



## **ANGELA CARTER AS A DRAMATIST: A FEMINIST APPROACH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper deals with Angela Carter as a moral pornographer - an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual license for all the genders, as she defined the term in *The Sadeian Woman*. The study analytically addresses Carter's dramatic works, rare as they are, from a feminist approach. Carter's amassed concern with postmodern feminism projects itself in the trajectory of her grotesque corpus, which mostly revises, reproduces and replicates other some of the classics that have looked at women from a somewhat different perspective in order to elucidate how the extant postmodernist discourse ignores or garbles consideration of the feminine within its globally increasing masculine sexuality and desire. The study shows that Carter retrieves the oft-neglected reconstructive features of postmodernism that unfold themselves in an integrated fashion, which bids the end of victim feminism due to ongoing changes in women's lives and developments in female psychology so as feminists may not content that aggression, violence, domination or sexual exploitation of females cannot be restricted to male motives only. Per se, Carter's dramatic works seek to reclaim a reconstructive aspect of postmodernism that defies the biases of modern feminism, thus reconstructing the imaginary revisioning of the world and finally depicting modern females as victimized yet emancipated women, as is critically evaluated in this article.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Angela Olive Carter-Pearce (née as Angela Stalker; b. 7<sup>th</sup> May 1940 – d. 16<sup>th</sup> February 1992) was a British writer, famed as a novelist, yet also known to have been a dramatist with a staunch feminist ideology, deeply piercing her soul. The description of her feminist attitude was given vent to in *Nothing Sacred* (1982) where she declared her feminist ideology, maintaining that she "learned what it is to be a woman and became radicalized." Since then, she wrote prolifically as a novelist and a short-story writer, an essayist, and a journalist, yet only negligibly as a picaresque feminist dramatist. As for her playwriting endeavors, she

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contributed to the radio two original dramas on *Richard Dadd* and *Ronald Firbank*. She was also busy writing adaptations of dramatic works published posthumously in a collection of dramatic writings known as *The Curious Room: Plays, Film Scripts and an Opera* (1996). She wrote the less read dramatic works known as *Come Unto These Yellow Sands: Four Radio Plays* (1985) and *The Holy Family Album* (1991), but these works were neglected though published with critiques in Charlotte Crofts' book, *Anagrams of Desire* (2003). Both her fiction and dramatic works palpably project the ongoing conflict between feminism and postmodernism as a part of the trajectory of the conflict between political and aesthetic practices subjectively dealt with in Angela Carter's works – an approach worthy of investigation in this study.

Carter was strongly influenced by the surrealist, Situationist cultural activism of the 1960s with an emphasis on the theater of the Absurd and sexual libertarianism, inducing her to weave and contrive the Western social and sexual values into a tapestry of picaresque feminist postmodernism. Roberts, describing her view, aptly observed that 'male desire dominated the popular imagination. Accordingly, female desire got squeezed, denied, warped and twisted.' As a matter of fact, Carter's feminist approach to writing simply works by depicting men in her fiction and drama as surgeons and lancets whereby they dissect women's minds and 'find a different way of playing with language and imagination' (Roberts 3). She unconsciously adopted this approach to eventually reveal men to themselves in the misogynistic world in which they lived, in an attempt to break the dominant patriarchy of men in this world (Aman et al., 2014).

This feminist approach propels Carter to be always concerned with the aesthetics of postmodernism and the politics of feminism, bringing women into the focus of critical inquiry that explores the feminine and the grotesque in her dramatic corpus. Her works, therefore, elucidate the postmodernist discourse in such a manner that they demonstrate how the feminine lurks behind a universal masculine sexuality that suppresses modern women. Therefore, Carter's feminist approach is one 'to be defined and enlarged as [an approach] that includes feminist writing practices and ways of knowing.' (Moss iii).

### **Carter's feminist approach**

Upon performing a close perusal of Carter's dramatic works along with her feminist fiction, the elements of her feminist approach can be identified in the influences of her feminist themes on the motifs of her works in which she critically exposes heterosexual union, narcissism, and submissive femininity. Carter challenges the reader's response to erotic violence in her characterization and her use of ironic plot reversals, refusing the polar categories of virtue and vice as abstractions of human sexuality and as ideological constructs



that palpably depict her feminist, postmodernist views. Thus, she invents the oxymoronic term of the “moral pornographer” in her book *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978) to describe an artist who employs pornographic stereotypes of dominance and submission to satirize gender relations.

Carter's notion of the moral pornographer ushered in a new perusal of feminism which has made the writer run the risk of becoming a perverted advocate of sexism by “uncritically accepting patriarchal thinking” (Clark 149) and “re-inscribing the essential practice of foregrounding sexuality as the acme of pleasure and the origin of authentic significance” (Alteverse 3).

With her book *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978) being a feminist re-appraisal of de Sade's anti-feminist approach, hers being one that refrains from considering women as merely biological breeding machines, her literary oeuvre is duly descriptive of her feminist and post-modern compatibility, reflective of her foundationalist thinking in the writer's picaresque voice and its iconoclasm both in her novels and drama (McCormack iii).

