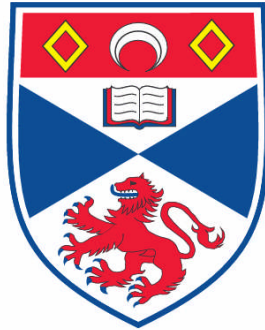


**JOURNEY TOWARDS THE (M)OTHER : MYTH, ORIGINS AND
THE DAUGHTER'S DESIRE IN THE FICTION OF ANGELA
CARTER**

Hope Jennings

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews**



2008

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***Journey Towards the (M)other:
myth, origins and the daughter's desires
in the fiction of Angela Carter***

**Hope Jennings
Ph.D. Thesis
September 2006**

Abstract

This study examines Angela Carter's demythologising of origin myths and will investigate the extent to which her fictions offer viable alternatives that allow for productive representations of women and gender relations outside patriarchal paradigms. In the first half of the thesis (Chapters 1-3), I will primarily focus on how several of Carter's earlier texts deconstruct existing mythical spaces, particularly the biblical creation story in Genesis. The Genesis myth is central to socio-historical constructions of gendered identities, and in itself, central to Carter's imagination. She repeatedly returns to this myth in her challenging of the ways in which patriarchal narratives construct violent relations between self and other, specifically where 'woman' is situated as the repressed other of male desires and fears. Alongside her demythologising of Genesis, Carter deconstructs Freudian myths of sexual maturation, exposing where these also set up a relationship of antagonism or enmity between the sexes. Although Chapter One will explore how Carter attempts to revise these origin myths from a positive stance, Two and Three will focus on the inherent difficulties faced by the female subject in her struggle against patriarchal myths and their violent oppression of female autonomy. The second half of the thesis (Chapters 4-6) will shift to an investigation of how Carter's later texts set up both possibilities and challenges for women when attempting to construct their own narratives of origin. Through her problematising of matriarchal myths and feminist fantasies of self-creation, Carter emphasises the need for confronting limitations rather than celebrating transgressions as entirely liberating. The thesis will conclude, however, with an examination of where Carter's own attempts at remythologising opens up an alternative space, or 'elsewhere', of feminine desires that allows for a refiguring of the female subject as well as more reciprocal relations between the sexes.

Declarations

I, Hope Jennings, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date_____ Signature of Candidate_____

I was admitted as a research student in September, 2002 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in July, 2003; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 2002 and 2006.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank The Sperry Fund for awarding me a Beinecke Scholarship, which extensively contributed towards funding my postgraduate studies; and the Alumni Association of Hunter College, Inc. for providing me with a David and Sadie Klau Foundation Fellowship for postgraduate research. Thanks are in due order to Dr. Alan Hausman for the time and energy he has invested in my academic career, as well as his continuing encouragement and assistance, especially with all matters regarding Freud. I am very grateful to Dr. Gill Plain, whose feedback on early drafts was invaluable, and for consistently being available to offer advice and further opportunities (both academic and financial). My deepest gratitude to Professor Susan Sellers, for her patience, insight, generosity, and confidence in the outcome of this thesis. She has allowed me the freedom to explore some of the most insane and impractical ideas, and her steady encouragement has helped guide me through both the personal and creative chaos of the past four years. I am also very appreciative of the administrative staff in the School of English, without whose practical assistance no research student could survive! Thanks as well to Student Support Services for helping me out of all those unexpected financial binds. Much thanks to my oldest, enduring family of friends back in the States: Midge and Chris McClosky, Christine and Geof Bowie, Laura Limonic, and Jimmy Crane (especially for taking in and loving Leo/Leah the transsexual cat). A heap of thanks and love to Elizabeth Bowie, for sharing survival tricks of whiskey and wine, all in a haze of photography, stories, and Cinderella fantasies. I am so grateful for having met some new enduring friends while at St. Andrews, too many to mention, but a special shout out to Karen Hayward, Jen Hess-Mouat, Sarah Taylor, and Rachel Marsh, to whom I am most indebted for innumerable reasons. Without you girls I would have been entirely helpless, especially after the infamous incident of the broken ankle! Thanks to Wil Moss for the new home, where most importantly I was able to find the space and quiet to finish writing this thesis. Last but not at all least, thanks to my much loved and much missed younger brothers, Joel, Jeremy and Seth; and to Stuart Cripps and Carolyn Jennings, for being married, respectively, to my mom and dad and thus becoming co-parents to me, with all the dedication and frustration that relationship implies. I am eternally grateful to my father, Randall, and my mother, Deborah, for their eternally unconditional gift of love, faith, and emotional, psychological, and financial support. This is suitably enough dedicated to both of you, because you have been the most peculiar and complex unit to have shaped my life, giving me far more than I could ever return.

List of Contents

<u>Introduction: Journey Towards the (M)other.....</u>	1-22
<u>Part One: Escaping Eden</u>	
Chapter I: The Word, the Flesh, and the Fall.....	24-46
Chapter II: A Monstrous God.....	47-73
Chapter III: Eve at the End of the World.....	74-103
<u>Part Two: Elsewhere</u>	
Chapter IV: Return to the Womb.....	105-136
Chapter V: The New Woman.....	137-171
Chapter VI: Family Romances.....	172-201
<u>Conclusion: Further Departures.....</u>	202-210
Bibliography.....	211-214

Abbreviations

All references to the following primary texts by Angela Carter will be cited parenthetically as follows:

HF: 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest'

HV: *Heroes and Villains*

ML: 'The Mother Lode'

MT: *The Magic Toyshop*

NC: *Nights at the Circus*

NE: *The Passion of New Eve*

PW: 'Peter and the Wolf'

SW: *The Sadeian Woman*

WC: *Wise Children*

Introduction: JOURNEY TOWARDS THE (M)OTHER

For the yearning to believe in a point of origin, in a universe with a beginning, middle, and end, which functions in accordance with clear rules and predictable outcomes is as strong as the impossibility of its discovery...[.]We refuse to despair, desperately hoping instead that there is a secret origin, a secret design that will be revealed to us on arrival, although the journey may be arduous and the waiting long.

~ Maria Aristodemou¹

As the above epigraph indicates, the notion of an origin holds a prevalent place in the human imagination, functioning as a narrative vehicle for conceptualising where we come from, often with the aim of understanding the present, and by extension, possible futures. However, the search for origins will always remain a tentative proposition, at best. Just as we are incapable of recalling our own processes of gestation and birth, we are also without the socio-historical means for remembering with certainty the birth of civilisation. Because there is no absolute form of knowledge surrounding what we consider to be the ‘prehistory’ of human cultures and languages, then origin narratives take on the cultural currency of myths. Origin myths are primarily intended to fill a gap or absence in our desire for self-knowledge, and like any myth, they reflect upon lived conditions or realities, and are thus inevitably invested with ideological interests. If we accept the premise that there is no ‘true’ origin to be discovered in the distant past, but is rather a notion that coexists with the concerns of our immediate present, then confronting how we construct our origins becomes a necessary task. In other words, by approaching origin narratives as products of current discourses and power structures we might begin to challenge the ways in which they significantly contribute to the construction of identities, whether they be psychological, cultural or geopolitical.

¹ Maria Aristodemou, *Law and Literature: Journeys from Her to Eternity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 235, 240.

This study will examine how Angela Carter's texts are engaged in an ongoing exploration of the (female) subject's relation to origins through the intersections of myth and history as discourses constructing gendered identities. Carter specifically challenges how origin myths are employed as a means of reinforcing those boundaries that distinguish 'man' from his 'others'. Thus, for Carter, as well as various feminists, the question of origins becomes necessarily centred around dismantling the master narratives that have been used to reinforce patriarchal representations of women. As I will be exploring throughout this thesis, I believe the development of Carter's approach towards origin narratives follows a two-fold journey: "one involving both patriarchal myth-smashing and woman-identified myth-making."² According to this process, I will be examining the tension between Carter's own claim, "I'm in the demythologising business",³ and the ways in which her texts simultaneously work towards "a new investment in myth" rather than an eradication of myth itself.⁴ Even if she distrusts and challenges the ways in which myths are used to police socio-cultural boundaries between self and other, she never loses sight of the fact that origins themselves are necessary to the human imagination in situating one's place in the world; that they cannot be dispensed with, but rather must be investigated and renegotiated. Before I set out the parameters of my own investigation, in order to contextualise Carter's positioning in relation to women's rewriting of myth I will first discuss some of the general feminist debates surrounding the question of origins.

According to Hélène Cixous: "The origin is a masculine myth...[.]The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious."⁵ Cixous' statement is in itself somewhat debatable, as it might be argued that there is no apparent reason why women, in contrast to men, should be any less concerned with seeking out or

² Jane Caputi, 'On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking', in Carolyne Larrington (ed.), *The Woman's Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora, 1992), p. 427.

³ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *Shaking A Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p. 38.

⁴ For this and the following sentence see Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 114.

⁵ Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7 (1981), p. 53.

devising origin narratives that reflect on their own experiences or desires. In fact, a great deal of feminist theories and texts embark on this very 'quest'. However, women's desires for origins often arise in direct reaction to a socio-cultural system that has historically denied them access to contributing towards those narratives constructing gendered identities. The origin myths that have been handed down to us primarily reflect masculine desires, which support and help keep in place the patriarchal order in its repression of the 'feminine' (Freud's Oedipus being a prime example of this).⁶ As Maria Aristodemou observes, reiterating Cixous' own positioning, the "dream of returning to a point of origin" is more than anything "the dream of *man* rather than of *woman* and the journey leads either back to oneself or to death."⁷ In other words, a masculine desire for the origin is often focused on recovering or returning to some coherent unified self, to uncover a secret design or mystery that would offer an incontrovertible truth of the male subject's identity that is not dependant on any relation to the (m)other.⁸

As we see with Oedipus, in his inexorable progression back to the origin in his quest for self-knowledge, when that truth is revealed to him it is one that is founded on death, as he is responsible for the deaths of both the father *and* mother. In its exposure of 'man's' own murderous impulses, the myth reveals the ways in which a patriarchal order constructs violent relations between self and other through masculine desires for the assertion of absolute autonomy in a world that is by its very nature chaotic, unstable and pluralistic. Furthermore, as Aristodemou points out, the "frustration at the unattainability of these goals arises from man's desire for and inability to understand and thereby possess woman".⁹ In other words, because 'man' is incapable of pinning down some

⁶ My use of the terms masculine and feminine is with the recognition that these are socially constructed gendered positions; that they are not inherently located in biological sex. In those places where I refer to either term preceded by a direct article, they will be cited with inverted commas to indicate that these are culturally unstable markers rather than fixed identifications that are wholly representative of 'man' or 'woman'.

⁷ Aristodemou, p. 250; throughout this thesis, all italics within quotations are the authors' original emphases, unless otherwise indicated as my own.

⁸ In those instances when I employ the term (m)other, this is to indicate where the maternal-feminine is also representative of the repressed other in a patriarchal order.

⁹ Aristodemou, p. 252.

truth of 'woman', threatening his own desires for a unified self in his quest for origins, then "perhaps the fact that women do not undertake these journeys suggests that they are already in possession of a knowledge that [men] are in search of."¹⁰ This feminine knowledge indicates "the possibility of another journey", one that "undermines the notion of the individual as separate, self-interested, and uniquely self-sufficient."¹¹ Unlike the archetypal quest of Oedipus, which is primarily concerned with arriving at a destination, where we merely end up with the endless substitutions and antagonisms that exist between fathers and sons, a feminine quest for origins is more interested in departures, in wandering, perhaps aimlessly, in a movement or journey towards the (m)other; towards a recognition and respect for the other's irreducible difference.¹²

Thus, when Cixous argues for conceptualising a feminine unconscious, it is with the aim of demonstrating how an alternative discourse or knowledge might allow us to approach myths of origin, as well as relationships to otherness, *differently*. This approach would reject a masculine nostalgia that conceives of the origin as an absolute yet irrecoverable foundation for human identities and relations. Rather, we might begin to imagine origin narratives that are far more fluid and radically open to articulating and accepting (sexual) differences, opening up an alternative feminine space that encourages reciprocal relations between self and other. The feminist discourses of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva all offer disparate yet interrelated approaches towards rethinking and revising origin myths, as located in both psychoanalytic and biblical narratives. Throughout this thesis I will be reading Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva alongside Angela Carter's texts, as I believe their works provide greater insight into how Carter's fictions often engage in a form of serious 'play'. Like Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, Carter irreverently deconstructs psychoanalytic models of sexual differentiation while also seeking out alternative means of employing Freudian and/or biblical myths in order to reconstitute the subject's relationship to the (m)other.

¹⁰ Aristodemou, p. 251.

¹¹ Aristodemou, pp. 252, 265.

¹² Aristodemou, pp. 225, 252.

Similar to the French feminists listed above, Carter accepts Freud's theory of the unconscious, which has shaped so much of twentieth-century thought, in that it has allowed for problematising the ways in which identities are constructed according to conflicting or contradictory desires within the self (as opposed to a coherent, unitary self). In an interview with Lisa Appignanesi, when answering a question concerning formative influences on her writing, Carter replies that she very much "enjoyed Freud", as his theory of the unconscious and dreams were "about life". Furthermore, if her work tends "to provoke unease" (particularly in its exploration of sexual aggression), she points out that such an effect is inevitable when dealing with the unconscious: "that's what the unconscious is for".¹³ Or rather, the exploration of the unconscious is a necessary and useful tool in exposing the violent and often perverse drives underlying human desire, and how those desires construct human relationships and identities.

However, where psychoanalysis poses the greatest problems for Carter and feminism in general, is the impact it has had on notions of masculinity and femininity. The majority of feminisms take specific issue with Freud's theory of castration, which, to forgive the pun, leaves women with the short end of the stick, situating them as 'lacking' in some fundamental way in relation to the male. This is further reinforced by Lacan, who asserts the phallus as a transcendent primary signifier, representative of the Law of the Father, or the socio-symbolic order, upon which the formation of individual identity is dependant through one's entrance into language.¹⁴ Although this premise has been widely accepted by French feminist theorists in their explorations of the role of the mother in introducing the child to language, Lacan's scenario begins to raise fiercely contested debate in his implication that subjectivity is contingent upon identification with and acceptance of the father's law. Through this imposition of the name of the father (his law), the child is severed from any connection to the mother's body, reinforcing a

¹³ Lisa Appignanesi, *Angela Carter in Conversation* (London: ICA Video, 1987), my transcription.

¹⁴ See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I*', in *Écrits: a selection* (1966), trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge Classics, 2001).

repression of the maternal-feminine; and “since the Law of the Father, in this schema, is identical with the symbolic order, and the language of the father structures reality, patriarchy appears to be the inevitable cultural condition.”¹⁵ Thus, even if Lacan insists the phallus is a metaphor, the restriction he places in the realm of language further restricts women from “affirming a different language, a different law, and a different culture.” Moreover, according to psychoanalysis’ own terms of inquiry, and in the tradition of philosophical language, Lacan’s subject is inevitably conceived as the male subject, placing ‘woman’ in a precarious position: ‘she’ is required to identify with a phallogocentrism that is founded on a repression of female desires, thus rendering her a ‘non-subject’.¹⁶ Ultimately, because Freudian and Lacanian discourses fail to affirm women’s differences, this “has led to an understanding of the play, and the origin of culture, in terms of models and laws that reduce woman to man’s mirror”.¹⁷

According to Maria Aristodemou, women might begin “to dissolve the false identification between father, origin, and law [through] the return...of repressed mothers and daughters to unsettle male culture, male law, and male identity”.¹⁸ In other words, if women are representative of the dangerous, threatening ‘other’ in a patriarchal order’s own unconscious desires, then they are also emblematic of the return of the repressed, and from their marginal positioning they might begin to subvert the dominant law/discourse. Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous all put forward this proposition, albeit from varied perspectives, yet their aims in rethinking the unconscious share striking similarities in setting up a tension between a masculine allegiance to the law and a feminine willingness to risk its prohibitions.¹⁹ This risk, as Cixous and Irigaray believe,

¹⁵ For this and the following sentence see Aristodemou, pp. 49-50.

¹⁶ See especially Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Aristodemou, p. 55.

¹⁸ Aristodemou, p. 54.

¹⁹ This tension between allegiance to and disobedience of the law plays a predominant role throughout my analyses of Carter’s texts, which in their explorations of the female subject’s relationship to the Law of the Father often problematise the possibilities and limitations of feminine transgressions. My discussion throughout the rest of this paragraph is drawn primarily from Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991), see especially pp. 31, 60, 74, 81, 135-6.

may open the way to an alternative symbolic order, which is not so much founded on a new origin, but operates from new patterns of relations to the origin, as well as between self and other. Like Irigaray and Cixous, Julia Kristeva believes it is impossible for us to think beyond the notion of an origin since it has become so embedded in our culture, but her thinking diverges in that she does not accept the possibility of leaving behind the existing symbolic order with the hope of establishing a new one. We seem to be stuck with the one we have, at least in the present, and so must learn to negotiate our sex-specific relations to the law while also exploring those areas where the law does not always determine human subjectivity (i.e. the unconscious). Kristeva insists, and Cixous and Irigaray would also agree, that women are capable of disrupting the symbolic order by directly confronting men's repressed desires, by going behind the screen of representation that a patriarchal order imposes upon women's bodies. If anything, this might allow for a confrontation with and a repositioning of what the symbolic order has always designated as "that unthinkable outside" – the "unthinkable side of femininity".²⁰

Origin myths, particularly those of the Greco-Judeo-Christian traditions, have been historically used to define 'woman' as that 'other' unthinkable space. For instance, Catherine Clément argues that because of patriarchal inscriptions of 'woman' as the site of origin, the female subject is viewed as embodying a primal, regressive, feminine power that requires the repression of her disruptive desires through the mediation of masculine powers of rationality so as to control and ensure the progress of culture.²¹ However, since women are situated outside the symbolic order and are therefore less loyal to its laws, then Clément believes it may be possible to change unconscious male fantasies about women through a feminist project of appropriating or rewriting myth. In other words, when challenging patriarchal myths, women have the advantage of subversively using their marginal positioning to disrupt phallogocentric representations

²⁰ Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* (1998), trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 72-3.

²¹ For this and the following sentence see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 6, 28-30.

from “outside the confines of masculine paradigms”.²² Moreover, even if myths are highly influential in perpetuating the “cultural conventions and expectations” of the prevailing order, because of their “accessibility and dissemination” they are not the sole property of any one political or social group.²³ As Aristodemou points out:

if myths are, as Freud thought by analogy to dreams, the expression of a society’s rather than an individual’s unconscious, then they are also, like dreams, over-determined, loaded with a variety of meanings and uses, and thus open to reinterpretation and appropriation by interested parties, including feminists.²⁴

The accessibility of myths, according to Michael Bell, is located in the fact that they primarily function as narratives about how we inhabit the world, representing the lived conditions of various societies or cultures.²⁵ However, because of changing belief systems and cultural preoccupations, societies themselves tend to change significantly in their attitudes or approach towards myth. For example, in the course of the twentieth century, western societies have undergone a dramatic shift in their understanding and application of myth. In the aftermath of the two world wars, we have begun much more closely to scrutinise how “the foundational ambition of myth” is often linked to questions of legitimating nationalist and socio-cultural interests. Thus, by rejecting the universality of human experience, we might also cease relying on myth to provide us with a foundational construct for human identities. Bell argues that mythic narratives offer “a multiplicity of possible human worlds”, and so to accept this “shifting horizon” is to embrace the risks “of encountering the radically new and foreign”. Moreover, and perhaps analogous to the fact that we are born into language and/or the symbolic order, myth itself is not something one *chooses* to create, but “rather one inevitably lives within a mythic horizon by the sheer fact of conscious and responsive being in the world”. In other words, we need to approach myths through the understanding that “the inhabiting of a self-conscious mythopoeia requires a constant self-critique”.

²² Aristodemou, p. 57.

²³ Aristodemou, pp. 29, 182.

²⁴ Aristodemou, p. 62.

²⁵ My discussion throughout this paragraph, including all direct quotations, is with extensive reference to Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 19-20, 34, 37.

Accordingly, in women's rewritings of those myths that have been handed down to us, it is necessary to remain conscious of the ways in which *all* myths "are the carriers of ideas and ideologies and it is the task of the new writer to use and abuse the genre to best suit her new purposes."²⁶ Angela Carter's own use and abuse of myth is primarily concerned with deconstructing "the social fictions that regulate our lives".²⁷ Her self-conscious mythopoeia employs postmodern tactics of irony in order to subvert religious convictions and moral certainties that past mythologies have attempted to inscribe.²⁸ In general, as Marina Warner observes, contemporary rewritings of myth (like Carter's) are specifically aimed at retrieving lost histories and reinhabiting the lived experience of the 'Other', answering a political concern with giving voice to disenfranchised groups. As a tool for recovering women's voices, myth's oral tradition is of especial interest to both Warner and Carter, who view myth, folk and fairy tales as traditions of flux and metamorphoses, narrative forms that once gave voice to multiple groups of people before becoming appropriated by the literary, academic, or cultural élite. Furthermore, they were once specifically female modes of narration, and through various stages in cultural history became devalued precisely because of their association with the 'feminine'.²⁹ Hence, Warner emphasises the importance for women to re-appropriate this tradition while reinvesting it with new values, new forms.

Likewise, though Carter might be intent on exposing those myths that are used to oppress or blind people to the socio-political realities in which they live, this "*attack* on myth is a form of *work* on myth".³⁰ Carter's texts persistently confront the ways in which western societies use myth to devise and regulate boundaries between themselves and what they deem to be 'foreign', in effect creating notions of what is inaccessibly and

²⁶ Aristodemou, p. 157.

²⁷ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 38.

²⁸ For this and the following sentence see Marina Warner, 'Myth and Faerie: Rewritings and Recoveries', in *Signs and Wonders: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), pp. 445-8.

²⁹ For an extensive discussion of this see Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994).

³⁰ Bell, p. 213.

threateningly 'Other'.³¹ Linden Peach further notes that Carter challenges concepts of self-identity, and especially female identity, as they have been constructed through myth and language. She employs tactics of defamiliarisation and deconstruction as a means of disrupting systems of difference, unravelling oppositions, and exposing how western culture itself is 'foreign' to productive human relations. Moreover, Carter retains a sense of self-critique by setting limits to her textual subversions, acknowledging the boundaries of what is realistically possible for liberation from those social fictions that regulate our lives.³² Ultimately, because Carter never discounts the importance of myth to the human imagination, she recognises that if we must go on living in a mythic horizon, then it is necessary and politically viable to create an ethic of myth.

As Luce Irigaray insists: "It is idle to revive old myths if we are unable to celebrate them and use them to constitute a social system, a temporal system."³³ In other words, myths must necessarily remain open to the assimilation of new experiences, incorporating the socio-historical changes through which we live.³⁴ We are, as Colin Falck argues, involved in a continuous process of "re-mythologising", a cultural move that not only enables us to discover *which* myths have a hold on our imaginations but also reveals how myth itself functions as "a play of the imagination". To engage in re-mythologising is to accept the ways in which myths are not fixed or static; they are an endlessly revitalised form that allows for multiple, fluid narratives concerning human experience. Thus, as Irigaray's above statement suggests, a productive investigation of the positioning of women in origin myths should not remain strictly limited to demythologising, but also extend itself to re-mythologising, devising new narratives, new relations to the origin, that would offer access to different realities.

³¹ For this and the following two sentences see Linden Peach, *Angela Carter* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 87, 97, 73, 161, 19.

³² Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp. 126, 134.

³³ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987), trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 81.

³⁴ For this and the following sentence see Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Post-Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 124, 130, 135, 138.

My investigation into Carter's exploration of origin myths involves several interrelated questions, to which I will be returning throughout this study. First, how might one engage in a productive form of subversion? Carter is often viewed as highly subversive in her writing, yet her textual transgressions paradoxically remain focused on revealing where transgression itself implodes. Second, does motherhood provide a viable, alternative discourse for feminisms when asserting their desires for a female subjectivity that is no longer limited to patriarchal inscriptions of femininity? For Carter, as I will be elaborating further below, the privileging of motherhood in feminist discourses might only end up collapsing female sexuality into female reproduction, which is the same essentialist move that a patriarchal order endeavours to achieve. Lastly, then, how might one develop a women's writing, or engage in a form of feminist myth-making, that remains self-conscious of the premises and/or positioning from which one speaks? Or rather, as the last two chapters of this thesis will primarily attempt to resolve, how might a feminist discourse articulate feminine desires without reiterating a phallogocentrism that operates according to a repression of the (m)other?

