotte's son, Julian, with whom she has a cool, detached relationship. As the details of their lives are revealed, it becomes apparent that while Charlotte thought she was providing a good life for her children and offering them a positive, feminist role model through her belief and involvement in socialist politics and her career as a geneticist, the children have felt neglected. Conforming to Terry Caesar's premise that children are not interested in the personal experiences of the mother and desire a reliance upon a culturally sanctioned script, they resented her for not acting as they thought a mother should. Throughout the text, Julian suggests that Charlotte did not choose to adopt the carefully outlined, institutionalized role of mother who stays at home and quietly supports Britain and its capitalist society. Charlotte's consuming interest in her career and her involvement in marxist politics upset both her children. Apparently, she and they had somewhat different notions of what a mother ought to be and how she ought to act. So although there is an institutional perception of motherhood, this ideology is not necessarily static or clearly delineated.

Once her daughter dies, Charlotte has a complete breakdown and to the utter horror of her son, she wreaks total destruction on her front garden and even worse, she does so in the nude. From Julian's perspective, she is (and

always has been) abject. As a child, he saw her as 'different' from what he thought mothers ought to be. Now, as an adult, he sees her actions as those of a mad-woman. Although a woman who has a breakdown after the death of her child is hardly a monster, for Julian, she is just that. His image of her naked and pulling up plants in her front garden is one of monstrosity literalized because she metamorphoses into a naked, instinctual creature, literally stripped of all pretensions of motherhood. By creating a scene in which the mother obliterates the fruits of her garden after the fruits of her own womb have been destroyed, Diski could be alluding to the deep-seated, 'natural' connection Charlotte feels but has not always been able to acknowledge to her daughter.

Julian's reaction only serves to reinforce Caesar's point that children, regardless of age, do not want their mothers to be people; they want them to adhere to the nebulous myth of the proper role of motherhood. Before her madness, Charlotte's refusal to adopt this institutionalized attitude threatened not only her child's sense of self, but also that of adult men who tended to avoid personal contact with her. With the advent of her madness, it is not only her (now grown) son who is threatened, but also those who serve the general authority of society, in this instance, the mental hospital. The medical personnel's attitude toward her madness is that she must take lots of medication and return

to being 'herself.' As she is, she poses a potential disruption or rupture not only to the family unit and its accepted rules of operation, but to society at large.

A similar attitude is implied by several of the characters in Jeanette Winterson's Boating for Beginners. The story focuses on Gloria, and her mother, Mrs. Munde, who live in a time before God created the great flood and Noah built the ark. But unlike the biblical versions of the city and story, Winterson's Ur is populated with fast-food outlets, and Noah himself is responsible for having created 'God' by accident out of a piece of cake and an electric toaster. Obviously humorous and sarcastic, the novel nonetheless explores the power of several myths, including that of motherhood. Gloria and her friend Marlene struggle to define themselves as separate from their mothers whom they view as difficult and problematic partly because they insist on viewing their mothers not as individuals, but as an established or fixed set. Gloria's mother is never even referred to by her first name, and Marlene's mother is not named at all. Gloria is often embarrassed by her mother's obvious worship of her employer, Noah, and her all-consuming desire to do nothing but cook--not for her family, but for the glory of God. Upon the death of her own mother, Marlene laments her loss not as a person, but as a role which exists as part of a cliched cultural script:

'My mother always smelt of coffee beans. I didn't



like her but she smelt lovely. You expect mothers to smell of something domestic, don't you? I don't mean lavatory cleaner or brussel sprouts, but coffee or fruit or hot ironing.' (Boating 154)

For these women, their mothers' beings are wholly confined to the realm of what they consider appropriate and natural domesticity. Although neither of their mothers conforms to their preconceived images of what motherhood ought to entail, the daughters still cling to these erroneous myths and thus must construct their mothers as abject in order to separate themselves from their origins. Neither Gloria nor Marlene sees her mother as truly monstrous, but both view their mothers as eccentrics who live on the border between what is acceptable behaviour for their role, and what is not.

The exposure and examination of boundaries is also central in several of Diski's novels. Like Charlotte in The Monkey's Uncle, Frances, in Diski's Like Mother, employs the institution of motherhood against the very institutions which maintain and enforce it in order to elicit an encounter between the human and the non-human and precipitate a questioning of the boundary between the two states. Like Mother is narrated by an anhydranencephalic baby named Nony (short for Nonentity) to a voice whom she calls her "captive audience" (Mother 18). This voice interjects questions and comments as Nony tells the story of

her mother, Frances, to "pass the time" (10). Kristeva's theory about the need for a child to see its mother as abject in order to develop into a separate self has no relevance for Frances or Nony because Nony will live at most only two years. In fact, it is partly that both Frances and Nony are constructed as monsters by those around them, sharing a seemingly undifferentiated status, that forms a significant part of the threat felt by doctors, nurses, Frances' husband, and even casual on-lookers. To them, Nony is monstrous because she does not have the capacity for any thought processes and Frances is equally monstrous because she will not view the baby in the same manner as the others do.

Although Frances is informed at twenty-two weeks into her pregnancy that the baby has no brain, she insists on carrying the child to term. Her unexplained refusal to abort constitutes her decision not to recognize the limits of what society has deemed human. Her stance is both incomprehensible and abhorrent to the authorities who usually aid not only in defining what is and is not human, but in disposing of what they consider abject:

No one understood why Frances had refused to abort the foetus, and she did nothing to help them. If she had offered any explanation at all, some people might have forgiven her. She could have said she had suffered a sudden religious

conversion, or that she was, by the time of the amniocentesis, biologically bonded to the foetus inside her, defective or not....Anything of that kind might have quietened the anger and opposition...But she said nothing....She frightened people with that. (20-21)

Frances' refusal to explain her actions is significant for several connected reasons. First, her staunch rejection of the idea that she feels biologically connected to the baby is an affront to how society has decided mothers ought to feel; such an orientation is a constitutive element of the fiction of the motherhood institution. Yet despite her silence, the doctors, nurses, and even Frances' husband, firmly believe that she will change her mind when the child is born, that she will feel like any mother ought to feel when confronted with "The thing...[that] was in no recognizable sense human, and no human ethical stance seemed relevant to" (21).

When Nony is delivered, the doctors hold her up to a light to demonstrate that it completely illuminates her head. One explains that "The light shines through because there's nothing to stop it. No brain, at least not in the human sense" (13). They firmly believe that Frances is in shock and needs a counsellor to help her deal with what they consider to be her loss (21-22). When she does not respond in a fittingly emotional manner and refuses even to say that

she at least feels some connection to the child through her reproductive and biological processes, the doctor allows his mask of indifference to slip for a moment and reveal his feelings:

'Why...?' he began. But instantly the anger and distance returned, snapping his face shut...[he] re-entered the evenly lit world of the hospital where anxious parents waited for him to offer hope of recovery and repair. (14)

As a figure of authority, he does not like to have his views challenged or contradicted. The doctor obviously prefers the "evenly lit world" without any grey areas where parents--especially mothers--quietly acquiesce to his definitions and system of beliefs. Those who choose not to disrupt the status quo will be rewarded with his help for "recovery and repair" without any further consideration of whether or not the authoritative definition of human that he, and the majority of society holds, needs reevaluation.

Initially, what is monstrous to others about Frances is her complete refusal to act in any manner consistent with social views of mothers or motherhood. But once she and Nony are away from the hospital, Frances inverts this model and instead, uses those expected motherly actions in a manner which is even more shocking to those around her. She consciously dons the guise of motherhood to expose the constructed notion of this role. Every afternoon she takes

the baby to the park and she does this with a keen awareness of what "the simple tale her coming and going told the onlooker....She was concealed by the unambiguous picture she presented to the strangers of her daily life" (181). But, the picture of motherhood is just that: a simulation. Frances enjoys using others' assumptions and stereotypes and, for her, they provide the perfect disguise while exposing others' biases:

She gained a sharp satisfaction from the discrepancy between the apparent and the real. She enjoyed the deception she played, constantly aware of the public image she portrayed and its distance from the facts of her life. (181)

Frances is using the appearance of normalcy to force people to confront their own constructed desires; she and Nony together constitute a threat to the authoritative image of motherhood because they suggest the abject space between the institutionalized image and the reality of the situation.

Frances' power is represented as nearly magical, although it appears evil to those around her, because Diski employs a common fairy tale image to depict Frances at this point in the narrative: "She was potent as a witch with a devastating spell to cast" (181). The *witch* fits into the model of the abject in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. In folk tales, fairy tales, myths and

legends, she is considered dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her innate powers to wreak havoc and destruction on the community. Andrew Sanders, in his study of the historical and sociological development of witches, argues that in general, these powers were regarded by the community as evil, and evolved to become equated with the witch's feminine nature; through her reproductive functions (as will be discussed in detail later in this chapter) she is closer to nature than men and this connection seemingly allows her control over various forces of the natural world (33-36). In a similar fashion, Kristeva points out in Powers of Horror that women are often considered "baleful schemers" and the feminine is regarded as "synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (Kristeva 70).

The power that Frances exercises, however, is not over Nature, but over human nature. She works her magic on the unsuspecting people in the park, "One brief sentence from her, and their world would never be quite the same again. They would never again dare to trust the meaning of what they saw" (Diski, Mother 181). Her ability to change others' views constitutes a continual threat: she forces them to acknowledge that the line which they have constructed to separate themselves from the 'not human' is a flimsy boundary. Yet, they cannot be rid of the abject; for what Nony represents, like fingernail parings and death itself, is a continual part of life. Still, the other characters in

Like Mother do not enjoy being confronted with this and their reaction is always the same:

"Is that a baby you've got there?" Frances would smile slightly. "Oh yes. Isn't she a pretty one? It is a little girl, isn't it? Yes....I can tell, yes, I can. It's those lovely blue eyes." Frances would gaze steadily at Nony's admirer until he or she had finished. "Actually, she can't see." The former admirer, overcome with embarrassment, froze...Frances would go on relentlessly. "She can't see because she hasn't got any optic nerve. But even if she had, it wouldn't help because she hasn't got a brain for the optic nerve to attach itself to....Frances waited for them to absorb the meaning of her words, then watched dispassionately as the smug assumptions drained away to be replaced by a rainbow of reactions--fear, sorrow, disgust, anger. It always ended with anger, a searing look of hatred... (182)

Diski's focus on Nony's eyes is an ironic one because from Frances' point of view, it is the others who really cannot or do not wish to 'see.'

Part of Frances' power is constituted by her ability, through her position as Nony's mother, to expose Nony's connection to the world: although she cannot think, she is still human and does still exist. Thus Frances employs Nony,

and what she represents to threaten others with the instability of their established symbolic order. Moreover, in the realm of folk expressions, eyes are said to be the 'windows of the soul' and since Nony has no brain and therefore has nothing behind her eyes, her existence calls into question whether or not she has a soul. For Kristeva, the corpse is the ultimate state of abjection because it is a body without a soul and is therefore 'unclean.' Part of the threat that Nony, through Frances' constant presentation of her, constitutes is that she is a living corpse; she exists on both sides of the boundary between human and not human and as such, she jeopardises those who wish to remain differentiated from the abject. Of course, the abject is, by nature, ambiguous: it both repels and attracts and it is partly its irresolvability as well as its inescapability which both frightens and angers other characters in the novel.

Nony also occupies another boundary central to the novel: that which exists between art and nature. Although her construction as an abject being, neither alive nor dead, threatens the stability of the symbolic order, paradoxically, she also owes her entire existence to that order. This is so because it is Nony, a child without either a brain or a voice, who narrates the entire story of Like Mother. When Frances refuses to explain or even to speak, it is Nony who becomes her voice. So for Diski, even the idea



of motherhood as a potential source of power is somewhat subsumed by the fact that mother does not speak for herself. The voice which articulates her experience is a voice which, since it has no brain, cannot utter a single sound. The mother-child relationship as represented in Like Mother is one which is founded on paradox: Frances is the narrative creation of Nony, but the daughter who acts as narrator has neither speech with which to convey a story, nor intelligence to conceive of such a situation. And yet, as the tale's narrator, she does both.

These novels suggest that in general, society seeks to construct motherhood as a culturally fixed definition in order to comprehend and control a mother's experience. But narratives cannot be entirely understood only in terms of their cultural script. This is because regardless of the patriarchal authority responsible for both the generation and perpetuation of the motherhood fantasy as all-inclusive and generic, the specific experience of being a mother remains a source for a significant and threatening relation to the real. In fact, the mother figure contains experience that has not been completely appropriated or reproduced by those in positions of cultural authority. By using Kristeva's arguments, I will posit that because a mother's earliest relationship to her child is one which excludes the father and relies on the semiotic, not symbolic communicative order, together mother and child form a threat

to patriarchy. Because the mother's language is not that of the father, and because her influence although repressed, remains a part of her child's psyche, the mother (and her offspring) can be resistant to the official or symbolic narrative process.

As will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, it is not that the mother's experience is wholly resistant to being emplotted in language. In fact, the experience of maternity and motherhood can and will be examined as a function of narrative. However, through her biological experiences as mother, she is resistant to the symbolic's limiting types of narrative and patriarchy's often erroneous conclusions. Kristeva's arguments suggest that man has often been afraid of woman's reproductive power and thus has sought avenues to control it. For Kristeva, the woman's connection to the 'natural' world is one of abjection. She outlines, in metaphoric terms, how the relationship between patriarchy and motherhood can be expressed and contemplated:

Menstrual blood...stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (71)

The image of the woman's menstrual blood is apt not only as

a sign of her biological capacities and her relationship to the natural world, but also as that which must be shed in order for change to occur. In the novels of Diski, Winterson, and Carter, blood is an ambiguous sign: it suggests woman's oppression while simultaneously offering the natural or animal world as a potential source of power, and it is this biological threat which forms an enormous threat to the Rule of the Father, the realm of the symbolic.

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#### Motherhood as Biological or Reproductive Function

While motherhood as an institution can suggest both threat to and compliance with patriarchy, motherhood as reproductive function suggests only threat because this biological aspect can be viewed solely as the source for a relation with the physical (or 'real'), with that which cannot be adequately explained or controlled by language. In part, this is probably the origin of the anxiety felt by patriarchal agencies of authority and the underlying reason for their (conscious and/or unconscious) creation of the institutionalized versions of motherhood which attempt to depict the experience in a manner consistent with society at large.<sup>3</sup> While the possibility of a connection to the real or the experiential which included only women was threatening

for numerous historical authorities, for the postmodern text, the possibility of a connection to the real (regardless of gender) is also rather problematic. While the postmodern text does not deny the existence of a real world outside the text, or a real situation, it is resistant to the notion that there is only one real world or a single reality. For these novels, that which occurs in the imaginative realm is as real, that is, can have as much significance for the characters, as actual experiences. For example, in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, the reader is told that the story of Jordan's journey which constitutes a large part of the text, consists "Not [of] the [journeys] I made, but the ones I *might* have made..." (emphasis added; Winterson 10). In other words, the narrative comprises wishes, imaginings, and other wholly 'unreal' sojourns. But it is these which for Jordan, are most real.

Similarly, in Diski's novel, Like Mother, Nony tells the unnamed listener the story of her mother, but Nony also tells her/him that this story is in no way "true": "The real story is story without a story" (155). But the postmodern novel, like any text, must rely on narrative to impart its meaning(s), and the experience of producing a child, the reality of the process and its connection to the physical realm, can be resistant to narrative representation. Contrary to the popular universalizing myths of motherhood, there are distinct facets of the experience which can

neither be appropriated nor reproduced by politics and culture at large.

As Kristeva posits in Powers of Horror, the maternal body is itself a continual site of abjection:

Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing. (77)

Angela Carter's novel, The Passion of New Eve, offers a most interesting example of the monstrous archaic mother and her terrifying reproductive power. In this text, the central character, a young man, Evelyn, takes advantage of Leilah. Through a bizarre and post-apocalyptic series of events and possibly because of his transgression against Leilah Evelyn is eventually kidnapped by a band of women and changed by their leader, a monstrous being called Mother, from a man into a woman, from Evelyn into Eve. Mother is a combination of both the natural and the technological and the text obfuscates the boundary between the two. She is an immense being, a giant Gaia figure who even functions as the mother of herself:

...she had made herself! Yes, made herself! She was her own mythological artefact; she had reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form...a patchwork quilt stitched from her daughters'

breasts over the cathedral of her interior, the cave within the cave. (Carter, Eve 76)

Although the scientific aspect of Mother's creation of both herself and Eve cannot be disregarded or dismissed, the paradoxical fact remains that Mother uses the technological to intensify the natural: she chooses to give herself more breasts--a superabundance of the quintessentially maternal image.

Everything about Mother is larger-than-life and it is her overwhelming femaleness that both impresses and terrifies Evelyn. To Evelyn, she is indeed "Mother; but too much mother, a female-ness too vast, too gross for my imagination to contain..." (Eve 84). Mother forms the connection to both the natural and the supernatural; she is a kind of magician or witch solely because through her status as female, she can bring about the seemingly impossible. She tells Evelyn that "Because I can give life, I can accomplish miracles" (80). She embraces, through her reproductive potential, the mythic, the magical, and the abject. As Kristeva theorizes, all individuals experience abjection when they attempt to break free of the mother's control and in some senses, this is precisely what Evelyn, at this juncture, is attempting to do. But according to Kristeva, the maternal body will, at this time, become the site of conflicting desires because there is both the "instability of the symbolic function" and also, there is a

"prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)" (Kristeva 14). Evelyn's ambivalent reaction to Mother is made apparent through his choice of descriptive imagery and by his more instinctual actions: although he purports to be terrified of Mother and horrified by her sexual advances, he does still reach orgasm during the intercourse that Mother initiates in her rape of him:

Sophia seized my trembling body as I cowered there and dragged it to the great, ululating being who now toppled from her chair to fall on her back on the floor, waving her legs in the air...Her nipples leaped about like the bobbles on the fringe of an old-fashioned, red plush curtain at a french window open on a storm....Her flesh seemed to me molten, burning. I caught one glimpse of her gaping vagina as I went down; it looked like the crater of a volcano on the point of eruption....her thighs grasped me with the vigour of the female mantis and I felt only engulfment...Then came a great bellow that signalled a gratification with which I myself had had very little to do...and she expelled me just as my seed pumped helplessly out... (Carter, Eve 81-2)

That Evelyn is fulfilling the ultimate Freudian Oedipal

fantasy is obvious, but Carter is pushing the narrative one step further because not only does Evelyn sleep with his mother, Mother herself 'kills' the father, Evelyn, when she literally castrates him directly after this episode. Thus Mother enacts the role of both mother and son and recasts Evelyn as father and child. The scenario employs several representations of the monstrous-feminine and the abject: the castrating mother (and her vagina dentata), and the natural/animalistic female.

Unlike many critics who argue from Freud's premise that woman terrifies man because she is represented as his castrated other, Susan Lurie suggests a more pertinent argument for this discussion in her article entitled "The Construction of the 'Castrated Woman' in Psychoanalysis and Cinema." <sup>3</sup> Although Lurie is writing about the horror film genre, her credo is applicable to literature as well, for she challenges a long-standing Freudian notion by suggesting that men fear women because they are *not* castrated. She asserts that woman terrifies man precisely because she is *not* mutilated as he would be were he castrated. Woman, then, is entirely whole and intact; she is represented like Mother in The Passion of New Eve: self-sufficient, omnipotent and terrifying in this incarnation of abjection. According to Lurie's argument, the Freudian idea of the castrated woman is a fantasy which attempts to ameliorate man's real fear of what woman could and might do to him: in essence, the man



fears that woman could castrate him during intercourse when his penis apparently "'disappears' inside the woman's 'devouring mouth'" (Lurie 55).