In her essay on the cultural criticism of the notoriously immoral work of the misogynist Marquis de Sade, Carter expressed her personal abhorrence for de Sade, and also her apposite disagreement with her contemporary feminist movement, which she clearly voiced in an interview with Katsavos:

*By the time I wrote The Sadeian Woman, I was getting really ratty with the whole idea of myth. I was getting quite ratty with the sort of appeals by some of the women's movements to have these sort of “Ur-religions” because it didn't seem to me at all to the point. The point seemed to be here and now, what we should do now. (Katsavos 13)*

By so doing, Carter does not indeed encourage or advocate violence against women, but she seeks to depict the pornographic scenario repeatedly in her works in order to induce or even compel her audience to identify the male brutality of men as sexual predators and to expose the underlying misogyny of the Western culture and its fascination with violence and the Sadeian inequality against women (Herman 1).

This approach contrives many of the essential features predominant in Carter's postmodern feminist revisionary works such as repetition and economic controls that govern one's actions, gendered roles and restrictions, and an experience of a double movement of repulsion and attraction within the same character.



### **Feminist Reifications in *The Bloody Chamber***

In her widely read anthology, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), Carter wrote screen scripts for stage and the radio grounded in myth and fairy tale on the surface, though deeply depicting the domestic everyday life with its murders and violence that sheds light on rebellious victims, especially of women in an oppressive and suppressive society.

Carter explicated that she was attracted to revisiting fairy tales in her dramas because this writing genre lacks in a sense of verisimilitude on purpose. She contends that a fairy tale's mythological sense of time typically in the introductory phrase of "once upon a time", provides a formulaic structure that induces the readers to ascertain to truths hidden in mythology without uncomfortably trying to validate these truths which can be paralleled to the reader's own life. In addition, the formulaic structure of fairy tales typically presents female forms of romance such as modern soap operas, which can be based on fantasy and wish fulfillment (Kristeva 81). The adaptation of fairy tales for drama in Carter's fiction and plays helps depict characters who are quintessentially rich or living in abject poverty, ones who experience excessive good fortune or come across bad luck, and ones who are witty or dumb, pretty or ugly. Carter could carve out of traditional fairy tales revisited in her drama soap operas which invent dramatic situations like family feuds, fatherly or husband-like oppression, violence or death apposite to the modern dramatic form. Carter could use the magical romance and domestic realism of the revisited tales to create soap operas that revolve around family dramas; Carter described it as heroic optimism.

In *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter explained why she resorted to world fairy tales not only to demonstrate that women have a lot in common, but to show the diversification of women's common predicament latent in their femininity.

In this vein, Carter reveals her attraction to witty heroines who can survive their predicaments by following their clear thinking and rejecting their passive subordination to males. Carter was clever in choosing titles of chapters in her *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* such as *Brave Bold and Willful*, *Clever Women, Resourceful Girls and Desperate Stratagems*, *Good Girls and Where it Gets Them* which depict female protagonists who center the stage no matter how witty or silly they are. Carter attempted "wish to validate [her] claim to a fair share of the future by staking [her] claim to [her] share of the past" (Carter, Introduction, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* xvi).

Originally a short fiction, *The Bloody Chamber* was later adapted to the theater and the radio as short plays in which the authoress revisits the tale of Bluebeard told by his fourth wife. Bluebeard was an ingénue pianist who made use of his wife's naiveté and her love for music.

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On their nuptial night at his castle, Bluebeard stands in line with his wife in front of a dozen mirrors while he disrobes her to nakedness, "a formal disrobing of the bride, a ritual from the brothel." At this moment, she is able to discern a kaleidoscopic picture of their reflections in the mirrors while she is naked and he is fully clad in his nuptial attire. She thinks:

*"The most pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring" (Carter, The Bloody Chamber 118-19).*

This scene captures Carter's feminist ideology. Actually, Carter sets up such scenes in order to manipulate their insinuations and the potential actions and consequences that these scenes can provoke in the audience. This scene from the theatre-adapted *The Bloody Chamber* suggests that "if a man is damaged or hurt a woman is released from the habitual sexual constraint forced upon her, she can take action, initiate contact, speak out, the power imbalance inherent in all heterosexual relationships, is leveled off" (Duncker 11). Carter herself contends that

*"As readers, we are asked to place ourselves imaginatively as masochistic victims in a pornographic scenario and to sympathize in some way with the ambivalent feelings this produces" (Carter, The Bloody Chamber, Introduction 151).*

Carter's plot in the *Bloody Chamber* describes the lot of many young women who get introduced to the world of adult sexuality while learning about the restrictions of marriage. She depicts the sense of loss and separation that modern women face when they leave their family home and move to their nuptial house. The heroine says,

*"And, in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" (The Bloody Chamber 7).*

Carter delineates her heroine as one who finally realizes that she is made of blood and flesh, and this latter is her most valuable commodity that she must not sell for free. To survive, she must make use of this commodity as she can see the carnal lust in her man's eyes:

*"I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never*



*acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it . . .*  
. “(The Bloody Chamber 11)

Carter further explains how the nuptial night in a honeymoon is like disrobing in a brothel where the young wife is treated in a whore-like fashion as a target of enjoyment:

*“He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke. . . . And when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops [nineteenth century Belgian graphic artist] . . . the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop.” (The Bloody Chamber 15)*

Indeed, these scenes induce in the reader ‘vicarious identification’ with the victims, paradoxically from the point of view of men ‘as male voyeurs’ in many of her fictions and drama scripts (Clark 159). As seen in these examples, Carter made use of “the intervention of the supernatural [that could have changed] the relations of women to men and above all. Of women to their own fertility.” (Carter, Introduction, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* xxii). By so doing, she could identify the laden inherited past that was both anathema and inimical to modern western females depicted