As the title of this thesis indicates, my investigative approach towards Carter's texts follows the process by which they engage in a journey towards the (m)other, moving away from patriarchal myths and towards new constructions of relations between self and other through bringing into play a feminine economy of desire that allows for a reciprocity and respect of sexual differences. This 'journey', however, is not an attempt to impose a grand narrative on Carter's work, as if she herself consciously set out to achieve some final goal or destination in her writing. Rather, I employ this term as a conceptual means for exploring how Carter often returns to the same problems and questions in her texts, attempting to work through them from different angles or approaches. In agreement with Linden Peach, I believe that Carter's texts are best read as an ongoing process, rather than approaching them as independent from each other.³⁵ Thus, in following this line of inquiry, specific concerns will inevitably overlap. Overall,

³⁵ Peach, p. 22.

each of the chapters are focused on questioning whether we can ever truly escape origin myths, or at least their oppressive elements. Carter's texts are highly sceptical of the possibilities of this, insisting on the need for repeated confrontations with the socio-historical discourses that are embedded in origin myths. The dismantling of patriarchal ideologies is an extremely complex task, and the scope of my analysis will work towards a thorough investigation into how origin myths situate the female subject in a particularly difficult relationship to the demands of the paternal law, which in its repression of the maternal body endeavours to suppress the articulation of feminine desires.

In Chapter One, I will explore how the Genesis myth is often used to indoctrinate the child in his or her relation to the prevailing order's attitudes towards sexual differences. In its construction of gendered identities, Genesis reinforces a relation of enmity between the sexes, particularly through its repressive attitudes towards Eve/woman. Thus, for various feminisms when confronting the biblical text, it becomes a question of whether we can revise this myth in order to provide positive representations of women. By looking at two of Carter's short stories, I will show where she suggests subversive tactics for a revisionary approach, exploring possibilities for reading the myth differently with the aim of constructing a more reciprocal relationship between the sexes. However, in the next two chapters I will focus on how Carter becomes far more self-critical in her play with the Genesis myth, showing where transgression becomes problematic, especially for the female subject.

Chapter Two will examine through an analysis of *The Magic Toyshop* how Genesis, as a patriarchal myth, is violently repressive of autonomous female desires. In this novel, Carter reveals the extent to which the female subject faces difficulties when attempting to break free from the confines of a patriarchal symbolic order. Since this is the dominant cultural system that guarantees the subject's identity, then women are often forced to conform to the social demands of a discourse that is aimed at 'domesticating' female desires, keeping them safely locked up in the circularity of a phallogocentric desire that reduces their difference. Although Carter exposes the limitations of patriarchy

through deconstructive tactics, showing how it is not in fact monolithic in power, she also questions whether a feminine subversion is sufficiently capable of freeing women from the oppressive influence of patriarchal myths. For instance, as I will be discussing in Chapter Three, in *Heroes and Villains* Carter examines the female subject's attempts at transgressing the law through adopting the positioning of Eve/woman's disruptive power, as located in the Genesis myth. Even if this marginal positioning is capable of exposing the ways in which boundaries between self and other are not as rigid as the patriarchal order insists, by relying on a fantasy of maternal power, the female subject in this text risks becoming trapped in an iconic image of femininity that the patriarchal order further uses to repress her.

Although Chapter Three concludes my discussion of Carter's deconstruction of the Genesis myth while Four initiates an exploration of possible 'elsewheres' of female desire, they are closely linked in their focus on Carter's challenging of maternal fantasies of power. As a result, both chapters will allow for a coherent transition between Part One of the thesis, where I concentrate on how patriarchal myths often trap the female subject in a claustrophobic, oppressive cultural space, and Part Two, which opens out into alternative feminine spaces that might allow the female subject access to constructing her own representation and/or narrative. However, Carter continues to remain focused on the limitations of subverting a patriarchal order. Thus, in my analysis of *The Passion of New Eve* (Chapter Four), I will examine Carter's use of dystopian tactics in order to expose how feminist fantasies of power, as located in matriarchal myths, are highly problematic. The text's deconstruction of the womb as an imaginary locale for origins aims to show how the maternal/womb is not a sacred space or source of power; that it in fact keeps women limited or enslaved to their biology or reproductive status. Carter effectively brings us to the end of this fantasy so that we might begin to engage with the realities of the (m)other; yet just as she questions what might replace a patriarchal order and its myths, once free from matriarchal myths, what alternatives might be possible?

In *Nights at the Circus* (Chapter Five), Carter explores various utopian spaces through an interrogation of feminist fantasies of self-creation. For a feminist discourse, as Carter suggests, the reliance on some utopian fantasy in order to project into the future the birth of a 'New Woman', or new order, is highly problematic. As the text reveals, a feminist utopia may merely end up offering an 'elsewhere' that moves women further away from a necessary confrontation with those socio-historical configurations of the 'feminine' that operate according to a repression of female desires. For instance, through Fevvers' desire for self-creation, her imaginative flights of fancy often directly conflict with the need for remaining grounded in an historical 'truth' or account of how gendered identities are constructed by the past. *Nights at the Circus*, then, is concerned with the ways in which utopia itself is an evasion, where the desire for escaping origins only leads to utopia's projected 'no place', a dead-end dream disconnected from the complexities of our present lived realities, and thus perhaps providing no way back to a productive engagement with the symbolic order and its construction of identities.

Carter does attempt to resolve this problem, and in my analysis of *Wise Children* (Chapter Six), I will show how the text opens up a feminine space of discourse that remains engaged with our lived realities. For instance, even if Carter's fictions are aimed at seeking out productive alternatives to oppressive matriarchal and patriarchal myths, she nevertheless acknowledges the significance of the roles that maternal/paternal figures play in the formation of subject-identification. Likewise, as much as various feminisms would prefer to avoid the allure of Freud's family romance, it is perhaps impossible to do so. What we can do, as Carter proposes in *Nights at the Circus* and more thoroughly demonstrates in *Wise Children*, is change our relations to the origin, which might only be achieved through a direct confrontation with its myths rather than an evasion. Through constructing alternative relations to both the mother and father, Carter suggests how this might provide a different model for relations between self and other. Furthermore, in *Wise Children* Carter forces us to question whether we will always inevitably create our own myths through the family narrative, and if we do, suggests that we need to remain

highly self-critical of how we do this. For instance, while Dora manages to construct her own origin narrative, she must also struggle against the allure of the paternal law, which offers the daughter a legitimacy but at the expense of a continuing repression of the mother's role in contributing to the child's subject-identification. I will be arguing, however, that Dora's difficult confrontation with the past eventually achieves a recovery of the mother. Similar to many of Carter's texts, *Wise Children* ultimately challenges us to confront who or what we repress in the construction of our origins and identities.

Thus, Angela Carter extensively explores the ways in which narrative works to construct the self, since for Carter, "an important function of fiction is to realise the (female) subject".³⁶ Moreover, her concern with origin myths, or "the past's debris", is not so much a form of nostalgia but a kind of "mopping up", suggesting that if identity is constructed according to the accumulation of the past's "ready-made meanings", then perhaps there also lies the possibility "to piece together your own myths".³⁷ However, that urge towards remythologising must remain a form of *self-conscious* myth-making, aware of its own limitations, and even if Carter herself insists upon this I believe many readers misinterpret her textual transgressions or ironies. One of the major problems in critical receptions of Carter's work centres around her representations of maternal figures. Although Carter's engagement with origin myths is aimed at dismantling a patriarchal system in its repression of the 'feminine', her treatment of the maternal often seems to undermine various feminist projects that seek to recover the mother as a positive central figure in psychoanalytic, literary, or socio-political narratives.

Although Carter's later texts are praised for offering a more positive feminist discourse of motherhood, her earlier texts are accused of either effacing the mother's presence or expressing an outright hostility towards her. I believe this perspective overly simplifies the inherent complexity of Carter's explorations concerning the (female)

³⁶ Sarah Bannock, 'Auto/biographical souvenirs in *Nights at the Circus*', in Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (eds), *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), pp. 200-1.

³⁷ Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), pp. 9-11.

subject's relation to the mother. As I will demonstrate in Part Two of this thesis, the later texts are not in fact as celebratory as many feminist readings suggest, but rather intentionally pose direct challenges to various feminisms in their own fantasies of the mother. Likewise, I would maintain that her seeming omission of maternal figures in her earlier texts is a self-conscious choice, and not out of a hostile desire to do away with the mother. Rather, Carter aims to expose how patriarchal myths violently repress the maternal-feminine. Accordingly, she seeks out ways in which to bring the mother back into view, while also acknowledging how this is an extremely difficult process.

In general, Carter's texts articulate a struggle against the mother as much as the father, and right up through her final novel, *Wise Children*, she remains highly sceptical towards the "mother as muse".³⁸ This is primarily rooted in Carter's distrust of feminist narratives that focus on matriarchal myths as a form of empowerment. As she argues in *The Sadeian Woman*: "the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses....reconciling mother(s), are consolatory nonsenses....Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods" (SW: 5). In Carter's opinion, the desire to posit a long-lost origin of human culture as essentially matriarchal, accompanied by the belief that a return to this particular origin might serve as a more productive blueprint for the future, not only stems from fantasies concerning feminisms' own origins, but also fails to change hierarchical or binary constructs of power. Although relying on the "cult" of the "Great Mother" as some promise or reassurance of *past* feminine power may offer women "emotional satisfaction", it does very little to effect real transformations in women's *present* realities (SW: 5). However, as Carter herself would agree, renegotiating women's cultural and socio-historical positioning to the maternal, and confronting the tensions between female sexuality and reproduction, is a necessary task. What Carter argues against is the reliance on myths that operate according to "false universals", which do nothing more than "dull the pain of particular circumstances", and in effect keep gender relations locked at an impasse in their "savage denial of the complexity of human relations" (SW: 5-6).

³⁸ Peach, p. 129.

As Nicole Ward Jouve observes, Carter certainly had “accounts to settle with the mother”, or at least the fictions of motherhood promoted by patriarchal narratives, yet in her desire to hunt down the maternal archetype to its extinction, Ward Jouve fears she also ends up suppressing the mother.³⁹ This is partly because Carter’s (re)writings of the mother are nearly always from the positioning of the daughter, indicating, at least for Ward Jouve, that Carter was perhaps incapable of making the imaginative leap over to the mother’s side. Although she refuses to fall prey to the maternal fantasy, which in itself mothers us, protects us from seeking active solutions, Ward Jouve asks whether Carter in fact chooses the father’s side. To answer this, I do not think it is merely a question of choosing sides, since this in itself remains loyal to dichotomous divisions that simplify the subject’s often complex processes of (parental) identifications in forming his or her identity. Furthermore, because daughters are generally viewed as potential mothers, at least from a patriarchal perspective, women are then forced into a far more ambivalent positioning or relation to the maternal body.⁴⁰

Ward Jouve accepts, however, that Carter’s later novels attempt “to negotiate a different relation to the mother”, journeying to the “end of the daughter’s anger” by moving beyond the fictions of both paternity and maternity in her attempts to “reinvent mothering” rather than the figure of the mother itself.⁴¹ Ward Jouve’s reading is highly insightful and provocative, but I also think her general mistrust of Carter’s ‘profane’ treatment of the mother leads her into discounting some of the very complicated movements that Carter makes between the mother *and* daughter. Though she is often concerned with exploring how the daughter can create her own myth of origins, Carter also questions the ways in which *both* mothers and daughters fantasise about each other, and whether the mother is somehow capable of offering a way back to a *precarious* self-

³⁹ For this and the following two sentences see Nicole Ward Jouve, ‘Mother is a Figure of Speech’, in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (London: Virago Press, 1994), pp. 140, 151, 157, 160-1, 163.

⁴⁰ I will be elaborating on this in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three.

⁴¹ Ward Jouve, pp. 168, 156, 159.

unity.⁴² Linda R. Williams goes on to speculate that Carter promotes the fantasy of the fatherless child in celebration of a feminist ideal of ‘woman’ giving birth to herself. I would in fact disagree with this precisely because such a fantasy reinscribes the masculine desire to erase and/or repress the (m)other as a vital presence in identity formation; and as I will be arguing in my analysis of *Nights at the Circus*, Carter herself remains highly sceptical of this notion of female self-generation. We are not born into a void of culture or history, and believing that we have escaped the traditional confines of the patriarchal family structure does not necessarily mean we will achieve a dismantling of phallogentric constructs of gender and power.

Also, in spite of technological advancements in reproduction, because we are born from a womb, the notion of the maternal body as a site of origin continues to play out in our personal, cultural and socio-political narratives. One of the most problematic effects of patriarchal narratives is that they have specifically attempted to deny or repress the mother’s desire. Thus, when confronting the effect that patriarchy has had on our views of the maternal, we need to persist in asking ourselves the following questions: Do we allow the mother to be sexed, to be both a reproducing body and a desiring body? Or does much of psychoanalytic and/or religious discourse continue to inform and determine our attitudes towards our mothers, perpetuating the denial of a desiring maternal body? A great deal of *écriture féminine* attempts to resolve these tensions, to write the mother differently, allowing for new ways of speaking about the ‘desiring mother’. In light of this, Nicole Ward Jouve insists Carter fails to support a feminist politics, since her fictional daughters rarely desire their mothers, and conversely, “no mother is seen as desiring.”⁴³ Again, I would say that Carter’s treatment of desire, in both daughters and mothers, is far more multifaceted than Ward Jouve allows. Carter’s position is relentless, and therefore often unsettling, in its disruption of the fantasies we construct around our origins, including feminist fantasies concerning the maternal body.

⁴² For this and the following sentence see Linda R. Williams, *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp. 121-3.

⁴³ Ward Jouve, p. 165.

It is not enough for Carter simply to deconstruct the myths that are handed down to us, but she also forces her readers to confront how we all piece together our own myths from the past's accumulation of ready-made meanings and/or symbols.⁴⁴ She exposes the "barrenness" of the archetypes or symbols in origin narratives through a rigorous questioning of how *we* empower those images and myths that are handed down to us.⁴⁵ Thus, in her deconstruction of matriarchal myths, Carter demonstrates how these often implicate women in contributing to a patriarchal order's violent repression of the 'other'. As I will be arguing in my readings of *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve*, even if the female subjects in these texts attempt to assert an autonomous identity through their reliance on fantasies of maternal power, they end up playing according to patriarchy's rules of mastery and violence. Carter herself has been strongly criticised for the elements of sexual violence in her texts, implying a valorisation on her part of female complicity with (sado)masochistic desires. I would argue that Carter's treatment of violence, especially in her earlier novels, does not articulate an authorial position of (naively) condoning such acts as rape or genital mutilation, but is rather a thorough and unflinching investigation of the (sexual) violence that often lies at the root of our origin myths. Her texts consistently question why humans feel the need to live by myths of violence. Furthermore, she remains focused on examining why that violence is predominantly directed towards women.

The need to demythologise is crucial to any project that is aimed at exposing the historical and ideological operations underlying mythic narratives, yet it is also necessary to take a step further and ask if there is anything we can offer in place of these myths. Is it possible to create new myths, or at the very least, remythologise, rewrite the cultural narratives that continue to have such a hold on our imaginations, without reinvesting them with the same discourses or frameworks of power relations? Linden Peach argues that Carter attempts to work through this problem in her search for a "third space"

⁴⁴ Sage, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, pp. 115, 119.

beyond binary thinking, shifting our frames of reference.⁴⁶ Or, as Elaine Jordan observes, her texts consistently explore “the possibility of revolt against the internal tattoos of ideology and naturalised, familiar myths”.⁴⁷ For example, Carter poses the question of “feminine lawgiving” in contradistinction to female victimisation, suggesting that the force of law is not merely oppressive but a source of pleasure and/or transgression for women, where the notion of prohibition is never theorised as the “singular monumental abstraction, *La Loi*”.⁴⁸

However, Carter’s persistent self-critique of her textual myth-making, and her refusal to valorise any one society, myth, or group of people often disrupts various feminist orthodoxies.⁴⁹ Marina Warner reminds us that Carter’s was never a conventional brand of feminism, rarely adhering to ‘popular’ feminist beliefs concerning what might be ‘proper’ forms of revolt. Her “discovery” of Sade’s usefulness in “illuminat(ing) the far reaches of women’s polymorphous desires”,⁵⁰ which offered “a new, fierce interior map of women’s sexuality”, tended to offend her contemporaries, who deemed her textual journeys into the discomfiting realms of perversion, masochism, collusion, and spectacle as “far too curious”.⁵¹ Perhaps, then, Carter positions herself as a ‘New Eve’, since her curiosity in exploring the possibilities of female transgressions is marked by “her gift of remaking the world for her readers”.⁵² For Carter, Sade offers a possible movement away from the reduction of female sexuality to reproduction, and in her rewritings of myth, particularly those surrounding maternal figures, she holds nothing sacred, especially the notion of a “natural bond”.⁵³ Carter rejects those ‘consolatory’ myths to which we are all tempted to cling, forcing her readers to confront and negotiate the often hostile realities of this world. Even if many of her texts fail to offer an entirely

⁴⁶ Peach, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Elaine Jordan, ‘The Dangerous Edge’, in Sage (ed.), p. 214.

⁴⁸ Jordan, pp. 194, 196.

⁴⁹ Peach, p. 163.

⁵⁰ Marina Warner, ‘Cunning and High Spirits’, in *Signs and Wonders*, p. 429.

⁵¹ Marina Warner, ‘Angela Carter’, in *Signs and Wonders*, pp. 49-50.

⁵² Warner, ‘Cunning and High Spirits’, p. 431.

⁵³ Angela Carter, ‘Sugar Daddy’, in *Shaking a Leg*, p. 28.

viable alternative to a patriarchal system, they do insist on the need for the individual or society to work *consciously* towards a different order, while revealing the limitations that are placed on the possibilities for doing so. Subversion, as she is also careful to demonstrate in her critique of the Sadeian libertine, does not always work as some utopian leap of the imagination, but is a long and complicated process, a struggle perhaps against one's own interior colonisation.

If anything, Carter's narratives are about survival, and are specifically concerned with the female subject's attempts to constitute an identity and speak unspeakable truths through crossing boundaries, negotiating limits, and shaping transgressions.⁵⁴ I will be keeping these tactics in mind, as I explore through my analyses of Carter's texts women's difficult positioning in relation to both the maternal body and paternal law. Although Carter predominantly speaks from the daughter's point of view, which is the perspective that I primarily focus on, and though her earlier novels are far more concerned with breaking free from the dominance of the patriarch, Nicole Ward Jouve reminds us that the mother is always "the story under the story".⁵⁵ In one of her autobiographical essays, Carter herself admits that she cannot tell the story of her own father without her mother invading the narrative; that the story of one cannot be told without the other since both of them represent for her "a peculiarly complex unit".⁵⁶ One of my primary interests in Carter's fictions is how she presents maternal/paternal figures as peculiar and complex units, reflecting on how our need to renegotiate our relations to origin myths necessitates a rethinking of our relations to both the mother and father, as differing yet mutual influences on our ways of conceiving gendered identities.

My examination of origins in Carter's work will thus follow a line of inquiry that considers her treatment of both patriarchal and matriarchal myths. Since her style of writing is also highly elusive and allusive, there are obvious implications to following

⁵⁴ c.f. Anne-Marie Smith, *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), in which Smith generally ascribes these same tactics to much of Julia Kristeva's work.

⁵⁵ Ward Jouve, p. 150.

⁵⁶ Angela Carter, 'Sugar Daddy', pp. 21-2, 26.

one reading or allusion over others, determining one's interpretation of these texts, which are "hybrids", and therefore open to multiple theoretical and thematic explorations.⁵⁷ It is my argument, however, that a study of Carter's engagement with myths of origin allows for a dynamic reading of her texts, opening the way to a more comprehensive understanding of many of the concerns that were important to Carter, as well as a feminist project of offering alternative and productive narratives of gender relations founded on a reciprocity and respect of differences. As I will be arguing in the last two chapters, Carter is very much involved with a feminine practice of writing, which, according to Hélène Cixous, involves ruptures and transformations, and is "a process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other".⁵⁸ In Carter's demythologising business, myth is in fact made anew, and her fictions provide worlds of possibilities, "generating stories out of stories".⁵⁹ Thus, the journey backwards into origins is experienced not so much as an abandonment of the present but as an extension of our dialogue with it, as a movement towards imagining and living new and different futures.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Peach, p. 168.

⁵⁸ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), p. 254.

⁵⁹ Sage, pp. 37, 50.

⁶⁰ Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 175.

Part One: Escaping Eden

...If the fall of man consists in the separation of god and the devil the serpent must have appeared out of the middle of the apple when eve bit like the original worm in it, splitting it in half and sundering everything which was once one into a pair of opposites, so the world is a Noah's ark on the sea of eternity containing all the endless pairs of things, irreconcilable and inseparable, and heat will always long for cold and the back for the front and smiles for tears...and no for yes with the most unutterable nostalgia there is.

~ Diane Arbus

from a letter to Marvin Israel, ca. 1960

Diane Arbus Revelations

London: Jonathan Cape, 2003

Chapter I: THE WORD, THE FLESH, AND THE FALL

i did not design this game
i did not name the stakes
i just happened to like apples
and i am not afraid of snakes
i am truly sorry about all this
i envy you your ignorance
i hear that it's bliss
~ Ani DiFranco¹

I've always thought the notion of original sin was pretty silly...it certainly gets horribly in the way of any attempts to persuade human beings to behave better than they generally do.

~ Angela Carter²

One of the most prevalent origin myths confronted by Angela Carter throughout her *oeuvre* is the biblical creation story in Genesis and its subsequent Judeo-Christian interpretations, which resulted in a theology of (original) sin/redemption, as well as socio-religious inscriptions of gender relations according to hierarchical models.³ Carter's interest in the Genesis narrative is articulated through a deconstruction of the ways in which our desires continue to be "held hostage" by the story of Adam and Eve, along with its ensuing mythology of the Fall.⁴ Her rewritings of Genesis often approach the Fall as a tale that is analogous to psychoanalytic models descriptive of the origins of sexual differentiation and maturation. The Fall, as Carter's work suggests, provides

¹ Ani DiFranco, 'Adam and Eve', © 1996 Righteous Babe Music/BMI.

² Angela Carter, 'Anger in a Black Landscape', in *Shaking A Leg*, p. 45.

³ It is necessary to keep in mind that nowhere in Genesis 1-3 is there mention of 'original sin'; this is an element that has been superimposed upon the Hebrew text by the New Testament, or Christian Bible. As a result, the Christian myth of the Fall has come to dominate our understanding and cultural perceptions of the Hebrew creation story in Genesis. Furthermore, though there is no mention of Eve after Genesis 5, there exists a wealth of Jewish apocrypha and post biblical exegeses that address themselves to her character. These commentaries also have had an extensive influence in constructing gender relations according to social schemas that rely on biological justifications for women's 'inferiority', dichotomously categorising male/female attributes. For an extensive compilation of these commentaries see K.E. Kvam, L.S. Scheuring, and V.H. Ziegler (eds), *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁴ Peach, p. 85.

Freud with his own structuring discourse, particularly his theory of the castration complex, which describes the male subject's 'fall' into knowledge of sexual difference. This fall, similar to the one we find in the biblical text, articulates a fear of 'woman's' sexuality, her economy of desire/pleasure perceived as a disruptive threat to the Law of the Father, whose word relies on a unity that represses female difference in the name of the One God (or, the one sex, 'man'). Thus, both the biblical and Freudian narratives assert a division between the sexes that is founded on a relationship of enmity.

In this chapter, I will primarily be focused on analysing two of Carter's short stories that explicitly link the biblical narrative to Freud's origin myth of sexual differentiation. I will show how both stories challenge the phallogocentrism embedded in these myths, as Carter rewrites the myth of the Fall through providing an alternative male perspective that refuses to reduce the other's, or women's, differences. Furthermore, Carter explores where the (female) flesh is representative of a feminine economy of pleasure or desire that disrupts the repressive authority of the paternal law/word. Before I begin my analyses of these texts, however, I will first briefly contextualise the ways in which Genesis itself positions Eve/woman as a disruptive presence that must be contained in her threat to a patriarchal order's desire for masculine unity. I will then show how this power of feminine disruption lends itself to various feminist appropriations of the myth in their attempts to offer a more productive reading of the biblical text, one that allows room for an alternative feminine knowledge that might bring into play a mutually reciprocal relationship between the sexes. Consequently, this will provide greater insight into Carter's own disruption of the myth's privileging of a masculine economy of desire that endeavours to repress the 'feminine'.