Joseph Campbell in The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology outlines numerous myths of the vagina dentata which he suggests pervade the stories of many cultures. In these legends, the female genitals are symbolically depicted in a threatening manner: the vagina has teeth. Although the stories are varied in content, they generally suggest that it is the duty of the hero to break or remove these teeth and tame woman's sexual nature. Wolfgang Lederer in his book The Fear of Women posits that several classic fairy tales also employ the symbolic image of the vagina dentata. One of the most common visual motifs connected with the toothed vagina is the guarded and difficult entrance. Lederer suggests that the story of "Briar Rose" and its variant, "Sleeping Beauty" offer a good illustration of this theme. His argument outlines how any hero who wishes to gain the favour of the heroine must first penetrate the hedge of thorns that bars his way. Only the prince who is worthy of true love can pass unharmed through the thicket. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" also symbolically suggests the vagina dentata because it aligns the grandmother with the wolf who ultimately devours Red Riding Hood and in Carter's revision of the tale, "The Company of Wolves," the wolf is aligned

with Red Riding Hood herself.

In Carter's The Passion of New Eve, it is during Evelyn's rape by Mother that he encounters the toothed vagina. While having 'forced' intercourse, Evelyn states that he feels "engulfed" (82) by the "female mantis" (82)--an insect whose intercourse with the male leads only to his death and dismemberment. Evelyn's feelings of being engulfed further suggest that Mother is ingesting him and in this role as cannibalistic parent who incorporates the threat of the vagina dentata, Mother is represented as completely abject. Moreover, Evelyn's description of Mother's enormous mouth suggests a confusion between her oral and vaginal openings--a confusion which further elicits his fears of castration:

I caught one glimpse of her gaping vagina as I went down; it looked like a volcano on the point of eruption. Her head reared up to kiss me and, for a hallucinatory instant, I thought I saw the sun in her mouth, so that I was momentarily blinded and retain no memory of the texture of her tongue, although it seemed to me the size of a sodden bath-towel. (82)

He describes her vagina in terms of a volcano about to erupt, but what "rear[s] up to kiss" him is her mouth, not her vulva. While the reference to being blinded by the sun obviously suggests the fate of Oedipus, there is also the

possibility that Carter is making a pun on the word "sun"; the son Evelyn imagines he sees in Mother's mouth is himself and he is "momentarily blinded" or annihilated in the moment that he enters her. Carter's representation of Mother as monstrous challenges Freud's notion that woman terrifies because she is castrated, that is, always already constituted as a victim. Mother stands wholly opposed to the victim position and its essentialist implication that woman is, by nature, the injured or long-suffering party.

In addition to eliciting castration fantasies which both attract/excite Evelyn and terrify him, the rape scene, through Evelyn's choice of natural imagery to describe Mother's genitals and the act of coition itself, suggests Mother's representation as an intrinsic part of the natural or animal realm. In the rape scene, he equates her row of nipples with window fringe which would ordinarily look out--but in this instance look in--on a "storm" inside her body and her vagina itself is, to Evelyn, a "volcano" about to erupt. Kristeva theorizes that it is partly woman's maternal function which constitutes her construction as the abject. The ability to give birth links her directly to the animal/natural world or the real world and hence to the 'timeless' cycle of birth, age and decay, and death. For Kristeva, this inescapable connection to nature continually reminds men of their mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order. The idea that woman in the role of mother is

akin to the human as animal is represented in Carter's The Passion of New Eve, and her short story "The Bloody Chamber" where the mother saves her daughter from death solely on instinct or mother's intuition. Frances, too, in Diski's Like Mother, suggests that as mother, she is an intrinsic part of the natural world through her representation as witch.

For Kristeva, the origin of the representation of the mother as abject can be traced back to the notion that a woman in the act of giving birth is unclean. She argues that in the Bible, Leviticus draws a parallel between the maternal body and the corpse; both are viewed as unclean and through childbirth, the two types of bodies become closely associated. Thus, "[e]vocation of the maternal body and childbirth induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides" (Kristeva 101). At this juncture, because the body suggests rupture and the uncontrollable force of nature, it constitutes a threat to the symbolic order, the Rule of the Father. If it is to represent the symbolic order, the female body cannot be 'blemished': it "must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic" (Kristeva 102). So for Mother, for Frances, and for all biological or natural mothers found in these texts, their fertilizable bodies align them with nature and they then

constitute a threat to the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic realm.

In addition to the manner in which the womb is represented as abject literally in relation to the female body, in both Carter's The Passion of New Eve and Diski's Happily Ever After, the texts' settings symbolically suggest the abject state of the womb. In Carter's text, Mother's laboratory and the home of her cult lies buried deep within the earth and access to this locale is through a series of long, winding, intra-uterine passages. The room in which Evelyn first finds himself is lit by a "pinkish luminescence" and allows him to see that the space is "quite round, as if it had been blown out, like bubble gum, inflated under the earth" and the walls themselves have a "slick appearance" or "a sheen" (Eve 62). The interior frightens Evelyn and he exclaims that he feels "Swallowed up underground and trapped" (63). The implication is that Evelyn's only exit will be to be born--or reborn and only when Mother has finished with her transformation of him. Slowly, the chamber darkens and the temperature begins to rise. Then, a

pinkish glow spread, seeped...until everything was lambent; the radiance intensified until it became reddish, and by degrees, crimson. The temperature increased until it was at blood heat. (Eve 65)

To Evelyn, the intra-uterine setting is depicted as

terrifying and gives a concrete expression to his initial belief, as demonstrated by his treatment of Leilah, in woman's essentially monstrous nature. In contrast, the women who live in these underground tunnels appear comfortable and content. But for Evelyn, the horror of the setting can be understood in part as a representation of his inner fears and also as a response to the loss or blurring of what he considers to be firmly established boundaries. The intra-uterine location obviously suggests some sort of metamorphosis and for Evelyn, implies a collapse of the boundaries between gender. As constituted in the abject, the womb setting disrupts and alienates through its challenge to the construction of identity. It is significant that at the end of the text, Evelyn, now Eve, must again return to the earth to have a final encounter with Mother. But in this instance, although the imagery is much the same, Eve's reaction to the landscape is somewhat different. Although she is not comfortable with her journey, she makes the trip of her own volition and calls out periodically for "Mama-mama-mama" (244). There is no response. Eve's conclusion is that the "destination of all journeys is their beginning" (244). For Eve, this is both literally and symbolically true. The implication is that as a man, Evelyn spent much of his time (symbolically) trying to return to the womb (through the sexual act), but when the notion became literally true, it initiated a rebirth as a woman and a

journey along a different gender line.

Barbara Creed suggests in The Monstrous Feminine that for the horror film, any house, room or other enclosed space can symbolize the womb and is generally central to a film's iconography (Creed 55). In Jenny Diski's novel, Happily Ever After, the central location of much of the text's narrative is a 'haunted' house in which Divya and Sylvie live on the main floor, Grace and Liam on the second, and Daphne inhabits the attic. Both Daphne and Divya hear an unexplained crying which emanates from a small closet under the stairs. Daphne tells Divya that the sounds are coming from the small, unhappy child that Daphne once was; her schizophrenic mother used to lock her in this closet for hours at a time: "Whether it was to keep her daughter safe from the demons that chased her, or whether it was to keep herself safe from the demon she thought her daughter was, Daphne never found out" (Diski Happily 15). According to Creed,

The haunted house is horrifying precisely because it contains cruel secrets and has witnessed terrible deeds, usually committed by family members against each other. Almost always the origin of these deeds takes us back to the individual's quest for her or his own origins which are linked to the three primal scenes--conception, sexual difference, desire. The

house becomes the symbolic space--the place of beginnings, the womb--where these three dramas are played out. (55)

Almost like a horror film, the daily lives of both Daphne and Divya are disturbed by the crying under the stairs. While the family house is usually considered a place of refuge, because of the sad but horrible crimes committed first against Daphne as a child, and now against Divya, this house is not a place for solace. Instead, it symbolically suggests the characters' almost obsessive needs to relive and reinterpret their earliest experiences with their mothers. It is significant that for Daphne, living 'happily ever after' means buying a mobile home and leaving the old, unhappy house of her miserable past. The caravan does not have the same connotations as a permanent structure and is not particularly suggestive of a womb. Instead, it suggests something which will conform to Daphne herself, to her wishes, wants and desires; it will remain under her control and be free of the ghosts of her unhappy past.

Unfortunately for Divya, the same opportunities are not afforded to her. In a sense, what Jock Holiday, her social worker, attempts to do by throwing her sleeping body in the Thames River is to offer her a chance to return to the amniotic waters. Because he sees no way for her to be truly happy in the house in which she must live, and with the mother from whom no escape is possible, he kills her because



he believes that death is her only chance for a 'happily ever after'. So in both The Passion of New Eve and Happily Ever After, the maternal body continually lies behind the characters' quests for identity and its presence is represented through the suggestive images of the intra-uterine.

\* \* \*

'Real' Mothers and 'Real' Children:  
The (Im)Possibility of Origin

Terry Caesar in her article, "Motherhood and Postmodernism" argues that the true alternative nature of a mother's authority is a narrative one. Because a mother's story is founded in the notion of origin--biological origin--it rebukes all other logics and all other stories which attempt to define themselves apart from this underpinning (Caesar 127). For the postmodern text, the figure of the mother comes to represent the origin each character must give up in order to explore other possibilities. This notion is somewhat akin to Kristeva's belief that children must construct the mother as abject in order to repress the maternal realm of the semiotic and enter the patriarchal world of the symbolic. But the problem for postmodernism, according to Caesar, is that its

simulacra cannot be represented without a belief in one real existence; this is why the figure of the mother persists in the postmodern text (127). The problem, then, becomes a question of how to emplot the mother:

Emplotting her means admitting that each mother is a singular figure: only one mother for each of us, one maternal body out of which to be born, one whole personal 'proposition' traceable back to the conditions of having been the child--woman or man--of a woman. A mother is so safe because she is so singular and can be, simply as a biological fact, so utterly recognized. (Caesar 128)

While this argument is true for the texts which focus mainly on the institution and/or the biological aspects of motherhood (Diski's Like Mother, The Monkey's Uncle, and to a limited extent Happily Ever After) and for the American (male-authored) novels that Caesar discusses, the notion of mother as biological fact is almost wholly undermined in a great number of texts by Diski, Winterson, and Carter. While the question of identity remains central to these narratives, the search metamorphoses into a quest for identity which involves as much a creation of being as a discovery of or return to past roots. In Diski's Happily Ever After, Winterson's Sexing the Cherry and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, and Carter's Nights at the Circus and Wise Children, the myth of maternity is undermined by

focusing not on the biological aspect of mothering, but on its practice; maternity, in all these texts, moves out of the realm of biological certainty. As Dora Chance succinctly states in Wise Children, "Mother is as mother does" (223).

The representation of the relationships between parents and children in these postmodern texts is remarkably similar to the plot structure found in many popular fairy tales. In stories like "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," or "Beauty and the Beast," one or both parents is usually completely absent from the story and if a mother does appear, it is usually in the guise of an unwanted (and often evil) step-mother. According to Gilbert and Gubar's argument articulated in The Madwoman in the Attic, the biological mother and step-mother are two aspects of the same character 'separated' only in the mind of the child. In the texts of Diski, Winterson, and Carter, children are often orphans or foundlings, raised or at least profoundly influenced by adoptive- or step-parents. While it would be difficult to view Daphne from Happily Ever After, Lizzie from Nights at the Circus, Grandma from Wise Children or Dog-Woman from Sexing the Cherry as evil, they are all depicted in a humorously witch-like or grotesque manner. Although their function is an extremely positive one from the developmental perspective of their 'offspring,' they do, nonetheless, bear a striking resemblance to their fairy tale ancestors. Daphne is never seen without her "hat [which] was made of the blackest velvet, with a soft brim

that flopped in what should have been an elegant fashion down over her brow" (Diski, Happily 20). Liam believes her to be "the devil, or his most trusted emissary" (9), and occasionally in his drunken dreams, his beautiful wife "became Daphne, grinning like the Wicked Witch of the North, and his hand found only flabby, drooping flesh, as she whispered, toothlessly, 'Darling...'" (126). Although Divya, too, initially associates Daphne with a witch (84), once they become friends and Daphne takes on the role of surrogate mother to the child, Divya considers Daphne to be "the fairy godmother in a film of Cinderella her mother had taken her to see..." (166).

Fevvers in Carter's Nights at the Circus, maintains that she was "Hatched out of a bloody great egg" (7) so the question of 'real' or biological parents is greatly problematized. Her entire existence points to an origin that cannot be discovered except in myths and stories. Although Fevvers' adoptive mother, Lizzie, is a benevolent character and is a positive influence on her somewhat eccentric child, her appearance is also that of a witch:

Lizzie was a tiny, wizened, gnome-like apparition who might have been any age between thirty and fifty; snapping, black eyes, sallow skin, an incipient moustache on the upper lip and close-cropped frizzle of tri-coloured hair--bright grey at the roots, stark grey in between, burnt with

henna at the tips. The shoulders of her skimpy black dress were white with dandruff. She had the brisk air of bristle, like a terrier bitch. (Nights 13)

Adding to her air of sorcery is the mysterious clock with which Lizzie can somehow make time slow down, stand still, or race ahead. In Fevvers' initial interviews with Walser, he is completely baffled by the manner in which "the room ...had...been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been held for a while above the spinning world" (87). Later in the novel, when Fevvers and Lizzie are aboard a train in Siberia, Fevvers asks Lizzie if she couldn't "hurry things up a bit?" (199):

Lizzie, at her cards, shook her old grizzled head. No Tricks. Why not? For the tricks my foster-mother can pull off....Shrinkings and swellings of clocks running ahead or behind....Her 'household magic' she calls it. What would you think, when you saw the bread rise, if you didn't know what yeast was? Think old Liz was a witch, wouldn't you! (199)

Grandma, who raises the illegitimate twins, Dora and Nora, in Wise Children, has her age to suggest her representation as a witch, and the fact that she has the 'magic' ability to seemingly return from the dead to haunt the twins when they are feeling sad. While Dog-Woman,

Jordan's adoptive mother who finds him on the banks of the Thames River in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, is not a witch, her gigantism aligns her with other mythic beings from numerous folklore sources.<sup>4</sup> For Diski, Carter, and Winterson, these intertextual representations function in both a humorous and serious manner; they conjure up their own associations with an historic literary past, and they suggest evil in a traditional sense; but then, these associations are subverted and undermined, and witches and giants are demonstrated to be good parents, although of course, they are not biological parents and so do not offer the 'natural' and singular connection to origin that Caesar suggests.

Ultimately, these parents function as both an existent and non-existent origin: on the one hand, Daphne, Lizzie, Grandma, and Dog-Woman act as mothers and thus force the focus of the narrative away from the biological aspect of mothering and onto its practice; on the other hand, however, none of the children except Divya can find a fixed biological origin to either construct as abject or to refuse delineation from. Terry Caesar is correct in her hypothesis that the true alternative nature of a mother's authority is a narrative one (Caesar 127), but it is not one which points, as Caesar then concludes, to a sole biological origin. Instead, these mothers suggest a narrative origin: the fairy and folk tale. Then, Diski, Winterson, and Carter

deconstruct those static representations too. Ultimately, these maternal step-figures do exist in the realm of the abject, the place "where meaning collapses" and the children are 'freed' to create themselves without the burden of biological beginnings.

What these radical representations can offer their adopted offspring is a narrative alternative, the opportunity to tell their own stories using not the patriarchal language of the symbolic, but instead, the poetic language found in the maternal sphere, Kristeva's realm of the semiotic. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva asserts that as a child grows, he or she must construct the mother as abject and leave behind the poetic influence and imagery which dominated this phase in order to join the mature world of the father, and take up his or her place in the symbolic order. However, for many children, the loss of the mother's breast is replaced by orality, by words, and such children then become quite verbose. Eventually, the

mature writer, whether a failure or not (though perhaps never losing sight of those two alternatives), never stops harking back to symbolization mechanisms, within language itself, in order to find in a *process* of eternal return, and not in the *object* that it names or produces, the hollowing out of anguish in the face

of nothing. (Kristeva 43)

The child learns that the metaphors of language are purely symbolic. These signifiers are not iconic; they do not describe a natural correspondence between word and thing. But in the semiotic phase, where the child/mother and self/not self differentiations do not yet exist, there is a different kind of communication possible. It is to this realm that the characters in the texts of Diski, Carter, and Winterson attempt to return through language itself.

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar suggest a similar kind of alternative for women who want to write, but who wish to differentiate their writing from the largely male-dominated literary tradition. Initially, Gilbert and Gubar assert that there is a great proliferation of paternity metaphors in literature in general and moreover, that male sexuality is the essence of this literary power: "The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis" (Gilbert and Gubar 4). If a woman chooses to write, she has a choice of models; either she can follow those suggested by her literary forefathers, or she can opt for the 'evil' arts as modelled by the step-mothers of the fairy tales:

And if Snow White escaped her first glass coffin by her goodness, her passivity and docility, her only escape from her second glass coffin, the imprisoning mirror, must evidently be through



'badness', through plots and stories, duplicitous schemes, wild dreams, fierce fictions, mad impersonations...Renouncing 'contemplative purity', she must now embark on that life of 'significant action' which, for a woman, is defined as a witch's life because it is so monstrous, so unnatural...she will practice false arts in a secret room... (Gilbert and Gubar 42)

So to choose the life of "significant action," a life of writing or creating, is to choose to align oneself with magic, the monstrous, the maternal, and to constitute a challenge to the patriarchal realm of the symbolic.

For Daphne, then, in Diski's Happily Ever After, it is necessary to constitute herself as a witch; it is a guise that she must consciously adopt in order to be a unique and successful writer. The representation is partially for the benefit of Divya, but it is more for Daphne herself. She repeatedly states that now she is older, she will make the construct *first*, then life will follow the magical literary format and end 'happily ever after':

All her previous novels had followed from the events of her life, so that, in effect, she did no more than edit experience into an acceptable structure. The new novel would be different; planned bit by bit by living it out, as if life were a notepad on which the structure of her

fiction would be sketched. (140-141)

It is the power of Daphne's book, its magic ability to structure her life before she in fact lives it, that allows her to create the later years of her life as the happiest ever. From a purely practical point of view, the novel allows her the funds to purchase the caravan and the freedom to travel as she chooses. But from a less concrete perspective, it is the novel which also brings her and Liam together and gives her the courage to move beyond this relationship to what will hopefully be a fulfilling life for both characters.

Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, is the semi-autobiographical story of a young orphan, Jeanette, who is raised by an eccentric adoptive-mother in a very religious household. Jeanette is initially committed to the born-again faith of her mother; as she grows, she even preaches regularly from both the church pulpit and the travelling tent. While there is a male minister who oversees all operations, the congregation is almost entirely female and often the text implies that the minister's role is that of a figurehead. The result is that the church appears as a largely matriarchal society, run by and administered for the women in the community. The fact that Christianity is dominated by patriarchy does not initially trouble Jeanette. But as she grows and discovers that her own sexual orientation is a lesbian one, she is forced by her mother to

give up the church. Ironically, her mother argues that it is only for men to preach the message of the Lord. Jeanette, then, must choose between the Word of the Father, and her own words, the ones which comprise the novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, and all the other texts which follow this one.

The notion of a poetic and therefore female language is only alluded to through the significant relationship between Jeanette and her first lover, Melanie, but it is an idea which is more fully explored in her next novel, Sexing the Cherry. In this instance, it is Jordan who becomes the artist figure, not a female character at all. However, this is not as straightforward an observation as it may at first appear. For in order for Jordan to fulfil some of his creative aspirations, he must briefly adopt the guise of a woman. His adoptive mother, Dog-Woman, offers him a complicated model of what constitutes female gender. She prides herself on being a 'lady' and believes this to mean that she must wear a clean dress and perhaps a string of pearls. However, she also believes in a life of significant action, of murdering those who she thinks are hypocrites and of defending, to the death, any who threaten the lives of those she loves. Her representation as giant suggests that her origin is a mythic one, but still, she is very much her own unique self.