*“in a valedictory spirit, as a reminder of how wise, clever, perceptive, occasionally lyrical, eccentric, sometimes down-right crazy our great-grandmothers were, and their great grandmothers” (Carter, Introduction, xxii)*

For Carter's feminism, acknowledging of and working with the debauched or profane impulses of her characters is critical, for the denial of these instincts and impulses has all too often depicted women as victims who succumb to their indefensible positions. Repeatedly across her work, Carter reconnoiters the results of such potential weaknesses in women, what happens when the debauched and the profane is challenged, opposed and rejected or, perhaps, cosseted. The double movement of repulsion and attraction, of succumbing to whims of lust and the disparagement of lust is critical to Carter’s own postmodernism since she writes both within and against the tradition of Western literature. In this vein, the heroine of *The Bloody Chamber* dramatically says:



*"I forced myself to be seductive. I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him." (The Bloody Chamber 35)*

Women, in Carter's plays, reveal the most dramatic nature of flesh, depicted "as a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity." (Carter, Notes 71).

Carter built her dramatic works on fairy tales, canonical literature and historical icons which she recursively manipulated for her own developing motifs and leitmotifs that lie at the center of her works. In this vein, she writes from a kaleidoscopic perspective of Western cultural traditions," tending to regard all of Western Europe as a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles . . . bricolage. All the elements which are available are to do with the margin of the imaginative life ...", as she rightly writes in her own words. This perspective shows that the myths, as well as the tacit mores that lie in the Western traditions, form their social and cultural values that control their sexual relations despite the fact that these sexual relations exist at the periphery of the Western cultural consciousness in a symbiotic relationship between folk stories (orature) and literature. Carter further maintains that:

*"The imaginative life is conducted in response to all manner of stimuli - including the movies, advertising, all the magical things that the surrealists would see in any city street. [...] I have always used a wide number of references because of tending to regard all women of Europe as a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles [...] [This] . . . is in fact what gives reality to our own experience, and in which we measure our reality" (Interview with Haffenden, 1985, p.92).*

Carter perhaps feels free to express her suppressions and repressions in her books as if she unconsciously tried to liberate herself from the effigies and simulacra of the Western culture. Dimovitz explains Carter's tendency toward this expression mode as a 'temporal trajectory of psychological and social development' (Dimovitz 16) in which "Carter analyzes not only the patriarchal culture as a function of the history of that culture but also the patriarch as a function of the Freudian psycho-analytic stages" (Dimovitz 65). An excerpt from *The Sadeian Woman* stresses Carter's point emphatically when the authoress describes the relationship between Eugénie and her mother as a ...



*pornographised description of the antipathy between mothers and daughters which suggests that women, also, retain elements of the early erotic relation with the mother that has been more fully explored and documented in men. Indeed, Philosophy in the Boudoir in many ways precedes Freud's essay on femininity and should be seen in the same Western European context of competition and rivalry between women that devalues women as they act them out in the dramas of sexual life. (Carter, The Sadeian Woman123)*

This paradisiacal mother-daughter dyad can also be read as a 'pre-symbolic semiotic' that characterizes 'pre-verbal communication' which shows in its inner text 'a seed of resistance and renewal to the feminine' ideology in opposition to 'psychological reality' representations (Gruss135).

### **The Cartean Postmodern Feminism**

Writing, for Angela Carter, is a tool of postmodern feminism, which entails the contrivance of bits and pieces from extant literary texts on particular occasions to combine them in an unanticipated manner and create a variety of effects that amplify her reshaped feminist motifs in her oeuvre. The case being thus, Carter's feminist approach conscientiously uses stable motifs in drama to break them away from gendered constraints that reveal the impulsive complications of her characters in such a way that demonstrates the varied possibilities of actions unexpectedly predictable by just illustrating some core identity. Therefore, Carter's works are broadly and widely imagined in a way that brings into the mind of her audience/readership a shared consensus over the thesis and the antithesis.

Carter unabashedly redesigned the fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* with decorations of the erotic and the pornographic to show the power of female sexuality and desire, and to help readers comprehend that violence against women provides excitement and thrilling for her lays, yet emancipates females from the iron fist of men. By so doing, she shatters "the mirror that has so long reflected what every woman was supposed to be" (Gilbert and Gubar 76) By so writing, she purposefully serves the neo-modern feminist movement, writing in the service of women.

In this fashion, Carter derails from the traditional delineation of gendered female roles such as the victimized virgin, the immoral seductress or the passively submissive mother to one that beautifully shows congruity in contradictions such as beauty in violence or virtue in vice. For instance, in *The Bloody Chamber*, the heroine finds sensual pleasure in her virginal role and its exploitation *en route* toward self-consciousness and self-responsibility. Carter's use of



language in the drama makes both her construction and its breaking into things of violence and beauty; her self-aware protagonist indulges in her virginal beauty and “sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away” (115). In this connived manner, Carter strives to misperceive the authority of the original texts that represent the innocent as beautiful and the corrupt as vile while she discloses the inexorable intricacy of women's representations.

In her fiction and plays, Carter shows that women's cunning, trickery and ribaldry gets [sic] the better of men, and overturns [sic] both worldly and magical authority” (Uglow 22). Her plays are made with her favored themes of erotic violence latent in the feral nature of women. Warner, therefore, observes that Carter's drama “turns topsy-turvy some cautionary folk tales and shakes out the fear and dislike of women [that the tales] once expressed [in order] to create a new set of values, about strong, outspoken, zestful, sexual women who can't be kept down” (Warner x).