Western society's repression of the 'feminine' is specifically located in the text of Genesis 1-3 (including its corpus of rabbinical commentaries and scriptural exegeses), as it arises out of and has been used to sustain a patriarchal order. It is 'woman', or Eve, who plays the most crucial role in evolving receptions of the tale, since within the deep structure of the Genesis text, it is the 'feminine' that serves as an anomalous, mediating

element permitting various constructions of ‘man’ and his others.⁵ Likewise, as Pamela Norris observes, the Christian myth of the Fall has primarily served as a vehicle for defining the status of women in relation to men, prompting readers of the biblical text to ask: “What is the appropriate response to a woman offering the forbidden?”⁶ In the majority of scriptural exegeses, this question hinges on determining Eve/woman’s portion of blame in the expulsion from paradise. Eve tends to take on full responsibility for the ‘fall of man’, and her transgressive behavior has been consistently employed as a prescriptive warning against a woman’s ‘natural’ condition as temptress.⁷ Thus, if it is Eve/woman who is to blame for the breaking of taboos and man’s expulsion from the Garden, then to maintain the (patriarchal) social order, Eve and her daughters are necessarily ‘cursed’, safely consigned to their desexualised roles as ‘suffering’ child bearers. For instance, the figure of the Virgin Mother arises out of the Christian theology of original sin and redemption, where Mary as suffering mother redeems Eve’s ‘terrible flesh’. Overall, the vast range of rabbinical commentaries and Christian writings surrounding Genesis 1-3 set up a conflict between male reason and female passion. These varying interpretations of Eve and her transgressions have been used to situate ‘woman’ as the dangerous Other, threatening masculine self-control, and thus prompting a patriarchal order’s urge towards repressing female desires as a means for protecting its own rationalisations.

The obsession, however, with containing female sexuality creates in itself a strong impulse towards the forbidden. As Julia Kristeva argues, Eve’s transgression in

⁵ Pamela J. Milne, ‘The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture: The Implications of Structuralist Analyses for Feminist Hermeneutics’, in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 154-5.

⁶ Pamela Norris, *The Story of Eve* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 37; except where noted, my discussion throughout the rest of this paragraph is with extensive reference to Norris, see especially pp. 60-75, 79-80, 87-91, 102, 128-9, 156, 178-81, 235, 251-60

⁷ According to Ambrose, “the woman is responsible for man’s error” and *her* pleasure is the primary source of sin. John Chrysostom claims that it was Eve’s pride that led her into discourse with the serpent, which was a “rupture of disobedience”. Augustine, in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, agrees that original sin had its source in the woman’s pride or disobedience, however “it is not in her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master”; Adam is only culpable in his eating of the forbidden fruit because “he did not wish to make her unhappy”, in Kvam, Scheuring and Ziegler, pp. 139-40, 145, 151-4.

eating the forbidden fruit could be interpreted as an instance of Adam's sublimated desire to transgress the law; the responsibility for the man's shame or guilt is ultimately shifted onto the woman in an attempt to justify men's powerlessness to resist their own sexual desires.⁸ Accordingly, if women are positioned as the embodiment of a patriarchal order's unconscious desires, then they are also representative of the return of the repressed. To invest such an excessive amount of fear in 'woman' bestows upon her immense powers of disruption, whereby she has the potential to destabilise the rigid boundaries a patriarchal order often constructs in its wish to keep out or suppress what is threatening to its rationale. An example of this can be found in the Church Father Tertullian's diatribe against the 'dangerous' female sex, in which he accuses each woman of being an Eve:

The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of that divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.⁹

Apparently, though Tertullian perhaps did not intend such a conclusion, the daughters of Eve are so powerfully threatening they are capable of committing deicide. Although Tertullian and the rest of his fellow Church Fathers believe their own justifications for keeping women locked up in perpetual penitence and suffering, they have neither the first nor last word on the subject of Eve/woman. She often manages to disrupt from within the confines of her story the misogynist fears attempting to enclose her, exposing the ways in which male fantasies or narratives, due to the unravelling of their own inner logic, do not always succeed in containing female desires. For example, in Pamela Norris' comprehensive exploration of the historical development of the figure of Eve and her alter-egos in both religious and literary texts, she presents Eve's story as if it were an ongoing epic in which the first woman and her daughters undergo a series of

⁸ Julia Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women' (1974), in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 143.

⁹ Tertullian, 'On the Apparel of Women', in Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler, p. 132.

metamorphoses.¹⁰ It would seem, then, that contrary to the male narratives surrounding Eve, which attempt to securely fix and neutralise female desire, the only consistent aspect of Eve's character is in fact her plurality. Thus, there is no fixed 'truth' of Eve (or 'woman'), precisely because she has been repeatedly appropriated, reinterpreted and reimagined by readers of the biblical text in order to support various socio-cultural definitions of women.

If the Genesis text has been so adaptable to diverse interpretive strategies and aims, then we can read it as a myth that, by its unstable, fluid nature, is also accessible to feminist revisions. For instance, Christine de Pizan's 'The Letter of the God of Love' provides an early example of women's writing that endeavours to offer a feminist response to the male discourses surrounding Eve and her daughters. Although Pizan remains faithful to the Christian theology of original sin when she asserts that Eve/woman's sins were redeemed by the Virgin Mary, because this ultimately led to the glory of Christ's incarnation, she embraces the Fall as a "fortunate" event.¹¹ By doing so, she attempts to overturn a history of misogynist interpretations of Eve, which have played a substantial role in reinforcing patriarchal definitions of the female sex as deserving of its submissive role. Pizan claims that Eve was "made of very noble stuff", in God's image as much as Adam, and that "she never did play Adam false", having offered him the forbidden fruit in complete innocence, without "spite".¹² Pizan then challenges anyone who "would search...in the Bible just to prove me wrong", since the Bible itself supports her egalitarian reading; rather it is religious doctrine that has distorted Eve/woman's reputation, only providing examples of corrupt and immoral women in order to instruct young schoolboys "so they'll retain such doctrine when they're grown".¹³ Pizan's interpretation holds much in common with numerous contemporary feminist rereadings of Genesis. These have been predominantly aimed at

¹⁰ Norris, p. 2.

¹¹ Christine de Pizan, 'The Letter of the God of Love', in Kvam, Scheering and Ziegler, p. 239.

¹² Pizan, p. 236

¹³ Pizan, pp. 238, 240.

freeing the text from its androcentric biases through a confrontation with those translations and/or scriptural interpretations that emphasise a relationship of distorted inequality between the sexes.¹⁴

In support of this reformist, or revisionist, approach, which attempts to recover and reassert an egalitarianism believed to be present in Genesis, Phyllis Trible proposes the need for engaging in a 'depatriarchalization' of the Bible. Trible claims that because the intentionality of biblical faith is not patriarchal, then we need to reread the Bible from an alternative positioning to that of the patriarchal Israelites or later Christian exegetes.¹⁵ In other words, if we accept Trible's argument, then it is not the biblical text that is the problem, but a history and tradition of male-centred readings (mis)informing our understanding of the (original) messages intended to be discovered therein. On the other hand, Pamela J. Milne insists that we need to remain wary as to whether the Bible can indeed be liberated from its patriarchal heritage.¹⁶ Though Genesis attempts to present a universalistic perspective, it is written from the male point of view since the story's logic presents the primal human as male. Furthermore, even if the mythic theme of the Fall posits sexual differentiation as bringing mutual joy and complexity/pain to both men and women, it is ultimately used to shift the guilt of the Fall/sin away from God and 'man', onto 'woman' and the serpent. For Milne, then, a feminist reformist approach is unlikely to succeed in ridding the text of its androcentric biases. Thus, if we accept that the biblical text is entirely patriarchal, then tactics of deconstruction might provide the most viable means for confronting the underlying phallogocentrism of Genesis, while also allowing for the possibility of effectively changing our relations to a text that cannot be rejected because of its profound influence on western thinking.

This deconstructive approach is similar to the one practiced by Angela Carter in her rewritings of Genesis. Though in this chapter I will be exploring the ways in which

¹⁴ For a wide range of feminist readings that follow this approach see especially Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *JAAR* 41:1 (1973), p. 31.

¹⁶ For the following points throughout the rest of this paragraph see Milne, pp. 147, 149, 158-9, 162-3.

Carter offers more productive readings or rewritings of the biblical creation story, she nevertheless remains highly self-critical of the possibility of ever divorcing the myth from its misogynist heritage. In Carter's fictions, the figure of the patriarch is often representative of a monstrous god, and her female subjects' attempts at freeing themselves from the tyranny of the paternal law are fraught with difficulties, usually ending in failure. It is this struggle with the law that Carter attempts to negotiate, seeking out ways in which Eve/woman might articulate her desires so as to disruptively reveal the absence of female representation in both religious and/or psychoanalytic discourses.

As Julia Kristeva argues, the Judeo-Christian religions attempt to suppress the (female) flesh in their privileging of the (male) word, or God's Law, and so women's subsequent exclusion from the symbolic order is perhaps best demonstrated by the Genesis myth.¹⁷ This is because Eve's disobedience in going against God's prohibition opens up an alternative feminine space of fleshly desires, placing her outside the law since she fails to submit to its demand for the rejection of sensual pleasure. Thus, the Genesis narrative itself structures women's knowledge as corporeal, "aspiring to pleasure", and in its desire for masculine unity, represented by a monotheistic God, the text suppresses this female knowledge. The construction of the paternal law, then, relies on excluding women from its symbolic economy, since by designating 'woman' to the realm of the flesh, 'man' is granted the sole privilege of engaging in the discourse of the law. Paradoxically, however, the integrity of the law/word is kept in place by that threat of feminine desire: if 'man' is in possession of the law, his power over it is sustained by creating one who does not have the law and desires to seize it. In other words, the male is threatened with castration, necessitating the repression of the female's desire. As a result, sexual differences are inscribed according to a code of oppositions, and the relationship between the sexes becomes one of enmity.

In her analysis of this scenario, Kristeva is explicitly connecting monotheistic principles to those found in psychoanalysis, acknowledging that neither of them can be

¹⁷ This paragraph extensively refers to Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women', pp. 140-4, 151-4.

entirely separated from their patriarchal heritage. Kristeva insists that feminism cannot afford to deny biblical teachings or narratives, since to do so would be to ignore the roots/origins of the paternal law. Likewise, she urges the necessity of challenging some of the major precepts of psychoanalysis, or “Freudianism”, because even if its “analytic word” recognises “the abyss between the two [sexes]”, it continues “preaching” the impossibility of communication between them, ensuring its own Word.¹⁸ Angela Carter also simultaneously challenges and deconstructs monotheistic and psychoanalytic discourses to expose how they operate according to the same principles in their attempts to construct ‘woman’ as other to the symbolic law/word.

My examination of Carter’s rewritings of Genesis will show how she challenges the myth of the Fall, as it has been imagined by both biblical and psychoanalytic narratives, in order to provide an alternative discourse concerning notions of sexual difference. For Carter, the Fall is indeed fortunate precisely because it thrusts us outside the undifferentiated space of paradise, thus allowing for women’s flesh, their desires, to enter into history. By exposing western monotheism’s exclusion of ‘woman’ (the flesh) from its word/law, Carter simultaneously opens the “forbidden book” (PW: 288) of women’s bodies, which the creation myth endeavours so hard to keep closed. She achieves this by entering “the female body into a structuring discourse”, yet without mystifying women through some unified representation.¹⁹ Furthermore, Carter presents the Fall as a form of grace, as opposed to sin, potentially allowing for a productive alliance rather than enmity between the sexes. That enmity is particularly reinforced by Freud in his formulation of the castration complex, and because it is this model of sexual differentiation that Carter explicitly disputes in the texts I will be offering as examples of her rewritings of the Genesis myth (both in this chapter and the next), it is useful and necessary to provide a brief summary of Freud’s theory.

¹⁸ Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, p. 145.

¹⁹ Jean Wyatt, ‘The Violence of Gendering: Castration Images in Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and “Peter and the Wolf”’, in Alison Easton (ed.), *Angela Carter: Contemporary Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 62.

According to Freud, the castration complex is the defining moment for the (male) child's 'fall' into knowledge of sexual difference. The boy's "terror of castration...is linked to the sight of something", which is in fact 'nothing', the girl's lack of a penis.²⁰ When he first catches sight of the female genitals, which he can only interpret as a horrifying absence, the little boy stiffens (as if paralysed by Medusa's head), yet this stiffening reassures him, offering "consolation to the spectator" by reminding him that he still possesses a penis.²¹ Thus, the erect male organ, as Freud symbolically interprets it, is displayed as a sign of defence, or defiance, a weapon warding off or intimidating what the male perceives to be an "Evil Spirit". The castration complex leads to the successful dissolution of the boy's Oedipus complex, since where before he might have viewed the female genitals with "unbelief", now having accepted the absence of a penis (attached to her body), he recognises 'woman' as castrated.²² Therefore he must accept the possibility of his own castration, forcing him to give up his mother as love-object and identify with the father (or the father's prohibition against incest). To identify with this paternal law prompts the formation of the super-ego, which allows for the sublimation of sexual desires or libidinal drives, ensuring the progress of culture. Unfortunately, as a result of his fear of castration, the boy's attitude towards the female sex may later develop into either "horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her."²³ Freud seems to see no *other* possible relation to the 'other' sex.

As for the little girl, Freud admits in a somewhat baffled tone that his knowledge of her "developmental processes...is unsatisfactory, incomplete and vague."²⁴ His attempt at formulating a precise chronology of the female child's sexual development undergoes a number of dramatic changes, yet for Freud it always hinges on the question

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head' (1940 [1922]), in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (ed.), *Freud on Women: A Reader* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990), p. 272; all further references to Freud will be from Young-Bruehl.

²¹ For this and the following sentence see Freud, 'Medusa's Head', pp. 272-3.

²² For this and the following sentence see Sigmund Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' (1934), pp. 297-8.

²³ Sigmund Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinctions Between the Sexes' (1925), p. 309.

²⁴ Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', p. 300.

of castration as one of the most crucial factors in signifying the differences between the sexes. He asserts that the essential difference is rooted in the girl's acceptance of "castration as an accomplished fact, whereas the boy fears the possibility of its occurrence"; furthermore, because the girl has no fear of becoming castrated (since she already is), then "a powerful motive also drops out for the setting-up of a super-ego".²⁵ Thus, the female subject perhaps never successfully resolves her Oedipus complex, and if she ever does, its dissolution occurs only as a result of the "experience of painful disappointments", after which "she is cast out of her fool's paradise."²⁶ What exactly is this fool's paradise? Freud claims it is precisely her desire for the penis, which she recognises as "the superior counterpart of [her] own small and inconspicuous organ", and because "she has seen it and knows that she is without it [she] wants to have it."²⁷ Of course, she will never have 'it', so she must leave her delusional paradise of believing 'it' will be hers. She is compelled to give up her original identification or love-object (the mother) for her father, and accept his child (his law/the phallus) as a substitute for the penis she may never obtain.²⁸ It would seem, then, that the little girl is a little Eve, forced to denounce her desire/pleasure (for the flesh/penis and/or maternal body) and submit to the Law of the Father (a phallic economy). Significantly, the fact that Eve herself has no mother reveals the lack of the law's recognition of mother-daughter relations, as well as a maternal-feminine economy of desire.

However, what if the little girl was never introduced to this law, and what if the boy refused to play by these 'rules'? Or rather, if we remove Freud's 'law of castration', what happens to the notion of sexual difference as a relationship of antagonism, where the boy feels fear/contempt towards the girl for her 'lack', and the girl is mired in envy/inferiority for what she has been convinced is lacking (in her)? Carter's short story, 'Peter and the Wolf', explores these questions, rewriting the Freudian scene of the boy's

²⁵ Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', p. 299.

²⁶ Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', p. 295; also see 'Some Psychological Consequences...', p. 314.

²⁷ Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences...', p. 309.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality' (1931), p. 322.

discovery of sexual difference and the girl's 'failure' to leave her 'fool's paradise', imagining both in the context of the Fall. Or, for the wolf-girl in this story, there is no Fall, since she remains in her state of prelapsarian grace, (unconsciously) drawing the boy, Peter, into her own innocence of the law, whereby he experiences "the vertigo of freedom" (PW: 291). In answering psychoanalysis' privileging of sight in its reduction of anatomical differences, Carter sets up two crucial moments in her text centring on the boy's observation of the female genitalia/body. Contrary to Freud's description of this moment, in which the boy feels horror at the absence of a penis, when Peter is confronted with the sight of the wolf-girl's vagina, he sees what *is* there rather than what is lacking. As Jean Wyatt suggests, Carter "answers Freud's 'no thing' with a complex whorl of fleshly things, his 'nothing' with a material 'infinity'", and by doing so, the text avoids reducing "female difference to a logic of the same."²⁹

The story itself maps out a terrain of differences, where the alien strangeness of the 'other' is rendered both familiar, or less threatening, while still retaining its specificity of difference. Carter locates the folktale in an old-world European landscape, the story opening and closing with a description of the mountains where Peter spends his childhood. The mountains are viewed from Peter's perspective, and his shifting view of them is descriptive of his own journey of discovery. As the story opens, the "grandeur" of the vast range appears "monotonous" to the "indifferent eye" of one who has always lived there, ceasing "to provoke awe and wonder" (PW: 284). By the end, upon Peter's departure, he looks back at the place where he grew up and sees it for the first time, "as it might look to someone who had not known it as almost a part of the self" (PW: 291). While observing "the primitive, vast, magnificent, barren, unkind, simplicity of the mountain", the place regains its own strange specificity, and is transformed for Peter into the "wonderful backcloth for an old country tale" (PW: 291).

Peter's tale revolves around the moment when he sees "the thing he had been taught most to fear" (PW: 284), and how he comes to view that thing with a sense of awe

²⁹ Wyatt, p. 61.

and wonder, allowing the wolf-girl her otherness without dread or the desire to appropriate and/or reduce her difference. The wolf-girl is in fact Peter's cousin, and when his family recovers her, their attempt to make her one of them again by humanising her proves disastrous. She is truly 'other' in the sense that she is a borderline creature, neither animal nor human, though her animalistic, savage primitiveness seems at first her only attribute. The wolf-girl's shit even smells different: "the refuse of raw, strange, unguessable, wicked feeding" (PW: 287). She is fiercely feral, biting the grandmother's hand, and the wound will later fester and cause granny to die, perhaps as symbolic retribution for her own blind desire to domesticate the wolf-girl (PW: 286, 289). Although the old woman "had contracted with herself to love the child of her dead daughter", as soon as the child begins howling, the grandmother becomes terrified and retreats from the girl with revulsion (PW: 287-8). When the pack of wolves invades the house, come back for one of their own, terror overwhelms the entire family, since "that which they feared most, outside, was now indoors with them", and Peter regrets ever first seeing the wolf-pack and the strange girl among them (PW: 288).

However, before the wolves rescue their fosterling, Peter has seen the distinguishing mark of her human femaleness. In that moment he experiences the "sensation of falling", yet remains unconscious of any fear, drawn into the sight of "her girl-child's sex" while viewing "her intimacy clearly, as if by its own phosphorescence" (PW: 287). The wolf-girl crouches upright and:

Her lips opened...so that she offered him, without her own intention or volition, a view of a set of Chinese boxes of whorled flesh that seemed to open one upon another into herself, drawing him into an inner, secret place in which destination perpetually receded before him, his first, devastating, vertiginous intimation of infinity. (PW: 287)

The boy 'falls' into the girl's otherness, but without horror or contempt, without seeing the absence of a penis but a *presence*, and not a presence analogously reduced to the male organ, but one that is specific to the female. Thus, Carter rejects Freud's description of the boy's discovery of sexual difference, insisting that there may be *another* way of seeing, that there is in fact *something* to see. By offering this something as a *material*

infinity, as Wyatt pointed out, Carter articulates the female body without trapping it in the confines of a unitary discourse, allowing for a mode of representation that operates from and opens out into an unbounded multiplicity.

This different way of seeing, though, is never presented as a simple alternative in Carter's story, since Peter's first vertiginous contact with the 'other' is merely an intimation, and the boy must still struggle against becoming indoctrinated by the Law of the Father. As for the wolf-girl, she is allowed to return to her 'fool's paradise', if she ever left it. She had "closed up her forbidden book without the least notion she had ever opened it or that it was banned" (PW: 288), yet Peter has been allowed a glimpse into that book, and it is not the text he has been taught to appreciate or even accept. As a result, and because the world he lives in does not permit or encourage an understanding of the flesh as other than that which is banned, Peter becomes "consumed by an imperious passion for atonement" and studies with the village priest, learning to read Latin and the Bible (PW: 289). Carter indicates here that even if the child or individual sees differently to the prescribed vision, he or she must still negotiate his/her relationship to the symbolic order, since that order determines one's entrance into adulthood in its constructions of language and time. Peter's journey from child to adult, then, does not simply centre on his discovery of sexual difference, but on how he learns to *interpret* that difference. He is forced to negotiate his identity in relation to the safe familiarity or acceptance promised by the law/word and to what exists outside the law, the strange 'devastating' intimacy of the flesh/other.

Peter rediscovers that intimacy when he is allowed a second glimpse of the wolf-girl, or more appropriately, wolf-woman, as seven years have passed and Peter is leaving home to join the seminary, eager and yet anxious "to plunge into the white world of penance and devotion" (PW: 289-90). After the first night of his journey out of the mountains, he wakes to find the wolf-woman on the other side of the river where he has camped, and this vision of her provides him with the intimation of another world that has nothing to do with guilt and sin. Though she is presented as more animal than human, the

wolf-woman is a kind of primal mother, with cubs feeding from her “dangling breasts” (PW: 290). Rather than reacting in revulsion Peter is genuinely overcome with that sense of awe and wonder, which he once felt when he first saw the wolf-girl as a child. For Luce Irigaray, this awe and wonder is absolutely necessary to forming an “ethics of sexual difference”, whereby the woman and man are “always meeting as though for the first time”, precisely because “one will never exactly fill the place of the other”.³⁰ As we see with Peter, he not only refuses to reduce this female other to the reflection of *his* projected desires and fears, but while he watches her lap water from the river, he also appreciates how she herself has no awareness of any reflection:

...she had never known she had a face and so her face itself was the mirror of a different kind of consciousness than ours is, just as her nakedness, without innocence or display, was that of our first parents, before the Fall. (PW: 290)

Her knowledge is corporeal, or “informulable”, as Julia Kristeva would describe it.³¹ In the face of this *other* knowledge, Peter cries with longing to cross over to the other side of the river and “join her in her marvellous and private grace” (PW: 290).

For Hélène Cixous, who employs the myth of the Fall to structure a different discourse of relationships between self and other, grace is an experience of coming to know the other in non-appropriative terms, which she suggests can only be achieved, or rather *received*, after the Fall.³² This is because in the undifferentiated space of Eden there is no acknowledgement of otherness, since for Adam and Eve before the Fall they have no understanding of their (sexual) difference from each other or the divine. Their innocence, which has no knowledge of loss or death, is entirely meaningless, as Cixous believes the only meaningful innocence is one that is marked by the risk or temptation of knowing the other, yet without trying to *be* the other. We need to *know* the other, to recognise his/her difference, but only through a movement of detachment, situating

³⁰ Luce Irigaray, ‘Sexual Difference’, in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader, 4th edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p. 238.

³¹ Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, p. 140.

³² For my discussion throughout this paragraph see Hélène Cixous, ‘Grace and Innocence’, in M. Joy, K. O’Grady and J. L. Poxon (eds), *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 234-6.

ourselves in a difficult proximity in relation to the other. Thus, through the movement or experience of the Fall, in which we are “absolutely guilty” in our knowledge of the other, we might receive the grace of a “second innocence”. Or rather, we are innocent (not guilty) of appropriating the place of the other.