For Jordan, the fact that his mother does not act in a

manner wholly consistent with either gender is positive:

I have met a number of people who, anxious to be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women and women as men. After my experience in the pen of prostitutes I decided to continue as a woman for a time...I noticed that women have a private language. A language not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words meaning something other. (Sexing 31)

The majority of Jordan's narrative comprises his quest for identity and for love. But significantly, it chronicles not the journeys he made, but the ones he "might have made, or perhaps did make at some other place or time" (10). They are the journeys of the imagination and are written in a poetic language with potentially multiple and varied connections between signifiers and signifieds. Jordan's journeys are into the land of fairy tales, to meet one of the twelve dancing princesses, Fortunata, with whom he falls deeply in love. Jordan's future lies paradoxically where he began because he suggests that his entire existence has been ordered by this love. Thus, his origins, like those of his adoptive-mother, Dog-Woman, are literary not biological, and the language which both creates the search and chronicles his progress is allusive, poetic, and maternal in its

broadest sense.

In Carter's Nights at the Circus, the aerialist, Fevvers, is not a writer per se; however, as will be discussed in Chapter III, she still succeeds in usurping the power of story-telling from the journalist, Walser, and uses this power to create her self. From the outset, Walser is established as a non-believer in the Fevvers' 'reality'; but "like the boy in the fairy tale who does not know how to shiver" (Carter, Nights 10), Walser will eventually understand the connection between goosebumps and belief. Carter sets Walser and Fevvers up as diametrically opposed: he is part of the American journalistic tradition which strongly believes in the possibility of objective reporting and the existence of a single, objective and measurable truth. Fevvers, on the other hand, is part of an artistic tradition which believes in magic, performance, and self-creation. So while initially it may seem that since Fevvers is the subject (and thus 'object') of Walser's story, she would have less power than he, the reverse turns out to be the case. As the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that Fevvers, not Walser, defines her self through a careful and controlled telling of her own story. Raised by Lizzie and following her lead, Fevvers finds that story-telling is her greatest source of power. She creates herself as spectacle and maintains the look of others through her performance. But it is a performance entirely created and maintained by

her own desires and it depends upon others' outmoded beliefs for success: Walser insists that "seeing is believing" (15). But for Fevvers, seeing is only a matter of construct, and she can create herself with seeming magic and great success.

Geraldine Meaney, in (Un)like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction, suggests that for Angela Carter, the concern with biological origins and the questions about identity that this concern raises is "inextricable from the problem of literary authority for the woman writer" (Meaney 127). Meaney's argument is focused on Carter's Wise Children, a narrative, 'written' by Nora Chance, the illegitimate twin daughter of a famous Shakespearean actor, Melchior Hazard. Ostensibly the text is about the fictionality of paternity, but it also simultaneously undermines the myth of maternity. At one point, Dora comments to her supposed father's twin, Perry, that "'Father' is a hypothesis but 'mother' is a fact" (223). But this comment is made during a debate not about paternal origins, but rather, maternal ones, and Perry counters Dora's assertion with one of his own: "Mother is as mother does" (223). His suggestion is that Dora's, and her sister Nora's, Grandma, is, in fact, the girls' 'real' (meaning biological) mother. For Meaney, the novel suggests that Dora's quest for the truth about her identity is essentially a question of which literary father to follow: Shakespeare or Joyce. Her argument carefully details how

Melchior Hazard aligns himself with the great bard, while Perry, Dora and Nora's 'acting' father, aligns with a Joycean character, so that eventually, the novel displaces "traditional by modernist authority" (Meaney 130).

Although there are strong links between Dora and Perry (both are essentially fabulists: he a conjurer, she a writer), Dora does not comprise, as Meaney suggests, "a variety of Joycean roles" (131). While she is briefly aligned with the pulp fiction character of Gerty McDowell from Ulysses' "Nausicaa" episode when she apologizes for describing her uncle "in the language of a pulp romance" (Carter Wise 30), ultimately her actions undermine all male-authored language. Meaney sees Dora as both Gerty McDowell, male masturbatory fantasy, and as Bloom himself, ironically distancing himself from her and her narrative (Meaney 131). However, in the final pages of Wise Children, it is Perry who fulfils Dora's ultimate sexual fantasy: on his hundredth and her seventy-fifth birthday, she seduces her uncle, and with him, she topples the last vestige of taboo on biological origins. Afterward, she realizes that her father, Melchior, had waited his whole life "to become father of himself" (Wise 224). This realization is one that Dora arrives at not through language, but through the sexual act itself; moreover, it leads her to the ultimate conclusion in her own quest for biological origins. When Perry pulls out twin babies from his pocket, Dora says to her sister Nora,

"We're both of us mothers, and both of us fathers" (230). So while the quest initially leads Dora through a patriarchal literary past, her search does not finally end there. Instead, she suggests that children must create their own parents, although paradoxically, it is a creation which, for Dora, is still confined to language.



## Notes

1. For more about this, see both Bruno Bettelheim and Marie-Louise Von Franz. Bettelheim works from a psychoanalytic perspective and Von Franz from a Jungian one, but both read fairy tales as archetypes and focus their discussions on the psychic impact of these stories on young children.
2. See Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born. She discusses the institution of motherhood and the unrealistic expectations that it sets up in detail. The core of her argument is that motherhood is particularly threatening to patriarchy because of a mother's biological functionings. In a slightly different context, Frederic Jameson, discussing the relationship between technology and motherhood, suggests that mothers are necessary in postmodern fiction because the modernization process is not as complete as one might believe and the connection to nature, which she represents, is never quite lost (ix).
3. Both Gerard Lenne in "Monster and Victim: Women in Horror Film" and David Hogan in Dark Romance discuss the connection between sex and death and its attraction for spectators of horror. Stephen Neale in Genre furthers these arguments by also drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and castration anxiety

to posit that male horror monsters represent castration in order to fill the lack and soothe male spectators' anxiety about castration.

4. See Chapter III for a detailed discussion of Dog-Woman's mythic connections.

## Chapter Two

### Everything Old Is New Again:

#### Fairy Tales Rewritten

While the majority of novels by Carter, Diski, and Winterson are postmodern fantasies which use fairy tale motifs, these authors have also written several stories which belong entirely to the fairy tale genre. Some are strictly re-writings of the classic stories; others are completely new. But in both types of tales, gone are the sleeping princesses awaiting the kiss of the prince. Gone too are the nameless, faceless stock characters of the Grimm/Perrault tradition. While these new tales maintain the structure and style of their classic counterparts, they do so in order to dismantle readers' notions of what comprises both the contemporary land of make-believe and its connection to the reader's extra-textual world in order to urge readers toward an awareness of the connection between fantasy and everyday life. These new stories are, like their predecessors, didactic; however the point in the postmodern fairy tale is not simply to replace one moral with another. The process whereby the moral is communicated is at least if not more important than the end result.

Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment argues that all fairy tales "depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent

existence" (12). Using this basis, Ellen Cronan Rose in her article "Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales" argues that these stories can be seen "as tales of Bildung, narratives of growth and development" (209). Both these critics suggest, then, that fairy tales reduce socialization to a paradigmatic story. The problem, however, as Rose and other feminist critics point out, is that classic fairy tales--the ones with which most Western readers are familiar--depict very different paradigms for boys than for girls. These stories, like those found in "most Western literary genres are...essentially male--devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world" (Gilbert and Gubar, Mad 76). The new stories of Carter, Diski, Winterson, and other feminist fairy tale authors are still stories of Bildung despite that fact that most are written with a mature audience in mind. They focus on many of the same crises that the classic tales do: development of morals, identity, and sexuality. But the feminist fairy tales attempt to articulate the developmental process in a more sexually egalitarian and often more sexually explicit manner than the classic tales have done. This is not to suggest that the feminist tales have eradicated princesses, marriages, or tests of strength and wit; however, the male and female characters in these stories participate in the plots in a more equal fashion.

The most obvious function, then, of this new type of

fairy tale is to counter the negative and unrealistic portrayals of both sexes in classic fairy tale texts. Sometimes, Carter, Diski, and Winterson simply re-write seemingly straightforward aspects of a tale, or change only one or two salient features. Other stories are complete departures from their originals or are themselves originals which employ and sometimes parody various motifs and structures from classic fairy tales. While their methods may differ slightly, all these new stories reflect the authors' general dissatisfaction with the dominant male discourse of the traditional fairy tale with its social mores, values, and even institutions which provide a sexist framework for young and old readers alike. Jack Zipes in his preface to Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England articulates a persuasive argument which demonstrates that the political purpose and design of these feminist fairy tales is quite clear:

the narratives are symbolic representations of the authors' critique of the patriarchal status quo and of their desire to change the current socialisation [sic] process. ("Preface" xii)

While I agree with the main sentiments of Zipes' argument, there is a central problem which he does not address. He writes of the authors' "desire to change the current socialisation process," which implies that the majority of these feminist fairy tales are written for children--

essentially as replacements for the old versions. In fact, these new tales with their sarcastic, ironic, and often biting tone, their overtly sexual scenes, their eroticization of all things bodily, and their inclusion of extreme violence often linked to sex make them stories for adults only.

This raises some pertinent but problematic questions: why would adults be interested in such tales? To what aspect of the adult personality do these tales appeal? And finally, while one is never too old to learn, and the process of socialization is a life-long venture, an attempt by a handful of texts to reformulate central notions firmly established in adults is a difficult if not impossible task. Obviously, there are no clear cut answers to such rhetorical and sociologically based questions and issues; however, the overwhelming and blatant focus on sexuality in these new texts suggests that Carter, Diski, and Winterson view this aspect of humanity as central to their discussions. From this general point of departure, the authors urge readers toward an awareness of numerous political, social, and individual problems which they consider to be a direct result of the manner in which people think about, write about, and even have sex.

Peter and Iona Opie write in their introduction to The Classic Fairy Tales that readers often have inaccurate stereotypes of what fairy tales are all about. For example,

the Opies suggest that readers tend to romanticize the story of Cinderella; they imagine it to be the tale of a lowly drudge who is transformed by magic into the belle of the ball where she meets and marries one of her social betters. In fact, point out the Opies, such is not the case because Cinderella was always a member of the aristocracy; what the magic reveals is the true state of affairs:

Her story is not one of rags to riches, or of dreams come true, but of reality made evident....In the most-loved fairy tales, it will be noticed, noble personages may be brought low by fairy enchantment or by human beastliness, but the lowly are seldom made noble. The established order is not stood on its head. (Opie 11)

In the new fairy tales of Carter, Diski, and Winterson, reality is still made evident, but such revelation *does* attempt to turn the established order on its head. In these feminist tales, women are shown to be sexual beings, and sometimes even sexual beasts. Their sexual orientation is not necessarily heterosexual and the type of arousal they enjoy can include the sadistic, the masochistic, and the perverse.

For most of these heroines, love is not a prerequisite to lust and neither is marriage. In fact, Carter's, Diski's and Winterson's texts suggest that marriage is generally

instigated, sanctioned, and maintained by men for the betterment of men, not women. Usually, as these stories demonstrate, marriage is something which women must either use to their own ends, or avoid completely. Partnerships still exist in these stories, but they are founded on the characters' mutual acceptance of each other. While this may seem rather too mystical, what it in fact suggests is that for Carter, Diski, and Winterson, being a princess and marrying a prince is not enough. Each character must accept and acknowledge his or her partner's sexual orientation, fears, intelligence, physical appearance (including the aging process) and so on. This is a markedly different reality from the one to which the Opies refer. Their comments and subsequent analyses are confined to the classic tales of Perrault and Grimm which in turn are reflections of several different and earlier societies.

Many introductions to fairy tale collections stress that the appeal of these stories is their timelessness: their reflections of society are true and universal and have remained so for centuries. This notion, however, has more to do with the reception of the classic fairy tales than it does with the texts themselves. Because these stories are still being told, they seem to continue to appeal to numerous generations of readers. Working from but also against this tradition, Carter, Diski and Winterson employ the land of make-believe to offer the reader a different



version of a rather different reality: one of overt violence, sexuality, and unending confrontation. In these stories, the characters' choices are usually difficult and ambiguous. The worlds they inhabit, like those of their classic counterparts, are wild, rough, and often unfair. But unlike the earlier fairy tale characters, these new princesses and princes are not limited to one obvious choice and one single 'happily-ever-after'. They must choose an alternative while acknowledging that the simple solutions no longer exist.

The very title of Angela Carter's collection of fairy tales, The Bloody Chamber, hints at the inescapability of bloodshed and its connection to things sexual. The stories suggest that when gender roles, values, and expectations are changed or even challenged, there will be confrontation and pain for all concerned. While this is a general theme of The Bloody Chamber, it is an aspect which Carter clearly emphasizes in her retelling of "Bluebeard" now called "The Bloody Chamber." Iona and Peter Opie trace the history of "The Blue Beard" to Charles Perrault's 1697 collection entitled Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe. The first English version (which the Opies have reprinted) was translated by Robert Samber in 1729 and published under the title Histories, or Tales of Past Times. Although no earlier written version of the tale has been discovered, the Opies suggest that numerous oral versions definitely do

exist because it seems likely that the story was essentially derived from the life of an historical personage, Comorre the Cursed, who lived about A.D. 500 (Opie 105).

In Perrault's version of the story, there is an omniscient third-person narrator who begins with the details of the Blue Beard's great wealth, and his misfortune of having a blue beard which caused women to run away from him in horror. He has a neighbour who has two beautiful daughters and he wishes to marry one of them. Initially, both are repulsed by his appearance; however, he entertains the family and some of their female friends for a week in the country. The youngest daughter becomes impressed by his wealth and "began to think that the master of the house had not a *Beard* so very *Blue*, and that he was a very civilised gentleman" (Perrault 106). A month after their marriage, the husband tells his wife that he has been called away on business. During his projected six-week absence, he suggests that she entertain her friends and family. He gives her the keys to the entire house and tells her to use all but one; this key is to a "closet" and he warns her that if she opens this room, she can expect his "just anger and resentment" (107).

While her friends and family enjoy the great house, she leaves them and opens the forbidden room. The reader is told that she "could see nothing distinctly...[then] she began to observe that the floor was all covered over with clotted

blood, on which lay the bodies of several dead women ranged against the walls" (107). She is horrified and leaves the room. Somehow, blood appears on the key and although she tries, she cannot remove it. The same night, the Blue Beard returns. "His wife did all she could to convince him she was extremely glad of his speedy return" (108). This sentence seems to imply that the wife convinced him of her joy by having sex with a man she now knows to be a murderer, for it is not until the next day that the Blue Beard asks for the keys. When he sees the blood, he tells her that he knows of her disobedience, and that she must join the others in the room. She asks for time to pray and while doing so, she asks her sister to watch for her brothers who are to visit today and to somehow signal for them to hurry. At the last moment, as she stands before Blue Beard's cutlass, her brothers rush through the gate and run him through with their swords. The wife inherits all Blue Beard's wealth which she uses to buy commissions for her brothers, provide a dowry for her sister, and marry herself to "a very honest gentleman who made her forget the ill time she had pass'd with the Blue Beard" (109).

This is a tale with a moral about women's indulging their curiosities. Perrault clearly implies that if the heroine had obeyed her husband and overcome her desire to know what lay beyond the locked door, she would have lived--albeit in a state of ignorance about her husband's true

nature. Once the wife actually knows the truth about her husband, she sees little choice except to trade sex for her life in a vain effort to keep him from discovering the now bloody key. This distraction, however, lasts only for one night and the implication is that while women can use their sexual wiles to cover their disobedience or mistakes, they will eventually be found out. But this version of the story (unlike Carter's retelling) suggests that the Blue Beard kills his wives because they do not obey, not for any pleasure--sexual or otherwise--that he may glean from such a horrific exercise. This interpretation is strengthened by another similar version of the tale by the Brothers Grimm entitled "The Fitcher's Bird." In this story, a wizard gives the key to a succession of women and when one successfully withstands the temptation to open the door, the wizard's power over her is broken and they wed (Opie 103). It is apparent, then, that women are rewarded for obedience and punished--even killed--for transgressing a husband's or potential husband's wishes.

Carter's fairy tale, "The Bloody Chamber," follows much the same general plot line as that of Perrault's. The heroine, a poor young pianist, agrees to marry a much older man, the Marquis, because he has money. Her mother married for love, but the man was killed in a war and has left the small family penniless. The young girl's choices for the future are extremely limited and the question of a mate

becomes a matter of practical survival in a seemingly brutal and physical male world. Although the Marquis is very much the girl's senior and is somewhat ugly, he does not have a blue beard. When he gives her the keys to all the rooms in his castle, she, like her forerunner, cannot resist the temptation to look inside the forbidden room. There, she finds the bodies of his previous wives, some still trapped in various torture devices which are reminiscent of those in the tales of the Marquis de Sade. When her husband returns, although she tries to buy time by offering to sleep with him, he refuses and demands to see his keys. He takes the bloody key and marks her forehead with it. As she is about to be beheaded, her mother arrives and shoots the Marquis with a service revolver she once used to kill tigers in India. The heroine then marries a blind piano tuner, the one servant in the house who was loyal to her, and along with her mother, they set up a school for the blind in the castle, and a small music school in town for themselves.

But the similarity of the plot aside, Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" changes the focus of the narrative before the reader even begins to read the story proper. By renaming the work, Carter shifts the reader's expectations from a story about a man metonymically named for his most prominent physical feature to a tale about sex and violence, and their connection to the female body. Her choice of the word 'chamber' is an important one because of its ambiguity:

as the OED outlines, the term can mean both a body cavity, obviously suggestive of a woman's vagina or womb, and a room, most often the bedroom. The tale is narrated retrospectively in the first person; the confessional voice is that of experience, and while the heroine often seems overly critical of the choices she made as a younger woman, there is also a clear sense that her options were both limited and unappealing. Transferring the telling of the tale to its central female character is obviously empowering, for the woman now has the opportunity not only to speak for herself, but to make her own judgements about how she proceeded and what motivated her to make the choices she did. Also, the narrator can thus both acknowledge the patriarchal structure of her society, and provide a form of critique against it.

Her world is one which draws a clear connection between affluence and power. Initially, (although understandably), the young girl was overly preoccupied with her fiance's wealth and the status that it afforded her. The Marquis gives her a choker which she refers to as "a bloody bandage of rubies" (12) and this description is suggestive of the connection between money and gender. The narrator uses this image to imply that the loss of virginity, and sexuality in general, can be a violent, painful experience. But also, the choker is suggestive of the economic value that society attaches not only to virginity, but to women themselves as

they can become commodities in their interactions with men.

By making the heroine the story-teller, Carter has given her the power to create or recreate herself. As numerous feminist critics have pointed out, many narratives 'speak' to the reader from an essentially male viewpoint and as such, the power of the pen has become equated with the power of the phallus. The tale the woman tells begins not with the details of the Marquis and his wealth, but rather with details about herself and her excitement about her forthcoming marriage. Her tone is often ironic or wry; because the story is told in retrospect, she comments on and often chides her younger, naive self. She makes it clear from the beginning that she was not marrying for love but for financial betterment. Her mother asks, "'Are you sure you love him?' 'I'm sure I want to marry him,' I said. And would say no more'" (Chamber 7).

The Marquis clearly sets out to impress her with his wealth and he succeeds. He sees her as a commodity which can be bought, and she is complicit in this arrangement referring to herself as "his bargain" (15). While she is not extremely happy about this state of affairs, neither is she unaware or unaccepting of the situation. It is the girl's mother who raises the question of love--a significant departure from the classic tales in which money is usually seen to go hand in hand not only with love, but with both beauty and moral virtue. As Marcia Lieberman points out in

her article, "Some Day My Prince Will Come," in the stories of Grimm, Perrault, and the other classic writers,

Marriage is associated with getting rich: it will be seen that the reward basis in fairy and folk tales is overwhelmingly mercenary. Good, poor, and pretty girls always win rich and handsome princes, never merely handsome, good, but poor men. (189)

Beauty, in these classic tales, has an obviously commercial advantage, but in Carter's story, the heroine does not see herself as particularly attractive. In fact, she feels rather flattered by the attentions of a man who is both a part of the aristocracy and extremely wealthy. What she eventually tells the reader is that the Marquis was attracted to her because he sensed in her the possibility of "debauchery" (20).