Carter's writing reconstructs the collective consciousness and understanding of genderism and its resultant social and sexual roles in the Western society by revisiting the cultural memes and its representations in the imagination of her readers/audience. Thus, the traditional constraints of gender roles earlier depicted by her feminist predecessors cannot be studied as such in her criticism, drama, cinema or radio works. Carter liberated herself and her writing. In her heyday in the 1960 and 1970, she traveled and led a rakish life without sacrificing her social life to enforced pregnancy, and so she wrote untethered by the conventions of professional life. She describes her development into this psyche adeptly in this citation:

*“primarily through my sexual and emotional life . . . I was radicalized . . . I found myself, as I grew older, increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice”* (‘Notes’ 39).

In this vein, Roberts adeptly described Carter's use of sex as a dominant motif in her texts as follows:

*“Since Carter didn't hide her sex, her gender, but used it as a springboard for her writing, I think she was seen as a kind of literary monster. Eventually, a space was made for her; her greatness was recognized.”* (Roberts 11)



Rosemary White also described Carter's abiding concern with gender, sexuality, and identity as what made critics recognize her status as that of a star writer. Therefore, Ron Luckhurst claims that Carter could carve out

*“an important, but resolutely marginalized presence on the British literary scene, her work shunted off into the area of programmatic feminist texts, with *Daughters of the House* somewhat patronizingly described as a breakthrough [text]” (Luckhurst 243).*

Carter could recognize at an early age of her artistic life that women's sexuality was elemental to the legitimacy of men's domination over women in her society, which always brought a feeling of sinfulness for women – one that required them to revolt against male domination in a growing feminescent society. In this sense, Millett aptly observed:

*“The connection of woman, sex, and sin constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought thereafter” (Millett 145).*

Angela Carter, who during the 1960s and '70s produced several pieces of fiction and drama that were quintessentially “against the grain of the widespread contemporary feminist belief that violence emanated from an exclusively male source” (Makinen 150), was, indeed not in agreement with her contemporaneous anti-porn feminists. She believed that pornography-driven writing could be ‘potentially liberating for women’ (Gruss 28)

### **Strands of Cartean Feminism, Style, and Influences**

Topographically across the entire corpus of Carter, the author has conjoined two strands of feminism, a Marxist feminism and a subversive Utopian one, both of which overlap and influence one another as well as permeate the oeuvre of the writer in a liberating approach that makes use of the socio-historical ground of Western culture and its literature (Michael 494). These two strands of feminism are commensurate with the maxims of postmodern feminism – “[...] that of reading the text as if it had already been read and recapturing a mythic time [...] to explicate, to intellectualize as if there were a beginning of reading, as if everything were not already read (Barthes 15). Marxism relates more to a materialistic world with new social formations and multinational capitalism (Jameson, 1989) that have already transformed the culture of the Western societies (Huysen, 1986) which requires a second perusal in the light of the third wave of feminism when feminist writers, Carter primary amongst them, stood at a powerful and unprecedented moment in post-modern history (Russell 2).



These two trends of feminism project themselves well in post-feminist discourse in the distinction between the binary terms of 'victim feminism' and 'power feminism' (Munford 59). According to Wolf, 'victim feminism' is 'when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness,' while 'power feminism' is 'unapologetically sexual' and 'examines closely the forces arrayed against a woman so she can exert her power more effectively' (Wolf 147). Reflecting on Carter's writings, both traditions of feminism exist in her drama and fiction: 'One tradition is severe, morally superior and self-denying; the other is free-thinking, pleasure-loving and self-assertive' (Wolf 149). This post-modern feminism of Carter's in her literary corpus is embedded in her writing through the depiction of generational conflict as well as isolation from feminist histories.

By the same token, postmodern feminism strives to reinstall historical knowledge and the historical context to mesh with the present reality and to explain the socio-politico-economic problems that defy modern society and transform it to one that would readily accept new notions of subjectivity while "working toward new theories and practices of speaking, writing, and acting subjects," and questioning "how codes, texts, images, and other cultural artifacts constitute subjectivity" (Nicholson & Fraser 213).

Further, and above all, her writing style is produced from her feminist radicalization with an approach that relates gender relationships in her society to the material representations of sensuality and sensuous pleasures. In fact, the social conditions in her society led to such liberation. At that time, women had more profuse access to higher education, were widely permitted to get jobs in the labor market, and were given more franchise by dint of a growing women's lib movement, and of course, the invention of contraceptives that enabled her to have pregnancy-free sex and refrain from marriage in a highly pragmatic fashion. This pragmatic attitude indeed informs most of Carter's wild writing.

Carter converts whoredom and the whorehouse into a 'wholly female world,' a 'sisterhood' of active, go-getting women, whose lives are 'governed by a sweet and loving reason.' Here, whores are 'all suffragists' (Carter, *Nights at the Circus* 38-39). Carter depicts sex in her drama and fiction as business transactions, not to be considered by ethical codes or judged by moral traditions. Across her literary corpus, she maintains, subtly or even explicitly, that both the wife and the whore have sex within an economic contract, but in the case of the whore, raucous acknowledgment of the profane sexual relationship is explicitly exposed. Albeit, the whore practices it being aware that economic conditions have positioned her in such a situation that she must partake of it in the same way as a wife does, pricked by economic necessities.



This pragmatism was explicated by Teresa de Lauretis who argued that recurring themes of feminism that make use of women's culture about the maternal body and the gendered roles of motherhood ...