To relate this to Carter’s story, although Peter is ‘guilty’ in his knowledge of the wolf-woman’s flesh, he never attempts to possess her otherness for himself. Furthermore, when the wolf-woman runs off “into the bright maze of the uncompleted dawn”, into the story belonging to her, “a child suckled by wolves, perhaps, or of wolves nursed by a woman” (PW: 290-1), Peter does not appropriate that story as his own. He departs from the mountains, determined to make his way “into a different story”, one of his own making, and though he is struck by a “last gasp of superstitious terror”, it is because he knows the risk of becoming trapped or paralysed by a claustrophobic nostalgia for the old world he has chosen to leave behind (PW: 291). In his final glimpse of the mountains, he refuses to look back on his childhood as a lost paradise. Rather, it is a savage, impersonal, oppressive place that he has managed to escape. Through his movement of departure, he begins to move forward in a newly discovered innocence of the world, free to construct his future without the weight of sin or shame. Moreover, Peter’s second unexpected encounter with the wolf-woman during his passage out of the mountains, in which he accepts the vision of her ‘animal’ beauty as a gift of grace, describes what Cixous calls “a submission for what returns”, an experience of love for the “found”, for that which we never desired beforehand or thought of loving.³³ By embracing the other’s difference, Peter experiences without fear the free-fall into an infinity of possible identities and relations, revealing how “the vision of real difference, taken in without denial or defensive categorisation, opens the mind to the previously unsignified, springing the subject free from established categories of thought.”³⁴

³³ Hélène Cixous, ‘Writing Blind’, in *Stigmata: escaping texts* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 151.

³⁴ Wyatt, p. 61.

This acceptance and respect of sexual differences, disruptive of Freud's (specular) theory of castration, can be found in another of Carter's short stories, 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest', in which she presents a newly invented Adam and Eve who refuse to pay loyalty to the (phallic) law. Though the moment of recognition (of sexual difference) in this text is located in the male gaze, similar to Peter's vision it is a gaze that looks on the other with awe and wonder. Furthermore, the text proposes an alternative feminine relation to the law, opening up a space for the articulation of female desires. The short story suggests that Eve's perceived transgression primarily centres around her discourse with the serpent, with that which is outside the law. Thus, Carter implies that Eve's desire is threatening precisely because she does *not* desire the phallus (law) but rather the flesh/fruit, which is "desired to make *one* wise" (Gen. 3:6), promising a (fleshly) knowledge of pleasure. Ultimately, Carter poses the question: If a woman does not desire the phallus, if her desire is for something outside the law, then what precisely sustains a phallic economy in its definition of women's bodies as castrated/lacking?

As Hélène Cixous suggests, contrary to Freud's scenario, it is not anatomical sex that determines differences between men and women but how they negotiate their relations to pleasure.³⁵ Cixous claims that "every entry to life finds itself *before the Apple*"; or rather it is only when one is confronted with situating him or herself in relation to pleasure, that one might gain a necessary knowledge of the flesh that initiates our growth into full, responsible human beings. Like Kristeva, Cixous reads the Genesis text as one of the most significant examples of how patriarchal narratives attempt to exclude from the symbolic order a feminine knowledge that aspires to pleasure. The figure of Eve is representative of how 'woman' is the one who has to deal with this question of pleasure, since the creation story describes "a struggle between the Apple [the flesh] and the discourse of God [the word]." God's word is mediated by Adam to

³⁵ My discussion throughout this paragraph, including all direct quotations, is with reference to Hélène Cixous, 'Extreme Fidelity', in Susan Sellers (ed.), *Writing Differences: Readings from the seminar of Hélène Cixous* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), pp. 15-16.

Eve, and so she is allowed no direct relation to God, whereas the Apple presents itself to her as an unmediated interior, so that the “genesis of woman goes through the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure, and through a non-fear of the inside.” Thus for Eve, God’s threat that “you will die” has no meaning; it is an abstraction that has no connection to her own direct knowledge, which is corporeal, revealing that what is at stake in the law/word is a conflict between absence/presence. In Carter’s story, she explores how the girl’s (Eve’s) relationship to pleasure, expressed as a ‘non-fear of the inside’, leads the boy (Adam) to the discovery of a different discourse outside the Law of the Father.

Although ‘Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest’ demonstrates the possibilities of stepping outside the law, in order to do so the story paradoxically follows a movement from the margins or boundaries of the law to a secret interior, which is figured as a maternal space where the children gain a knowledge of fleshly pleasure. This journey to the interior prompts for the children a discovery of sexual difference directly related to their discovery of a lush sensuality in the world around them and in each other. Their fall into this guilty knowledge, however, is experienced as a form of grace, since both regard each other with a newfound innocence, and without fear or desire for appropriation. Carter positions the girl as a somewhat aggressive Eve, the initiator of this entrance into the realm of desire, while the boy is the one to follow her lead in accepting the forbidden, yet his acceptance opens up into “a multiple, universal dawning” rather than enclosing them in sin and shame (HF: 66). Carter may be following a close reading of the myth in her characterisation of Adam and Eve, picking up on those elements in the biblical text itself where Eve comes across as far more active due to her curiosity. However, her rewriting results in a different interpretation of the Fall, dismantling the notion of original sin. If sin is a matter of the flesh, as patriarchal interpreters of Genesis often assert, then Carter indicates that this is a particularly damaging myth. It not only attempts to conceal the very real relationships between men and women, but also restricts them within the boundaries of a law that prohibits any genuine discovery of love.

Carter opens her story with the description of an edenic landscape: a pristine, untouched territory; a vast valley “like an abandoned flower bowl” surrounded by mountains; and in its centre a dense forest (HF: 58). The outskirts of the forest have been settled by a group of Creoles, living in “prelapsarian villages where any Fall was inconceivable” (HF: 63). Never expressing curiosity in exploring the heart of the forest, the villagers are merely happy “to cultivate their gardens” (HF: 58). In spite of their lack of desire or curiosity, they create a mythical, malign tree, “whose fruits could have nourished with death an entire tribe”; though they knew the tree did not exist, its presence “categorically forbade exploration” (HF: 59). In this scenario, though the villagers have never in fact entered the heart of paradise, and therefore never experienced a fall, they construct for themselves a mythology imbued with threats and prohibitions. Carter seems to be suggesting here that perhaps no society can exist without structuring for itself a system of laws or taboos, yet I think more importantly she is exposing the absence upon which symbolic systems (or patriarchal myths) are often predicated. This becomes even more evident with the figure of Dubois, a botanist, widower, and father of the twins, Madeleine and Emile. In his attempt to return to some original unity with nature, Dubois rejects “knowing man” (HF: 61). He is represented as a kind of sterile, distant, unmoved deity, and not unlike the monotheistic God in Genesis, Dubois desires to keep his children in a state of undifferentiated innocence, guarded from any experience of knowledge outside the garden in which he plants them.

At the start of Carter’s story, Madeleine and Emile are infantile versions of Eve and Adam, and Dubois is an absent god whose only demand is that his children remain locked in their innocent purity. As they grow older, “he seemed to them more an emanation of their surroundings than an actual father, and from him they unknowingly imbibed a certain radiant inhumanity...a benign indifference...towards all those who were not beautiful, gentle and, by nature, kind.” (HF: 60-1). As twins, and for the most part left to themselves, their identities are founded on the reflection they give back to each other, and they become increasingly isolated in a perfect intimacy (HF: 61).

Carter's tone of irony in her description of the children's undifferentiated relationship, in which they realise they have no one else with whom they might share their discoveries, reveals how this sameness breeds a certain discontent or boredom, a lack of growth. It is precisely through reading their father's books that they begin to desire a knowledge for what he himself has tried to reject or keep from his children; thus, the law creates a desire for the very thing it prohibits.

The children begin exploring the forbidden forest, going further and further "into the untrodden, virginal reaches of the deep interior" (HF: 61), determined to eventually reach its "navel" (HF: 62). Though Emile and Madeleine refuse to believe in the mythical tree, they are fearlessly curious about it, partly rising out of their contempt towards the natives' own "incuriosity blended with a twinge of fear", and the sense that their world seemed incomplete, lacking "the knowledge of some mystery" (HF: 62-3). Significantly, at the age of thirteen, marking the onset of puberty, they decide to penetrate the heart of the forest, and without any desire for return; like Peter, they look back at their childhood home "with eyes pure of nostalgia for lost innocence...only with that faint, warm claustrophobia which the word, 'home', signifies" (HF: 63). What they discover in the forest is "a vegetable transmutation", where previously recognisable forms of natural wildlife undergo "an alchemical change", presenting an array of fantastical variations (HF: 65). As they journey towards that "central node of the unvisited valley" (HF: 62), the forest seems to envelop them like a womb, the changes in the landscape progressively taking on distinctly feminine-maternal features. One tree proffers fruit like oysters, another has breasts from which the children drink a milky liquid (HF: 66). Their exploration of this maternal terrain, the very thing that their world has been lacking, is marked by a lush exoticism and returns them to a fleshy origin that pre-exists the father's law, initiating a discovery of their own flesh.

However, this discovery is not without risks or sinister undertones, as Madeleine and Emile are also introduced to the tension of power relations as they gradually become "less twinned" from each other (HF: 65). Perhaps one of the most crucial moments in the

story, marking out the siblings' first intimations of sexual difference, is when a white lily bites Madeleine's hand, drawing forth blood (HF: 64). This may be symbolic of the adolescent girl's onset of menstruation, but the "fanged flower" (HF: 65) is also a rendering of the female genitalia, or at least a certain Freudian depiction of the *vagina dentata*, its seemingly white and innocent waxen petals deceptively concealing teeth. The text therefore not only exposes innocence as a somewhat deceptive and deadly ideal, but also points out the inherent antagonism set up between the sexes in phallogocentric discourses, which construct the female (flesh) as threatening. When they bathe together in a river, Emile can no longer ignore his sister's nakedness, associating her with the "carnivorous water lily" (HF: 64), and inspiring in him a momentary "unfamiliar thrill of dread" (HF: 65). Madeleine, sensing her brother's anxiety in relation to her, is now motivated by a desire "to make him do as she wanted, against his own wishes", thrilling in her own new-found power over him (HF: 65).

Just as we see in 'Peter and the Wolf', though, it is not so much the children's discovery of sexual difference, but how they comprehend those differences that informs their relations to the law and each other. Their journey into knowledge is fraught with danger, with necessary risk, as Cixous would urge, because without risking the disruption of the other, 'brushing' up against one's own sense of identity, there is no meaningful, or at least productive, experience of grace or love. Madeleine and Emile learn to negotiate a relationship to pleasure that moves them outside the paternal law/word, which restricts relations between the sexes to enmity or a reduction to the same. Similar to the Genesis myth, and Cixous' reading of the text, it is Madeleine (Eve) who deals with the question of pleasure through her disobedience to the paternal law. She insists that everything they discover must remain secret, convincing Emile of the need to conceal something from their father, which they have never done before. Emile at first believes his sister has "received some mysterious communication from the perfidious mouth that wounded her" (HF: 64), as if Madeleine, like Eve, has been holding discourse with a (wise) serpent. He discovers in his sister "the ultimate

difference of a femininity”; yet he does not view her with dread or contempt but rather with a desire for “this difference [that] might give her the key to some order of knowledge to which he might not yet aspire” (HF: 64).

Carter is subtly undermining here the ways in which a patriarchal order recognises an alternative feminine knowledge, yet in its refusal or inability to accept that difference on its own terms, ultimately attempts to repress the female body. For Emile, his awakening of desire is unsettling not only because he recognises something lacking within himself, thus penetrating to the heart of desire, but also because he consciously accepts this lack rather than project it onto his sister. In other words, Emile respects that Madeleine’s difference gives *her* the key to a feminine knowledge instead of attempting to possess it for himself; because the ultimate difference of femininity is something he might not even aspire to understand, he merely hopes to receive this ‘other’ knowledge as a gift of grace. Consequently, Emile’s non-appropriative desire both literally and figuratively opens up an alternative space in which the (maternal) flesh is allowed precedence over the (paternal) law.

The story concludes with the children reaching the centre of the forest, where they find a small inner valley with a fresh-water pool (which has no visible source, and is thus the navel/womb they have been seeking). Beside the pool they discover a “citronesque” incense tree, which nicely plays on the word *incest* (foreshadowing the story’s ending) (HF: 66). The tree has both masculine and feminine attributes, and is representative of an erotic alliance between the two, displaying elongated “flowers tipped with the red anthers of stamens” and “clusters of leaves” that “hid secret bunches of fruit, mysterious spheres of visible gold streaked with green” (HF: 66). On each orb there is “a round set of serrated indentations exactly resembling the marks of a bite made by the teeth of a hungry man” (HF: 66). The fruit does not present itself as forbidden, but invites itself to be eaten, and Madeleine laughingly calls the fruit “dessert” (HF: 66), accepting it as a gift from the forest. Significantly, this image of her eating the fruit is presented to us through Emile’s eyes. He experiences a moment of ecstasy,

comprehending his sister's specifically feminine pleasure, which dares to laugh at the law, rejecting its prohibition of the forbidden (flesh). Without protestation or anxiety, Emile silently appreciates the juice dribbling down his sister's chin, her "newly sensual tongue" licking her lips, and when she offers him the fruit:

Her enormous eyes were lit like nocturnal flowers that had been waiting for this especial night to open and, in their vertiginous depths, reveal to her brother in expressible entirety the hitherto unguessed at, unknowable, inexpressible vistas of love. (HF: 67)

Daring to step outside the law, then, experiencing a fall into fleshly knowledge might not lead to sin or shame, but to vistas of love. Madeleine and Emile, like Peter in his relationship with the wolf-woman, seem to have achieved that difficult proximity to each other's differences, coming together as if for the first time and without the fear of being consumed by the other. Their sense of awe and wonder allows them "a space of freedom or attraction, a possibility of separation or alliance."³⁶ They choose an alliance through the consummation of their desires, as Carter's story simply ends: "He took the apple; ate; and, after that, they kissed" (HF: 67). Even the taboo of incest is rejected in this garden of *earthly* delights, and in its disruption of the myth of the Fall's premise of original sin, which Carter claims is a pretty 'silly' notion, the text explores the possibilities of sexual relations operating outside the law. Or rather, paradise is ultimately discovered in an ongoing mutual relationship between the sexes, a reciprocity that is no longer delimited by fear of the other's irreducible difference but engages in a recognition and respect of these differences.

Carter's rewritings of Genesis suggest the need for escaping the limits of Eden while seeking out an alternative discourse of sexual differences that does not remain loyal to the paternal law in its repression of the 'feminine'. As Hélène Cixous argues, by confronting the limits of the biblical text we might also come to accept that we are not inevitably condemned if we step outside the boundaries of the law.³⁷ Moreover, it is this

³⁶ Irigaray, 'Sexual Difference', p. 238.

³⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'The (Feminine)', in Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 152.

willingness to risk the prohibitions of the law that indicates an economy of female transgression that opens the way to a discourse of feminine pleasure or desire, one that resists and subverts the monolithic unity of the father's law. Although I have initially examined Carter's revisionary approach towards the Genesis myth, we need to keep in mind that she predominantly remains focused on demythologising rather than remythologising. Thus, as I will be arguing throughout each of the subsequent chapters in this study, even if Carter's texts seek out possibilities for transgression, she primarily does so through a necessary confrontation with its limitations.

Chapter II: A MONSTROUS GOD

They were peaceful in bed as two married people who had laid in bed easily together all their lives...[B]ut, when she closed her eyes again, Melanie was inside the white igloo of the swan's wings. The swan was too big, too potent, to all at once stop being.

'It was a ludicrous thing, the swan,' she said. 'But so much work went into it.'

'He put himself into it. That is why it had to go...'

~ Angela Carter¹

Patriarchy, like the phallocracy that goes with it, are in part myths which, because they don't stand back to question themselves, take themselves to be the only order possible. That's why we tend to think of myths as representing secondary realities rather than as one of the principal expressions of what orders society at any given time.

~ Luce Irigaray²

[The Female Body]: Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain, settle it down, so it can never get away from you again.

~ Margaret Atwood³

In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter explores the problems that exist for the female subject when attempting to transgress or escape the Law of the Father. Contrasting with the stories discussed in the previous chapter, which focused on the male child's recognition of sexual differences, the novel's third-person voice is specifically gendered according to its female protagonist's perspective. My analysis of the text will examine how Carter engages in a deconstruction of what Freud claims is the little girl's "path to the development of femininity".⁴ Carter challenges the inherent difficulty of this feminine 'education' in order to expose how Freud's own discourse operates from a patriarchal stance, projecting onto women's bodies the repressive gaze of phallogocentric desires while

¹ Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, p. 174.

² Luce Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 23-4.

³ Margaret Atwood, 'The Female Body', in *Good Bones* (London: Virago Press, 1993), p. 46.

⁴ Freud, 'Female Sexuality', p. 336.

forcing them to submit to the Law of the Father. Although the text undermines patriarchy's specular economy of desire through its depiction of Melanie's adolescent fantasies, in which she expresses a feminine pleasure with regards to her own body, Melanie is nevertheless forced to negotiate her sense of self in relation to a symbolic order that demands the suppression of female desires.⁵ Ultimately, *The Magic Toyshop* is directly concerned with exposing how the violent myths of patriarchy are used to uphold that order, often signified through the Law of the Father and its symbolic system.⁶ Again, Carter links Freudian discourse to elements located in the Genesis myth, and through the figure of Melanie, who is representative of an adolescent Eve attempting to make sense of a chaotic, contradictory world, I will be investigating how these patriarchal narratives lock up or imprison the female subject in a femininity not of her choosing. Accordingly, patriarchy itself is figured as a monstrous system of oppression, and because the individual is socialised to accept the paternal law as necessary to one's entrance into the symbolic order, I will also take into account Carter's exploration of the inherent difficulties for both men and women in overthrowing an oppressive patriarch.

In its depiction of a monstrous god, or tyrannical patriarch, *The Magic Toyshop* might be read in the context of *Paradise Lost*. One of the central tensions in Milton's text is the individual's struggle with Authority (God). Milton presents Genesis as a maturation myth reflecting on the ways in which individuals must learn how to deal with authority in order to reach their full potential as responsible human beings, which can only be achieved through a fall into knowledge. In its general allusions to *Paradise Lost*, Carter's novel further dramatises that struggle between a father who would keep his children confined to a dependent state of infancy and the need for the subject's free will.⁷ However, unlike Milton's God, the patriarch in *The Magic Toyshop* is representative of a threatening, malevolent deity, yet because his actions are often motivated by fear and

⁵ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 68.

⁶ Peach, p. 73.

⁷ See Jacqueline Pearson, "'These tags of literature': Some Uses of Allusion in the Early Novels of Angela Carter", *Critique* 40:3 (1999), pp. 248-56.

insecurity, the status of the father's power is revealed to be extremely unstable. Uncle Philip is a "barely embodied principle", a "grotesquely exaggerated" patriarch, whose tyranny may in fact have very little substance behind the role or artifice.⁸ Thus, the text presents patriarchy as menacingly monolithic while simultaneously deflating it, revealing that "its greatest horror and its greatest weakness is that it is sustained by the force of its subjects' belief".⁹ Through the course of the novel, Carter's two protagonists, Melanie and Finn, struggle to break free from Philip's (patriarchy's) oppressive brutality, and it is only by overcoming their own fears of his authority that they are able to gain some measure of freedom from the stranglehold of his law. However, as I will be concluding, in this text subversion does not necessarily result in a different order, and even if the father is dispatched, there is the danger of continuing to live out our gendered identities and relations according to patriarchal myths.

The Magic Toyshop offers further insight into how the Genesis myth structures gender roles, providing a model for the child's recognition of sexual differentiation and subsequent socialisation. On one level, Carter appreciates the significant socio-cultural role the myth plays in providing the individual with an imaginative means for negotiating his or her identity in relation to the symbolic order. If read as a maturation myth, then the Fall itself is representative of the need for departure from Eden/paradise, which is symbolic of the childhood world that we must all leave behind. Accordingly, Adam and Eve's act of disobedience is not so much a rebellion against authority, but indicates the natural emergence of the individual consciousness in relation to the group/society.¹⁰ In other words, through disobedience (or transgression of the law) the child learns how to confront and test the limits of the social order as a means for defining his or her place in society, for understanding what kind of (gendered) behaviour is socially accepted or condemned. Furthermore, as Lyn M. Bechtel argues, the limitations voiced in the text are not so much punishments but descriptive of life's realities, since the hardest lesson of the

⁸ Gamble, p. 71.

⁹ Gamble, p. 72.

¹⁰ Lyn M. Bechtel, 'Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4b-3.24', in Brenner, pp. 84-5.

myth is in its emphases on learning the ability to control and accept one's *lack* of control over the arbitrariness of life and death.¹¹ In this sense, Genesis might be interpreted as a productive model for humans, a myth we can live by, since it provides us with an imaginative vehicle for negotiating those interactive relationships that exist between individuals and communities.¹²

However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that those relationships, as structured by the myth itself, are rooted in a patriarchal society. Thus, the myth defines gendered relationships and identities according to culturally constructed sexual roles that are repressive of both men and women, restricting them to masculine and feminine identifications that do not allow for any mutual interaction between the two. Moreover, because Genesis is a patriarchal myth it primarily relies on and is used to further reinforce a paternal authority that demands obedience to its word/law. Of course, Milton would argue that obedience to the Authority of God is a matter of free will, yet Milton's own stance is rooted in a theology of original sin/redemption arising out of the Christian myth of the Fall. If we interpret the biblical creation story as a maturation myth, yet read it strictly from the perspective of the Hebrew text, then the character of God, or Yahweh, becomes highly ambiguous. As David Penchansky observes, the Hebrew myth is in many ways concerned with revealing the "monstrous aspects to the divine", or rather, God the father as representative of a monstrous patriarch.¹³ Because this is closely aligned with my own reading of Genesis, as well as my reading of *The Magic Toyshop*, it will prove useful to take a brief look at how this interpretation potentially allows for a subversive approach towards the oppressive elements of the myth (an approach Carter herself attempts in her novel's representation of a monstrous god).

By focusing on the inherent contradictions in the biblical text, particularly in its devising of prohibitions and tests, David Penchansky believes the myth itself poses the

¹¹ Bechtel, pp. 107, 109.

¹² Bechtel, pp. 114-16.

¹³ David Penchansky, 'God the Monster: Fantasy in the Garden of Eden', in G. Aichele and T. Pippin (eds), *The Monstrous and the Unspeakable: The Bible as Fantastic Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 44.

following questions: What are God's motivations here? Why the divine threat of death? Why the need to keep humans inferior to him?¹⁴ Because this father god is so intent on deliberately withholding knowledge from his creations, yet without clear justification, then Yahweh's character is extremely ambivalent; he is both malevolent and weak in his desire to keep humans inferior. According to Penchansky's interpretation of the text, after their transgression the humans hide from God not because their souls are corrupt, but because they are afraid of his power; thus, in the face of their disobedience God either seeks the destruction of the humans or he is entirely indifferent to their fate. Moreover, when thinking about the historical contexts of the myth, its own origins, we need to ask: What sort of historical group would portray its own god as a monster? The Yahwist myth is generally accepted to have been written during the Kingly period in Israelite history, and so God as tyrant was perhaps used to criticise the excesses of Israel's leaders, the story therefore affirming that society's marginalised classes. In this sense, the myth is highly subversive, since contrary to usual origin myths that attempt to structure or establish the status quo, the Hebrew creation story not only implicitly questions authority but also insists on the need for doing so. As Penchansky argues, modern culture should have a resurgence of interest in this dangerous/unstable god, since such a god might provide the only tenable explanation for the world as we experience it. Thus, Genesis remains useful to our own contemporary society because it allows us to challenge the limits of power; if we accept that the myth presents God as a tyrannical father, then he is if anything an *ordeal* humans must endure, the problem they must work to overcome in negotiating their relations to power and/or the law.

Penchansky also suggests that examining the biblical myth from the perspective of fantasy provides further subversive tactics, and Carter herself employs elements of fantasy in *The Magic Toyshop*, particularly the ones that Penchansky claims are present in the creation story. For instance, similar to the general narrative structure found in

¹⁴ My discussion throughout this paragraph, as well as the next two where I contextualise these arguments in relation to *The Magic Toyshop*, extensively refers to Penchansky; see pp. 45-7, 52-9.

fantasy (or folk tales), the Genesis myth reveals how humans achieve new levels of maturity by going through an ordeal/test against an evil authority figure who resists their growth. Likewise, Carter's protagonists are a young Adam and Eve who must learn how to survive an ordeal, achieving maturity through transgressing the law of a tyrannical patriarch. By doing so they not only find the means for undermining a repressive authority, which they had believed was monolithic in its extent of power, but also discover the possibility for a more mutual reciprocity between the sexes than the patriarchal myth encourages. As Melanie observes, after Finn returns from destroying the swan (which is representative of Uncle Philip's oppressive law, as well as patriarchy's oppressive myths):

He must have been through a great ordeal. It must have been like the wedding-dress night. In the pleasure garden, Finn had walked in the forests of the night where nothing was safe. 'I have been in that place, too,' she thought. (MT: 172)

Melanie refers back to the night she tried on her mother's wedding dress and was locked out in the garden, which becomes for her a nightmarish Eden, and this scene itself (which I will be discussing in detail further below) is crucial to analysing Carter's view of Genesis as a particularly oppressive myth for the female subject. Although Melanie and Finn eventually manage to escape their own private and hellish versions of Eden, because both have gone through that ordeal it becomes a *shared* experience, allowing them to overcome their fears of the tyrannical patriarch.