When he takes her to the opera wearing her ruby choker, she catches sight of herself in a mirror. First, she notices that he is watching her with "sheer carnal avarice" (11) and his gaze creates her in the image of his own desire:

When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I



sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption  
that took my breath away. (Chamber 11)

While she may not be beautiful, the point is moot because what excites the Marquis about his new wife is not her lack of knowledge, but of experience. Her virginity is clearly part of the attraction, but she does not appear to be surprised or worried by his image of her sexuality as a commodity. In fact, by agreeing to the relationship, she becomes complicit in his sexual aggression. She knows that his money and experience give him power over her and initially, she accepts the role of victim willingly. What Carter does not make clear is whether or not this potential for corruption existed before the heroine met the Marquis. While Carter does not deny women the right to express their sexuality, in this tale, it is likely that the girl's desires are, at least in part, created in response to those of the Marquis who is older and more powerful than she. It is probable that her conception as corruptible became a self-conception in response to the way in which the Marquis looks at her.

Carter's use of the mirror suggests that the heroine has fallen under the spell of reflections and sees herself not as she really is, but as her husband sees her. But by leaving open the possibility that the girl could willingly cast herself in the role of victim, Carter intimates that sexuality cannot be made to conform to any particular

ideology; sexuality remains problematic, inexplicable, and irrational. While none of the women in The Bloody Chamber are sexually experienced, neither are they wholly innocent. Heroines are complex and fallible; they are not above sexual desire, even when they are virgins, and they are not always beyond being satisfied by, or at least indulging in, what most of the members of their society would consider to be perverse.

What Carter does make clear is that the narrative voice of experience sees her younger self as foolish and naive. While she did marry for financial and social betterment, the now older narrator suggests that her youthful expectations about the marriage were wholly unrealistic and overly romanticised. She tells the reader how she initially dreamed about her new life and she describes the Marquis' home with traditional fairy tale images and language; his ancestral seat is

that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation in which he had been born. To which, one day, I might bear an heir. Our destination, my destiny. (8)

Her conception is a romantic one taken almost directly from any number of classic fairy tales and perpetuated in numerous areas of the extra-textual world. In addition, phrases like "walls made of foam" and her description of the

castle's locale as surrounded by "the amniotic salinity of the ocean" (12) are suggestive of the birth process. Her marriage will be her rebirth in the land of experience, and with this loss of innocence, she will discover that monsters are not confined to the realm of fantasy.

The narrator intimates, however, that part of the monstrosity is not simply an exterior one: it perhaps lies within the young girl herself. She obviously believes the fairy tale versions of marriage to a wealthy and powerful man and has been 'set up' to have expectations about what life in a castle will be like. Unfortunately, her husband is no prince. He is a collector, and he collects both pornography and women. His sexual tastes and appetite contradict the social and literary myths that some of his other characteristics and possessions seem to her to suggest. Also, the girl has been influenced by her own mother's experience: she married for love, but this was not a relationship which allowed her and her daughter to escape the harsh realities of their daily lives. When the father dies, mother and daughter are left alone and destitute, and so it does not seem surprising that the young girl should be attracted to vast wealth as a means out of her present state. Ironically, she sees marrying for love as an overly romanticized ideal; yet, her own romanticized notions of life with a wealthy husband in a castle lead her down an unhappy and life-threatening path.

The bride's mother figures prominently in the story from the very first page. The narrator is proud of her and makes her strong presence apparent:

My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I? (7)

In the end, it is this strong woman (not brothers as in the original tale) who, through "maternal telepathy" (40) comes to the rescue of her daughter. While in the beginning she was wise enough to allow her child the freedom to explore her sexual maturity and to make her own choices, she never deserts the girl. At the last moment as the Marquis raises his sword, the mother appears and "without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head" (40).

The change of the rescuer from brother to mother is of paramount importance because her victory suggests a female revenge against an unequal and unfair male tyranny. Ellen Cronan Rose takes this argument one step further by suggesting that the bond between two women is of the utmost significance not just in this first story, but in all the stories of The Bloody Chamber. Rose uses a central tenet of

Adrienne Rich's book, Of Woman Born to form her theory about the centrality of the mother-daughter bond. According to Rich, because women grow up in a world essentially hostile to females, daughters need their mothers to instill in them a sense of their own potential, not their limitations (Rose 221). As Rose persuasively argues,

A mother 'who is a fighter' gives her daughter a sense of life's possibilities. Following her example, Bluebeard's widow and her 'sisters' in the stories that follow are enabled to explore life's possibilities, to develop into adult women by learning to love themselves. (222)

At the end of "The Bloody Chamber," the heroine learns how inexperienced she truly was, and she symbolically acknowledges the need for a continuing connection to her mother by the act of rescue, and by her wish to have her mother reside with her and her new partner, the blind piano tuner.

The fact that the man she now chooses as the replacement for the Marquis is blind is significant for several reasons. First, on a practical level, she is pleased that he cannot see the red mark of the bloody key on her forehead and this suggests that while the mark will serve as a reminder to her, it will not hinder their future relationship. The fact that the mark remains indelible is suggestive of some sort of guilt; however, it is a branding

which seems unfair because the girl is young and inexperienced, has few and limited choices; moreover, she is a victim of both social myths and circumstances, and of the Marquis himself. While the piano tuner's blindness protects her from feeling shame through his look, more importantly, because of his blindness, the heroine will not be tempted to create and see herself through his eyes, as she did with her first husband. Since he cannot see, it is less likely that he will be able to dominate or control her in such a manner. While Carter resists making value judgements about her characters and their actions, the final choice the heroine makes is to stay with the piano tuner for love--he is poor and he has no prospects. Carter does not even intimate that the two will marry, but the fact that there is love between them is made clear. In this way, she suggests a privileging of emotion over monetary gain and also suggests that marriage does not necessarily lead to happiness; other fruitful unions are possible.

In Carter's two versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," entitled "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves," she continues to develop the centrality of the older female figure in the development of a young girl. Before beginning this discussion in detail, it is both interesting and helpful to know the historical background of this perhaps most famous of all classic fairy tales. As the Opies outline in The Classic Fairy Tales, no written version of "Little

Red Riding Hood" has been found prior to the account published by Perrault in Histoires, ou Contes du Temps Passe. Because this story was much anthologized in English during the eighteenth century, most readers are familiar with at least one of its many versions. In Perrault's telling of the tale, Little Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf; she is not rescued. However, in an 1812 version of the story by the Brothers Grimm, the wolf, after eating Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, falls asleep. A passing huntsman somehow guesses what has happened and opens up the wolf's stomach. Out pops Red Riding Hood and her grandmother and they both live happily ever after. Read symbolically, both tales have, over the years, been interpreted as a story about the initiation of a naive but sexually maturing girl into the ways of the world. As numerous critics have pointed out, the red cloak which the heroine not only wears, but is metonymically named for, suggests that she is both virginal and fertile. Its colour, however, is not simply suggestive of her sexual maturity, but connotes, like the scarlet letter, both the devil and heresy. It also prefigures, in a more literal manner, the shedding of her blood and the 'death' she suffers at the paws of the heinous wolf. Moreover, both menstrual blood and the term 'death' are symbolic of sexuality and are part of the standard language of orgasm.

In Perrault's version of the tale, the third person

omniscient narrator outlines how Red Riding Hood makes an unwise bet with a wolf about who can arrive first at her grandmother's house. As Jack Zipes points out in "A Second Gaze at Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations," "she accepts a wager which, it is implied, she wants to lose" (230). For Zipes, the fact that she is swallowed by the wolf is akin to a rape and thus the story suggests that she is responsible for her own unhappy end. Because the tale does not conclude with Red Riding Hood's rescue, Zipes believes that Perrault's tale suggests that there is no salvation for girls like her; there is only a somewhat wry moral which suggests that girls ought not to talk to strangers else they risk, and will deservedly suffer, sexual consequences. But moreover, Perrault's story obviously equates sex with sin. As Zipes points out, "Playful intercourse outside marriage is likened to rape, which is primarily the result of the little girl's irresponsible acts" ("Tribulations" 230). While the Grimms' version of 1812 ends with the rescue of Red Riding Hood by a huntsman, this tale, too, centres on and rationalizes male power. By having both the girl and her grandmother rescued by a passing male, the implication is that only a strong man can rescue a woman from her (sinful) lusty desires.

While Peter and Iona Opie suggest that the Perrault version is the earliest written rendition of the tale, Jack Zipes outlines an earlier oral version which he argues dates



from the late Middle Ages. In this tale, the heroine does not wear a red cape or hat and so the story does not begin with the dominant colour red and its sexual connotations. When the heroine meets the monster, it is a werewolf. He asks her where she is going and by what route. She chooses "the path of needles" while he takes "the path of pins." When she arrives at her grandmother's house, the werewolf has killed the old woman, put some of her meat on the shelves, and her blood in bottles. This the young girl eats. Then, she strips off her clothing and gets into bed with the werewolf; but when she realizes who or what he is, she tells him she needs to go outside to relieve herself and she escapes. While the werewolf chases her, she arrives safely at home. As Zipes writes, the tale is obviously sympathetic to the young girl who learns to cope with the hostile world in which she lives:

She is shrewd, brave, tough, and independent; Evidence indicates that she was probably undergoing a social ritual connected to sewing communities: the maturing young woman proves she can handle needles, replace an older woman, and contend with the opposite sex. ("Tribulations" 229)

What Zipes objects to in Perrault's and the Grimms' versions of the tale is that both reflect what he calls a general male attitude which portrays women as eager to be seduced or

raped (229).

Carter's two versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" borrow essential aspects from all three versions of the story, but in the end, "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves" share the outlook of the oldest known oral version of the tale: both are essentially sympathetic to the young girls who prove themselves to be tough, resilient, and resourceful in a hostile world dominated by superstition and outworn tradition. For the young heroines, "[i]t is a hard life....[and] They lead harsh, brief, poor lives" (Carter, "Werewolf" 108). Because of their circumstances, both girls are initially set up as victims, and their choices for the future are narrower than those of the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber." For these characters, there appear to be only two possibilities: either they can submit to patriarchal tradition and general superstition and perhaps risk becoming werewolves, or they can embrace the monstrous through sexuality and choose a bestial coupling, but succeed in avoiding marriage. The lack of choice offered these heroines is highlighted by two textual devices: the narrative voice, and the relation of numerous tales of superstition at the beginning of each story.

Unlike the first person retrospective position adopted in "The Bloody Chamber," these tales are narrated by a limited omniscient voice who speaks to the reader in a familiar, conversational tone. Thus, part of what both

heroines must struggle against is this narrative voice which is not their own. In "The Werewolf," the narrator explains how in this northern country, the inhabitants have "cold weather, [and] they have cold hearts" (108). But then he or she furthers this assertion with an explanation. Because their lives are so difficult and since they are completely isolated from the rest of society (of which it is implied both the narrator and the reader are a part), these people's beliefs and dominant mythologies are quite different from those of contemporary western society:

To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often....The Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that. (108)

The narrator speaks of the woodland people's ways in a patronizing and superior manner which points up the lack of factual basis for most of these beliefs and further suggests that neither he/she nor the reader would ever fall into such arbitrary and discriminatory practices. These people,

When they discover a witch--some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh sinister! follows her about all the time...strip the crone, search

her for marks, for the supernumary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death. (108)

By adopting the guise of a knowing and wise friend, the narrator uses irony to make clear the obvious fact that most readers, like the woodland people, often support beliefs and traditions which are wholly constructed and usually harmful or limiting to some segments of the population. In this instance, both young heroines deserve much credit for their ability to survive in a world such as theirs. Their lives are regulated and controlled by both the harsh climate and the stories which shape not only the landscape, but the minds of those who inhabit these settings.

In "The Werewolf," the monster is part animal and part human, but unlike the male wolf in the classic "Little Red Riding Hood," this wolf is significantly gendered female. As the young girl walks through the woods, she is met by what appears to be a wolf. Like the heroine of Zipes' story, she is cool and practical: using her father's hunting knife, she cuts off its paw and it "went lolloping off disconsolately" (109). After wiping the blood from the knife, she continues on her way to her grandmother's house where she finds granny sick in bed. As she takes a cloth from her basket, a hand with a wart and a wedding band--her grandmother's--falls out. It has metamorphosed from the wolf's paw. The heroine pulls back the bedcovers and finds

that the old woman has a bloody stump where her hand once was. The girl crosses herself and "crie[s] out so loud the neighbours...come rushing in" (109). They believe that the wart is a witch's nipple, and drive the old woman out into the snow and stone her to death. "Now the child lived in the grandmother's house; she prospers" (110).

Ellen Cronan Rose in "Through the Looking Glass: When Women Write Fairy Tales" suggests that "The Werewolf" is about how a woman can achieve her "(hetero)-sexual maturity by affirming her own sexuality through identifying with her (grand)mother" (Rose 225). She argues that in this tale, the heroine discovers the fact that her grandmother and the wolf are one and the same. For her, the obvious implication of this pairing that the young girl must accept is that being a mature woman means being a sexual animal. This affirmation must come before a girl can enter into a sexual relationship with anyone else. While the history of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood does have obviously sexual connotations, those manifestations are notably absent in Carter's version of the story. The child is not named "Red Riding Hood" nor does she wear the symbolic red cape. Indeed, we are told that she "had a scabby coat of sheepskin" (Carter, Chamber 109) and that she is not at all naive about the ways of the forest. The only connection to sexuality lies in the image of the wolf whose literary history has been read to suggest carnal lust and bestial desire.

Rose's conclusion is that the story's ending is essentially positive because the girl, like her grandmother, accepts that she is essentially a sexual being and thus symbolically replaces her grandmother in the house (Rose 225). Such a conclusion is overly simplistic for two reasons. First, Rose is relying only on the image of the wolf to determine that the story is about sexuality or sexual and general maturation. But even if this assertion is correct and the story is an example of a tale of sexual *bildung*, the positive outlook that Rose reads in the story's conclusion is too optimistic. What the young heroine chops off the werewolf is her left paw, the one which the narrator carefully tells the reader has a wart and is still wearing a wedding band. The pairing of these two images cannot be accidental. Together they suggest that marriage is akin to a superficial but not particularly attractive virus. It is this pairing which the girl must "lop off" in order to make choices other than those made by her grandmother.

But the consequences for refusing to submit to the dominant cultural beliefs are harsh: death by a community stoning, as her grandmother suffers. The grandmother's history is not alluded to in the text; what happened to her husband and how or why she became a werewolf is not explained. So when the girl symbolically replaces her elder in the house, it is an ambiguous ending. Is she refuting her grandmother's choice of marriage or her metamorphosis into a

werewolf? Or does her assumption of grandmother's house suggest an acquiescence in the credo of the neighbours and therefore imply an equally bleak future for the young girl? If she accepts the notion of marriage, perhaps she will become a werewolf and likewise be put to death. Or perhaps it is because grandmother refutes her marital status by becoming a werewolf, a sexual being incarnate, that she must be killed by painful and torturous means. Regardless, the heroine is a heroine only because she proves herself to be a survivor. What her future holds is unknown, but her circumstances, and those of all women in these communities, suggest that she can conform to others' dated standards and suffer an emotional or developmental death, or she can refute their ways and risk being seen as the Devil and be murdered.

In Carter's second version of "Little Red Riding Hood" entitled "The Company of Wolves," the heroine chooses to join with the bestial and live a life outside that of her established community. Again, her choices are narrow and limited, but her victory is in surviving and in avoiding the role of victim to which both the literary history of Red Riding Hood and the other characters in her own story would wish to consign her. The text is divided into two parts and the tone, language and content of the separate sections suggests that there are also two distinct narrators. The voice of the initial narrator assumes the identity of the

girl's community. He or she tells tales of happenings "in our village" (112) from a third-person limited omniscient point of view. Several of his or her comments are direct contradictions of the heroine's actions and assertions in the story's second half and thus this first narrator seems to stand in opposition to the choices the heroine later makes.

The text begins with the first narrator's relation of various stories surrounding the presence of werewolves within the community and he or she clearly establishes the notion that for these folk, devils, werewolves, and other mythic beings are quite real and present a definite threat to peoples' lives. He or she specifically focuses on the tale of one woman who marries a young man. On their wedding night, the unwise groom goes outside to relieve himself and never returns. Although the bride and her family search for him, he has completely disappeared "so the sensible young girl dried her eyes and found herself another husband not too shy to piss into a pot who spent the nights indoors" (112). They have two children and all seems fine until one freezing night, the first husband returns. He demands a bowl of cabbage, but when he sets eyes on her children, he shouts,

"I wish I were a wolf again, to teach this whore a lesson!" So a wolf he instantly became and tore off the eldest boy's left foot before he was



chopped up with the hatchet they use for chopping wood. (112)

When he is dead, he metamorphoses back into the young man he was the night he left their marriage bed. The woman weeps at the sight and her second husband beats her. From the outset, then, "The Company of Wolves" suggests that marriage is an ugly and difficult reality for many women and the man with whom they reside may be as much wolf, or monster, as any to be found in the darkest forest.

The second section of the text is narrated in a less familiar voice and details the particular story of another young woman who, wearing a bright red shawl like her famous predecessor, sets out for her grandmother's house on Christmas Eve. Unlike "The Werewolf," the sexual connotations of the red cape and their connection to the heroine are made clear from the outset. The narrator carefully details the girl's budding sexuality and tells the reader that "she has just started her woman's bleeding" (113). While walking through the woods, the young woman hears the howling of a wolf; she reaches for a knife which she has hidden in her basket, but it is not a wolf, only a handsome young man who appears on the path. He offers to carry her basket thus disarming her and removing her only obvious means of protection, the knife; but without hesitation, she accepts. When he suggests that he and his compass can arrive at granny's house quicker than she can by

taking the path, the wager is laid and again she accepts. He tells her that if he wins, he would like to claim a kiss. Carter, then, is taking what has hitherto been a sub-text in the classic version of the tale and made it an explicit part of the story. But the girl's response to the request is an ambiguous one: she blushes and lowers her eyes. This suggests that she does possess an awareness of his attraction to her and a knowledge of matters sexual, but it also suggests that she is embarrassed and modest, not sexually experienced.

The young man arrives at the house before the girl. He strips off his clothes and the last thing the grandmother sees is "a young man, eyes like cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed" (116). After he devours the woman, he makes the bed, dons granny's nightcap, and replaces the dropped Bible on the table. But when the heroine arrives at the house, she quickly realizes that the wolf is not her granny and that she herself "is in danger of death" (117). Her alternatives are few: she could kill the wolf if she could reach the knife, but she dares not as his eyes are on her; or, she could match his strength, passion and wit with her own. She makes her decision and as she does, she hears the howling of the wolves. She says, "It is very cold, poor things...no wonder they howl so" (117). Her sympathetic position with respect to the wolves is in direct contrast to the first narrator's assertion that although the wolves

make a melancholy sound, they "can never move the heart for not one phrase in it hints at the possibility of redemption" (112).

This heroine does pity the wolves, but neither she nor they have any desire to be redeemed. If she were to wish for such a redemption, she would be aligning herself with those narrow-minded villagers who believe in myths such as sex is only acceptable between married people and then only for procreative purposes. Faced with a choice between their mythology and that of the wild beasts, her decision is both brave and pioneering. She throws each article of her clothing into the fire, an act which suggests that she is shedding her previous socialized incarnations, and also that she is entering a state which will be irreversible. In many traditional tales, as the reader has been reminded in the first section of this story, werewolves must remain as wolves if their human clothes are burned. The heroine, then, freely accepts her 'bestial' side and revels in the sexual experiences that she is now able to enjoy. As the pair recite the familiar dialogue about the size of ears, eyes, arms, and so forth, they finally arrive at the mouth:

What big teeth you have! She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the room was full of the clamour of the forest's Liebestod but the wise child never flinched, even when he answered: All the better to eat you with. The girl burst out laughing; she

knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire... (118)

The heroine's laughter mocks the coy and naive fear of her classical predecessors. She is not afraid of her sexuality nor of taking her place in a world that she chooses, not one of society's making. Moreover, her strength and wit transform not only her, but also the wolf so that the final scene depicts her "sleeping in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf" (118).