*“keep feminism bound to the terms of Western patriarchy itself, within the political unconscious of dominant cultural discourses, and so will tend to reproduce itself, to retextualize itself even in feminist rewritings of cultural narratives” (de Lauretis1).*

Carter, thus, elaborates on the relationships between female representations in pornography and the material conditions of the Western society, negating the mythical stereotypes of the woman's image in literature as a virtuous victim or ideal mother to one that depicts women as free choosers of their destiny, and therefore, as of women empowerment. Carter does this in a subtle fashion in her texts; for example, Carter, by rewriting the theme of whoredom in a play by seventeenth-century British playwright John Ford, *T'is Pity She's a Whore*, the writer repositions the drama in a 19<sup>th</sup> century, American-West context as if she were, and she was indeed, writing for a late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist audience. By revising the language of the characters, their actions, and their clothes, Carter exposes the conditions of the developed western society that still restricts the social and sexual roles of women at that time, censoring and disparaging women who, accordingly, do not conform to the conventional, men-approved representations of femininity.

Carter's writing points out its textuality in line with previous texts in such a manner that notions of authorship and uni-leveled reality are challenged. One of the play's central preoccupations is that it defies the traditional Western conflict between reality and imagination. The play's denunciation of any spick-and-span delineation of reality versus imagination functions as the pivotal strategy for undermining the Western conception of the subject and traditional gender categories and for offering forms of liberating power for women. This liberating power takes along its path potentials for change in the realms of dramatic writing and the relations between genders as well as anticipates possible new forms for feminist literary forms.

De Lauretis further explicates in her *Technologies of Gender* that Carter has approached gender issues in her drama in the challenge of certain cultural practices of men against women:

*To envision gender and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract, we must abandon the male-centered*



*frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced by the discourse of male sexuality (de Lauretis 17).*

This explains why Carter has resorted to classical texts on women in English literature to re-read and re-write them in a new voice that ‘articulates the force of the question of femininity’ (de Lauretis109) - a feminist approach that ironically subverts the patriarchal control in the modern society. Explaining this artistic approach, Angela Carter innocuously writes in her *Notes from the Front Line*:

*“Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. ... I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (Carter, Notes 69).*

This postmodern wine is readily comparable to the bottles of an androcentric culture in which postmodernism is to an extent complicit (Simpson, 19). In the particular case of Carter's writings, both drama and fiction, this issue of re-reading and re-writing is rarely straightforward, especially when we know that Carter oftentimes reshapes the ritualized settings of others' texts to amplify and magnify issues of gender and representation. She was keen to do so in order to draw to them the attention of her readers and audience in a manner that receives investigation ‘within the rhetoric of an unsettling eroticism’ (Simpson 20). It was also done to initiate in the minds of her readers a partial and defocalized analysis of these concerns with gender issues in classical texts and fairy tales whereby to seek out postmodern strategies Carter deftly employed in her writing along with their transgression and transformation by (and of) feminism as she knew and practiced it.

This also explains why Carter has, for this purpose, resorted to dramatic irony in her plays. Haraway comments that irony in Carter's drama played an important part to manifest and interpret the latter's feminist approach. She said,

*Irony . . . is a rhetorical strategy and political method, one [which should be] more honored within social feminism” (Haraway149).*

As thus, irony as a dramatic device in Carter's plays, helps to show the contradictions of life such as the co-existence of virtue and vice in her characters so that the readers/audience would accept their reconciliation. Therefore, dramatic irony, for Carter, is one ‘about humor and serious play’ as Haraway (1991) aptly observes. No gender issue or feminist role escapes detection and parody in the works of Angela Carter. Within her drama, she uses parody and



irony as techniques whereby to critique human relationships based upon symbiosis or transgression. According to M<sup>ac</sup>Cormack,

*“No desire, no human need, no pernicious deed goes unnoticed or unexamined in Carter’s feminist postmodern picaresque.”(M<sup>ac</sup>Cormack33)*

Carter also makes use of typography and punctuation in her writing to add force to her parody and to obviously display the more subtle and intense role of affects in her texts as in *Overture and Incidental Music for A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Ryan-Sautour aptly observed that ...

*“The excess of exclamation points, colons, ellipses, and italics, points out the need to perceive each of Carter’s words as parody, each word resonating about previous cultural contexts and meanings. A profusion of punctuation thus also cloaks Carter’s text with irony, teasing the reader to seek out hidden emphasis, as is evident in The Herm’s description of Titania, “Tit-tit-tit-omania boxed me up in a trunk she bought from the Army and Navy Stores, labelled it ‘Wanted on Voyage’ (oh yes, indeed!) and shipped me here. Here! to – ATISHOO – catch my death of cold in this dripping bastard wood. Rain, rain, rain, rain, rain!”(85) The shifts in the register (“bastard”), as well as playful anachronisms (“Army and Navy Stores”), amplify the process of interpellation in the passage. The repetition of the colloquial “tit” – in its irreverent referral to Titania’s large breasts in Carter’s version of the character, the play on the concept of desire with the inverted commas around “wanted,” the colloquial aside “oh yes, indeed!” set apart by brackets, the dashes’ breaks in the line, in combination with the onomatopoeic quality of the sneeze emphasized by capitals, the typographic repetition of the word “rain,” and all of this punctuated by various exclamation marks, enhances the pull behind the Carterian word. (Ryan-Sautour 7)*

Carter used these devices within her feminist postmodern picaresque and dramatic revisions not only to entertain but also to instruct by allowing her readers to revel in the vicarious pleasures offered by the identities of her characters as in *Richard Dadd* and *Ronald Firbank* and *Come Unto These Yellow Sands: Four Radio Plays* (1985). She does so while proffering to her readers/audience ample opportunity to perceive the manner in which these characters are transformed Carter’s feminist postmodern feminist writings.