Finn and Melanie are also able to overcome those fears once they manage to see through the charade of paternal power as a monolithic force. Like the deity in Genesis, Uncle Philip symbolically plays dual roles: as a parent who must be left behind and as a foe who must be vanquished. By seeking to keep humans in ignorance and dependency, God becomes their jailer, just as Philip is the warden of his household, virtually imprisoning all the family members by terrorising them through threats, prohibitions and punishments. However, as Penchansky argues, the seditious structure of the biblical text effectively exposes God's strikingly human flaws, characterised not only by his insecurity and jealousy when attempting to preserve the integrity of his word/law, but

also the relative ease with which his word is undermined. For instance, he is outwitted by a serpent (his own creation). Similarly, Philip attempts to make Finn in his own image when he orders him to rape Melanie, which Finn refuses to do, instead informing her of Philip's plans, thus gaining her trust and outwitting Philip. Also, Philip is a "cuckold", his wife and brother-in-law carrying out an incestuous affair right under his unsuspecting nose (MT: 195). When Philip's commands are thwarted, such as when both Finn and Melanie spoil his puppet shows by not performing in them according to his strict rules, his reaction is blustering, fearful and abusive. Penchansky interprets God's own reaction to be the same when Adam and Eve disobey him, since their disobedience in itself reveals his ineffectualness in rigidly being able to sustain his law. Ultimately, such an unflattering depiction of the deity, as might be located in the biblical text, works to undermine all authority. As I will be exploring in more detail further on, Uncle Philip's own monstrous aspects are in fact his weaknesses, ultimately allowing Finn and Melanie to transgress the paternal law.

However, the nature of that transgression, as well as its success or failure, is highly ambiguous, particularly when interpreting Melanie's character and actions. Sarah Gamble believes that Melanie's role as heroine is marked out by her refusal to play by the rules, causing patriarchal structures to collapse.¹⁵ Jean Wyatt is not so optimistic, reading Melanie's character as descriptive of how the female subject becomes an object in a patriarchal order that forces girls to put on the "veil of femininity".¹⁶ Melanie may have broken free from her Uncle Philip's domineering control, but by the end of the novel it appears she has been so thoroughly socialised by the patriarchal order's inscriptions of femininity, that in fact none of its structures seem to have collapsed. Doing away with the father does not always rid one of his laws. This is not to say that the text offers no hope of confronting or dismantling symbolic systems that endeavour to suppress or restrict an autonomous female desire and/or subjectivity. If anything, Carter

¹⁵ Gamble, p. 68.

¹⁶ Wyatt, p. 65.

remains intent on exposing how patriarchy is not a monolithic force, and that its insistence on a (masculine) unity in representation often unravels according to the inherent flaws of its own oppressive logic.

As Luce Irigaray argues, regardless if patriarchy, or phallicism, claims an absolute base of power, that power is essentially “erected on nothingness: a father’s womb”.¹⁷ For instance, both monotheistic and psychoanalytic discourses posit this father’s womb, a problematic assertion that reveals patriarchy’s own tenuous foundations. In Genesis, a male deity *speaks* the universe into being, eradicating the potency of a female presence in reproduction. By investing all power of creation or representation in the name of the father, this disallows any possible imaginary that includes the notion of God the mother. This exclusion, however, is predicated on a fiction, a nothingness, precisely because it does not reflect on the reality of (reproductive) gender relations, but only expresses phallogocentric desires in determining those relations. Thus, the very real presence of mothers (or feminine-maternal desires) is capable of disrupting a symbolic system that would keep them repressed. Freud also attempts to repress the mother’s presence, or the maternal body, as a source of desire. Although this is forbidden according to the incest taboo, when Freud insists on the need for the little girl to give up her mother, he is in effect requiring the female child to define *herself* as a ‘little mother’ so that she might answer for the father’s (oedipal) desires. Or rather, the female subject is not permitted to invest any desire in her identification with the mother, but must take her father as the *only* object of her desire in order to reinforce his law.¹⁸ The daughter is therefore severed from the mother, as her identity is now solely dependent on the name of the father.

However, Freud is often troubled by the failure of many of his female patients to conform to this prescribed path to femininity, which depends on how well the daughter

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still (London: Athlone Press, 1992), pp. 53-4.

¹⁸ See especially ‘Female Sexuality’, and for an extensive analysis of how Freudian discourse reinforces this scenario, see Jane Gallop, *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

has surmounted her attachment to the mother. He claims that “complications” arise when the girl reverts to her maternal attachment, or when she repeatedly changes her position (in relation to her maternal/paternal identifications).¹⁹ It would seem, then, that Freudian fictions, like so many unifying patriarchal narratives, reveal their own uncertainties when faced with the actual multiple possibilities that are involved in the formation of human and/or gendered identities. Therefore, as Irigaray points out, because a phallogocentric symbolic order believes itself to be the only order possible, thus failing to question its own premises, then patriarchy itself is a kind of myth, one that might be effectively challenged through exposing its inherent instabilities.²⁰ In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter challenges the underlying flaws of a phallogocentric order, the text operating as both an effective analysis of and a damaging critique against the myths patriarchy uses to violently appropriate and determine subjective identity, particularly female identity.

One such ‘myth’ that Carter attempts to rewrite, or at least expose in its illogical premises, is the Freudian theory of female narcissism. She ruthlessly deconstructs the repressive logic of psychoanalysis’ underlying phallogocentrism in its attempts to strip the female subject of any real autonomous desire. By exposing how the girl’s narcissistic desire is not so much for herself but for the image of a femininity that is projected onto her by the male gaze, Carter forces us to question whether there truly is such a thing as *female* narcissism. For instance, in the opening pages of the novel, fifteen-year-old Melanie discovers “she was made of flesh and blood”, and as she explores her new body, she luxuriates in “the supple surprise of herself” (MT: 1). Linden Peach points out that Carter is emphasising what has been traditionally suppressed in fairy tale and/or myth: the adolescent girl’s pleasure in her body and accompanying discovery of sexuality.²¹ That may be, but Carter is also quick to disclose the aim of that pleasure when she reveals how the majority of Melanie’s fantasies are obsessively focused on some imagined future husband. If we compare Melanie’s “phantom bridegroom” to the

¹⁹ Freud, ‘Female Sexuality’, p. 337.

²⁰ Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous*, p. 23.

²¹ Peach, p. 75.

fantasised husband concocted by the housekeeper, Mrs. Rundle, it becomes clear that in spite of their ages, they both dream of the same thing (MT: 2-3, 6, 8). The only fulfilling role they seem capable of imagining for themselves is as somebody's wife. Granted, this may be a desire specifically instilled in them by the demands of a patriarchal system, but this is precisely Carter's point. She shows how that system structures women's fantasies and fears around what Freud defines as one of the major components of female narcissism: a woman's desire to be loved. In this sense, Melanie is at first presented to us as the perfect model of a successfully feminised young girl, at least according to psychoanalytic discourse.

The text goes on to expose the extent to which that positioning of female passivity situates the young girl's desires in a dependent relation to a masculine specular economy of desire. Melanie expresses a number of typical adolescent girl's anxieties and fantasies centring around her physical appearance and its sexual appeal for an imagined male audience. She neurotically fears she might get fat on Mrs. Rundle's bread pudding, because then nobody would love her and she would die a virgin (MT: 3). She compares herself to Romeo and Juliet, who were married and dead of love by the age of fourteen, concluding that her own body had probably reached its peak and was now destined to deteriorate or mature, since "she did not want to think she might not be already perfect" (MT: 9). She spends hours in front of her mirror, affecting various poses, mimicking Pre-Raphaelites and Toulouse Lautrecs, "a pale, smug Cranach Venus", Lady Chatterley with forget-me-nots in her pubic hair, and all in preparation for her potential husband (MT: 2-3). When she surreptitiously puts on her mother's wedding dress, the surprise of her reflection delights her, recalling Milton's Eve, as Melanie momentarily feels she was "sufficient for herself in her own glory and did not need a groom" (MT: 16).²²

On one hand, these scenes where Melanie takes pleasure in discovering her own body might be interpreted in a positive light, as potentially subversive of Freud's

²² See *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, lines 460-80, where Eve first discovers her reflection.

discourse. For example, Sarah Gamble reads Melanie's journey into the "realm of narcissistic desire" as indicating the real object of her desire to be herself: her "wonderfully self-absorbed autoeroticism keeps breaking through her reveries", and she is merely trying out roles in front of the mirror without having to commit to any one of them.²³ Accordingly, femininity is shown to be a costume, not a natural condition, where adolescence serves as its blueprint. On the other hand, Gamble admits that even if Melanie's desire grants her a sense of power because she is conscious of it, she is already regarding herself from the male perspective. Jean Wyatt also agrees that although Melanie seems to discover herself for herself, she is actually "already a part of a system of representations that defines her as object".²⁴ She is trapped in a "closed circuit [that] makes a mockery of self-discovery"; as a woman recedes behind the veil (of femininity), her reflection becomes distorted by the forms dictated to her by culture.²⁵ Melanie's autonomous image is therefore only an illusion since her status is already that of an object. Even if no one else is present, the mirror represents herself as "subject to the world's gaze", and it is only a delusion to believe that she is in possession of that gaze; Melanie is thus embracing her function "as cultural sign in a symbolic system not of her making". Although Melanie will later *attempt* a refusal to play by the rules of patriarchy, her power of transgression remains limited by the mirror-image that has been foisted upon her. She views herself according to a masculine desire, or rather, her sense of self is experienced through the male gaze; her pleasure in her developing body and her sense of power in her feminine allure is primarily informed by and serves as a reflection of patriarchal images of female sexuality.

According to Irigaray, in a phallogocentric system, man makes woman powerful only to reproduce himself, to ensure a faithful reduplication of *his* desires, and thus woman's only place is that which is appropriate for man's need of her.²⁶ Therefore, what

²³ For this and the following two sentences see Gamble, pp. 69-70.

²⁴ Wyatt, p. 69.

²⁵ For this and the following two sentences see Wyatt, pp. 70-1.

²⁶ Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, pp. 45, 47.

Freud would call female narcissism is not so much a 'natural' component of the little girl's mental life, but something that has been both constructed for her by the society in which she lives, and perhaps projected onto her by Freud's own discourse. Thus, as Irigaray observes, a woman participating in a phallic economy never knows what she could have desired for herself, and when she does speak her 'truth', the female subject unveils this "economy of illusion", revealing the place supposedly hers but actually assigned to her, produced by man and endured by her.²⁷ Though Melanie never manages to articulate or even fully comprehend her 'truth', her adolescent fantasies nevertheless reveal the cultural role that has been assigned to women, as well as how women are socialised to accept that role as their own. Melanie's desires originate in and are expressed through a specular condition that disallows her any individual or autonomous play. She is permitted only the one possibility of fashioning herself according to phallogocentric inscriptions of the maternal-feminine.

Furthermore, because the female subject must identify with the paternal law in order to gain acceptance into the symbolic order, then this forces her to define her origins solely in the name of the father, ultimately cutting her off from productively being able to imagine her origins in relation to the maternal body.²⁸ Significantly, Melanie is incapable of imagining either her own or her mother's origins, which of course can be read as the child's 'natural' revulsion towards accepting the parent as sexually active. However, Melanie's conviction that her mother was "born dressed" (MT: 10) also indicates how the mother, and by extension the daughter's understanding of her, is determined according to socio-cultural signs, where mothers and daughters are trapped in an imaginary that refuses to allow for the representation of the maternal flesh/desire. Though Melanie feels quite grown up when she attempts to imagine her parent's premarital sexual intercourse (and so perhaps her own conception), it is couched in somewhat abstracted, darkly romantic Lawrencian imagery: "Had [her father] already

²⁷ Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, pp. 61, 65.

²⁸ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 76-7.

sacrificed his smiling bride to the dark gods?" (MT: 13). Perhaps Melanie has a vague intimation here of the ways in which female desire is sacrificed to the desires of a patriarchal order, which keeps 'woman' contained in her role as mother-wife. She revolts against the idea of finding herself in this same position, refusing to comprehend why her mother might have kept the wedding dress so perfectly preserved all these years (MT: 13). We are left to assume the mother was saving it for her daughter, a common tradition, but indicative of how this culturally produced maternal role is foisted onto daughters by their mothers who have also accepted it as such. Thus, the text challenges mother-daughter relationships as they have been constructed in a patriarchal system.

Carter continues to deconstruct Freudian theory as a narrative that is analogous to the Genesis myth in order to reveal how both endeavour to suppress autonomous female desires. For instance, Melanie is positioned as an adolescent Eve who already has "a well-developed sense of guilt" (MT: 5), and in the scene where she puts on her mother's wedding dress, she feels like a "grave-robber" (MT: 15). This not only foreshadows her mother's real death and the girl's subsequent guilt that she was the one to have killed her, but is also symbolic of how the female subject must put on a femininity that assigns her the role of mother while also violently severing her from her own mother. Although in *The Magic Toyshop* the mother is absent throughout the text, she is initially quite present for Melanie, as a potent figure whom Melanie desires to emulate, at least for the image of sophisticated femininity she represents. In secretly putting on her mother's dress, Melanie is conscious of this being a transgressive act, an attempt to take her mother's place, to *be* the mother: "she dabbed stale Chanel behind her ears and at once smelled so like her mother that she glanced at herself in the mirror to make sure she was still Melanie" (MT: 14). The dress itself becomes a tempting serpent, as the satin "slithered over her" (MT: 15), promising her some illicit knowledge of feminine power. The dress, however, is actually too big for Melanie, indicating that the role assigned to a young girl by a patriarchal order is both ill-fitted and immense enough to swallow her to the point where she disappears. Melanie becomes entangled and

trapped in the gown's "acres of tulle", wrestling with the veil "blinding her eyes and filling her nostrils"(MT: 15), just as young girls are often ensnared and smothered in the veil of femininity that is thrown over them, enshrouding their own desires.

Carter explicitly figures Melanie's initiation into the patriarchal order as an ordeal. At first, Melanie accepts the images of femininity that are projected onto her because they promise a safe haven or sense of belonging, since to become 'successfully' (hetero)sexualised according to the prevailing laws of the symbolic order is to be 'securely' accepted by one's socio-cultural group. She is seduced by the deceptive allure of the dress, just as she is seduced by the patriarchal images of femininity reflected back to her in the mirror (symptomatic in itself of how the daughter is seduced by the father's law). This seduction, however, slowly turns on her. While wearing the wedding dress she decides to walk out into the garden, drawn by the moonlight transforming the landscape into some virginal, untouched paradise (MT: 16). Again, she engages in a form of fantasy, believing the dress and the romance of the garden at night transform her into a grown-up Eve, a powerful temptress confident in her unique allure. As Melanie strolls through her private Eden, she feels that "she was the last, the only woman", the entire universe safely enclosing and revolving around her (MT: 17). Suddenly, the "alien loneliness" of infinity panics her, as "terror crashed into the garden" and she discovers she has locked herself out of the house (MT: 18). The very thing that had offered her an idyllic, glamorous identity proves to be a threatening, suffocating space where she discovers herself uprooted, exposed and dangerously unstable. Likewise, throughout the novel Melanie's romantic illusions will be stripped away one by one, and though "she had felt she was pregnant with herself", the ideal grown-up self she had believed to be gestating inside her suffers a "miscarriage" (MT: 20). She is shoved out of her childhood into a harsh reality where she does not belong, where she has no secure sense of autonomous selfhood; she is an Eve trapped in a brutal, chaotic wilderness rather than some sheltered paradise.

In order to get back into the safety of her house, Melanie's only option is to climb the apple tree that reaches up to her bedroom window, and even if it had once been "her playmate tree", its fruit now seems sinister and poisonous, the tree itself an ordeal she must survive (MT: 20). She is forced to take off the dress as she climbs, and becoming conscious of her nakedness, as if exposed "in the ultimate nudity of the skeleton", she feels herself "strung up between earth and heaven, kicking blindly for a safe, solid thing in a world all shifting leaves and shadows" (MT: 21). Just as she did with the unwieldy veil, in her clumsy scramble Melanie begins "wrestling with the tree", the dress in her arms flapping like white wings in her face (MT: 22). All of this encapsulates Melanie's later experiences, when she struggles to find her footing in the cold hostility of Philip's world, and is 'raped' by the swan as she plays Leda to her uncle's grotesquely sinister marionette. Furthermore, in its obvious allusions to the Genesis myth, the scene describes how the female subject must struggle with the paternal law, taking on a disproportionate guilt for her transgression of that law. Similar to (prelapsarian) Eve, who has no concept of death, transgresses the law in pursuit of her own desire/pleasure, and as a result is 'cursed' with the role of suffering child bearer, Melanie is 'punished' for exploring her fantasies. By the end of the first chapter, her mother has died and she comes to believe "it was the fault of the wedding-dress night, when she married the shadows and the world ended" (MT: 77). Like Eve she is held responsible for allowing death into the world, since Melanie considers herself to be "the girl who killed her mother" (MT: 25); and like Freud's little girl, she is now expected to become "a little mother" to her younger siblings (MT: 28, 31).

According to Freud, the ambivalence in mother-daughter relations arises out of the daughter's need to 'kill off' the mother in order to take her place. Because the mother and daughter inevitably engage in a jealous rivalry for the father's affections, or so Freud insists, then the little girl develops an inherent fear of the mother (of being killed by her),

which in itself develops into a death-wish against the mother.²⁹ However, Carter exposes the ways in which this psychoanalytic scene functions according to a violent appropriation, not only in its putting to death of the maternal body, but also in its negation of the young girl's sense of identity. Melanie reacts to the death of her mother by smearing her mother's makeup on her face in "a formalised mask of crimson and black" (MT: 26), and smashes her own mirror with the desire of seeing "herself gone, smashed" (MT: 25). All pleasure that she might have once experienced in viewing her reflection has been robbed, as she has now begun to suspect that the mirror itself is false, merely reflecting back patriarchal desires. Melanie's own desires are asphyxiated. Though previously she had found "death inconceivable", she suspected however that it might be "a room like a cellar, in which one was locked up and no light at all" (MT: 6). Indeed, Melanie is now thrust into the claustrophobic, sordid world of her uncle's toyshop, its dark cavernous space suppressing any freedom of desire or play (MT: 39).

The oppressive atmosphere of Uncle Philip's toyshop is representative of a patriarchal order, which Irigaray argues closes women up in house and family, in "final, fixed walls".³⁰ This is because 'man' desires "fixed bonds" rather than "ties which are always developing", and so he turns female bodies into "private properties", constructing 'woman' in his own desired image with mirrors that "conserve and freeze [his] desires".³¹ As Margaret Atwood indicates, the heterogeneity of feminine desires threatens a phallogocentric order's rigid circularity of desire, and so to keep the female body 'caught' in the mirror of phallogocentrism, a patriarchal order does everything it can to "stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain, settle it down, so it can never get away".³² Likewise, when Melanie enters her uncle's house, she is presented with her mute Aunt Margaret, who is literally collared with a choker necklace representing the leash that keeps her chained to her husband's law. Also, as Philip's 'private property',

²⁹ Freud, 'Female Sexuality', pp. 332-4.

³⁰ Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, p. 25.

³¹ Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, pp. 9, 16, 18, 24.

³² Atwood, p. 46.

she is meant to 'instruct' Melanie in her role as an adult woman: silent, servile, suffering, and beautiful, both of them merely "planets round a male sun" (MT: 112-13, 140).

Again, the house (or structuring discourse) that is meant to safely enfold Melanie in fact alienates her. She desperately searches for a way "to make herself at home [because] she could not bear to feel such a stranger...so insecure in her own personality, as if she found herself hard to recognise in these new surroundings" (MT: 58). Transported from merely one father's house to another's, Melanie is trapped in the "harsh, unloving truth" (MT: 94) of yet another Eden that allows her no room in which to mature, as she struggles to negotiate her sense of self in relation to a domineering authority. This is perhaps descriptive of adolescence itself, yet Carter also indicates that for a young girl these 'growing pains' are especially difficult, since in a patriarchal order the female child is taught to internalise a sense of shame, which acts as a form of social control over women in their own relations to their bodies-identities.

The Genesis myth itself is a narrative that has been used to 'shame' women, just as Melanie feels guilt for her mother's death, perhaps because she had taken such transgressive pleasure in exploring her own body. That internalised shame is reinforced even further as she struggles to make her way out of adolescence into adulthood, acknowledging her experience in the context of the Genesis myth: "Eve must have felt like this on the way east out of Eden.... And it was Eve's fault" (MT: 94). Furthermore, her sexual awakening truly commences once she is forced to negotiate her identity in relation to the realities of the male sex (as opposed to her previous fantasies of an imagined lover). This awakening is explicitly imbued with a highly self-conscious guilt or anxiety directed towards her body. The first person Melanie meets when she arrives in her uncle's house is Margaret's younger brother, Finn, who plays Adam to her Eve. Eventually, they form a tentative alliance in their struggle against the monstrous patriarch, but initially Melanie feels directly threatened by Finn. She is overcome by a wave of attraction and repulsion towards him, as he gives her "a half-frightened, half-

pleasurable sensation” (MT: 34, 54, 61). Significantly, it is Finn who forces her to give up her romantic fantasies of the ideal husband:

She remembered the lover made up out of books and poems she had dreamed of all summer; he crumpled like the paper he was made of before this insolent, off-hand, terrifying maleness, filling the room with its reek. She hated it. But she could not take her eyes off him. (MT: 45)

Confronted with the disturbing reality of Finn’s masculinity, Melanie begins to feel her own imagined sense of self crumple up before his eyes (MT: 54). Furthermore, Finn seems to be on the side of the father’s law. He admonishes Melanie when he sees her wearing trousers, informing her she is “a walking affront” to Philip’s ideal of femininity, and advising her on how she should wear her hair so as not to spoil her “pretty looks” (MT: 45, 62). Finn, like Adam to Eve, is the one who mediates the word of God/Philip to Melanie, and Lucie Armitage argues that he distinctly takes on aspects of the Father, as the novel sets up an “Oedipal struggle with another male for sole control over a doll”.³³ Indeed, when Finn dictates Philip’s rules and prohibitions to Melanie, this is not simply because he fears the punishment he or anyone else might receive if they fail to obey those demands, but by taking on aspects of Philip’s power Finn perhaps unconsciously perceives he might gain some of that power for himself. Thus, although Finn is primarily concerned with transgressing the law in order to escape the oppressive tyranny of Philip, he is often engaged in that murderous oedipal rivalry with the Father. As a result, Melanie is situated as an object of exchange between them in their power struggle. I would argue that Carter is demonstrating here how the male child, in order to establish his own identity, is also seduced by the paternal law, keeping in place its violent, repressive treatment of women. However, even if Finn struggles against the rules of patriarchy (as I discuss further on), that struggle poses greater difficulties for Melanie.

Melanie seems to have become entirely ensnared within the mirror of phallogocentrism, dependent on the image it provides her because she has not been

³³ Lucie Armitage, *Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 203-4. This also refers to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’, to which Carter’s novel extensively alludes, though unfortunately I am not able to explore this aspect of the text.

allowed any other means for securing her identity. For example, when she realises that she is about to receive her first kiss, Melanie is immediately anxious about her appearance because she has not seen her reflection in a long time (MT: 101, 103). Although she is comforted by seeing “herself as she thought she looked”, reflected in Finn’s gaze (MT: 105), as he embraces her Melanie is overcome by the sensation that she is being enveloped by a black crow, and the kiss is not at all as she had imagined or hoped it would be (MT: 105-7). She wishes for an audience to observe their kiss, because then at least “it would seem romantic”, as if out of some film; or that she herself might become a voyeur, safely removed from her “undesiring” body, which nevertheless fails to disengage itself, as she is “convulsed with horror at this...rude encroachment on her physical privacy, this humiliation” (MT: 106). Melanie feels as if she is “consumed” (MT: 106), incapable of articulating a response of either passion or revulsion, simply because all she knows is that she is expected “to be kissed” (MT: 105): to be a passive recipient of Finn’s intrusive and appropriative masculine desire. Significantly, it is when Finn closes his eyes during their kiss, when she can no longer “see her own face reflected in little in the black pupils of his subaqueous eyes” (MT: 105), that Melanie begins to panic. She is lost without the mirror of *his* gaze, which might at least confirm her desirability, even if she herself can only feel a complete “blankness” (MT: 107).