Jeanette Winterson in Sexing the Cherry also suggests that women must accept their sexuality in order to lead happy and fulfilled lives. The implications are more complex than this, however, because Winterson, unlike Carter, intimates that society at large must accept the choices women make about themselves. What Winterson implies is that both men and women have been adversely affected by the proliferation of fairy tale notions and ideals and the stereotypes that many classical tales depict are not limited to the world of fantasy. In Sexing the Cherry, Dog-Woman's son, Jordan, falls in love with a dancing princess named Fortunata. His search for her leads him to meet her sisters, eleven of the twelve dancing princesses, and their narratives comprise a separate section in the middle of the novel. The stories they relate about themselves and their partners offer a contrast to the typical fairy tale unions.

Some of these characters enjoy lesbian relations; some love their male partners, others do not. Regardless, none of their relationships relate the simple and happily-ever-after conclusion found in the marriage or mating tales of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm.

By borrowing both the title and the names of the characters from the classic fairy tale, "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," Winterson is obviously inviting a comparison between the earlier version and her own. As Peter and Iona Opie suggest, while the first written version of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" appeared in M.M. Grimm's 1823 German Popular Stories, there are probably over one hundred variants of the tale, and many much older than this nineteenth-century rendering. In the Grimms' version of the story, the focus is almost entirely upon the male character, an old soldier, who sets out to solve the mystery of the twelve dancing princesses. Their father, a king, has offered the hand in marriage of one of the daughters to any man who can discover where the princesses go each night and why they return with their shoes worn through. The princesses have so far successfully eluded discovery by drugging each would-be suitor. When he falls asleep, they escape through a trap door in the floor and descend to an underworld where they dance until dawn with twelve handsome princes. On his way to the princesses' castle to test his skills, the old soldier happens across an elderly woman who, for reasons

unexplained, tells him not to drink the princesses' wine and to take a cloak which will make him invisible. That evening, while the elder sister appears overly confident, the youngest senses that something is not quite right. She suspects that they are being followed by the old soldier, but her sisters foolishly ignore her fears. When the soldier reveals where the girls go each evening, he claims not the youngest but the eldest for his bride because, he says, "I am not very young...And they were married that very day, and the soldier was chosen to be the king's heir" (Grimm 194).

The symbolism of the tale's setting implies that women's exercise of their own desires is something base and low: they must descend into the earth in order to indulge their passions. Part of the sin, also, is one of excessive pride: the eldest sister is overly confident that they will never be caught. Because of this, it is she who must marry the old man. Initially, this tale may appear to be a departure from the mainstream romances found in most classical fairy tales because it does not offer the reader a couple united in beauty and bliss. However, its moral is quite in keeping with the traditional tales. What it suggests is that marriage alone is capable of transforming proud and independent women into responsible obedient wives. If a female character thinks she can escape such an end, she is proven wrong. Like the test of obedience in "Bluebeard," the eldest fails to exercise restraint and is punished by a

forced marriage to an old man whom she does not love. Moreover, he is financially compensated for her mistake because he becomes heir to her father's kingdom.

The notion of marriage as punishment remains central in Winterson's version of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," but unlike the 'obvious' mistakes that their classical predecessors made, what exactly these postmodern characters have done wrong to bring such misery upon themselves is unclear. Their stories begin when Jordan descends into a well where apparently all the sisters (except Fortunata) now reside. There, the first princess informs him of the general beginnings of their story. The plot is similar to that of the Grimms, with some notable exceptions. First, each evening when they disappeared, these princesses did not descend into the earth, but rather flew up to a silver city which floated high above the earth. The sole occupation of the city's inhabitants was to dance, but the girls were not matched up there with twelve dancing princes. In fact, the text intimates that while they danced as part of the larger group, they also pursued and honed their own individual dancing talents. The first sister explains to Jordan that every night, they danced until they were exhausted, and then returned home. When the princesses were finally caught, it was by a young prince, not an old soldier, who clung to their skirts as they flew through the window. This young hero claimed in marriage the youngest daughter, Fortunata,

but she alone escaped. All the other daughters were married to his brothers, but for various reasons, these relationships ended. Now the princesses live together, without their husbands, at the bottom of a well.

The change of dreamscape from subterranean to ethereal suggests radically different associations and connotations. The fact that the princesses ascend before they enter into marriage suggests that what elevates them is their individual pursuit of and indulgence in their passion for dancing. What ultimately causes their downfall, and literally their return to the earth, is marriage. By reversing the locales of the real and the dream worlds, Winterson reasserts the primacy of the individual and the importance of her desires. The narrative voice also forms part of the inscription and empowerment of the female characters. Whereas the Grimms' version of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" is told by a third person omniscient narrator who has obvious sympathies with the old soldier, Winterson's princesses speak for themselves; each tells her own particular tale and they begin (significantly where most fairy tales end) after the wedding ceremony itself.

Three of the princesses are lesbians and the stories of their lives, while they reflect a happiness, satisfaction, and fulfilment within the relationships themselves, ultimately end unhappily because society did not approve of such unions. However, none of the eight heterosexual



princesses enjoys any real happiness within their relationships at all. Their husbands are various combinations of unfaithful, slothful, homosexual, perverse, sadistic, manipulative, egotistical, and a number of other adjectives which would make them less than ideal partners for healthy, heterosexual women. While the lesbian lovers do not enjoy the acceptance of their communities, they do at least find love within their relationships. In contrast, the heterosexual princesses are, in most instances, psychologically imprisoned because society does sanction their unions. Such couplings are acceptable to society but harmful to women who are condemned to a life of misery until they reassert their independence. Even then, as is implied by the fact that they live in a well, each is still condemned to a subterranean existence.

Only Fortunata lives a happy and satisfying life and this is because she finds fulfilment in herself alone. Near the end of Sexing the Cherry, she relates her version of the tale to Jordan. She tells him that "for years she had lived in hope of being rescued; of belonging to someone else, of dancing together. And then she had learned to dance alone, for its own sake and for hers" (Winterson, Sexing 99). The alternatives the story presents for these characters are rather bleak: heterosexual unions, although socially sanctioned and acceptable, are torture for women; lesbian couples, while happy between themselves, are ultimately

separated by an unfeeling, often murderous society. As the first princess comments to Jordan, there is always a penalty for love (47). Only Fortunata, whose name denotes luck, escapes the pain and penalty of love; and she remains alone. But surrounding this is the fact that within the larger story of the novel, her existence is somewhat debated and always contradictory. Her sisters wonder if she is still alive; someone suggests that if she is living, she must be so old as to be crippled; Jordan finds her once, but realizes he can never return to her again. So because she is so elusive, Winterson seems to be suggesting that such self fulfilment can only exist in fantasies.

Two of Jenny Diski's fairy tales from her collection of stories entitled The Vanishing Princess are relevant to this discussion, "Shit and Gold" and "The Old Princess." The former is Diski's reinterpretation of "Rumpelstiltskin" and the latter is an original work which mocks the fairy tale stereotype of the princess. Like those of Carter and Winterson, Diski's stories depict women who are intelligent, witty, analytical, powerful, and sexual. Although they too inhabit a world of limited choices, they are heroic because they choose to embrace lives in opposition to the dominant fairy tales perpetuated by their societies.

"Shit and Gold" and Grimm's 1823 version of the story entitled "Rumpelstiltskin," share the same moral; both stories are warnings about the perils of boasting. But in

Grimm's tale, the warning is essentially directed at the girl and the dwarf, while in Diski's version, the guilty are obviously the father and the king. Also central to both tales is the importance of a name. As Peter and Iona Opie suggest in their introduction to the Grimm's tale, the story probably dates to a very early era because it hinges on the belief of an interdependence of name and identity--the dwarf's power is broken if his name can be discovered (Opie 195). In Diski's version, the narrator, also the central female character, begins her story by explaining the importance of her name. That she has one at all is a challenge to the usual fairy tale assumptions and dictates. For Diski, as for Winterson, Carter, and many other feminist writers, names are essential because they are a part of one's individuality. From the outset, Diski's narrator refers to the previous story ("Rumpelstiltskin"), and in typical postmodern fashion, she constantly challenges its "inaccuracies":

For the purposes of the story, I never had a name. I was always just the daughter of a miller, and then later the Queen--meaning Mrs King. But we millers' daughters have names, like everyone else, though the archetype-makers would have you think differently, even in a story such as this, where naming names is the name of the game. Well, I bloody well had a name and have one

still... (Diski, Princess 113)

Her name, she informs the reader, is Claraminda Griselda. Of its origins, she explains that the "first confabulation of a name being indicative of the florid hopes my father had for his own flesh and blood....the second name my father once heard in a tale told in a local inn by some accountant fellow called Chaser, or Chooser, or Chancer, or something, who fancied himself more than just an ordinary customs and excise man" (113).

Claraminda's earthy, sarcastic comments constantly undermine the seriousness of Grimm's original or any other version for that matter. But the intent of the humour is serious: it points out, in case the reader has never considered such a possibility, that fairy tales are essentially fantasies. But before pursuing this argument in greater detail, it is necessary to summarize the basic plot of both versions.

Grimm's "Rumpelstiltskin" is related by a third person omniscient narrator. The story is about a young, beautiful girl, who is also shrewd and clever. Her father, a miller, makes her out to be something which she is not and he tells the king that she can spin gold out of straw. Her protests to the contrary do no good; she is left in a tower and told to produce gold from the straw. If she succeeds, she will be rewarded with marriage to the king. If she fails, she will die. As she is weeping, a dwarf enters and

offers to work this miracle for her if she offers him something in exchange. The first night, she gives him a necklace. On the second night she gives him her ring. On the third night, she has no jewellery left with which to barter, so she offers him her first born. The king, delighted with both her beauty and her presumed powers, marries her. When the dwarf returns to demand her child, she cries and he softens. He gives her three days to discover his name; if she should succeed, he will leave. One of her servants, while wandering near a wood, hears a voice repeating a rhyme which ends, "Little does my lady dream/Rumpelstiltskin is my name" (Grimm 198). When the queen "guesses" his secret, he is so angry that he puts his foot through the floor. So the moral about boasting, and about presumptuous pride is doublefold: obviously the miller ought not to have inflated his daughter's powers, and the dwarf ought not to have presumed that his name would never be learned. Neither is the daughter exempt: she should not have made a bargain which she had no intention of keeping.

Diski's version follows a similar plot line: a miller boasts to the king that his daughter can turn straw into gold. When she cannot do this, the dwarf appears to offer his aid. She makes essentially the same bargain as her classical predecessor; however, when he returns to collect his due, she turns the terms of the deal around. Instead of asking for three days to discover his name, she offers,

during a period of three days, to make him *forget* his name. Because of her sexual prowess, she succeeds, and since the king is most unsatisfactory in bed (and in all other locales as well), Rumpelstiltskin becomes one of her regular lovers, along with the dairy maid and a pimply shepherd boy.

Diski, through Claraminda, creates characters who are not the usual one-dimensional archetypes found in most fairy tales. While this observation may seem obvious, perhaps its implications are not so clear. If a story is constructed solely around archetypes, it can be reduced to a paradigm; as such, it is a small step for such a story to become true in a universal sense. But it is precisely against this universality that Diski, Winterson, and Carter write. For these feminist writers, the creation of characters who have motives, likes and dislikes, and identifiable manners of acting and speaking, suggests that the elements of this story are not universal, but quite particular. And paradoxically, by rendering this tale in Claraminda's own individual voice, Diski makes both its appeal and its criticism of fairy tales more general. Because it is *her* tale, it may or it may not have relevance for someone else; but regardless, it is not singular in its conclusions about the way things really are.

But universality aside, Diski's story is still a clear indictment of the idea that women are property. It is quite obvious from the story's outset that Claraminda is seen as a

commercial commodity by both her father and the king. The reader is told by Claraminda herself that "Frankly, I wasn't the prettiest girl a king had ever laid eyes on. Not ugly you understand, but nothing really special" (Princess 118). Unlike most classic fairy tales, what is to be exploited in Claraminda is not her beauty--it is something which does not even really exist: the possibility that she can spin straw into gold. The underlying suggestion is that most men, even kings, can overlook a plain appearance if their pocketbooks will swell. That the criticism is not wholly limited to these two characters is made evident by Claraminda herself. As she sits in the king's tower wondering how she can produce the impossible and contemplating the other alternative, she implicates the entire underpinnings of her society:

The question I held in my mind was: did I really mind about dying and leaving a world where fathers and kings (and it ought to be said, ineffectual mothers) caused one to be in such a predicament? (122)

What sways Claraminda's desires in the direction of life is her humorous sense of the practical and her youthful outlook; she clearly implies that her naivete allows her to go on because things cannot really be as bad as they appear.

At the end of the story, it is again Claraminda's practical attitude which both places her in a position of

power and undermines the dreamy, overly romanticized 'original' story. When the dwarf returns to collect his compensation, the first-born child, Claraminda meets his stock questions in an original manner:

'Don't you get tired of this nonsense? Guess my name. Three days. And what would you want with a baby anyway? Listen, I have an alternative suggestion....More interesting for both of us. Why don't you give me three days to make you forget your name?'

'But...' he spluttered eventually. 'That's not the way it's done. You have to discover my name. You've got to find it out. Names. It's about names.'

'But actually it's not very interesting, is it? All that happens is that I send out my servants who creep about and listen in doorways, and eventually--though granted, at the last minute--you can be sure one of them will come across you in a wood cackling your name to yourself in premature self-congratulation, and the game will be up. What's clever or amusing about that? A rich and powerful woman uses her servants to find something out. Big deal... (Princess 125)

Clearly the character in control of this conversation, and essentially of the outcome of her own story, is Claraminda.



She will not be confined either by the dictates of the classical tale or by the male dwarf who clearly believes that he ought to be the one asking the questions. By changing the terms of the bargain, Claraminda also makes herself, not her servants, responsible for the eventual outcome and by taking on this responsibility, she demonstrates not only bravery, but a strong belief in her self and her own abilities--in this instance, her sexual abilities.

Her speech also points out that the stock questions and responses found in the classic version of "Rumpelstiltskin" privilege the wealthy and powerful and intimates that there is nothing particularly clever about the denouement of that particular saga. By pointing out such a seemingly obvious conclusion, however, she makes way in her own story for her own conclusions. Although Claraminda does become wealthy and powerful, she does so not because she marries a king, but because she is intelligent and sexual. At the story's end, the reader is told that it is Claraminda who runs the entire kingdom because the king is too busy gloating over his wealth to do anything else. Part of her power also resides in her sexual prowess; because she succeeds in making Rumpelstiltskin forget his name, she alone is the heroine.

Diski's final story in The Vanishing Princess, "The Old Princess," is about a different kind of heroine--one who does nothing heroic at all. This tale is not a rewrite or

reinterpretation of any previous story; rather, it is Diski's parody of the stereotypical princess. "The Old Princess" is the story of a princess to whom nothing happens. She lives in a tower and is fed and cared for by her 'keepers' whom she never sees. They give her a kitten for her birthday and she names it 'Dinah' "after a cat in a book she had read" (Princess 192). The obvious allusion to Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland is suggestive of the probability that the princess, like Alice, lives in a fantasy world. This princess is sure she has a destiny because she is a princess; so by this circular logic, she waits for something to happen. Nothing does. The only event in the entire story is that near its conclusion, Dinah dies. It is at this point that the princess tries the door of her tower and finds that it is not locked--she wonders if it ever was. The Old Princess further considers the possibility that there are numerous other princesses in other towers also waiting for their destiny to arrive. While the story is a simple one, it points up a rather problematic situation. What Diski is implying is that this character believes herself to be a princess and as such, has modeled her expectations, and indeed her entire existence, upon a fairy tale archetype. She has wasted her life because she never considers herself as a person, or considers that she has a specific personality. Instead, she remains passive and expectant, and she waits "for a very long time; for as long

as she could remember....So long, in fact, that she had almost forgotten what it was she was waiting for" (191).

But while the story does contain an implicit criticism of the main character, it is a stronger indictment of the source of the princess' misconceptions. One day, the truth of this situation dawns on her:

It came upon her that, in spite of all the books telling her about princesses in towers and other waiting areas, and their eventual discovery, she was a princess to whom nothing was going to happen. There had not been a single story about such a princess, and she was wholly unprepared for such a special destiny....She began to see that the problem was with the books, and felt some resentment at her keepers for having provided her with stories which took only part of the truth into account. There was no reason, of course, to write about princesses such as her: a life of waiting without an end was not the stuff that stories were made of, but it did give an unbalanced view and a possibly unreasonable expectation to those princesses whose destiny failed to turn up. (193-4)

Diski's detached, ironic tone makes it blatantly obvious that there is a reason to write about "princesses such as her." What Diski, following her postmodern credo, is

assaulting in the tale of "The Old Princess" is the misconception that fantasy and fairy tales never have an effect on the lives of real people. Paradoxically, she makes this attack by using a fairy tale figure, the princess herself, to point up the space between the conception or the stereotype, and the character's inner self. The final irony is, of course, that the Old Princess does not really have an inner self or a personality because she has lived her life according to a story and a paradigm which do not exist.

Diski, Carter and Winterson write and rewrite fairy tales in order to point up that the classical paradigms of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and others, are overly reductionist, sexist, inaccurate, misleading, and even offensive in their implicit suggestion that their stories are tales of universal truth. While accepting that their tales, too, are still essentially stories of Bildung, what the new fairy tale authors are attempting to articulate is complex and sometimes contradictory. But by using the problematic classical paradigms, motifs, and characters which are familiar to most Western readers, Diski, Carter and Winterson challenge these readers to reevaluate the assumptions which lie beneath or behind the 'once upon a time' and 'happily ever after'. While Carter, Winterson, and Diski begin their foray into the land of make-believe from historical representations based on sexual inequality and patriarchy, they end in a mostly uncharted region where sex

is linked to violence and to self-revelation.

### Chapter Three

#### The New Fairy Tale Heroine:

#### Gigantic, Strong, Aged, and Lusty...

Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of a woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep: she waits.

(The Second Sex 273-4)

As Simone de Beauvoir suggests, female characters in classic fairy tales have limited roles and few choices. Those who are young and beautiful spend their time awaiting princes; those who are old or ugly concoct spells and wreak havoc; biological mothers, if they appear in the stories at all, tend to die untimely deaths. Indeed, the representation of women is one of the chief concerns of contemporary critics such as Jack Zipes, James McGlathery, and Karen Rowe, particularly given the formative influence of fairy tales on children if not from bedtime reading, then from the blockbuster re-tellings of these classics presented by the Disney corporation.

Carter, Diski and Winterson use not only their rewritten fairy tales, but also many of their fantasy novels to alert readers to the subtle but pervasive power of these images of female passivity and male activity. Carter's The Passion of New Eve, Nights at the Circus, and Wise Children, Diski's Happily Ever After, and Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, attempt to invert and reinvent the reader's notion of what is and is not feminine, attractive, and most importantly, what is heroic through a reconstruction of the heroine in terms of the monstrous-feminine. In these novels, woman is constructed not as victim, but as powerful monster: she may appear as a giant wielding great physical strength, as a story-teller exemplifying the power of the pen and the word, or she may appear animalistic and instinctual as she uses her body in a sexual manner to achieve her goals. Her construction as monstrous is, to some extent, a relative one and can shift or change depending upon various characters' perceptions of her. However, in a general sense, such a construct is also abject: these postmodern heroines are both monstrous and human; they signify the boundary between the two states and through this position, they have the potential to dismantle dated and often sexist notions of what constitutes the heroic. Such a narrative intention is a subversive one because it attempts to counter the pervasive belief that the traits of physical beauty, youth, diminutive size and physical weakness not only define women, but

determine their desirability.