Carter has heavily relied on such techniques as parody, irony, and intertextuality in her plays; she was used to drafting multiple revisions of texts and of the same plots, often changing the setting and characterization but keeping to the thematic elements of the plot. She does this with the retelling of fairy tales and other international literary works by adaptation. Therefore, she wrote *The Courtship of Mr Lyon*, *The Tiger's Bride*, *The Erl-King*, *The Snow Child*, *The Lady of the House of Love*, *The Werewolf*, *The Company of Wolves*, and *Wolf-Alice* as revisionary adaptations of multicultural world fairy tales, with the intention not of doing versions of horrible adult fairy tales, but of extracting the latent content of traditional stories, as she said in an interview with John Haffenden. Carter's feminist approach has indeed turned to literary myths to relay her ideology and to reveal how the elements of oppression in the society have been established like horrible fairy tales in the minds of men:

*"I tend to use other people's books, European literature, as though it were that kind of folklore. Our literary heritage is a kind of folklore"*  
(Carter, Interview with Haffenden 81).

Traditional fairy stories had provided ample substance for Angela Carter to draw on in revealing the beauty and violence in gender and sexual relationships, especially when she wrote fiction and less frequently in the play scripts for her radio drama: "... she could experiment with her own writer's role, ally herself in an imagination with the countless, anonymous narrators" (Sage40).

For example, Carter in *Erl-King* borrows the image of Eros comparably with Goethe's *Erlkönig* in which the protagonist lured children with music or with a bag of treats which could also stand for the bodies of children killed by the boogeyman and cut into parts and kept in a sack he carries with him. For Carter, Erl-King represents the erotic man who would spare no opportunity to ravish a woman fearlessly. According to Herman, this observation works commensurately with her theory that the bogey represents Eros in all of the adaptations of the story in Goethe's poem, Shakespeare's play or Carter's play, even when he was not delineated in the guise of Cupid. In Carter's version of the story, the dramatist

*"angles the terror through the fascinated eyes of the Erl-King's prey. She is a Carter heroine, in thrall despite herself to the woodland spirit's feral, eldritch charms"* (Warner25).

*The Erl-King* in the Cartean version retrieves the *au fait* pattern of the Silvan lord or god of the woods - again revisited in Carter's *Overture and Incidental Music as Oberon*. Oberon, or the king of the forest, absurdly and unreasonably punishes four mortal lovers and his queen, Titania, because the queen adopted a young Indian boy after the death of his mother who is



her friend. The boy is drawn to the fore of the action and transformed into a sexually ambiguous representation of *The Golden Herm* with his dramatic monolog functioning as the overture for the play. The play is a humoristic parody of Shakespeare's fairy world in his many of his dramatic works (Ryan-Sautour 2). One critic explains why the writer revised Shakespeare's motif and performance in her work:

*"For Carter, Shakespeare was a metonym for theater, and theater was something she accorded a deep value to in life as in art" Sanders observes (Sanders 56).*

Sanders further elucidates:

*"Overture and Incidental Music" indeed seeks to lay bare the genealogy of discourse which "across the generations" has become implicitly associated with Shakespeare's work.*

In this play, Carter explores the energies of patriarchy as a comical examination of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by reinstating and recovering the forest setting into her text. This scene is akin to the Athenian woods that resemble the festive revelry and sexual liberty where lovers seek asylum to when they elope from the Duke and Aegeus to join secretly in matrimony as described by Shakespeare.

The dominance of sexual hints in the play gets the audience/readers more deeply and intimately involved in the happenings, especially with Carter delineating the Indian boy as a hermaphrodite whose sexuality explicitly calls Oberon to be turned on with an erotic affect:

*She [Titania] blames it all on Uncle Oberon, whose huff expresses itself in thunder and he makes it rain when he abuses himself, which it would seem he must do almost all the time, thinking of me, the while, no doubt.*

*Of ME!*

*For Oberon is passing fell and wrath*

*Because that she, as her attendant hath*

*A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;*

*She never had so sweet a changeling;*

*And jealous Oberon would have the child (86)*

The sexual affect in the play interpellates the audience to identify the gender dispositions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Day 74). As Sanders explains, the fairy world of Shakespeare entails more intricate discussions of identity, but "Carter re-reads Dream from a



feminist and postcolonial perspective and strives to reinsert a darker magic and sexuality."(Sanders 117). Carter dismantles the sexual identity of women as one that differs from the sexual wants of men. She does so by inviting her readers "to enter the theater that releases sexual identity into more ambiguous configurations of desire" (Ryan-Sautour, 3). In this sense, Oberon is described as a lustful man who desires the Indian boy, the Hermaphrodite, symbolically women, who does not desire Oberon by nature:

*What does the Herm want?*

*The Herm wants to know what 'want' means.*

*'I am unfamiliar with the concept of desire. I am the unique and perfect, paradigmatic Herm, provoking on all sides desire yet myself transcendent, the unmoved mover, the still eye of the tempest, exemplary and self-sufficient, the beginning and the end.'*

*Titania, despairing of the Herm's male aspect, inserted a tentative forefinger in the female orifice. The Herm felt bored. (95)*

But the Sylvan Lord never rests unless he gets what he wants from the Indian boy transformed into a Puck:

*Oberon saw him.*

*Oberon stooped down and picked up the Puck and stood him, a simulated Yogic tree, on his palm. A misty look came into Oberon's eyes. The Puck knew he had no option but to go through with it.(96)*

This scene explains the male/female binary relationship, which is detestable to modern feminist women who hate exploitation.