One of the reasons why Melanie feels increasingly alienated in Uncle Philip’s house is because it does not have any mirrors, failing to provide her with at least the illusive freedom of being able to play with her own self-image (as she was once able to do). This lack of mirrors is representative of Philip’s overbearing law, since he believes he is the only mirror-image with which his ‘children’ should be concerned, just as Adam and Eve are created in God’s image. Furthermore, the world belonging to Uncle Philip is determined by the rigidity of its prescribed limitations, its lack of play, as he claims, with an irony he himself misses: “I don’t like people playing with my toys” (MT: 86). Philip’s humourless authoritarianism, which reduces his creations and the people around him to a mere functionality, “suppressed the idea of laughter” (MT: 124). He is very

much like the biblical God in Genesis who never laughs, and Carter's ironic presentation of Philip's over-determined laws reads as a form of textual transgression. In other words, Philip's severity is so exaggerated it is almost excessively unreal; by forcing us to laugh at the ridiculousness of his surplus of restrictions, the text exposes the chinks in a patriarchal order so as to undermine its seemingly monolithic authority. Furthermore, Philip's laws cannot possibly be sustained or effectively reinforced without his presence, which is in fact more of an absence. Since he rarely interacts with the members of his family, his dominance only remains in place by taking firm hold of his subjects' imaginations and fears. When Melanie first sees his puppets, she insists that they are "too much", overwhelming her until she feels she herself has become a doll, reality and fantasy blurring unrecognisably in a chaos of illusion (MT: 68). This not only sums up the entire edifice of Philip's world, in which Melanie has become stranded, but also exposes that what lies beneath the logic of a patriarchal order is nothing more than an artifice, an untenable foundation.

For Carter, a patriarchal order might be nothing more than a mere confidence trick, which relies on successfully duping its victims in order to retain its illusion of power. This illusion does have a real effect on people's lives, however, and is sustained by the myths and/or laws it constructs to perpetuate itself. If, as Jean Wyatt suggests, in *The Magic Toyshop* the closed space of the family doubles as a cultural space, then Philip's toyshop can be read as a cultural site where the myths of patriarchy are sustained; yet Carter is also playing a *serious* joke on patriarchal mythmakers, exposing an imaginary that is crude, blunt, and violent.³⁴ For instance, Philip's puppet theatre is the church/religion where he is God, manipulating his dolls with a rigorous precision, while his audience is expected to participate in the show according to his ritualistic yet arbitrary rules (MT: 126-7). Though his shows are evidently amateurish and banal, those watching are forced to make a pretence of solemn appreciation because it is the only permitted reaction (MT: 130-1). To veer from these rules is to invoke Philip's wrath. He

³⁴ Wyatt, p. 68.

brutally beats Finn when the boy ruins one of his performances, clumsily tangling the strings of the puppets and making a lewd mockery of Philip's conceited 'high art'. Philip's authority is demonstrated by his puppet-play (his myths), and he loves his mannequins more than the humans around him. When he forces Melanie to play the role of Leda, she realises "he was resenting her because she was not a puppet" (MT: 144). Philip's ply-wood swan is itself representative of the monstrous patriarch, recalling that in the myth of Leda and the swan, it is Zeus who is masking himself within the form of the rapacious bird. Although Melanie is terrified of the swan, she reassures herself by feeling "superior to Uncle Philip's mediocrity", and is capable of laughing at him because she recognises the whole farce for what it is, that the puppet swan is nothing more than a shabby "grotesque parody" (MT: 162, 164-5).

However, Melanie's fear remains in place, as she is threatened with the possibility of "giving herself to the swan" (MT: 162). This is not only an expression of her sexual anxieties surrounding her attraction to Finn, but also of submitting to the Law of the Father, which entails a loss of her own autonomy. At first, Melanie knows her participation in the puppet play is only a harmless charade, and that the puppet swan was "nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings" (MT: 165). As the swan moves towards her, however, and as she compliantly resigns herself to lying beneath it, she is overcome with horror, since "looking up, she could see Uncle Philip directing its movements" (MT: 166). The puppet is revealed in all its 'reality' to be an extension of her uncle, the one orchestrating this 'rape'. Later, when the show is over, even if the swan seems "pathetic now its motive power was gone", no longer animated by its strings, Philip himself remains "an elemental silence which could crush you to nothing" (MT: 167-8). Thus, Melanie is the good girl who accepted the father's law, played according to his rules by acting out his assigned role of femininity because it promised her an identity, only to discover that the father's desire makes her his object. This, Melanie realises, is not some farcical game, but the very real physical and psychical violence that the paternal law inflicts on the female subject, and it is no laughing matter:

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

Melanie passes out from the sheer terror of becoming irreconcilably split in two, and Jean Wyatt describes this passage as an enactment of violent father-daughter relations, in which the girl's 'rape' is experienced as a "psychic dismemberment".³⁵ Melanie is split into an object and a nothing (within), and so lacking that subjective centre, "reality haemorrhages", exposing the violence of gendering masked by the father's love, which is offered as a bribe or gift, an idealisation of the father's power in relation to a dependent (female) self.³⁶ Or rather, the father seduces the daughter, convincing her that her identity is dependent upon his acceptance of her desire (for him), and the only way he will accept that desire is if it is contained within the appropriate modes of femininity that he dictates to her. Therefore, as soon as Melanie realises that her autonomy has been nothing more than an illusion, that her desires have always been contingent upon playing by the rules of the patriarchal game, she is rendered other within herself. This is because, to reiterate Irigaray, she is incapable of articulating what she might desire for herself, and the pain of this realisation is so violent that it causes her to lose consciousness; thus, even if she refuses to play according to Philip's rules the attempt nearly crushes her to 'nothing'.

In this sense, Carter asserts the extreme difficulty faced by the female subject when trying to transgress the paternal law. As Jane Gallop reminds us, since the (patriarchal) symbolic order is what gives the girl an identity, then merely dismantling or giving up the law is not so simple; it would have to be a repeated giving up, a continuous process that works towards rediscovering "some feminine desire...that does not re-spec the Father's law".³⁷ In other words, this desire would no longer operate according to a

³⁵ Wyatt, pp. 65-6.

³⁶ Wyatt, p. 67.

³⁷ For this and the following sentence see Gallop, pp. 78-9, 91.

phallic, specular economy, but would discover a way to transgress the law without necessarily making transgression itself the Law, since, after all, revolt against the father *is* the Oedipal complex. The struggle to imagine a productive form of female transgression is one that Carter repeatedly returns to in her texts. However, in *The Magic Toyshop*, she seemingly focuses on the son's revolt rather than the daughter's. Although Finn's refusal to play by Philip's rules might be interpreted as yet another Oedipal revolt, he does struggle against conforming to the violent masculinity that is expected of him. Thus, Carter exposes how deeply both women and men become entrenched in the roles assigned to them. Finn, however, is allowed greater room for transgression than Melanie, as seen in the following passage, in which Carter emphasises the female subject's more limited opportunity for manoeuvring outside the law.

When Philip orders Finn to rehearse the 'rape scene' with Melanie by physically raping her, Finn refuses to do so, even though Melanie is 'asking for it', in a manner of speaking. Melanie is taken up with the idea of giving her virginity to Finn, which she believes might be "the real beginning of a deep mystery between them", but Finn immediately deflates this romantic notion when he attaches the word 'fuck' to Melanie's imagined anticipation of the act (MT: 149, 151). Finn basically calls things as they are, disallowing both himself and Melanie any illusions concerning their situation. Melanie prosaically claims: "I think I want to be in love with you but I don't know how", and Finn responds by telling her she sounds "like a woman's magazine"; that what she feels "is because of proximity, because I am here" (MT: 155). After Finn dismembers and buries Philip's swan, the culmination of his revolt against the patriarch, he goes to Melanie, distraught, seeking comfort from her *proximity* rather than any sexual desire to possess her. Respecting one's proximity to the other, as Cixous urges, is perhaps a 'real beginning' to genuinely productive (gender) relations. In this sense, Finn attempts to fashion for himself an alternative relation to the law, one that does not depend on a violent repression of the other. Melanie, however, feels smothered by her relationship with Finn, and is revolted by the prospect of being with him forever. This is primarily

because she can only view herself as a little mother-wife, and incapable of seeing any other alternative, she merely gives in with “a depressed sense of the inevitability of it all” (MT: 177-8). Melanie is forced to accept that she is trapped in a system that domesticates and locks up her desires, love itself becoming a pathology, an alienation for her.³⁸

Thus, Finn may have chopped up the swan, dismembering the phallic body, but for Melanie, like the patriarchal order and its oppressive myths of femininity, the “swan was too big, too potent, to all at once stop being” (MT: 174). Though she believes their experiences are now “parallel” since they have both gone through an “ordeal” (MT: 172-3), it seems that like Eve after coming out of Eden, Melanie will escape the toyshop still faced with the ordeal of being dependent on the male for her sense of self, still circumscribed within his desires. Therefore, even if Carter’s deconstruction of Freudian narratives attempts to expose the ways in which femininity and masculinity are contrived masquerades, she remains highly sceptical as to whether we can entirely free ourselves from the myths that have shaped our socio-cultural identities. The construction of gendered identities are naturalised through the myths and/or symbolic systems handed down to us, and so her texts assert the necessity of continuously challenging patriarchal narratives in their failure to provide an imaginary that is productive to sexual relations.

Although *The Magic Toyshop* expresses this scepticism towards completely dismantling the Law of the Father, like the short stories discussed previously, it begins to offer an intimation of different relations to otherness. As Jean Wyatt argues, Finn and Melanie forge a mutual dependence, and according to a brother-sister bond rather than one of husband-wife.³⁹ This is reminiscent of the relationship between Madeleine and Emile, and like the young boys in both of Carter’s stories, Finn refuses the phallic function, forfeiting the rights of patriarchy, and in effect disrupting male dominance and male fears of being demoted to the feminine. Ultimately, according to Wyatt, Carter’s text refuses to idealise or eroticise this sibling model, but rather deflates notions of power

³⁸ c.f. Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, p. 2.

³⁹ For this and the following three sentences see Wyatt, pp. 72-6.

and romantic fantasies that are dependant on the male. Finn and Melanie's recognition of mutual need, in contrast to Philip's one-dimensional self-sufficiency, exposes a dominant masculinity that is in fact implausible, a failed masquerade, which in itself is dependent on a repressive logic that eventually implodes from within. I would agree with Wyatt's reading here, since Uncle Philip's house is burned down due to his own oppressive tyranny, perhaps indicating the end result of a patriarchal order. However, we cannot forget that it is Finn who is allowed the right of transgression against the father's law, which may in fact only position him as a replacement for the patriarch. Melanie herself is not permitted any such active form of revolt, and in the end, she still discovers herself "in Finn's face; there she was, mirrored twice" (MT: 193). I would argue, then, that Wyatt herself seems to idealise this sibling model, which perhaps does not even apply to Carter's text. Finn and Melanie are explicitly depicted as an Adam and Eve, conclusively tied together as man and wife, and with all the hierarchical power structures that relationship implies.

However, the novel does not end on an entirely bleak note. Finn and Melanie do manage to escape from the authority of a monstrous patriarch, having survived their passage from childhood into maturity. Though Carter is not quite clear about what they have escaped *to*, it is certainly a fortunate fall into a world of wider possibilities, at least in comparison to the limitations of the oppressive Eden they have left behind. Melanie and Finn may still be trapped in the Genesis myth, informing their sense of identities according to feminine/masculine norms, but this is because Carter recognises that the struggle to free ourselves from patriarchal myths is a *continuous* process, the 'problem' humans must work to overcome. There is, however, as Wyatt rightly points out, that tone of mutual recognition between Finn and Melanie, which may also indicate the potential for an alternative experience of gender relations. As they flee the burning house, Melanie thinks: "Now we have shared all this, we can never be like other people. We can only be like ourselves and one another", and then acknowledges aloud, "I have already lost everything, once", with Finn replying, "So have I" (MT: 199). They seem to have

experienced a fall into that second innocence, which Cixous believes is necessary to discovering a non-appropriative relationship to otherness, of coming to know the other without trying to possess the other or project one's own truth onto the other's identity.

So perhaps they might also achieve between them "a new human identity", which Irigaray asserts can only come about when we are capable of imagining a 'play' between the sexes that "would exclude any relationship of mastery to the origin: any master signifier for the desire of origin or the origin of desire."⁴⁰ For culture to advance, we need to find new models of sexual identity, where a woman is situated and valued as a *she* in relation to *herself*, and this will only happen when "women and men [are] wed beyond an already defined horizon".⁴¹ In other words, because the phallic order restricts sexual desires to the boundaries of the paternal law, thus freezing a mobility of relations between the sexes, then to undermine that order men and women need to learn how to move *between* their differences, to become "creators of new horizons" that would "enable a meeting with the other".⁴² *The Magic Toyshop* concludes with a similar meeting between the sexes, yet Carter leaves us somewhat uncertain as to whether this meeting will actually lead to a 'new horizon', an alternative relation to the origin and its myths of violence and mastery. Finn and Melanie are left alone, seemingly outside the boundaries of the father's law, yet they remain situated in the terrain of the Genesis myth: "At night, in the garden, they faced each other in a wild surmise" (MT: 200).

Lucie Armitt believes the text's ending indicates that there is "no Edenic, utopian escape", particularly because for Melanie life with Finn will continue to be patriarchal since he shares "a fascination with women as spectacular commodity".⁴³ Furthermore, as Sarah Gamble observes, because Melanie and Finn are left "strangely bereft in the absence of the patriarch", not quite certain how to proceed into a different story, the text perhaps also leaves the reader stranded in that 'wild surmise', forced to

⁴⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 72; also see *Elemental Passions*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, pp. 3-4.

⁴² Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, pp. 90-3.

⁴³ Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*, p. 211.

question: What happens when “stories end and systems are overthrown”?⁴⁴ I agree with Gamble’s analysis here and will be following her lead in the next chapter. According to her, *The Magic Toyshop* initiates the breakdown of ideological structures but fails to think beyond, while Carter’s post-apocalyptic fantasy, *Heroes and Villains*, “proceeds directly into that speculative future”, where she begins to imagine further possibilities for establishing a different symbolic order. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that those possibilities are never fully realised, as *Heroes and Villains* is located in yet another Eden, albeit a decaying, claustrophobic paradise, where the sexes encounter each other and yet fail to establish a relationship of mutual respect because of their repressive fear of the other’s differences. Also, even if the text’s protagonist engages in a form of female transgression, embracing her role as a disruptive Eve, this attempt to dismantle the patriarchal order collapses on itself, since Marianne’s ‘play’ with myth essentially relies on an iconic image of femininity that helps keep the paternal law firmly in place.

It would seem, then, that Genesis itself is the myth Carter’s fictions find difficult to leave behind. Her continuous return to this narrative indicates a process of struggling against the old myths while working towards providing new ones; thus her rewritings of Genesis, particularly in their focus on the figure of Eve, are vital experiments. Though the characters of Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* and Marianne in *Heroes and Villains* (discussed in the following chapter) struggle with articulating and asserting a feminine identity, often posing more problems than solutions, they allow Carter to explore the ways in which patriarchal narratives might be effectively dismantled. Through challenging a phallic economy of desire, which *is* monstrous in its violent repression of the (m)other, Carter persistently seeks out a “new Eden”,⁴⁵ one where the cultural myths of women’s oppression would no longer inform gendered identities and relations.

⁴⁴ For this and the following point by Gamble, see p. 73.

⁴⁵ Peach, p. 85.

Chapter III: EVE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

...so long as we have not recognized another *other* – which is not the other person...but *the other logic in me*, my strangeness, my heterogeneity... -- then the cult of the 'origin', of the inaccessible foundation, of the unnamable paradise will embrace its 'return of the repressed' in the form of a 'faith', or, more brutally, in the form of fratricidal wars that claim to reconstitute the lost foundation.

~ Julia Kristeva¹

Throughout this chapter I will continue examining the ways in which the Genesis narrative acts as a delimited mythical space, threatening the female subject's identity with a patriarchal order's repression of feminine desires. As suggested in the previous chapter, *Heroes and Villains* picks up from where *The Magic Toyshop* ends, as Carter forces us to imagine what exactly might replace a patriarchal order once we have done away with it. *Heroes and Villains* is situated in a post-apocalyptic terrain, whereby the destruction of civilisation might allow for a break from history's master narratives and potentially open up an alternative space allowing for a different order. My analysis of the text will initially focus on how Carter disrupts this myth of the apocalypse; even if the apocalyptic ending somewhat paradoxically promises a new beginning, the text reveals how the new world only turns out to be a repetition of the old. That continuation of the old world, as I will then be examining, is demonstrated by the text's opposing communities of Professor and Barbarian, whose reliance on dichotomous, hierarchical constructions of self and other keep them trapped in a violent history of 'fratricidal wars'. As Julia Kristeva suggests in the above quotation, as long as we fail to change our relations to otherness, to recognise how we ourselves are other, then we will always regress to a primal, violent space, one that remains informed by patriarchal myths reinforcing an enmity between self and other. Kristeva's theory of abjection, which in itself is an exploration of the primal violence located in the subject's formation of

¹ Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p. 163.

identity, will contribute significantly to my ensuing discussion of how the boundaries constructed between self and other lead to a further violence between the sexes. The text's male and female protagonists both repress the other in their attempts to assert their own sense of autonomy. Ultimately, *Heroes and Villains* poses the question: Is it even possible to devise a different symbolic order where relations between the sexes would no longer stand at an impasse, and if so, how? With this in mind, the majority of my analysis will focus on how Carter herself interrogates whether the privileging of the maternal might offer an alternative productive model for gendered identities and relations. Such an investigation, as outlined in the following two paragraphs, must necessarily centre on the figure of Marianne, whose precarious positioning of female transgression is one of the most highly problematic elements in the text.

Like *The Magic Toyshop*, the third-person narrative of *Heroes and Villains* follows the perspective of a young girl as she is thrust into the alienating terrain of a chaotic world where she struggles to survive in a society that is hostile towards the 'feminine'. That survival, however, is achieved through learning how to play by patriarchal rules of mastery and violence. Though she attempts to refuse the role of victim, she manages to do so only by victimising others. Marianne falls prey to the myth of the Monstrous Mother and its fantasy of power, which places her in an abject positioning that not only further alienates her from her desires but also perpetuates a patriarchal order. This is primarily because she fails to create an alternative myth or narrative for herself, and in spite of her seeming transgressions she remains loyal to a phallic law that imposes upon women an iconic status of femininity explicitly located in the Genesis myth. For example, although Marianne believes she is asserting her independence when she runs away from the sterile enclaves of the Professors, the tribal/familial myths of her adopted community (the Barbarians) threaten to incorporate or subsume her sense of autonomous identity, restricting her to a maternal-feminine role that is figured as both abhorred and desired, feared and repressed. Marianne discovers herself cast in the role of dangerous temptress, whose willingness to disrupt the law, to

transgress its boundaries, makes her both extremely potent and highly vulnerable to a society that fears the 'feminine'.

As Carter observes, the 'sins' of both Eve and Lilith, with whom Marianne is associated, are used to explain and justify the "bad heredity" that a masculine imaginary believes is inherently passed down to all members of the female sex (HV: 124). More significantly, because of Eve/woman's desire for that which stands outside the law, as a perpetual reminder of her transgressions she is afflicted with the 'curse' of bearing children. Or, at least according to patriarchal interpretations of the biblical text, a woman's only possible path to redemption is through her role as suffering mother. Thus, like Marianne in *Heroes and Villains*, the female subject is encouraged (in patronising tones) to "embrace [her] destiny with style" (HV: 124), since her only access to the symbolic order is to suffer and bear children. Marianne initially revolts against this maternal positioning, yet her only means for survival is to learn "how to manipulate the mystique of myth and spectacle for her own ends".² In doing so, however, she continues defining herself according to her reproductive role, which ends up reiterating a patriarchal order's repressive view of women. Ultimately, her attempt to play with myth fails to bring about a new world, and she is hardly representative of a radically New Eve but merely "Eve at the end of the world" (HV: 124). Although she has elevated herself to a position of authority, she is only "Queen of the Midden" (HV: 61), tyrannically ruling over the refuse heap of western civilisation, which, if it ever revives again, will most likely build upon and repeat the same cycles of violence and hierarchical power structures with which it began and brought itself to an end.

Thus, in the text's depiction of a post-apocalyptic world, we realise that even if most of civilisation seems to have crumbled away, the patriarchal order breaking down in chaos as a result of its own violent impulses, its myths nevertheless remain firmly in place. If anything, Carter is intent on exposing the inherent dangers of continuing to live by these myths. She shows how the violence inscribed in our origin narratives,

² Gamble, p. 79.

particularly the ways in which they construct hostile divisions between self and other, are at the root of violence not only in our present but also foreseeable future. That is to say, in our origins lie our ends, or, as T. S. Eliot once expressed it: “in my end is my beginning”.³ *Heroes and Villains* occupies this ambiguous borderline existing between beginnings and endings, linking the biblical creation myth to the apocalyptic vision of The Book of Revelations, which in its emphasis on God’s power to uncreate the world functions as a mirror text for Genesis. Likewise, *Heroes and Villains* demonstrates this process of “uncreation”, where all has “reverted to chaos” and dissolves in “an ever-widening margin of undifferentiated and nameless matter” (HV: 136). Accordingly, although the text is located at the end of the world, it merely enacts a regression to some primal scene, which is not so much a lost paradise but rather an unrepresentable space, a claustrophobic nightmare. In this sense, Carter explores “the ways we project fantasies onto the world and then stand back in horror when we see them come to life”.⁴ The myth of apocalypse is in itself a horrific fantasy projected onto the world, imagining a violent ending in the belief that this might clear the way for a new beginning. However, as *Heroes and Villains* indicates, the apocalypse does not allow for a break from the past but in fact depends on a history of violence that only ends up generating further violence. Thus, Carter reveals how our notions of endings are inextricably and often problematically tied to the ways in which we fantasise our beginnings. She places under scrutiny how our failure to change our relations to the origin, to its myths, makes inevitable an end that is only a violent repetition of the beginning, in which “time is going backwards and coiling up...history wound back on itself” (HV: 93).

We are left to assume that *Heroes and Villains*’ post-apocalyptic future is the result of a nuclear conflict, the text itself reflecting on a specific historical moment. Written in the late 1960s, Carter’s conceptual basis for the novel was most likely meant to serve as a critique of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality so prevalent during the height of

³ T. S. Eliot, ‘Four Quartets’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971).

⁴ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London/New York : Longman, 1980), p. 140.

the Cold War. That critique aims to expose how the violent divisions between self and other, rooted in the very origins of western culture, in its myths, religious texts and philosophies, may potentially be responsible for bringing about its own end. Written during the same era, yet in contrast to some of Carter's more negative projections, Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* attempts to show where the apocalyptic moment (or imagination) has the potential for effecting positive change in a seemingly disintegrating world. Perhaps in reaction to the cultural hysteria of nuclear armament and as an answer to encroaching millennial fears, Kermode insists that our world may "exhibit all the symptoms of decay and change, all the terrors of an approaching end, but when the end comes it is not an end".⁵ Rather, it reveals itself to be a "broken apocalypse", where false endings merely signify "human periods in an eternal world", since "the great crises and ends of human life do not stop time". In other words, the transformative power of apocalypse plays out in the tendency of our imaginations "to choose to always be at the end of an era" so that "out of a desolate reality would come renewal".

This same impulse can be found in one of Carter's earlier novels, *Several Perceptions*, in which she plays with apocalyptic imagery (in the contexts of the Vietnam War) to show where moments of crises and/or chaos might lead to the renewal or transformation of human communities, allowing for greater freedoms in the expression of speech, imagination and individual desires. In *The Passion of New Eve* (discussed in the following chapter), though the text takes us on an horrific journey through a dystopian America, when we come to that journey's end we are left with the sense of an entirely new subjectivity coming into form, one that is no longer held captive to the old myths of suffering and violence. *Heroes and Villains*, on the other hand, demonstrates how the End does not necessarily promise a new beginning, as there is no renewal or change in human relationships and gendered identities, but only a regression to a 'Barbarian' society founded on primal fears and hostility directed towards the 'other'.