The concept of the monstrous-feminine is intimately connected to the presentation of the female body. The new heroine's physique is different from both her society's norm and that depicted as ideal in the classic fairy tales. Moreover, it is a difference which is grounded in monstrosity and invokes varying (and sometimes conflicting) degrees of anxiety and attraction in a number of other characters. Diski, Winterson, and Carter attempt to bring about a confrontation with the abject in order finally to eject that which no longer belongs and to redraw the boundaries between human and non-human, and between the fairy tale heroine and her postmodern incarnation. The struggles these new heroines enact and the stereotypes that they challenge are initiated by the representation of their bodies. But from this point of departure, these characters can ask the reader to question his or her definition of what constitutes feminine, heroic, lady-like, sexy, motherly, familial, and strong, to name but a few concepts. Some of these representations are an open challenge to an idea prevalent in fairy tales that only the young or beautiful can enjoy intimate relations, attract the opposite sex, incite and experience lust, passion, and enduring love. While these novels are essentially postmodern fantasies, not re-writings of fairy tales in the sense that Carter's The Bloody Chamber is, they do employ tropes and borrow monsters



from fairy and folk tales to combat the underlying ideologies that the classic tales reflect. These contemporary authors share the concern of critics such as Karen Rowe who warns that it

is perhaps too easy to ignore the significance of romantic tales in forming female attitudes toward the self, men, marriage, and society by relegating them to the nursery. Or one can dispute their impact by asserting that worldly education enables women to distinguish fantasy promises of bliss from conjugal actualities. Either dismissal of fairy tale implies that adult wisdom is entirely rational, thus negating the potency of cultural myths and personal fantasies in shaping one's experience. Precisely this close relationship between fantasy and reality, art and life, explains why romantic tales have in the past and continue in the present to influence so significantly female expectations of their role in patriarchal cultures. (265)

It seems unlikely that there was ever a time when all women were happy to clean chimneys and darn socks; so in a sense, classic fairy tales have created myths about women that have relatively little to do with actual women. Rowe's implication is that fairy tales can create desire in both sexes. While it may be a fantasy of some men to marry a

compliant, beautiful woman, fairy tales can convince women that this is their fantasy too. Clearly, critics like Rowe are suggesting that many of these tales succeed in depicting women as commodities and simultaneously make women complicitous in their own victimization. The heroines that Carter, Diski, and Winterson offer the reader are anything but classically conventional and are certainly not victims. Neither passive nor polite, their bodies are sites of their own pleasure, whether they be winged (like Fevvers), multi-breasted (like Mother), or septuagenarian (like Daphne, Dora, and Nora). These authors create women who are not only heroic, but who challenge both fairy tale, and more broadly, social perceptions of ideal female form. Diski, Winterson and Carter offer readers giant women who are sexy. They offer readers old women who feel lust and incite passion in others. They offer readers female characters who counter the fairy tale stereotypes in order to challenge literary and social myths.

The notion that society accepts, fears, dismisses or respects individuals based partly on size and stature is not new. Jenny Diski partly alludes to this idea in The Monkey's Uncle in which she begins each chapter with a quotation from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. In several episodes of Carroll's novel, numerous characters view Alice not as a young girl, but as a monster, solely based on her size. Alice is not overtly interested in challenging other

characters' perceptions of and conclusions about size in general, but she is concerned with her individual, specific experience, and most of all, she wants to 'fit in.' Alice's desire to be other than she is and the problems which ensue as a result of her wish being fulfilled are telling in their implications for the texts of Diski, Winterson and Carter.

Near the beginning of Lewis Carroll's tale,

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; 'and even if my head would go through,' thought poor Alice, 'it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could if I only knew how to begin.' (4-5)

Alice outlines the problem of size well. Although she is, in fact, a small girl, she is much too large to go where she chooses: into the garden. Size, in this instance, is relative, for at this point in the story, Alice is not really a giant. The miniature door and the world beyond transform her body into something gigantic; the size of one thing is dependent upon the other for measurement and the

body itself is the only mode of perceiving scale. But in order for Alice to access the world that she has chosen, she must become smaller than she is. In other words, her desire is to fit into the world (literally), not to make the world fit her or to find a place whose size is proportionate to her own.

Throughout Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the heroine is constantly changing size in order to fit somewhere, or speaking metaphorically, to measure up to someone's notions of who and what she ought to be. Carroll is, in this instance, "literalizing a metaphor." As Brian McHale points out in Postmodernist Fiction, metaphorical expressions

belong simultaneously to two frames of reference. Within one of these frames, the expression has its literal meaning; within the other it functions figuratively. Only the second of these frames of reference actually exists in the fictional world of the text...The frame within which the expression functions literally is *nonexistent* from the point of view of the text's world, absent where the other frame is present....so metaphor arises from the tension between a presence and an absence, an 'existent' and a 'nonexistent.' The absence or nonexistence of the secondary frame of reference, however, is not necessarily absolute...

[one] may be co-opted or expropriated, so to speak from the world of existents, the fictional world of the text; or, alternatively, they may begin as nonexistents relative to the fictional world, but subsequently enter that world as full-fledged existents. (133-4)

Alice literally cannot fit into the garden because she is too large. But Carroll's point is that metaphorically, Alice is always trying to 'fit in' somewhere--she wishes to conform to the world around her and she is not satisfied with who she is at present. Alice, like many classic fairy tale heroines, measures herself both literally and metaphorically against a standard of comparison which is created, defined, and maintained by the culture and society in which she lives. And as Susan Stewart points out in On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, and the Collection, "Aesthetic size cannot be divorced from social function and social values" (95).

Within the classic fairy tales, the heroine's value resides in her diminutive stature and lack of physical strength. These traditional accounts tell of 'small' women whose place and importance in these stories are congruent to their metaphorically diminutive stature. If the heroine were not created as such, she would not need to be rescued. She would not need a prince. Perhaps she would not need a father to protect her. And perhaps she--and others--would derive

her value and social position from something other than her physical appearance. But such a rewriting of the standard character functions of fairy tales suggests a challenge to the status quo in general; and this is exactly what Winterson and Carter are prepared to do when they, like Lewis Carroll, literalize another metaphor and create "larger-than-life" heroines: Dog-Woman, Fevvers, and Mother. These authors assume that the reader understands the (in)significance of literally and metaphorically small female characters in traditional fairy tales. From this point of departure, they present the reader with characters who are the exact opposite: women who are enormous, and therefore are monstrous to many others around them. As McHale outlines above, in the literary metaphor, the boundaries between two frames of reference are purposely being blurred and the result is that the nonexistent object of comparison is coming into existence within the text. Carter and Winterson have co-opted the literal meaning of the metaphor and brought it into the usually metaphorical realm of the novel. They are relying on the reader's familiarity with the traditional fairy tale concept of size in order to point out that such notions are socially constructed, and also that they are both reflected and maintained in the classic texts. Carter and Winterson literalize a metaphor in order to challenge the reader to reconsider what ought to constitute feminine, attractive,

heroic, and even human.

Dog-Woman from Sexing the Cherry, Mother from The Passion of New Eve, and Fevvers from Nights at the Circus are indeed female characters who are larger than life--larger than every living thing within the novels. Both Dog-Woman and Mother are giants in the traditional sense. Fevvers, while she is closer to most men's heights than most women's, stands "six feet two in her stockings" (Nights 12); but one of the first details that Walser tells the reader is that Fevvers is a "big girl" (7). His decision to yoke the adjective "big" with the diminutive term "girl" suggests that from the outset, Walser feels overwhelmed by Fevvers' size and he tries to downplay and undercut her with language. While Fevvers may not be a true giant in either the fairy tale or the twentieth-century sense of the word, she, Dog-Woman and Mother are perceived by other characters within the novels as monstrous beings who loom over landscapes, over obstacles, and certainly over men. Like Alice in the miniature world, the standard of comparison is relative. But relative to others around them, these three characters are women of great physical size and power; moreover, they are capable of initiating change and influencing novelistic world events because of their stature. And unlike Alice, 'fitting in' is not important to Dog-Woman, Fevvers, or Mother. In 'short', these characters are everything the tiny traditional fairy tale heroine is

not.

The first part of Sexing the Cherry is narrated alternately by Dog-Woman and her adopted son, Jordan. They live in London in the middle of the seventeenth century, and part of their story revolves around the historical events of the era: the beheading of King Charles the First, the establishment of Oliver Cromwell, the coming of the Plague, the Great Fire of London, and so on. But both characters also tell their personal stories, what happened to them during this time of political, social, and emotional upheaval. What becomes central to Dog-Woman's character as the novel unfolds, what actually allows her to act, to survive, and to be heroic, is her massive size. It is obvious from the outset of the novel that Dog-Woman is not the traditional or typical fairy-tale heroine, although the reader does not immediately realize that she is a giant. She introduces herself: "I had a name but I have forgotten it. They call me the Dog-Woman and it will do" (11). Then, when a man is tardy about revealing a supposed wonder from a far-off land, she threatens to smother him against her breasts. When he "starts humming and hawing and reaching for some coloured jar behind his head, and I thought, he'll not let no genie out on me with its forked tongue and balls like jewels, so I grabbed him and started to push him into my dress. He was soon coughing and crying because I haven't had that dress off in five years" (12).



Her manner of speaking is literal and matter-of-fact, and she suggests that the man swoons because she smells. From the reactions of other men later in the novel, however, there is a good possibility that this man swoons from terror at her size. In a subsequent episode, Dog-Woman's bulk and her physical power are the obvious cause of men's fear. She returns to her hovel to find that Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace--Roundheads, whom she violently opposes--have sequestered her shelter for printing broadsheets, written by Samuel Peck to denounce the King. Incensed, she attacks one of the men:

"This Peck," I said, seizing Firebrace by his jacket, "This Peck is an enemy of mine, having taken two good dogs and never paid for them, and that some years back." Firebrace started his wriggling, so I lifted him clean from the floor and brought him to my eye level. He began to dribble... (65)

But fifteen Roundhead soldiers soon appear at the door. Still, Dog-Woman is not afraid. She accuses them of being part of Satan's league, and orders them, as Jesus did, to "Get thee behind me" (65). When they do not disappear, she uses her size and strength to overpower them:

I ran straight at the guards, broke the arms of the first, ruptured the second and gave the third

a kick in the head that knocked him out at once. The other five came at me, and when I had dispatched two for an early judgement another took his musket and fired me straight in the chest. I fell over, killing the man who was poised behind me, and plucked the musket ball out of my cleavage. I was in a rage then. (66)

Dog-Woman is challenging the social views espoused by those around her in both a physical and metaphorical manner. Even if the reader does not agree with Dog-Woman's stance, she obviously bears out the strength of her convictions and will defend herself and those she loves against any kind of victimization. The black humour of this scene with the Roundheads is not to be missed; and yet, there is a serious sentiment being addressed here. There are almost no popular fairy tales which endow women with great physical size and strength. Not only is Dog-Woman able to beat up a man, she can take on--and annihilate--fifteen men at once. Moreover, she can take on an entire political movement and expose it and its members for the hypocrites she thinks them to be.

The situation is an interesting example of Kristeva's notion of abjection and how it can be experienced in relation to its inscription in the symbolic realm. The symbolic comprises the order of borders, discrimination, and difference; it is the sphere of language, of 'reality' as most understand the term, and it is inseparable from the

Rule of the Father. Kristeva argues that every society is founded on various notions of the abject; each group must construct its own laws and boundaries and then jettison that which its members deem is antisocial. The abject is not a "quality in itself"; rather, it is a relationship to a boundary and represents what has been "jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (Kristeva 69). In every instance, the abject threatens not only the individual, but society itself because the abject's presence constantly calls into question the boundaries upon which the symbolic, the social, exists. The symbolic can only maintain itself by attempting to maintain its borders and the abject highlights the fragility of this law. In this particular situation in Sexing the Cherry, a civil war is beginning between those who favour a continuation of the Royalist rule and the Roundheads who would prefer to see Britain governed by an individual not ordained by the Divine Right of Kings. The inherited right of kings to rule was, in seventeenth-century England, an accepted and established practice; it was a border or a rule which constituted part of that society. Thus the Roundheads, through the threat they constituted to this law, can be seen as abject.

However, in Sexing the Cherry, the irony is that it is not society in general which attempts to jettison the threat to the symbolic order, it is Dog-Woman. Because she is a giant, a monstrous being, and because her name draws

attention to the blurring between her animal and her human sides, she is constructed as abject as well. She ought to form the threat to established British laws and practices; yet, she chooses to support the status quo and to defend the Divine Right of Kings and all it stands for. In Winterson's text, the notions of 'right to rule' and how such notions ought to be challenged is not resolved. The abject nature of both the situation and Dog-Woman herself serve to point up the problematic nature of the existence, but aside from this, do not ultimately resolve the dilemma.

Winterson is not content to create this mythic character and restrict her to her seventeenth-century time-frame. In the last section of Sexing the Cherry, the narration jumps forward in time to present day. Here, the reader encounters a character named Nicholas Jordan, who bears a striking resemblance to the seventeenth-century Jordan, and an unnamed female chemist who feels a mystical, unexplained connection to Dog-Woman. Like Dog-Woman, the chemist believes that the political system of the day is filled with hypocritical and dangerous men. Rather than threatening the land through beheading a king, these modern men are risking lives because they are ignoring environmental disaster: mercury poisoning. Like Dog-Woman, the chemist feels the strength of her convictions, but she also inexplicably taps into another source for power: Dog-Woman herself.

The chemist tells how she often feels powerless, how she felt small and helpless next to her parents, and now she faces a country full of large, hostile men. She speaks of the desire for power and control--complete control--and she suggests that real power resides inside oneself and one's own ability to create a world:

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. 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. (125)

This woman has internalized and literalized the metaphor of 'larger than life.' But her need to be powerful is really a matter of will: it forces her physically to expand to the point where she feels big enough to fight for herself on a more abstract level, to fight for what she believes is right. When she realizes that she does not need to be large literally in order to be strong, she

found out something strange: that the weight persisted in my mind. I had an alter ego who was huge and powerful, a woman whose only morality was her own and whose loyalties were fierce and few. She was my patron saint, the one I called on when

I felt myself dwindling through the cracks in the floor or slowly fading in the street. Whenever I called on her I felt my muscles swell and laughter fill up my throat. (125)

The image brings to mind a character from a genre closely aligned with the fairy tale, Paul Bunyan of the tall-tale tradition. Susan Stewart in On Longing details how this initially oral tradition began as a way to pass the time amongst mostly working class men who, because of their work, were isolated from society for long periods. However, like the fairy tale which began as an oral form and gradually became a literary one, the tall tale eventually moved into the written realm. While there were other famous characters from these stories, by far the most popular hero was Paul Bunyan. Because of his inordinate size and strength, he was able to overcome any obstacle he encountered on the new frontier. By endowing Dog-Woman with similar characteristics, Winterson is suggesting that she, too, can overcome the obstacles which stand between her and an improved world. But more than this, Winterson, by endowing a woman with such characteristics, is inverting a male tradition and a male idol. For Winterson's readers, Dog-Woman as *woman* becomes a symbol of empowerment and a source of hope and inspiration for positive change.

Angela Carter uses a slightly different strategy to invert the male story-telling tradition and assert the power

of the heroine in The Passion of New Eve. The first part of this novel is narrated retrospectively by Eve through Evelyn's eyes and details how, after having taken advantage of a young, poor black woman, Evelyn is kidnapped by a band of women. The woman who leads this female cult and performs the operation to change Evelyn into Eve is a giant referred to by the others simply as 'Mother':

Her head, with its handsome and austere mask teetering ponderously on the bull-like pillar of her neck, was as big and as black as Marx's head in Highgate Cemetery....And how gigantic her limbs were! Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of giant fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. (74-5)

The women's loyalty to Mother is absolute. In fact, many of the cult's members donate one of their breasts so that Mother may have two tiers of nipples. To them, she is 'larger-than-life' and she encompasses all women, gives 'birth' to all women. She is the prototypical earth mother. Although Evelyn views her as a kind of terrifying monster at their first meeting, she is a figure of great inspiration to the other female characters in the novel. Even Eve comes to feel a connection to her in the end after she has undergone the sufferings which appear to be women's lot in this story.

But initially, it is Mother's immense size which

impresses Evelyn and it is because she is so large that she is easily able to overpower and rape him:

She was so big she seemed, almost, to fill the round, red-painted, overheated, red-lit cell in which she chose to manifest herself and I became aware of an appalling sense of claustrophobia....My knees were buckling under me, I sank lower and lower to the floor as she raised her arms and stretched them out towards me. What arms! Like girders. Like aqueducts. Her voice went down a scale of brooding tenderness. "Don't you know you're lost in the world?....Mama lost you when you fell out of her belly. Mama lost you years and years ago, when you were tiny....I am the wound that does not heal. I am the source of all desire. I am the fountain of the water of life. Come and possess me! Life and myth are one!" (80-1)

For Evelyn, the possibilities of constructing Mother as abject and defining himself as separate from her are eradicated. Although he views her as monstrous, her monstrosity cannot be escaped or evaded for two reasons. First, she is too large and she literally engulfs him. This physical assault and "reintegration of the primal form" (81) prefigures her subsequent castration of him and his rebirth as Eve. But moreover, Evelyn cannot escape Mother because



her power over him is not limited to her role as 'his' individual mother. Instead, both she and Evelyn construct her as intimately connected to a greater, 'universal' and mythic symbol of abjection: the archaic mother.

In Powers of Horror, Kristeva discusses the way in which the female body is constructed as an abject in order to keep the subject, the growing child, separate from the power of the mother, a power which threatens to destroy the child and his or her sense of a developing, separate self. She suggests that the symbolic aids in the formation of an opposition between the impure female body (constructed as impure by men because of its biological functions) and the pure speech which is associated with the symbolic, male body. This boundary between feminine and masculine is a means of establishing an order that is "clean and proper" and has further implications, which will be discussed, for the body types of both Mother and Eve. In her discussion, Kristeva stresses the double signifying function of the archaic mother: she is both the source of life and the abyss (10-1). For Evelyn, Mother signifies both the origin of his 'new' life as a woman, and the death of his 'old' male self. But Mother, through her mythic connections, also forms a threat to the symbolic realm in general. Barbara Creed in The Monstrous Feminine uses Kristeva's notions of the archaic mother to argue that the goddess's construction as originating womb suggests the possibility of discussing the

maternal figure

outside the patriarchal family constellation. In this context, the mother-goddess narratives can be read as primal scene narratives in which the mother is the sole parent. She is also the subject, not the object, of narrativity. (27)

By investing Mother with the attributes of both the human and the mythic, Carter creates a character who has the potential to transcend the realm of patriarchy. Mother, as a figure of abjection, challenges the borders between human and non-human, woman and mythic being, life-giver and destroyer. Because she constructs herself (and others also perceive her) as the source of all life, she can assume a position of ultimate authority in the text: she is the "subject, not the object, of narrativity." As such, she has control not only over her own manifestations, but over the appearance, and even existence, of others. Mother is the sole parent of her 'offspring' and the father is not only noticeably absent, but has been metamorphosed by Mother into a daughter.

Mother has obviously chosen to create her own body in a manner which suggests the mythic, an overabundance of the fertile maternal, and the grotesque. Her physical manifestation is an example of Kristeva's notion that the female body must be constituted as "clean and proper" and must bear no mark of its "debt to nature" if it is not to be

represented as monstrous (Kristeva 102). Mother is most obviously monstrous, and yet, she is more so to Evelyn than to Eve. And although Mother constructs herself as a kind of monster, she creates Eve to be the prototypical, stereotypical beautiful woman: she is young; her body is small and in proportion; her breasts are large and shapely; and she has blonde hair. Eve's body signifies the acceptable female form--sexually enticing and pleasurable to look at. The unacceptable, monstrous aspect of the female body is signified by Mother. Clearly there is a relation between size and power for it is Mother who cannot be challenged and it is Eve who is victimized because of her appearance.

Parts of Mother's body are 'made', not natural, so it is ironic that the attributes which she adds (her tiers of breasts) link her to the mythical and thus to the natural world: ultimately, she is Mother Earth. This point is furthered near the end of the novel when Eve tries to make contact with Mother at the shore of the ocean and to do so, she must enter a cave in the rocks. The crevice resembles a birth canal, and the deeper she goes, the larger and warmer the cave becomes. Although she never again meets Mother as the immense character who raped her as a him, she feels a connection to Mother through the earth itself. In fact, at this point in the novel, the suggestion is that earth is (m)other: enormous, all-encompassing, inescapable.