Carter's approach, as in *The Bloody Chamber*, is to recover the sexuality of the original context of classical literature, either in *Erl-King* or *The Snow Child*, *The Werewolf*, *The Company of Wolves*, or *Wolf-Alice*. In the backgrounds of the plays, Carter stands as the "moral pornographer," who can explore and expose the brutality and bestiality of patriarchy. In the case of *Erl-King*, Carter takes the classical text of Shakespeare's as her springboard from which she can jump as the "moral pornographer," speaking now to a specifically English audience. She also makes connections back to her Sadeiandiscourses on power, of the sexual predator and his self-conscious prey – the woman. Describing *Erl-King*, Carter writes in the tongue of the female first person protagonist:

*"I always go to the Erl-King, and he lays me down on his bed of rustling straw where I lie at the mercy of his huge hands... He is the tender*



*butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes" (87).*

This bawdy scene of female exposure, by lying down on the bed naked or by disrobing as in Bluebeard's mirrored boudoir, is repeated in several works of Carter's such as *The Tyger's Bride*; yet, in this latter work, the image is more brutal, and Anthropophagus, where Carter introduces the image of female flesh as meat, offered predatorily to the boogeyman.

Again, upon reading *In the Company of Wolves*, one can already grasp how Carter articulated and rephrased the expected conditions of the *Little Red Riding Hood's* only assault into the predatory wolf-infested wood, where the big eyes of the fairy beast were then and there watching:

*"His eyes are quite green as if from too much looking at the wood. There are some eyes can eat you" (86).*

The mesmerizing stare of the beast is also how he casts his spells:

*"And now—ach! I feel your sharp teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses.*

*The equinoctial gales seize the bare elms and make them whiz and whirl like dervishes; you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream" (80).*

In Angela Carter's *The Holy Family Album*, we are again with fairy tales as the background to the plots of her collection of short plays. For instance, *The Juniper Tree* is classified under unhappy families in her collection in which a woman was trying to peel off an apple beneath a juniper tree, but she cuts her hand. She was day-dreaming that she would give birth to a child as white as snow as in fairy tales, but she eats the lethal juniper tree berries and dies in child labor. Her husband marries again, and the new wife feels nothing but hate for the mother-less child. Later, the stepmother decapitates the child by snapping the lid of the pantry on his head as he is trying to have an apple. The child's sister soon comes in and cuts off his head for ignoring her. The stepmother chides the girl but connives with her to cook the boy into a stew for dinner. When the father comes home, he eats that stew which tastes so delicious to him that he forbade it for others. When Marlene, the sister, collects her brother's bones in a handkerchief, she goes to the juniper tree and buries them beside the boy's mother's remains. Then, a small bird suddenly appears in the tree's branches to sing the following lines:



*My mother, she killed me.*

*My father, he ate me.*

*My sister, Marlene, she made sure to see my bones were all gathered together, bound nicely in silk, as neat as can be*

*and laid out beneath the juniper tree.*

*Tweet, tweet! What a lovely bird I am!*

The bird is rewarded with a gold watch when it sings the song to a goldsmith; it is given red shoes when it sings it to a family in the vicinity but is given a millstone for singing it to millers. The boy disguised as a bird comes back home. He sings and the father comes to listen to the musical notes to be given the gold watch. The repenting sister takes the red shoes, but when the sinful stepmother curiously comes out for her gift, the bird drops the millstone on her head to kill her. Only then does the bird transform into a boy to the astonishment of the father and the sister, but all go back home for dinner, happily ever after.

Carter explains in her *Notes* that this is

*"the definitive version of a tale of child abuse and sibling solidarity known all over the world [that] does the happy ending have more of an ache of wish-fulfilment" (Carter, Notes 464).*

In the fable retold by Carter, trees represent kin and kindred relations as in a genealogical tree, called by Marina Warner 'the arboreal metaphor of family descendancy' (Warner 61). In the play, the forest allegorically represents sexual predation, isolation, or a snare for straying or wayward children. Whatever the symbols, the writer uses the device of transformation eventually as a deliverance from the protagonists' sufferings and pains.

Kinship relations are also revisited in Carter's *The Snow Child and Lady of the House of Love* with a revisionary adaptation of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, with the stories again adapted for the theater. Just like The Juniper Tree, the mother is presented as meeting death at the hand of child labor with the youngest daughter, or the codetta. The plays show the jealousy of the step-mother and the latter's hatred for the children of the first wife. The Snow White presents such incestuous themes such as the desire for the daughter, the father's lust and step-mother's jealousy, and in turn the oedipal desires of a father and daughter, and how these arouse the mother's jealousy which makes her wish to get rid of the daughter, and these are much more clearly stated here than in more common versions (Bettelheim 200). However, as Bettelheim suggests, she introduces "the Oedipal entanglements to our imagination rather than forcing them on our conscious mind" (Bettelheim200).



Carter's texts proffer newfangled postmodern possibilities for the postmodern reader as they repeatedly reflect on gender issues of historical connection to classical fables, reflexivity, identity and its representation, value, order, meaning, control, and the production and prescription of the bare truth exposed.