⁵ For this and the following two sentences see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: studies in the theory of fiction* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 82, 88-9, 97, 99.

In light of this, I believe *Heroes and Villains* allows for a crucial counter-argument to Frank Kermode's view of the apocalyptic imagination, exposing a weakness in its general thesis.⁶ Kermode essentially argues, relying on a wide range of literary texts and traditions to support his claim, that our belief in the End, as a fiction in itself, is a necessary myth of horror and violence, since it is only through a violent transformation in human consciousness that a positive renewal in human relationships, and perhaps even a new age, might be initiated. In contrast, Carter asserts in *Heroes and Villains* that the extreme violence of the apocalyptic imagination merely results in a continuation of the old order, precisely because nothing has been done to change our relationship to the violence rooted in the origins of western culture and its myths. As we see with the text's rival communities of Professors and Barbarians, in their continuing reliance on those violent divisions between self and other that led to the apocalypse, they both fail to imagine the possibility of creating a different 'reality' for themselves, a new form of living in their post-apocalyptic age. On one level, their failure to transform the world in which they live is directly related to their problematic views of time. As Kermode himself warns, the "modern apotheosis" of the apocalyptic imagination leads us to believe that we live in an age of "eternal transition [and] perpetual crisis", located in our "tendency to conceive of the End as happening at every moment".⁷ Although such crisis is a necessary means "of thinking about one's moment" we must refuse to accept that it is "inherent in the moment itself"; to merely exist from "transition to transition" is hardly an inducement to positive change, but rather leads us to "suppose that we exist in no intelligible relation to the past, and no predictable relation to the future."⁸

The Professors are engaged in this hopeless "quest for [an] irrecoverable history",⁹ obsessed with reconstructing and preserving a past that no longer has any

⁶ I am not, however, arguing that Carter was writing in direct response to Kermode. What I am suggesting is that both of their texts arise concurrently within a specific historical moment, taking significantly different approaches towards rethinking the myth of apocalypse.

⁷ Kermode, pp. 101, 25.

⁸ Kermode, pp. 101-2.

⁹ Gamble, p. 75.

material significance to their present (HV: 8). They view themselves as the last bastion of culture, yet because they believe the nuclear apocalypse has brought the complete End to time itself, “the time-scale of the community stretched out years for ever and also somehow cancelled them out, so an event could as well have taken place yesterday or ten years before” (HV: 9). The Professors express no desire for looking forward since they are convinced the progress of culture has ended, and Marianne’s father, a Professor of History, sums up their attitude of weary resignation: “We are all arbitrary children of calamity...we have to take the leavings” (HV: 11). Thus, the Professors’ preservation of knowledge disseminates nothing: “words had ceased to describe facts and now stood only for ideas or memories” (HV: 7). As a result, the community lives in a self-induced trance, in which “time was frozen” (HV: 1), inevitably breaking out in brief spurts of madness or suicide in reaction to the sterile boredom of their existence (HV: 9). As for the Barbarians, they are manipulated by and follow a shamanistic hodgepodge of eschatological religion and superstitious ritual, ultimately existing in the utter loss of time, since time itself has been rendered “raw in original shapes of light and darkness” (HV: 41). This original light and darkness, its Manichean world-view, is representative of both communities’ continuing reliance on binary oppositions, that ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality reinforcing the construction of hierarchical dichotomies and master/slave power relations.

The boundaries maintained between the Barbarians and Professors are the age-old dichotomies of savage and civilised, nature and culture. In the Professors’ attempts “to keep destruction outside” (HV: 8), believing it is their duty to preserve what little they have from those they deem a threat to their decaying world, they blindly adhere to rigid categorisations of self and other. Marianne’s father insists that “if the Barbarians inherit the earth, they will finally destroy it” (HV: 11), seemingly forgetting that it was the ‘civilised’ men who actually brought on the apocalypse. As a Professor of History, though, he has a good grasp of the historical dialectic, admitting that they need the Barbarians to maintain an equilibrium: “if the Barbarians are destroyed, who will we

then be able to blame for the bad things?” (HV: 11). The dynamics of this relationship between the two communities, of mutual need and denial, is later played out on an individual level between Marianne, the Professor’s child, and Jewel, the Barbarian ‘prince’. Both of them enact a violent struggle with each other, and like any two opposing terms, they become “engaged in a desperate dialectic, each anathema and necessary to the other”.¹⁰ In other words, one cannot exist without the other, nor can one live *with* the other, and so the ‘weaker’ term is either repressed or exiled to the boundaries of what the prevailing order would like to exclude as a means for maintaining its ‘dominant’ position.

The Barbarians, then, are kept outside the borders of the Professors’ closely guarded enclaves, strictly confined to their eponymous function, which is “to ravage, steal, despoil, rape and, if necessary, to kill”; when they make their intermittent raids on the Professors, they willingly fulfil their assigned roles, looking “like hobgoblins of nightmare” (HV: 5). Though the Barbarians make themselves appear more ruthlessly savage than they actually are, the Professors unquestioningly accept this as evidence that they have “reverted to beasthood”, thus providing incontrovertible proof “of the breakdown of social interaction and the death of social systems” (HV: 24). By categorising the Barbarians as less than human, refusing to see beyond the mask the Professors have projected onto them, the Professors are able to preserve their sense of isolated superiority. By creating their own hobgoblin Other they justify the boundaries they have constructed for themselves, ultimately asserting the need to continue waging “fratricidal wars” against all outsiders.¹¹ In this sense, the Professors have succeeded in preserving the very origins of western culture, perpetuating its long history of violence and xenophobia. However, throughout *Heroes and Villains* contrived dualisms are shown to be extremely deceptive and oversimplified, and as Linden Peach observes: “the post-apocalyptic fantasy becomes a narrative space in which Carter explores the blurring

¹⁰ Gerardine Meaney, ‘History and Women’s Time: *Heroes and Villains*’, in Easton, p. 89.

¹¹ Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p. 163.

of conventional boundaries and binarisms and the ways in which such artificial boundaries are maintained.”¹²

The artifice of those boundaries is primarily revealed through Marianne’s perspective, as the text immediately focuses on the power of its female subject’s gaze.¹³ Marianne, with her “sharp, cold eyes” (HV: 1), is situated as a ruthless deconstructionist who “broke things to see what they were like inside” (HV: 4), tending to be “absolutely merciless in the thoroughness with which she engages in the process of demolition”.¹⁴ Although she articulates a fascination with the otherness of the Barbarians, it is not because she believes in the outlandish myths the Professors have built up around them. Rather her “extraordinary curiosity” (as opposed to the Professors’ general disinterest in anything outside their walls), prompts in her the desire to “fraternize with the enemy” and to “see the stranger’s face close at hand” (HV: 17). This in itself is a form of revolt against the stifling ennui of living in the Professors’ compounds. Furthermore, Marianne is capable of seeing that the Barbarians are not so much savages but “cruelly dispossessed survivors”, and when the “fearful strangers...revealed their true faces...these faces were sick, sad and worn” (HV: 14). Eventually, after Marianne goes to live with the Barbarians, the sight of their warrior garments hung up, disembodied, merely appear to her as the “fragile shells of such poorly founded terror”, and with the last of her romanticised notions of the noble savage entirely deflated, “her distaste was mixed with grief” (HV: 45). Even if Marianne continues to view the Barbarians as primitives, like children who “don’t think” (HV: 38-9), she acknowledges that they are not so very different from the Professors in their need to “always look round for something to blame when things go badly” (HV: 58). Every community needs its scapegoats, and even the Other needs its other, roles that both Professors and Barbarians play out for each other.

¹² Peach, p. 87.

¹³ Elisabeth Mahoney, “‘But Elsewhere?’: the future of fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*”, in Bristow and Broughton, p. 80; also see Sage, p. 19.

¹⁴ Gamble, p. 79.

In Marianne's extraordinary curiosity, her willingness to risk and transgress the boundaries constructed between Professor and Barbarian, she is representative of a highly disruptive Eve. Her unsanctioned desire to fraternise with the enemy is reminiscent of Eve's own discourse with the serpent. Just as Eve's disobedience is an instance of female transgression that undermines the word/law of God, Marianne's female mobility is extremely subversive in its exposure of the ways in which boundaries between self and other are not as strict as the symbolic order attempts to convince its subjects. Standing on the margins of both Professor and Barbarian communities, since she never truly belongs to either group, she is less bound to their superstitions, becoming in some ways a far more effective force in being able to challenge the limitations of the law.¹⁵ By the end of the novel, "both male-dominated worlds look like different aspects of the same nursery", and we realise, along with Marianne, that there are "no heroes and villains; only a set of silly games which men play."¹⁶ The categories 'man' constructs for himself very often fail to provide a substantial reflection of the 'realities' in which he lives, and it only takes a cold, critical gaze, like Marianne's, to reveal those 'truths' to be mere fictions, no matter how powerful their hold on the imagination.

However, because Marianne's act of crossing boundaries between the Professors and Barbarians poses itself as a direct threat or social danger to either group's contained, isolated views of itself, her positioning of female marginality is also used against her. The masculine imaginaries of both Professor and Barbarian worlds explicitly distrust and fear the 'feminine' as a disturbing force that must be confined, and in the text's allusions to the Genesis myth, Carter continues challenging the ways in which the biblical narrative reinforces a patriarchal order's views of the dangers of the female sex. Thus, if Marianne is representative of a disruptive Eve, then like Eve who is punished for her transgressive behavior, she eventually discovers herself enclosed in a social system that insists on defining 'woman' as the absolute Other in order to uphold the masculine

¹⁵ Punter, p. 140.

¹⁶ Punter, p. 141.

integrity of the word/law. For instance, when Marianne goes to live among the Barbarians, *she* is now defined as the dangerous outsider, and Jewel fears Marianne as a tempting or polluting presence, an Eve or “a little Lilith” (HV: 124), whose powers of disruption threaten his sense of masculine control. Though Marianne attempts to dismiss Jewel’s tattoo of Adam bewitched by Eve’s “perfidious smile” as merely a “grotesque disfigurement”, a symbol of pain and mutilation (HV: 85), she also comes to realise that this image signifies a specific ideology through which Jewel’s view of her is mediated.¹⁷

Like Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop*, Marianne struggles to see her way beyond the male fantasies projected onto her, and throughout the text is forced to negotiate her sense of identity in relation to the precarious and vulnerable positioning of female repression that Jewel’s view imposes upon her. On the other hand, Marianne perhaps goes one step further than Melanie, projecting *her* desires onto the male (Jewel) in order to assert her identity. However, even if such a reversal allows Marianne to produce for herself a powerful fantasy of autonomy, Carter slowly strips this away since the girl is in fact allowed very little room for transgression. Ultimately, the text not only reveals Marianne’s alienation from her desires but also her complicity with a patriarchal order in her failure to imagine any relationship between the sexes other than one of fear and hostility (a problem I will directly return to below). For the most part, then, like many of Carter’s fictions that question the limits of female transgression, through Marianne’s disruptive positioning *Heroes and Villains* sets up a potentially productive and subversive stance, only to stress the dangers of enclosure rather than celebrating female marginality.¹⁸

From the first moment Marianne meets Jewel she is threatened with enclosure, her self-control immediately beginning to disintegrate. Although she is the one who offers to help Jewel escape the Professors’ compound, asserting that she is leaving with him of her own free-will, he absurdly insists on claiming *her* as his hostage: “She had

¹⁷ Peach, p. 88.

¹⁸ c.f. Meaney, p. 86.

wanted to rescue him but found she was accepting his offer to rescue her” (HV: 18, 24). Furthermore, even if he is “as complete a stranger as she could wish to meet” (HV: 23), answering her desire to know the Barbarian ‘other’, she realises that *he* is not so much other but is forced to acknowledge her own increasing sense of self-alienation. This is not only because Marianne is confronted with the strange heterogeneity of her desires, her unexpected desire for Jewel unsettling her rigid sense of autonomy, but is also due to the fact that Jewel views her as an object of exchange. In other words, his gaze signifies a phallogentric economy of desire that positions the female subject as the repressed other in relation to the male, implicitly relaying to Marianne that “as a battle trophy, [she is] of less use but more interest than a bolt of cloth” (HV: 25). Having been rendered as an object in his eyes, he shifts in her own vision, seemingly monolithic and overwhelming her: “when he stretched out his arm, he could pull down the sky on everything” (HV: 25). Marianne, “trapped in his regard”, is overcome with a sense of vertigo (HV: 23), and more threateningly, a loss of distinct boundaries between her sense of self and other, which she desperately attempts to preserve. I would argue that it is from this point onward that Marianne begins to experience abjection, which Julia Kristeva figures as the “hole into which the subject may fall”, marking both the place of genesis and obliteration of the subject, and ultimately attesting to the impossibility of clear borders.¹⁹

Kristeva’s general theory of abjection can be read as a primal myth of the pre-oedipal mother-child bond, imagining the origins of subjectivity according to the human need for borders or boundaries. In this scenario, the mother is situated as the primary body from which the infant must learn to separate in order to gain access to the symbolic order. Human individuation is gained and experienced through one’s acquisition of language, accompanied by the infant’s separation from the mother. By setting up boundaries between the me/not-me, language helps to control or manage this separation, which, as Kristeva views it, is a violent or traumatic severing. Language, thus, serves as

¹⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1989), pp. 72-3.

a compensation for that primal loss in the ability to connect and bond with the mother. However, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, when this loss is not successfully dealt with, the subject becomes abject: he or she loses all proportionate sense of boundaries and is eventually propelled into a space of struggle against the (m)other in order to reclaim his or her identity.²⁰ Overall, Kristeva's exploration of those conditions that allow, or hinder, the child's access to symbolisation provides insight into how the subject's claim to his/her own body and identity is primarily motivated by the need for excluding that which confronts the subject with a threatening otherness. This is the primary aspect of Kristeva's theory that I will be focusing on, as both Marianne and Jewel attempt to establish their sense of selves through a rejection (abjection), or repression, of the other.

To illustrate Kristeva's theory, particularly as we find it in *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne is thrust into a decidedly abject terrain when she joins the Barbarian community, where nothing is familiar and all is marked by a pervasive reek of disease and decaying flesh (HV: 33). She is confronted with what Kristeva describes as the improper or unclean: refuse, corpses, bodily fluids, defilement, those things that stand on the ambiguous borderline of "death infecting life", threatening or unsettling identity, system, order, and revealing that which we "permanently thrust aside in order to live" (our own mortality).²¹ For instance, the crumbling mansion in which the Barbarians live is "a gigantic memory of rotten stone", a confusing jumble of architectural styles, literally confounding Marianne's previous sense of boundaries and controlled order among the Professors (HV: 31). The mansion's kitchen is an "abattoir" of bones, rotting meat, bloody pelts and carcasses (HV: 46), a "cave" overwhelming Marianne with its "smell of earth, of rotting food and of all-pervading excrement" (HV: 42). In reaction to this space of food, filth, and waste, "Marianne drew herself coldly inside her skin" (HV: 42), promptly deciding that "she had no reason or desire to stay any longer in this disgusting and dangerous place" (HV: 51). No longer seduced by the Barbarians'

²⁰ Grosz, p. 78.

²¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 3-4.

mystique of otherness, revolted in fact by the “vast midden” of their existence (or bare subsistence), Marianne’s only desire is “to escape, as if somewhere there was still the idea of home” (HV: 52). She is strikingly similar to Kristeva’s abject, who struggles and yet fails to retain his or her boundaries. Marianne’s initial instinct is to (re)establish her identity by separating herself from the Other through a retching repugnance.²² However, when Marianne’s attempt to escape from the Barbarians ends in failure, her continuing experience of abjection, her fall into its rabbit hole of disorder, dis/ease, and dissolving boundaries, problematically develops into a fantasy of absolute autonomy. This is because she refuses to recognise or accept any relation to the other, which in itself is an evasion of reality, a refusal to negotiate the ways in which one’s identity is inevitably (in)formed by the identities of others.

Ultimately, Marianne locates her alienated sense of self in “the impossible, untenable identity the subject projects onto and derives from the other”.²³ For instance, just as the Barbarians are in many ways phantasms of the Professors’ own making, assuring them of their own (illusory) superiority, Marianne projects onto Jewel her desires and fears in order to secure herself from having to acknowledge her increasingly fragile and fragmented identity. She assigns him the role of demon lover not only as a means for protecting herself from *his* ‘reality’ but also as an assertion of her absolute autonomy, which she believes places her in a superior position to Jewel. Linden Peach argues that by projecting onto Jewel an erotic phantasy of the *homme fatale*, Marianne engages in an eroticisation of the Other that is primarily a product of her own foreignness to her desires (her desire, in fact, *for* the Other).²⁴ Though I agree with Peach, I also would argue that there is something far more disturbing underlying this.

We cannot ignore the fact that as soon as Marianne attempts to flee from the Barbarians, Jewel comes after her and rapes her, effectively making her his battle trophy, an object of male conquest (HV: 59). This act of rape, its utter violation of self, is an

²² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

²³ Grosz, p. 72.

²⁴ Peach, p. 94.

experience Carter repeatedly explores in her texts. Similar to Melanie's traumatic experience of 'rape' in *The Magic Toyshop*, Marianne also suffers a psychic dismemberment: the brutal invasion of her physical privacy severs her from any solid sense of reality, as she feels entirely disassociated from her self. Likewise, in *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve/lyn claims s/he learns what it means to be a woman through the act of rape: "I felt myself to be, not myself, but he", indicating that "the experience of this crucial lack of self" is a brutal act of identity-theft (NE: 101). For Marianne, then, her experience of rape directly threatens all her previous notions of autonomy. Jewel's violation of her traps her in a system of male power and violence, since she is now forced to return to the suffocating enclosure of the Barbarian camp that is dominated by its superstitious and repressive treatment of the (female) other. As Jewel himself admits, he needs to "swallow" and "incorporate" Marianne into the tribal/familial dynamic, negating the threat of her presence as a disruptive outsider: "I've nailed you on necessity, you poor bitch" (HV: 55-6). It is precisely this act of incorporating Marianne through physical violence that threatens her with a loss of all boundaries. Thus, as a means for self-preservation, she actively denies Jewel's reality by in turn objectifying his status in relation to her, projecting onto him the erotic phantasy of demon lover.

Kristeva defines projection as necessary to warding off the alienating abyss of the abject. It is the process by which one claims one's own territory because the Other, dwelling within as an *alter ego*, points it (the self) out through loathing: "I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be 'me'. Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be."²⁵ Marianne fantasises that Jewel is a demon lover who 'possesses' her precisely because it allows her to continue "denying him an existence" (HV: 88), an exclusion that allows her to claim her own identity. Moreover, to accept Jewel's reality, to even attempt to identify with him, would force her to confront the indignity of her "newly-awakened, raging and unsatisfied desire" (HV:

²⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 10.

87). She cannot accept what might be their mutual need of each other because “if he was necessary to her...she would be changed” (HV: 134). Marianne is threatened with the collapsing boundaries between self and other that accompanies the experience of abjection, which is painfully disorientating: “when she perceived she and Jewel were, in some way, related to one another she was filled with pain for her idea of her own autonomy might, in fact, be not the truth but a passionately held conviction” (HV: 132). Thus, the ambivalence Marianne feels towards Jewel defends her from directing that loathing towards herself. He takes “on in her eyes the ghastly attraction of the deformed” (HV: 86), becoming “an object which drew her”, a phantasy of “pleasure and despair” (HV: 82-3). Ultimately, every aspect of their relationship is founded on a desire “to annihilate one another”: Marianne responds to Jewel’s violation of her by “courting her own extinction as well as his, [since] she discovered extraordinary powers as soon as the dark removed the dangerous evidence of Jewel’s face” (HV: 87).

Marianne begins explicitly to equate sex with violence, her nightly encounters with Jewel playing out as mutual acts of antagonism and annihilation in the space of a deteriorating, attic room, half-exposed to the sky as its roof gradually crumbles away. This increasing loss of the borders between interior and exterior is further emphasised when Marianne perceives Jewel’s body dissolving in the darkness (HV: 81). The more Marianne takes pleasure in their violent intercourse, she begins to convince herself that she is the one who has power over Jewel: “as if he were helplessly trying to prove his autonomy to her while she knew all the time he vanished like a phantom at daybreak...at the moment when her body ceased to define his outlines” (HV: 89). As Sarah Gamble observes, Jewel’s continuing power over Marianne is if anything sustained by her belief in it, since the roles he plays are merely those which Marianne permits him.²⁶ However, even if Marianne’s objectification of Jewel is read as a means of self-defence, or defiance, allowing her to retain whatever limited power or self-control that is available to her, this refusal to play the role of victim is extremely problematic. For her, survival is

²⁶ Gamble, pp. 77-8.

dependent on a denial of the other's irreducible difference, desiring a negation of the Other by projecting onto Jewel a reflection "of her own violent desire".²⁷

Marianne wields patriarchy's own weapons of dominance, believing these are her only available tools, which in fact end up being turned against her. I would argue, elaborating on Gamble, that even if Jewel's power over Marianne often depends on her conviction of it, we cannot forget that he is a very real presence whose relation to Marianne is one of mutual struggle of mastery over the other, as both of them desperately attempt to assert their autonomy. Jewel's sexual violence towards Marianne does have a power of its own, his desire motivated by a similar conviction to establish, as he claims: "some status in relation to myself" (HV: 90). That status, for Jewel, is dependent on what Marianne realises is an even more "terrible violation of her privacy", when at one point during intercourse he commands her: "Conceive, you bitch, conceive" (HV: 90). Shocked and disgusted, comprehending that Jewel does indeed have the will and capacity to force upon her an identity not of her choosing, any previous notions Marianne had invested in that relationship between pleasure and power "died now she realised pleasure was ancillary to procreation" (HV: 91).

It is this maternal role that threatens to engulf Marianne entirely. On her wedding night, Carter evokes for us yet again the wedding dress as a suffocating symbol of imposed femininity. The dress is explicitly described as "an image of terror", its rotting piece of fabric a "crumbling anachronism", and as its "bodice slid down her flesh with sensations of slime and ice", Marianne had "turned into a mute, furious doll which allowed itself to be totally engulfed" (HV: 68-9). The dress itself signifies the abject for Marianne, as she begins to feel her "dissolving perimeters" while struggling against this impersonation of "the sign of a memory of a bride"; yet echoing Melanie's similar struggle in *The Magic Toyshop*, "the drifting veil caught in her mouth and gagged her" (HV: 72-3). She is forced onto "a primitive bride-bed" (HV: 76), and is advised "to reconcile herself to everything from rape to mortality" (HV: 59). This advice is offered

²⁷ Gamble, p. 78.

to her by Mrs. Green, who represents “some kind of domestic matriarch” (HV: 43), and like Aunt Margaret in relation to Melanie, serves as a somewhat insidious maternal example for Marianne. The only comfort she can provide the girl on her “sham” wedding night is merely “the repetition of certain old saws about human behaviour which might or might not any longer have application” (HV: 77).

Those ‘old saws’ are precisely what Marianne herself recognises as being anachronistic, “a pun in time” (HV: 56), which we might extend to Carter’s own view of the old myths that effectively function to keep women in their ‘proper’ place. The maternal role projected onto women by a patriarchal order, which historically has been used to restrict women’s identities solely to their reproductive status, must be rejected as a social construct “that once had a place and function but now has neither any more” (HV: 57). This itself encapsulates Marianne’s problematic positioning in relation to maternal archetypes: she acknowledges them as anachronisms that have no place or function in her own self-perception and/or definition of herself, but in recognising that they continue to hold power over the masculine imaginary, she nevertheless attempts to manipulate those myths of maternal potency to retain a position of dominance over Jewel and the Barbarians. As Sarah Gamble notes: “Having so singularly failed to find the glamorous objective Other [in Jewel], Marianne instead transforms her own self into an icon of otherness”.²⁸ Even if she seems to reject stereotyped (female) roles, in her use of mythic spectacle mixed with political purpose, we are left to question whether this is an effectively subversive or further repressive move.

Indeed, Marianne serves as Carter’s warning to a feminism that too readily accepts its own myths, particularly that of “the healing, reconciling mother”, since regardless if the “revival of the myths of [matriarchal] cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life” (SW: 5). For example, at one point Marianne is confronted by the following aphorism: “I THINK, THEREFORE I EXIST; BUT IF I TAKE TIME OFF FROM THINKING, WHAT

²⁸ For this and the following sentence see Gamble, p. 79.