The link between earth and giants is an ancient one. As

Susan Stewart in On Longing points out, many natural landscape formations are named after, or incorporate words referring to, a giant race (70). Stewart outlines several traditional Anglo-Celtic-Germanic myths which suggest that giants were the original inhabitants of this planet and present day humans are only fallen descendants. According to these stories, the diminutive size of humans is representative of a shrunken morality--humans are less than giants in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Fevvers, Dog-Woman, and Mother, through their historical association, are more closely related to both the primordial and prelapsarian states of being than ordinary human characters. The historical association with the giant tradition is akin to the notion of abjection: both suggest a potential threat to those usually in positions of power. Susan Stewart writes,

The giant, from Leviathan to the sideshow freak, is a mixed category; a violator of boundary and rule; an overabundance of the natural and hence an affront to cultural systems. Here we find the opposite of the clockwork precision of the miniature; for while the miniature 'works,' coordinating the social, animating a model universe, the gigantic unleashes a vast and 'natural' creativity that bears within it the capacity for (self-) destruction. (Stewart 73)

In The Passion of New Eve, Nights at the Circus, and Sexing the Cherry, Carter and Winterson use their heroic giants to attack cultural systems. Through their historical and symbolic associations, these characters pose a real threat to the status quo as represented in each of the novels. Biological reproduction (which presupposes both a mother and a father) underlies the notion of the nuclear family. This model, in turn, has been validated and upheld as right and proper by numerous Christian sects. But Mother, first through her creation of Eve, and even by her failed attempt at artificial insemination, can undermine the necessity of the long-accepted manner of reproduction. Her creation of Eve from Evelyn is also a parody of the biblical story of genesis in which God makes Eve from Adam's rib. But in this instance, Eve and Evelyn do not make a couple; Evelyn must be destroyed to make way for Eve. This is not to imply that Carter is suggesting that future generations ought to be metamorphosed from existing ones or that artificial means of reproduction are superior, but The Passion of New Eve definitely problematizes a variety of social conventions or truths, many of which have formed the basis of Western culture. Fevvers, as will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, threatens the 'accepted' laws of nature and questions the centrality of the human eye as ultimate judge of truth. Dog-Woman also challenges a belief of truth as seeable and therefore real. But in addition, she poses a

threat to the laws of physics, to the government, and to the notion of the nuclear family as the other characters in the novel understand these concepts.

From the outset of Carter's Nights at the Circus, it is established that Walser does not believe that Fevvers' wings are real. His assignment is to write her biography for inclusion in a series of articles entitled "Great Humbugs of the World. Walser, unlike Evelyn in The Passion of New Eve, does not initially think that his sense of self is threatened; yet, it is. The reader is told at the beginning of Nights at the Circus that there was something "a little unfinished about [Walser]...almost as if he himself were an *objet trouve*, for *subjectively*, himself he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought" (10). Walser, in the once great journalistic tradition, sees himself as objective. He is foolish enough to believe that all facts and stories can be reported in such a way as not only to represent, but to access and to reproduce truth. He does not consider the possibility that language can be used to manufacture truth. Because he is unlike Fevvers who realises the subjectivity of reporting existence, Walser will be trapped into a belief in Fevvers by his own false philosophical objectivity.

Initially, it might seem that his role as journalist and therefore story-teller suggests that Walser is in control. Fevvers, as a trapeze artist and subject of

Walser's story, would seem to have less power because it is she who is being 'looked at'; it is she who is being created as subject of Walser's story. Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses the power relations of the spectacle in cinema and how the male gaze usually dictates the appearance and 'performance' of the screen heroine:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split into active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 33)

Although Mulvey's arguments are confined to her discussions of the screen, her conclusions about how women are constructed as passive erotic objects for both male actors and spectators has relevance to Nights at the Circus. Mulvey discusses the male gaze as one which is essentially limiting and destructive for women. But Fevvers specifically makes herself into the object of the gaze; she literally lives and makes her living by making herself into a spectacle. She knowingly enacts a fantasy--that she has wings suggests

that she could be a sort of angel--and paradoxically uses the construct of the male gaze as a source of her own power.

What becomes apparent as the novel unfolds is that Fevvers herself defines her own being through her creation of self as spectacle and through a careful and controlled telling of her own story. Appearance alone is not enough; part of Fevvers' power is also constituted through her control of the narrative. As Carol Siegel points out in her article, "Postmodern Women Novelists Review Victorian Male Masochism," "the text denies [Walser] the power of the pen" (13). This becomes more and more obvious as the tale progresses; Walser feels his own weakness when confronted with the superior story-telling skills of both Fevvers and Lizzie:

He continued to take notes in a mechanical fashion but, as the women unfolded the convolutions of their joint stories together, he felt more and more like a kitten tangling up like a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place. (40)

The story-telling itself is Fevvers' greatest source of power. It is even partially responsible for her extraordinarily large appearance, for when she finishes speaking, "She even seemed to have diminished in size, to have shrunk to proportions only little more colossal than human" (87). In essence, she creates herself as 'object' and



she maintains her status through a reliance upon others' outmoded beliefs--people like Walser who cling to the limited philosophy that seeing is believing. But this is accomplished while paradoxically maintaining part of her power through her appearance.

Carter, in Nights at the Circus, undermines the notion that enormity can make women unattractive sexually. In fact, she relies on the idea that some men can feel threatened by large powerful women and makes this the basis for the somewhat masochistic sexual attraction that Walser feels toward Fevvers. At first, Carter sets Walser up to seem invincible and unflappable, for "like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver, Walser did not know how to be afraid" (10). Fevvers will, of course, change all this. Initially when he interviews her, he feels a bit overwhelmed by her size. It is not just her height and bulk which move him, but the largeness of her mannerisms and behaviour, her loud belches, farts, and so on. She is obviously in complete control of the situation; she does not act in a demure manner, and the combination of actions and gestures aids in his construction of her as gigantic and even masculine. At this point, he questions her difference from his standard norm for women:

Her face, in its Brobdignagian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for

fairgrounds or figureheads for ships. It flickered through his mind: Is she really a man? (35)

Not only does Walser blur the distinction between human and kitsch artifact, he actually questions her gender. In an ironic reversal, he thinks that perhaps she is less different than him--the antithesis of female--perhaps she is a male. The comparison to a Brobdignag suggests that Walser identifies with Gulliver; like Gulliver, he feels powerless and insignificant in the face of such incredible size. His reflex is to 'reduce' her to some knowabl. thing--a man, like himself.

Carter intimates that this unease is an unusual feeling for Walser because he prides himself on being a strapping young American from California, a war-correspondent, and most importantly, a member of the press. He has been endowed with all the requisite manly characteristics and as supposed creator (or at least teller) of the Fevvers story, he should feel a great deal of power. Yet, he does not. Instead, while conducting the interview, he feels threatened: "Alone with the marvellous giantess, Walser saw the undercurrent of suspicion towards himself she had partially concealed during the interview now come to the surface. Her geniality evaporated; she squinted at him beneath her thick pale lashes with almost hostility, seemed ill-at-ease, reached out to toy with her bunch of violets in a bored fashion" (42). The third-person narrator makes these observations

from Walser's point of view; and yet, there is little in the content to support Walser's interpretation that Fevvers feels any real hostility towards him. She may indeed be bored or disinterested, but he reads this in terms of submerged animosity and constructs her as monstrous. She is that which makes him shiver--initially out of fear, and later from love or at least, passion.

The second time that Walser is left alone with Fevvers, the narrator makes clear that Walser finds her size and her potential physical threat titillating:

Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she interled to fill up...all the room with her bulk. As she raised her arms, Walser, confronted by stubbled, thickly powdered armpits, felt faint; God! she could easily crush him to death in her huge arms, although he was a big man with the strength of the California sunshine distilled in his limbs. A seismic erotic disturbance convulsed him...He scrambled to his feet, suddenly panicking, scattering underwear, grazing his scalp painfully on the mantelpiece. "Ouch--excuse me, ma'am; the call of

nature--" (57)

Walser's desire further reduces him because it makes him appear incapable not only of dealing with Fevvers, but of confronting his own sexuality. Again, she has constructed herself as an object for his admiring gaze, and yet, it is he who is rendered passive and helpless while she remains in the position of command. His reaction to her "gaping maw" and powdered armpits embarrasses him and it is obvious that despite the distillation of California sunshine, he is not the person in control even of his own physiological reactions.

Fevvers, to some extent, plays upon Walser's reactions. What is masculine about her, though, is her bulk, not her body hair. But what is even more masculine (as fairy tales tend to define and use the term) is the power she so obviously possesses. Near the end of the novel, Walser has lost his memory and is living among the natives on the frozen tundra of Russia. While Lizzie and Fevvers are also lost, Fevvers is the one who acts, who brings about the rescue. Lizzie points out to her that she is playing into a fairy tale construct:

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. That's the custom. And I don't doubt that custom will apply to the trapeze artiste who

rescues the clown. The name of this custom is a  
 "happy ending." (Nights 281)

While Fevvers is initially displeased with the possibility of marriage, she perks up and replies to her adoptive mother,

'Oh, but Liz--think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well--I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century--' (281)

While Fevvers' ideas are, as Lizzie will mention, a bit idealistic, the fact remains that it is Fevvers who is in control of her and Walser's destiny--both individually and as a couple. It is she who assumes the role of hero as Vladimir Propp in The Morphology of the Folk Tale defines it: she is the agent of action who brings about the resolution (Propp 54).

The story concludes, however, not with a formal marriage, but with a frolicsome coupling in which Fevvers assumes the symbolically powerful position of "woman on top"

(Nights 292). Carol Siegel argues that "the figure of the male masochist is a model of transgression" (2) because in a patriarchal society, men are not supposed to enjoy being dominated by a woman; to do so is to align one's (masculine) self with the feminine. This is precisely what Fevvers requires: she wants a different sort of relationship free (or as free as possible) from society's coercive assignment of gender roles. She wants, as Siegel suggests, Walser to be the "New Woman's Knight and his own saviour in the battle against patriarchy" (10).

It is Fevvers' final big joke, and the pervasive laughter that it engenders first in her, and then in the rest of the world, which forms the novel's closing scene. She finds it incredibly humorous that Walser believed her to be "the only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world" (294). With this, the "spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to 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" (295). This scene raises the notion of carnivalesque laughter that Mikhail Bakhtin outlines in Rabelais and His World. His theories about the medieval carnival are pertinent to this discussion and will be discussed again later in this chapter. What is relevant here, however, is his suggestion that through the inversions brought about during carnival, the world is revealed in its

ambiguously humorous aspect. According to Bakhtin, this laughter is,

first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. (11-12)

Thus Fevvers' joke is on everyone, herself included, and it is impossible to pin down a victor and a victim because the two roles are in constant flux. Beyond this, Carter is making the point that being male does not necessarily equate with being powerful; nor does being large, small, hairy, or clean-shaven necessarily dictate one's gender or sexual orientation.

Although the exact nature of Walser's attraction to Fevvers is not made explicit, Carter suggests that the attraction lies in the physical power he thinks Fevvers has over him--and she maintains this power to the end. Thus, the role of strong person is undergoing an ironic reversal because in the traditional fairy tale (as in many romance

novels), the tiny, frail woman is literally overpowered and carried off by the powerful hero. But in Nights at the Circus, most of the men are small and weak. One minor character, Buffo the clown, is very large, but he loses his mind. And although another circus character, Samson, is physically strong, he is extremely limited in intelligence. Once he comes to the realization that sheer brawn is not enough to build a life around, he spends the rest of the novel trying to be something more than just big and strong. He even plays with the literal and figurative notions of weight and strength when he says,

'All my life I have been strong and simple and--a coward, concealing the frailty of my spirit behind the strength of my body. I abused women and spoke ill of them, thinking myself superior to the entire sex on account of my muscle, although in reality I was too weak to bear the burden of any woman's love.' (276)

In Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, Dog-Woman, like Fevvers, is stronger and larger than any man, let alone any potential suitor. But unlike Fevvers, she does not appeal sexually to others because of her enormity; in fact, she thinks that being so large excludes her from both the emotional and physical act of love: "I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains" (Sexing 34). Although Dog-Woman,



in her literal manner of speaking is referring to herself as a mountain, in the metaphorical sense Winterson is also implying that love is a huge and difficult task--a heavy burden, as Samson pointed out--and few people possess the courage and strength it required to shoulder it. Love is scaling mountains. Again, a cliché is literalized and shown to be false: Dog-Woman is a mountain and she is unscalable; but she is not unlovable, certainly not so because of her size.

Part of Winterson's tactic for dealing with Dog-Woman's sexuality is humour. The reader is encouraged to laugh at her ignorance, at others' fear, and the incongruous events which transpire because of this combination. As a young girl, she falls in love for the first time, and following the example set by her society, she tries to make her appearance conform to what she perceives are society's notions of feminine. Like Alice in Wonderland, at this point, she wants to 'fit in'. Dog-Woman ties a ribbon in her hair, and she even "decide[s] that true love must be clean love and boil[s] [herself] a cake of soap" (35). But when she presents herself to her beloved, it seems that all her efforts are in vain. Despite her attempts, she does not conform to his conceptions of the acceptable female form. She cannot mask her monstrous being through her 'costume'. Her would-be lover is not fooled and he

graced me with all of his teeth at once and swore

that if only he could reach my mouth he would kiss me there and then. I swept him from his feet and said, 'Kiss me now,' and closed my eyes for delight. I kept them closed for some five minutes and then, opening them to see what had happened, I saw that he had fainted dead away....'What is it?' I cried. 'Is it love for me that affects you so?' 'No,' he said. 'It is terror.' (36)

Dog-Woman is unsurprised by his reaction. Her enormity precludes wearing conventionally feminine clothes, but moreover, being a giant in seventeenth-century England precludes being feminine at all.

Despite others' reactions to her appearance, she continues to follow what she considers to be the fashion dictates of the day. Ironically, it is important to her to be thought of as a "lady" and for the trial of the king, she wears her

best dress, the one with a wide skirt that would serve as a sail for some war-torn ship, and a bit of fancy lace at the neck, made by a blind woman who had intended it to be a shawl. I had given her some estimate of my dimensions, but she would not believe me and so, although I have nothing to go round my shoulders save a few dozen blankets sewn together, I do have a fine-worked collar...and despite my handicaps I cut something of a fine

figure, I thought. (65)

It is the disjunction between Dog-Woman's self-perceptions and others' reactions to her that both creates the humour and points out the more serious undertones of the work. She is obviously aware of her enormity; and yet, for her, this fact should not bar her from participating in society as a woman. Partly this is because Dog-Woman does not accept size as a fact; she plays with the concept of both size and weight to point out that their 'factuality' is a matter of perception: "In the dark and in the water I weigh nothing at all" (40). Her body's place in society is what makes her seem large; she is a giant in comparison to the norm of others. But these attitudes do not exist independent of human thought or the human eye; they are social constructs created to exclude those who threaten the status quo, and Dog-Woman has this potential. As Rosemary Jackson in Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion points out,

In a culture which equates the 'real' with the 'visible,' and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that which is invisible. (45)

Jackson continues to explain that those things which are not seen or threaten to be un-seeable have a subversive element because "Knowledge, comprehension, reason, are established through the power of the look..." (45). In Sexing the Cherry, as in most novels by Winterson, Carter, and Diski,

those characters who do not see and judge with senses other than their eyes miss much truth.

One example of this is Dog-Woman's memories of her childhood. Despite having produced such a huge offspring, her parents, she explains to the reader, were of ordinary size. Winterson is challenging the reader's understanding and acceptance of the laws of physics, for mass and gravity as most readers understand them simply do not apply to these childhood memories. Dog-Woman tells how when she was a girl, her father swung her onto his knees to tell her a story, and she broke them. But her mother, "who lived only a while and was so light that she dared not go out in a wind, could swing me on her back and carry me for miles. There was talk of witchcraft, but what is stronger than love?" (25) The very language that Dog-Woman employs plays with the reader's sense of difference between the abstract meaning of the word 'strength' and the concrete one. At first, she is speaking about physical strength--seeable, demonstrable, and therefore provable. But then, she switches to the unseeable--and therefore unprovable, perhaps unbelievable--strength of love.

Like numerous classic fairy tales, this blurring of the distinction between meanings asks the reader to question his or her beliefs and suggests the existence of realities beyond what one can see. Thus, the point that Winterson is making is not entirely new: love has the power, the

strength, to create other realities. Because Dog-Woman's mother loves her, she can perform seemingly super-human acts and make them appear commonplace. It is suggested that since she breaks her father's knees, he does not have the strength one needs to see past her incredible size. The power love holds, then, is one of transformation: it can change circumstances and create new appearances--even new realities. It is love which endows Dog-Woman's mother with the ability to carry her seemingly giant daughter for miles. Even in Carter's Nights at the Circus, it is partly love which transforms Fevvers' mousy brown hair to blond and changes Walser from a being who lives life in the third person, to one who actually feels and experiences the world (Nights 294). This conclusion is, as Fevvers says, "the ultimate confidence trick" (294) which the novel plays on both the characters and the reader, because in Nights at the Circus, the heroine's entire character is based upon the notion that eyes do not lie and love is an intangible thing.

A great deal of Fevvers' attractiveness to her fans is the gap she creates between fact and fiction, between reality as most of the characters agree it is and a quite different reality which she not only invents, but whose existence she proves through her provision of seeable evidence, through her creation of herself as something to be looked at. But even then, she plays with the concept of vision and the characters' abilities to believe their own

eyes, for her flying (and thus her self-definition as woman with bird-like appendages), as Walser notes, is more plausible because of what it does not show:

the girl went no further than any other trapeze artiste. She neither attempted nor achieved anything a wingless biped could not have performed, although she did it in a different way...he was astonished to discover that it was the limitations of her act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable--that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief. For in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman...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. (17)

If Fevvers is a real miracle, she is one of her own making, and her magic stems from her power to create herself visually for other characters in the novel. In such a universe, then, God is supplanted by the human eye; it is the power of sight which becomes ultimate judge of what is and is not. Fevvers herself embodies the paradox of belief; the characters in the novel cannot *not* believe she is what she purports to be because she offers ocular proof. In essence, Fevvers embodies a rewrite of the Cartesian credo: they see her, therefore she is.

In Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, the reader is warned in the frontispiece of the book that his or her notions and definitions of reality are about to be questioned:

Matter, that thing most solid and well-known which you are holding in your hands and which makes up your body, is now known to be mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light. What does this say about the reality of the world? (8)

The novel answers this rhetorical question and the point is underlined by Dog-Woman herself. In terms of a definition, if matter is only empty space and points of light, then matter is really nothing. So how is it possible to judge size, or exclude people from society, based on nothing? Winterson and Carter point out that this is precisely what occurs. Their novels offer larger-than-life heroines to challenge concepts which have grown much larger than the societies which have created them. Through these texts, it becomes apparent that most of the characters have ceased to consider the manner in which boundaries, divisions, and classifications are created and maintained. In order to defamiliarize conditioned responses and create female characters in positions of power, Winterson and Carter use this notion of being looked at--which as Laura Mulvey suggests usually implies objectification and lack of power--as a source of power and control for the women themselves. These authors have created a spectacle by creating Dog-

Woman, Mother, and Fevvers as giants. Yet this spectacle is a paradox: on the one hand, it creates a female character at the centre of the text's attention, in the centre of the other characters' views; but it also separates these heroines from the society of which they are a part and casts them in the role of the abject. Because Dog-Woman, Fevvers, and Mother exist in this shifting, shaded area, they offer the potential threat of change and metamorphosis. But their size, the fact that they cannot be missed or dismissed, demands a response from other characters within these stories.