For instance, Angela Carter presents the daughter's Electra's complex in line with the mother's sexuality. She compares her views with those of Freud's in the latter's essay on *Femininity*, introducing her view that the nature of libido is bisexual, and that there is a female libido, too. This explains why ...

*"the mother wishes to repress her growing daughter's sexuality before she herself is growing old and custom is removing her from the arena of sexual life. She sees her daughter, the living memory of herself as a young woman, as both an immediate rival and a poignant reminder of what she herself is losing. The daughter, on the other hand, sees the mother, not as an aging rival but as a mature woman and one in permanent possession of her father, who is the most immediately present object on which she may focus her desire." (Snow White123)*

This view is commensurate with the views of Western culture, Freud's Vienna or the notion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nuclear family in which the image of a careless, working mother plays in the background and where patriarchal authority is missing because the father ...

*"is absent from this malign fiesta, just as he is absent from every child's primary experience, the birth and the breast, the first bed and the first table" (Snow White124).*

Carter goes too far in her feminist views as to declare that the "Father is always absent from this scenario because, in fact, he does not exist" (Snow White, p.133). In this vein, women, as in the case of Eugenie of the Snow White, can liberally act like the men's surrogates, with their bodies being "the charade of domination and possession." (Snow White, p.126)

Carter believes that a woman is the tent's pole in the conventional view of the family in her feminist writings. She once said:

*"Like a good Freudian, I was thinking of houses as being mothers, so there was this empty mother, with the sky on the other side...when mother is dead, all life has gone out of the house" (Interview with Sage 19).*



Therefore, on exploring the postmodern features of Carter's texts, it seems that the obverse concerns of fable and history stand out in Carter's dramatic texts, especially with their intersections with the classical serving as a ground and a source for provoking postmodern feminist thought. This was frequently done in her dramatic adaptations to the radio and the cinema for the purpose of dramatizing feminist questions about gender and its representation, all the while by expropriating her texts to be presented in the more public medium of the radio and the television. At this point, Carter's *'Tis Pity she's a Whore* seems to be expropriative and crucially functional in uttering the big maxims of postmodern feminism. Carter's play *'Tis Pity she's a Whore* expropriates, more emphatically and outrageously than any of her earlier texts, the range of postmodern dramatic wiles and gimmicks to dramatize feminist questions about gender and its representation, complicit with the dramatic narrative of canonical postmodernity.

This subject-matter lurking in the Western literary tradition provided Carter with radical and revolutionary ideas that proscribe to freedom in violent sexual manifestations that abandon the romantic authoritative voice for a multitude of other female voices often delineated as depressed in previous feminist literature. She described this revolutionary feminist approach to writing as a 'unique one-off' with the artist being 'an original, a god-like and inspired creator of unique one-offs' (Carter, *Introduction x*).

## CONCLUSION

No wonder then that Angela Carter was theoretically influenced by such writers as Foucault and Laing when she composed *The Bloody Chamber* while she was elaborating on the material life experiences of women and their shared subcultures. Throughout her works, Carter pictures "women who grab their sexuality and fight back. . . women troubled by and even powered by their violence" (Makinen 3). Morgan in his *The Anatomy of Freedom: Feminism in Four Dimensions* recaps Makinen's statement above that Angela Carter has declared that "pornography as sexual-violence propaganda is, in effect, the 'theory,' while rape, battery, molestation, and other increasing crimes of sexual violence against women are, not so coincidentally, the 'practice.'" (Makinen 107).

Palpably, Angela Carter worked out the leitmotifs for her dramatic adaptations to show that falling into the entrapment of sexuality is a work of nature rather than of culture as in *The Bloody Chamber*, *Wolf-Alice*, or many other plays and fictions. Therefore, she manipulated the Gothic literature motifs of mirrors, bridal nuptials, blood and sexual initiation profusely found in Gothic fairy tales.



No wonder then that Carter fearlessly examined such forbidden profane topics of pornography, sexual fetish, rape, incest, and cannibalism in her drama scripts and fictions that have been adapted to the stage such as *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Company of Wolves*, *Come unto These Yellow Sands* and *The Curious Room*. Indeed, as Bettelheim suggested, a controversial, dominant issue in the background of Carter's works, is her use of the sexuality of her characters to defy the traditional image of women by using fabulous animal imagery to show the ferocity of an avenging step-mother, the lust of an abusive husband and the brutality of bawdy males. Carter also used the transformation theme in her plots to carve out a happy Oedipal ending or a psycho-analytic closure by revisiting classical works - an issue "contentiously split along gender lines." (Herman, 2013, p. 125) Carter's plays also depicted in her feminist approach to writing the violence and brutality of man against women, and in return, the woman's backlash to abandon submissiveness and passivity to rescue her social life before it languishes. In so doing, she is delineating the bestial male and the victimized female where in her plots women continue to be fractured by the pressures around her rather than by reconciliation with men, or the patriarchal authority in the society. As such, the dominant themes in her plays and fiction had been those of the woman's subjectivity to male predation, parental abandonment, and a constant search for (sexual) identity and origin.

Carter recovers in her stories adapted for the theater what makes her dramatic works feminist in nature par excellence, as she depicts the intricacy of sexuality in men and women, with the latter persecuted by sex to finally evolve as victimized yet emancipated women. In a patriarchal society, her tales have deftly explored themes of absent mothers, neglectful father-figures and young women awakened to the bestiality of man. Carter has successfully developed a perfect image of irreconcilable opposites in the life of the post-modern woman: dominance versus submissiveness and predation versus preying, which thereby distinguish her feminist approach to dramatic writing.

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