Because these characters occupy the paradoxical position of being both ex-centric and at the centre of their tales, they urge an awareness of the culturally and socially created boundaries of their respective milieu. As Rosemary Jackson points out, such a paradoxical position is a central part of fantasy; the situation is oxymoronic, and for a brief moment, these characters open up illegality and disorder, can say the unsayable and do the impossible. Moreover, their representation as giants makes them kin to the race of the cyclops whose eye is "an affront to symmetry and the 'correct view'" (Stewart 73). In all of these novels, the issue of vision is central and ambiguous. The ability of others to 'see' Fevvers allows her to construct herself as object of the gaze and then to use the power of the look to gain control over those who usually remain in



control: the male characters. Sight, in this sense, can be constructive.

However, it can also be imposed as a measure of control and means of limitation. In the third section of Nights at the Circus entitled "Siberia," Carter details a women's prison run by a Countess, herself a murderess, specifically for other murderesses. The building is a panopticon and the prisoners can see no one except the Countess who sits endlessly watching them. One of the prisoners, Olga, feels that to be subjected to this constant gaze is the worst punishment imaginable; indeed, it is the Countess' gaze which holds all of the women prisoner. Finally, Olga succeeds in making eye contact with one of the other women who delivers her food. This encounter begins a series of encounters between Olga and Vera, then between many of the other prisoners. When they are released for morning exercise, the women "all turned towards the Countess in one great, united look of accusation" (218). Their withering gaze reduces her to a chattering idiot and through the power of the look, the women succeed in liberating themselves. This section of the novel has relevance for Fevvers, too. For although the gaze can be positive and allows her access to power, Fevvers' love of being adored nearly costs her her life. When the Grand Duke wants to collect and keep her as one of his eccentric and unique artifacts, she is tempted into his house specifically because he promises her a

diamond necklace, but also, she is flattered by his wanting to look at her.

Although neither Daphne from Jenny Diski's Happily Ever After nor the twins, Dora and Nora, from Carter's Wise Children are giants, they too, are "an affront to symmetry and the correct view'" (Stewart 73), for Daphne, Dora, and Nora challenge the pervasive social notion embodied in the classic fairy tale that old women are not sexually attractive or sexually active. As Propp points out in Morphology of the Folk Tale, old women tend to be confined to the role of hag, witch, or at best, fairy god-mother (59). They are never the heroines of the story, much less the heroes. They simply act as magical agents--either fortuitous or otherwise--but their place in the story is a marginal one because they affect others' lives; their own stories are never central. Because both Daphne and Dora are the authors of their own stories, they have the narrative power to displace their younger princess rivals--Grace and Tiffany--and centre the narratives on their own experiences, desires and thoughts.

Diski's novel makes its fairy tale associations clear even before the book begins with a title that alludes to the formulaic fairy tale ending: happily ever after. The plot centres on Daphne, a sixty-eight year old novelist, living in the attic of an old house in London, England. She is in love with Liam, a man of about forty, once a Professor of

Anthropology at Oxford, now a drunk drowning himself in alcohol and sexual fantasies about his young wife, Grace. Grace, however, has really no interest in Liam, who left his wife and two children to pursue her, his student. She now finds him pathetic and uninteresting and spends her time having affairs. On the ground floor of the house lives Sylvie, a woman who has never really had a home of her own, and her young daughter, Divya, who has lived in foster care most of her young life. Sylvie cannot keep a job or even manage to get up in the morning and consequently, she cannot really be a mother to Divya. The story is about all of these characters, but it centres on Daphne's determination, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, to win Liam's love. As the book opens, he says he hates her and the reader is told that he "had come to believe that she was the devil, or his most trusted emissary, sent especially to taunt him" (9). He even goes so far as to say she was "undoubtedly a witch, a harpy, a filth-minded old baggage with a foul mouth..." (27). Her appearance does, in fact, resemble the fairy tale witch--she insists on wearing the requisite witch's hat, "made of the blackest velvet, with a soft brim that flopped...down over the brow. It was not unlike a hat her mother had worn, but Daphne's had a rather high crown..." (20). She has long, grey, stringy hair, and of course, she is old. Her body, her appearance, and the eye-witness reports of Liam suggest to the reader that Daphne

resembles a witch. With this image come the associations of evil, magic, and abjection. For as Susan Stewart points out in On Longing, witches are both a part of and apart from society (101). They hold a certain amount of power because others fear them and their magic. But they are constantly pushed out of society because they are different. Also contributing to Daphne's position in the novel is the manner in which Daphne defines herself: first and foremost as a novelist, and this role also places her in an abject space as both a part of society, but also outside it, commenting upon it.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the act of writing is empowering because it allows for a kind of self creation and inverts the usual subject/object relationship. Aleid Fokkema, in Postmodern Characters: A Study of Characterization in British and American Postmodern Fiction, posits that speech and writing are traditionally masculine actions and are "linked to a position of power" (171). Daphne's magical power, though, resides only partly in her ability to use words and language, for language itself is presented in an ambiguous fashion in Happily Ever After: it can create reality or it can hinder participation in reality through distracting characters from the physical. In part, Diski is embracing the poststructuralist view that the subject is constituted in language; however, like Nights at the Circus, Happily Ever After also offers a powerful

defense of the body and the individual self through its concentration on things corporeal. The novel does explore the boundaries between real and fantasy, between margin and centre, but its theme remains focused on the body as Diski explores facts and fictions surrounding concepts like age, appearance, sex, sex appeal, and so on.

Initially, Liam and Daphne are polarized in their representations of language and the body: Liam's existence, despite his belief to the contrary, is language based; Daphne's, on the other hand, is mostly physical. Liam at first thinks that he is now living a life wholly focused on the physical. He left his wife and children for "Grace's Breasts"; he spends most of his time as a slave to alcohol; and he is totally obsessed with sex. But in fact, Liam is living a life of fantasies and images, a life built inside his own head created and held together by language. He is, as Daphne will show him, living an unbalanced life which concentrates too heavily on the ability of language to create realities and negates the importance of the corporeal body. But this is not to say that language cannot create realities, because this is precisely the paradoxical notion that Diski presents to her readers: Daphne, as a young author, lived her life and then transcribed it in her novels; consequently, she was most unhappy. Now, however, Daphne says she will write a happy life, and then live it. So in this instance, Daphne can and does create a reality

through language. The difference is one of measure and balance because despite the fact that the novel offers an off-centre view of the aging body, it also suggests that its characters need both language and physicality to lead a happy, healthy life.

Daphne at sixty-eight years of age does not ignore the realities of her sexual desires; at one point, she thinks to herself how the twenty-first century will have to "unthink" the twentieth, and say "good-bye it-goes-without-saying no fucking for the over sixties" (24). But nor does Daphne ignore the potential magic of language to bring about change, for she says that "comfort was so easy if you called things by the right word..." (57). Liam finally will come to an awareness of the potential dangers of language; he says to himself near the end of the story that "How one spoke about things mattered, because however clear minded you might be, language put images into your head and there was no getting away from them, once there" (184). Liam, then, develops throughout the novel. Using the traditional fairytale theme of metamorphosis, Happily Ever After is about his change from a man who was overly reliant on thoughts, language, and things mental, to one who revels not just in daydreams about sex, but in the physical experience itself and in bodily functions in general. But while he enjoys the body, he does so with an awareness of the realities language can create. Similarly, the novel chronicles Daphne's

metamorphosis from a woman who does not have control of her life to one who not only controls her existence, but positively affects the lives of those around her.

Part of Liam's initial obstacle to a more balanced and happier way of life is that he, like so many characters in these novels, forms judgements based solely upon the eye--upon appearance. He falls in love with Grace not because of who she is, but because of what her breasts look like--they are round, firm, and definitely youthful. She conforms to Kristeva's notion of what society considers to be the acceptable female form. Daphne's appearance, on the other hand, initially repulses him because she is wrinkled, sagging, and obviously old. Her body signifies the boundary between youth and age, and implicitly between life and death. Because these boundaries are sacrosanct to Liam, he perceives Daphne as a monster whose body serves to remind him of the fragility of his connection to the symbolic. While Diski is not trying to suggest that ageing is not a fact, she is suggesting that the manner in which Liam thinks about aging is completely tied to sight and to social conditioning. Liam is afraid of death, and so the aging process, as it is represented in Daphne's aging body, frightens him. It is because she *appears* old that he is revolted. But when he accepts his own mortality, and his own "cosmic helplessness" (183), he can get past the obstacle of appearance; he no longer craves the image of youthful beauty

that his society has created. Then, he is willing to abandon the hollow image of Grace, whom he refers to as his "pale princess" (32) because she, like the fairy tale character this diminutive refers to, is static and nonexistent--she "lives" only in language. In fact, early in the novel as he looks at her, he wonders briefly if she is as lovely as he thought:

But then his extra-concentrated stare had brought her loveliness back, making him double up with the pain of wanting her. It was only his imagination, he thought, but based on something; fed by a look in her eyes... (32-3)

In contrast to the ephemeral image of the princess, the novel insists that witches do exist, but Diski's presentation of Daphne urges the reader to redefine the concept of what comprises such a being. After Daphne has seduced Liam, the narrator tells the reader that

Liam was perfectly well aware that Daphne was a witch and that he had been put under a spell. However, he had been under spells before, and he couldn't see what he had to lose. (183)

What is implied here is that love is the ultimate magic spell that can transform the manner in which characters look at each other and at reality.

This is the same conclusion that Dora comes to in Carter's Wise Children. The novel chronicles the lives of a



set of identical twins, Dora and Nora, who are now somewhere between the age of seventy and seventy five (the book contradicts itself on this point). Born on the wrong side of the blanket and living on the wrong side of the river, "the left hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the *bastard* side of Old Father Thames" (1), their heritage places them in an ex-centric position. From their off-centre perspective, they challenge ideas about fathering, mothering, and things familial in general. The novel focuses upon the body itself as the site of conflicting, contradictory ideas about age, sexual drive, and appearance in general. The story is narrated by Dora and comprises mostly the sexual adventures of her entire family. That Dora, at her advanced age, should choose to concentrate upon this aspect of her life and the lives of those around her is an open challenge to the fairy tale presentation of sex for older women: in traditional fairy tales, older women do not even think about sex, much less write about it or worse, have it. As Karen Rowe points out in "Feminism and Fairy Tales," traditional stories like "Snow White" usually "recreate the fears of a menopausal mother" (349), and the conflict that ensues is usually the result of an unacknowledged sexual jealousy on the part of the older woman towards her daughter's or step-daughter's blooming sexuality. As Rowe suggests, "Recurrent narrative features make clear this generational conflict, as the stepmothers

habitually devise stratagems to retard the heroine's progress" (350).

But Carter inverts traditional fairy tale roles making age displace youth as the focus of the novel. Although Dora and Nora have a step-mother in the figure of Grandma, there is no suppressed sexual competition between her and the twins. This despite the fact that Grandma is a confirmed nudist who often drinks and jokes with Perry, the paternal uncle of Dora and Nora, about whom Dora has had lustful thoughts. The confusing nature of who is attracted to whom and who is sleeping with whom serves to highlight the accepting nature of the characters in the novel towards themselves, their ages, and their sexuality. At the end of the novel, Dora has sex with Perry on his hundredth birthday. He asks her how long it has been. Then, she remembers, the girl she was in the past is

reflected in those bracken-coloured eyes of his. I was a lanky girl with a green bow in her mouse-brown hair, blinking away the first, worst disappointment of her life in the sun on Brighton Prom. When I was just thirteen years old, Perry! You dirty beast! (221)

Carter tries neither to offend the reader's sensibilities nor to proffer a moral judgement upon Perry for having sex with a girl so young. Her main point in this instance is that sexuality is always present, regardless of age. In

fairy tales, the rules which govern when characters may experience sex are strictly enforced: after marriage, but before old age.

Beyond this, however, Carter, like Diski, suggests that age is a concept that people create. As Dora suggests, characters tend to see each other not as they 'really' are, but as they are reflected in each others' eyes (221). In some senses, because the characters in Wise Children seem to live forever and are not always in agreement about their chronological ages, Carter is challenging the idea that age is a factual, provable, indisputable reality. Like Liam and Daphne in Happily Ever After, and Dog-Woman in Sexing the Cherry, Dora comes to believe that what has the real power to create realities, or at least to change how one sees reality, is love. As Dora meets her beloved Uncle Perry for the first time in about twenty five years, he says, "'Floradora! You haven't changed one bit!'" (208). She does not look at herself the same way and she explains that

I was about to say him nay, draw his attention to the crow's feet, the grey hairs and turkey wobblers but I saw by the look in his eye that he meant what he said, that he really, truly loved us and so he saw no difference; he saw the girls we always would be under the scrawny, wizened carapace that time had forced on us for, although promiscuous, he was also faithful, and, where he

loved, he never altered, nor saw any alteration. And then I wondered, was I built the same way, too? And was his fleshy envelope, perhaps, in reality in much the same sorry shape as those of his nieces outside the magic circle of my desire? (208)

I have been arguing that part of what makes the heroines of these novels so heroic is their ability to see beyond the "fleshy envelope" of humanity. When characters do not wholly rely on vision to form opinions and judgments about shifting concepts like truth and reality, they transcend the boundaries that limit their lives and thought patterns. But paradoxically, it is precisely because these heroines remain so firmly a part of their "fleshy envelopes" that they become even more heroic. In other words *og-Woman*, *Fevvers*, *Daphne*, and *Dora* move to a kind of alternative utopian vision because of their connection to the body and physicality itself. In *Sexing the Cherry*, *Nights at the Circus*, *Happily Ever After* and *Wise Children*, the heroines embrace a bawdy, raucous, 'down-to-earth' sensibility that connects them to another tradition: the medieval carnival.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, outlines how folk culture tended to see duality in every form or image. In this way, forms were active, ever-changing, evolving and never static. For every object, there was its

opposite; so for every hero, there was an anti-hero. During the carnival period, the folk would create parodies to make fun of the ruling bureaucracy--clowns, fools, and even giants would take part in farcical civil and social ceremonies (5). The tradition temporarily inverted hierarchy, removed boundaries between age, class, and social position, and created a timeless time when people observed no laws but those of carnival. Their motive was to reassert the comic aspect of life, to see humanity in its universal and drollest form so it could be renewed, restored, and invigorated (11). Part of the carnival spirit embraced the body and bodily functions. As in the novels of Carter, Diski, and Winterson, there were numerous images of the human body with food and drink, sometimes defecating and often having sex. Bakhtin's point is that for this medieval culture,

the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistical form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people....the body and the bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character....a people who are continually growing and renewed. (19)

Carnival offered people the possibility of a "second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin 6). This

creation of an alternative world is congruent to the narrative strategies of Carter, Diski, and Winterson whose texts attempt to counter traditional fairy tale images, motifs, and underlying ideologies. By offering readers monstrous heroines, characters who are earthy, sexual, old, enormous, and in charge of not only their own fate, but that of others, they are creating a different realm where "Once upon a time" suggests a space not limited or defined by outdated stereotypes.

### Conclusion

...And They All Lived Happily Ever After

This thesis began from the premise that in numerous novels by Carter, Diski, and Winterson, woman appears as some sort of monster, and that this representation is largely borrowed from well-known folk and fairy tales. In these new stories, heroines are not constituted as sleeping beauties or princesses metamorphosed from scullery maids; rather, they are powerful beings in control of their own lives, destinies, and most importantly, their own stories, because they acknowledge their narrative connection to the monstrous-feminine. These postmodern heroines do not live their lives in glass coffins awaiting rescue. Instead, they look for inspiration to the witch, the primeval mother, the giant, or the half human, half animal creature.

In the classic fairy tales, these latter images often served as a source of fear for and potential threat to the heroes, heroines, and the status quo in general. In the postmodern tales, the giant or the witch still invokes fear, but the threat she embodies is directed not against the heroine, but against all those who oppose her. In some instances, the heroine herself is the monster, or to put it more accurately, the monster is the heroine. In the older tales, the princess almost always overcame the so-called evil characters because of her innate beauty, goodness,

civility, and passivity. Carter, Diski, and Winterson, however, delimit the notions of success, happiness, and heroism by constituting their heroines in terms of what has previously been considered anti-heroic. Thus characters like Dog-Woman, Fevvers, Daphne, Dora and Nora can be gigantic but lovable, have wings but still be human, or be elderly but be able to both incite lust and enjoy passion.

These texts take sexuality--an unstated subtext of the classic tales--and make it an explicit and central aspect of their thematic explorations. For as the examples from individual texts have shown, when woman is depicted as monstrous, it is almost always in relation to her mothering, reproductive, or sexual functions. Through her sexuality, woman is constituted as the abject, a that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). I have argued that such representation suggests her purpose in these novels is to initiate an encounter between the symbolic order and all that threatens its stability.

But while these challenges to authority are briefly successful in these novels, they are neither sustained nor unqualified. In Sexing the Cherry, for example, Dog-Woman succeeds, through her enormous strength and stature, to reveal the sexism and hypocrisy of Preacher Scroggs and many of the other Roundheads. Her gigantism helps to make her a hero, and makes those around her appear very small indeed.



However, her triumph over these men and what they stand for is a personal, not a universal one, for the environmentalist must still do battle against these same enemies in different incarnations in the twentieth century. And beyond this observation is another question. Can the reader still see Dog-Woman as a feminist hero when she espouses ideas which blatantly contradict contemporary notions of equality? Dog-Woman, for example, firmly believes in the Divine Right of Kings and that a lady can be defined as a lady by what she wears. So does the fact that Dog-Woman embraces a dated credo which runs counter to the novel's overall implications undermine her status as a new hero? Or does it simply suggest that everyone operates within a specific cultural and historical circumstance, and the reader ought not to disregard a character's larger actions and significance because he or she also upholds some socially- or time-specific ideas which are biased and limiting?

These questions themselves arise in part because of the political nature of both the classic and the postmodern texts. Initially, I was tempted to see only the older tales as moralizing and didactic. Because both their content and format usually lead to a single and implicitly universal moral or conclusion, I considered these stories to be overly pedantic. However, after further consideration, I began to wonder what the difference is between fairy tales as instruction and these postmodern novels as instruction.

After all, Carter, Diski, and Winterson, like the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, have a political agenda which lies behind their story-telling. While the postmodern method emphasizes the process of the apprehension of knowledge at least as much as it emphasizes the knowledge itself, there are still some obvious messages emerging from these texts. These three authors share a concern about the socializing process, and about the sorts of stories and myths which have influenced and continue to shape western society's thoughts and actions.

To say that their novels suggest that fairy tales are the origin of all such evil would be a gross misrepresentation. But their appropriation of the classical motifs does imply that Carter, Diski, and Winterson still see these images as potential sources of power. And this leads to another unresolved issue; why did these authors choose the particular fairy tales they did? Stories like "Red Riding Hood," "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" and "Rumpelstiltskin" are certainly widely read, but they are not the only available options. Carter, in The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book, collected a number of lesser-known traditional stories, most of which reflect brave, independent, articulate heroines who succeed not through passivity, but through thought and action. So why would Carter, Diski, and Winterson choose to borrow from tales which are overtly sexist and misogynistic?

Part of the appeal is obviously because these tales are so well-known and postmodernism relies on a reader's familiarity with previous traditions, genre, and even content in order to parody, subvert, or challenge these tenets. But there is also the possibility that these authors saw something strong and resilient in these fairy tales, perhaps a quality which has made these ancient stories both so well known and so long-lived. We do not know if any of these postmodern novels will ever enjoy either the popularity or longevity of stories such as "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" or "Bluebeard," but by appropriating various motifs from the classic tales, perhaps these contemporary authors also hope to borrow some of the mass appeal and influence of these earlier stories for their own works. This literary process is akin to the botanical one alluded to by Jordan in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry. He writes of creating a new, superior type of cherry tree from two individual, but compatible strains, each with specific strengths and weaknesses. His explanation of this experimental practice hints at the possibility of a similar narrative intention:

Grafting is the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent....the cherry

grew and we have sexed it and it is female. (78-9)

This scientific practice is very much a part of the postmodern literary method. By borrowing monsters from classical fairy tales and grafting them onto postmodern fantasies, Carter, Diski and Winterson urge readers toward a re-vision of both old and new.

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