THEN?" (HV: 98). Though Marianne is highly capable of "utilizing her perceptions till the very end" (HV: 81), once she becomes pregnant with Jewel's child, burdened with a maternal role not of her own choosing, she can no longer "think of anything" and is "unrecognisable to herself" (HV: 149). In other words, she begins to fall prey to the allure of a mythic version of herself, accepting somewhat apathetically at first and then wholeheartedly the reproductive function into which Jewel has trapped her. She comes to believe a child might provide her with some form of dynastic power, ensuring her place among the Barbarians, just as Jewel had desired a son to ensure his own status (HV: 90). Failing to remain sharply critical of the myths imposed upon her, it would seem, then, that like Marianne, "if a woman takes time off from thinking...she is in danger of becoming a mother goddess."²⁹ I am not at all suggesting, however, that Marianne is ever duped by the mythic status she applies to herself; if anything she remains to the very end the same rigorous deconstructionist she started out as. Similar to many of Carter's female protagonists, and admirably so, she is above all things a survivor. Although we might be drawn to this aspect of Marianne's character, it is necessary to keep in mind that Carter also urges us to question the ways in which she chooses to survive.

One of Marianne's major failings is that rather than seeking out alternatives to those myths that operate according to a fear of the 'feminine', she sets herself up as a matriarchal tyrant in order to defend her vulnerable positioning. She willingly chooses to become 'Eve at the end of the world' when she might have rejected that role as anachronistic in itself. Since the apocalypse has already come and gone, the eschatological myths of the biblical text are now glaringly redundant, thus offering her the freedom to create for herself a different myth. Instead she continues to rely on the violent oppositions located in the Genesis narrative, establishing herself in a position of power bought at the expense of conforming to patriarchal configurations of the maternal-feminine. Marianne opts to manipulate the Barbarians' perception of her as a terrifying, disruptive (m)other since she has learned that the most effective weapon is fear, "the

²⁹ Meaney, p. 92.

ruling passion” (HV: 50). It is the figure of Donally, a self-professed shaman, who essentially passes on this knowledge to Marianne. Having fallen from the ‘elevated’ society of Professors, he plays the tempting serpent to Marianne’s Eve, insinuating that he can offer her “a little power” (HV: 61). Like the serpent, he presents a perversion of her father’s law, which had demanded strict obedience to the voice of reason: “The cracked mirrors of [Donally’s] dark glasses revealed all manner of potentialities for Marianne, modes of being to which she might aspire just as soon as she threw away her reason as of no further use to her” (HV: 107). Marianne does, however, initially struggle against the role Donally passes on to her, as a manipulator of myth, precisely because she sees the artifice behind his own charade (HV: 60).

Donally tyrannises the Barbarians through a chaotic mix of religious symbols and rituals, their meanings entirely arbitrary and “depending on his mood” (HV: 29). One of his most potent symbols is a serpent, which he keeps locked in a cage and lets out from time to time in order to threaten and subdue the tribe, but in the end it turns out to be merely “a dead snake, and stuffed” (HV: 133). It would appear that if Donally’s serpent is nothing more than a lifeless and impotent artefact, then by extension so is the very foundation of his power. This indeed turns out to be the case, as Donally is easily expelled from the tribe once he is exposed as a charlatan, ruled by the fear of losing his power as much as he uses that power to instil fear in others. Thus, just as the serpent in itself “signifies nothing” (HV: 126), Donally’s threats, prohibitions and laws (like Uncle Philip’s) turn out to be merely blustering, desperate attempts at preserving his tenuous authority. Upon his enforced departure, he makes one last feeble effort at displaying his power, giving an ineffectual performance of some mad King Lear, spewing out curses on the female sex (since it is Marianne who has replaced him in wielding influence over Jewel): “She shall have a vile childbed culminating in a monstrous birth and ultimately she will betray you in circumstances of unbelievable horror” (HV: 130). Donally’s grand exit is immediately deflated by what is perhaps Marianne’s laconic aside: “Lightning should have flashed but did not” (HV: 130). She is, as ever, shrewdly capable of

dissecting the façades behind which others hide. Though she remains sceptical of the false allure of myth, as a manipulative tool of power wielded over others, by the end of the novel she certainly adapts Donally's lessons to her own purposes.

Moreover, in choosing to conform to the father's law rather than subvert it, Marianne also remains preoccupied with the imposition of pain on one person by another, having learned from her relationship with Jewel the use of violence as a form of self-preservation. Just as Carter challenges the myth of apocalypse, which does not bring about a new beginning but merely a repetitive cycle of violence, the text exposes the extent to which violence often holds its victims prisoners, since the cyclical nature of violence continuously repeats the circumstances in which it originated.³⁰ Thus, Carter's depiction of sexual violence in *Heroes and Villains* directly challenges the ways in which men are trapped in cultural codes of pain and suffering used to dominate women. Furthermore, in her presentation of Marianne's particular brand of female power, Carter reveals where this is not in fact always an antidote to male violence but often indicative of women's complicity in their oppression through the perpetuation of further violence.

This is made painfully clear when Marianne, having been the victim of rape, virtually inflicts the same act on another. Donally's son, who has the mental equivalency of a child, makes an ineffectual sexual advance towards her. Though she knows she could defend herself if she wanted, Marianne "roughly seized hold of him and crushed him inside her with her hand" (HV: 115). She literally seizes the chance to physically dominate another, which is essentially prompted by her desire to assert her own vengeance against Jewel for having "put a kid up [her]" (HV: 116). Though her 'rape' of the boy is in reaction to her pregnancy and the helpless position in which she feels it has placed her, she now falls prey to some sentimental maternal fantasy of herself: "She was caught in a storm of warmth of heart; she wanted to fold him into her, where it was warm and nobody could harm him, poor, lucid, mindless child of chaos now sucking her as if he expected to find milk" (HV: 116). First, as an abject fantasy, Marianne violently

³⁰ For this and the following two sentences see Peach, pp. 92-3.

disrupts the boundaries between mother as nurturer and devourer, and in the end she has nothing to offer the other (no milk): the fantasy itself is barren. Second, this scene possibly disrupts Julia Kristeva's own notion that maternity might provide access to the Other, since Marianne can never fully accept the reality of the Other, even if at one point she attempts "to feel the shape of the child down there which knitted its flesh and blood out of her own in the artificial night of the womb" (HV: 135). Marianne views her own positioning as a maternal body (womb) to be an artificiality, the child itself perceived as an alien presence that further threatens her desperate claim to some self-sufficient autonomy. Pregnancy turns out to be yet another alienating experience for Marianne, hindering her from articulating her desires. This is not only because motherhood has been imposed on her against her will, but also because she herself reduces her identity to the maternal, believing this is now her only means to power. Put differently, Carter's text suggests that "the female imaginary would appear to self-destruct" when we make the theoretical move of collapsing female sexuality into reproduction, in effect neutralising the mother herself as a desiring being (which, though contrary to Kristeva's aims, is something that potentially occurs in her work).³¹

We should keep in mind, however, that Carter is not so much anti-motherhood, per se, but is intent on posing the question of "*why* maternity is now available for discussion as myth, for interrogation, acceptance, or rejection".³² In other words, she interrogates why various feminist discourses (and we might include Kristeva's own discourse here) choose to privilege the maternal as a source of female power, which becomes highly problematic when confronting a history of patriarchal discourses that have repressed women precisely because of their reproductive status. As a result of those patriarchal discourses, women have been 'exiled' from history, from speaking for themselves and constructing their own narratives. Thus, Carter's interrogation is centred on the question of how women might construct their own discourse(s) of maternity

³¹ Meaney, p. 97.

³² My discussion throughout this paragraph is with extensive reference to Meaney; for all direct quotations, except where noted, see pp. 91, 98-100.

within a specifically historical and/or material framework, but without reiterating a phallogocentrism that figures the mother as “the threat of confinement(s), repression, repetition, exile, [while] father is the guarantor of autonomy, action and independence to act – within ‘history’, which he defines.” For Julia Kristeva, because women are positioned outside the symbolic order, outside linear, historical time, then as both gestating (reproductive) and desiring (speaking) subjects, they are consigned to a temporal space that is cyclical, an “extra-subjective time”.³³ Kristeva views this female-specific relationship to an extra-subjective time as one that encourages a more productive access to the Other (represented by the mother’s relation to the foetus). According to Kristeva, the maternal body is both literally and figuratively a liberating “space dizzying in its vastness”, where boundaries between self and other are not so rigidly constructed as when restricted to the confines of the symbolic order, which insists on a distinct separation between self and (m)other. For Kristeva, then, the experience of motherhood offers an alternative space/time of disruption/transgression, where maternity remains an unheard discourse, at least from women’s perspectives. For Carter, however, because motherhood represents a figurative and cultural space to which women have been exiled, from history and from access to producing their own narratives, then her fictions become necessarily focused on “purging the old mystifications which have exiled women to eternity [maternity]”. As Gerardine Meaney points out: “A recurrent conflict emerges in the writings of Carter and Kristeva between resistance to history as the agent of determinism and desire for access to history as the arena of change”.

Thus, as I will be discussing in far greater detail in the second part of this thesis, where I explore, respectively, the use of dystopian and utopian tactics in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*, Carter challenges how “the option for women in relation to writing and history” might only present “two forms of exile, from articulation and action or from themselves”.³⁴ Moreover, in the contexts of asserting a feminist

³³ Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, in *Moi*, pp. 189, 191, 199.

³⁴ For this and the following sentence see Meaney, p. 100.

discourse, Carter's texts question whether the assumption of (female) subjectivity inevitably requires subjection to phallogocentric modes of representation: by entering history do we also "become the slave of history"? As we see in *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne's assertion of her identity is essentially dependent on becoming a slave to the myth of the mother; as an omnipotent force that rules through terror, her power is derived from the masculine fears that a history of patriarchal narratives have projected onto women's bodies. Kristeva herself warns that we must refuse to accept the notion of 'woman' as "possessor of some mythical unity – a supreme power, on which is based the terror of power and terrorism as the desire for power."³⁵ Again, although Kristeva views this desire for maternal power as a force of subversion, in that it might offer a specifically feminine discourse, she also acknowledges that the myth of the archaic mother is paradoxically a feminist utopia, one that fails "to bring out the singularity of each woman, and beyond this, her multiplicities, her plural languages".³⁶ In other words, by relying on some archetypal maternal power as the source (origin) of female identity, this not only further represses women's differences (from each other), but might also further alienate them from articulating their desires. In effect, they remain ensnared in a history of phallogocentrism that operates according to a denial of sexual differences, which ultimately keeps relationships between the sexes locked at an impasse.

At the end of *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne and Jewel fail to discover a reciprocal relationship between them, which might allow them to move away from the cycle of violence in which they have become trapped. In spite of their brief attempt at imagining the possibility of a 'brave new world', believing they might leave behind both the Barbarians and Professors by creating between them a "fearless and rational breed" (HV: 132-3, 137), they both revert to an embittered distrust and denial of each other. The dizzying freedom of stepping outside the law, of taking that risk, is one neither of them can manage, precisely because they cannot overcome their fear of the other. To illustrate

³⁵ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 205.

³⁶ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', pp. 205, 208.

this, Carter returns to the scene of the (fortunate) Fall. However, unlike the far more revisionist approach demonstrated in the short stories discussed previously (see Chapter One), in *Heroes and Villains* that Fall does not encourage a mutually respectful recognition of the other. Rather, Carter remains focused on exposing a patriarchal order's construction of those violent divisions between the sexes, between self and other, which is both presupposed and established by the biblical text. Indeed, the following passage serves as a failed moment of recognition between the man and woman:

He raised his eyes and they looked at one another with marvelling suspicion, like heavily disguised members of a conspiracy who have never learned the signals which would reveal themselves to one another, for to neither did it seem possible, nor even desirable, that the evidence of their senses was correct and each capable of finding in the other some clue to survival in this inimical world. Besides, he was so much changed, so far fallen...and so was she... (HV: 148)

Unlike the male and female protagonists in Carter's previous rewritings of the Genesis myth, for this Adam and Eve recognition merely becomes denial, a refusal to accept the other because it might mean a confrontation with the self. The violence between Marianne and Jewel is never resolved or defused, but only escalates in their refusal to respect each other's differences. Carter reveals where that violence operates at its most extreme, where the individual remains alienated from the Other because s/he is alienated from the self. Marianne is yet again threatened with the vertigo of abjection, once again feeling herself diminished, "vanishing into the dangerous interior" (HV: 149). This is precisely because the maternal role she has conformed to alienates Marianne from discovering what she might have desired both for herself and differently from the patriarchal order's definition of her: "she was surprised to find herself dislocated from and unfamiliar with her own body" (HV: 149). As for Jewel, he is never allowed to claim his own identity or body, trapped in a role of masculinity that has been predetermined for him by a long history of male violence, which he cannot escape. His flesh is literally inscribed with the Genesis myth, his tattoo of Adam gazing suspiciously at Eve's gift ultimately determining his relationship to Marianne, as well as his fate.

Jewel's acceptance of his 'heroic' death is in itself a feeble charade, an artifice of masculinity that Marianne brutally deconstructs. He dies at the hands of Donally, the 'father' seeking vengeance on the 'son' for his expulsion from the tribe, both of them playing out that age-old narrative of murderous oedipal rivalry. Furthermore, Jewel willingly chooses to fall into Donally's trap because he believes Donally might finally make him into the "Tiger Man", redeeming him from having fallen under Marianne's 'tempting' influence (HV: 146). Previously, Jewel had attempted to drown himself, perhaps as an heroic act of self-sacrifice, yet Marianne drags him out of the sea, rescuing him from this "seductive death" (HV: 140). Jewel intensely resents her for "the ghastly indignity of her rescue" (HV: 142), and even if he knows his heroic role is merely a construction of masculinity, he cannot forgive Marianne for revealing this to him. If anything, Marianne's greatest power of disruption is her ability to see through the whole charade of gendered identity, to expose the weaknesses underlying patriarchy's myths of femininity and masculinity. As she observes Jewel putting on his war paint before he departs to die a senseless death, she remarks in disgust: "Your mask has slipped too far for me to be able to respect you" (HV: 146). Likewise, as soon as a patriarchal order reveals the weaknesses behind its own façade of power, it no longer commands respect or fear from its subjects but an irreverent challenge to all its premises.

Marianne's challenge, however, is cruelly derisive, her subversion hardly productive but destructive. Instead of truly rescuing Jewel, or attempting to negotiate a different relationship between them, one that would allow for a recognition of their mutual need for each other, she can only desire his death because this essentially allows her to continue repressing his difference as well as her own desires. Marianne's impulse is to destroy Jewel in order to save herself, refusing to believe that she might discover "in the other some clue to survival in this inimical world" (HV: 148). Before he departs, the two of them exchange final blows, and Marianne triumphs, violently knocking him down (HV: 147). When she receives news of his death, it is somewhat anticlimactic, as she seems "strangely surprised at the swiftness and ease with which Jewel had departed from

life” (HV: 151). He is literally rendered “No more”, the novel itself ending on these words and then almost deafening silence (HV: 151). Carter, however, indicates that this is not the end, that there will be more cycles of the same violence, precisely because Marianne fails to free herself from the influence of the old myths that operate according to a repression of the (m)other.

After Jewel’s death Marianne embraces her role as a Monstrous Mother, at least as it is perceived by a patriarchal order. Marianne’s matriarchal power is not founded on the (re)generation of life but is representative of the power of uncreation, as Jewel himself fears. Just prior to his death, Marianne informs him: “you’re nothing but the furious invention of my virgin nights” (HV: 137). Later she smashes the mirror where Jewel had put on his war-paint, where she had seen him for the last time, and feels “a warm sense of self-satisfaction” and “pleasure” in the thought that she is the one who has destroyed him (HV: 147). By recognising her illusions, that Jewel is no more than the creation of her projected fantasies, she discovers the power to decreate him while simultaneously (re)creating her own image. The image she chooses, however, is merely that of a witch stirring her cauldron, giving birth to visions of monstrous beings “with faces of horses and lions” (thus fulfilling Donally’s prophecy) (HV: 149). She immediately slips on the iconic mask of a terrible, devouring mother, implementing this myth of maternal potency in defence of her precarious positioning among the Barbarians now that Jewel is no longer there to protect her from them. When she is informed that the Barbarians are threatening to abandon her, she claims: “They won’t get rid of me as easily as that. I shall stay here and frighten them so much they’ll do every single thing I say...I’ll be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron” (HV: 150). Thus, the novel ends with one form of tyranny replacing another, as Marianne takes up a masculine positioning in relation to the law by turning from victim to predator.³⁷

If we recall that Marianne is at one point encouraged to become ‘a little Lilith’, then she seems to have done so by inserting herself in Jewel’s place, and not only as the

³⁷ Meaney, p. 96.

‘tiger lady’ substituting for his ‘tiger man’, but as the demon lover. In midrashic expansions of the Genesis text, Lilith explicitly represents male fears surrounding the perceived dangerous/demonic aspects of women.³⁸ She is the first woman who rebels against her submissive position, becoming a sexual predator and giving birth to demons, just as Marianne envisions for herself. Sarah Gamble points out that if we read Lilith as a marginal figure, then she has perhaps “never reached the point at which her disruptive presence can be neutralised”.³⁹ Or rather, unlike Eve, because Lilith herself exists outside the biblical text, then she has never been entirely appropriated by the patriarchal order in its assertion of Genesis as a fundamental myth determining femininity. By aligning herself with the subversive potential of this figure, Gerardine Meaney suggests that Marianne might have written her own myth differently, and as an Eve or “Lilith with a little knowledge [she] would be a dangerous woman indeed”.⁴⁰ However, Marianne remains alienated from her desires, and her marginal positioning throughout the text does not give her access to power but in fact encloses her in a system of violence so that by the end of the novel the same boundaries between self and other have been firmly reinforced. Thus, in her emphasis on how myth encloses women in stereotyped roles, exiling them from historical access to their own narratives, Carter disrupts a certain feminist fantasy of female marginality, or even maternity, as subversively liberating.

Elisabeth Mahoney, however, insists on reading the conclusion of *Heroes and Villains* in a far more positive light, interpreting the scene where Marianne is confronted by the half submerged statue of a bare-breasted woman brandishing a clock as a movement towards a new construction of the female subject taking pleasure in new textual spaces.⁴¹ Mahoney asserts that this image of a woman ‘possessing’ time indicates a rejection of outmoded versions of the ‘real’ and/or symbolic, achieving a displacement

³⁸ The earliest account of Lilith can be found in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, in Kvam, Scheering and Ziegler, p. 204; also see p. 174n.33, which refers to Lilith’s status as a demon; and pp. 162-3, 207 for a discussion of the development of her character in medieval midrash.

³⁹ Gamble, p. 81.

⁴⁰ Meaney, p. 102.

⁴¹ For this and the following sentence see Mahoney, p. 84.

away from the realm of the father to a maternal, desiring, fantasy space. This reading, however, is somewhat problematic, projecting its own fantasy onto the text, since Carter is in fact warning against the myth of the mother as a guarantor of female identity and power. As Gerardine Meaney points out, Carter's work proposes that this figuring of a 'women's time' is nothing more than "the eternal recurrence of a vicious cycle, a shocking, stereotyping victory of maternity over the woman as protagonist, as thinker, producer of her own story."⁴² In other words, even if Marianne is determined to control her own narrative after freeing herself from her fantasies of Jewel, by acceding to some (archaic) maternal fantasy of power, she embraces an image that is not of her own making, but merely a (re)production of male fantasies converging on the abject mother. Overall, then, Carter's text clearly indicates where "enmeshing oneself in myth or allegory" does not necessarily guarantee transgression or achievement of a different order.⁴³ *Heroes and Villains* exposes the ways in which the manipulation of myth is if anything an effective tool in deploying power over others, and how regardless if that myth system is patriarchal or matriarchal, it will continue to propagate violent oppositions between self and other as long as it functions according to a hierarchical power schema. This is a problem that reoccurs in *The Passion of New Eve*, to which I will now be turning, yet Carter also begins offering "the hope of escape from the dream factory", allowing for a possible movement away from the oppressive myths or fantasies surrounding the (m)other.⁴⁴

To conclude my discussion of Part One of this study, in these last three chapters I have been specifically focused on the ways in which Carter's texts interact with the Genesis myth in order to expose how this origin narrative constructs gendered identities and relations within a patriarchal order. I examined in two of her short stories her exploration of alternative and/or subversive tactics for rewriting this myth in order to show various possibilities for productively revising its oppressive elements. However, in

⁴² Meaney, p. 92.

⁴³ Gamble, p. 81.

⁴⁴ Gamble, p. 128.

The Magic Toyshop and *Heroes and Villains*, Carter becomes far more self-critical towards her textual transgressions, as these novels acknowledge where transgression itself becomes extremely problematic, especially for the female subject when attempting to escape the confines of patriarchal myths. *The Magic Toyshop* is useful in analysing where and how patriarchy is not monolithic in its power, yet Carter also suggests that deconstructive tactics do not necessarily achieve a dismantling of its symbolic order. Likewise, in *Heroes and Villains* Carter emphasises the female subject's precarious positioning when relying on a fantasy of matriarchal power as a form of transgression, which ultimately ends up reinforcing patriarchy's violent repression of female desires. Thus, even if Carter's earlier texts offer us various disruptive Eves, it seems that none of them are capable of entirely escaping Eden.

The Genesis myth continues to play a significant role in many of Carter's later novels, and in subsequent chapters I will return to an analysis of how she further develops her critique of this myth. However, my primary focus will be on the various ways in which Carter explores alternative mythical spaces that might allow women access to their own representations. Through her use of dystopian and utopian tactics, we begin to move outside of Eden towards an 'elsewhere', a subversive female space that disrupts the symbolic order's word/law. Although Carter's figuring of these 'elsewheres' of feminine desire often ends up being highly problematic, particularly in the (female) subject's desire to escape origin myths and/or history's master narratives, they are necessary experiments. Ultimately, Carter's play with myth opens up a space in which women might construct their own narratives, in which they are no longer exiled from history but capable of entering history as a driving force of change; allowing for alternative relations to otherness, a transformation of gendered identities, and a genuine renewal of human communities.

Part Two: Elsewhere

...if all utopias seem attainable today...perhaps we should try to avoid them in order to recover a non-utopic society, less perfect and more free...But how can one be free without some sort of utopia, some sort of strangeness? Let us therefore be of nowhere, but without forgetting that we are somewhere...

~ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 117

Chapter IV: RETURN TO THE WOMB

And the curious resemblance between the womb and the grave lies at the roots of all human ambivalence towards the womb and its bearer; we mediate our experience through imagination and dream but sometimes the dream gets in the way of the experience, and obscures it completely – the womb is the First and Last Place, earth, the greatest mother of them all, from whom we come, to whom we go...[T]his entrancing rhetoric [has been] compounded out of several millennia of guesses and fantasies about the nature of the world.

~ Angela Carter¹

One of the major links between Angela Carter's last three novels is the author's consistent problematising of various forms of feminist myth-making and where it might fail to offer a revolutionary or emancipated female identity. Though *Heroes and Villains* provides an early example of a text in which Carter challenges notions of the maternal body as a source of feminine power, much of the novel remains focused on contesting patriarchal myths. In *The Passion of New Eve* (henceforth referred to as *New Eve*) Carter now explicitly parodies matriarchal myths in order to show how these do not necessarily guarantee a different symbolic order but often end up reiterating phallogocentric representations of women's bodies. The text clearly continues to rely on deconstructive tactics, yet Carter also begins to explore the possibilities of constructing a specifically feminine discourse, one that is located 'elsewhere' or outside of phallogocentric parameters.² This 'elsewhere' is explored through Carter's use of either dystopian or utopian tactics, which she employs to interrogate forms of female sexuality with the aim of opening up "a potentially radical representational space."³ In this chapter I will be focusing on some of the dystopian elements present in *New Eve* as a means for looking

¹ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, pp. 108-9.

² My use of the term 'elsewhere' primarily refers to Luce Irigaray's application of the word, which she employs to demonstrate how women are already located outside or beyond a masculine imaginary due to its repressive logic. Irigaray privileges this marginal positioning in order to explore the potential available to women for articulating a feminine imaginary or economy of desire that does not re-spect the phallogocentric mirror of representation. See especially 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of Women', in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 76-7

³ Mahoney, p. 73.

ahead to *Nights at the Circus* (discussed in the following chapter), where Carter plays with various utopian spaces or fantasies. As Frances Bartkowski observes: “Dystopian novels are crucial to a full engagement with the problematics of utopian thought.”⁴

In both *Nights at the Circus* and *New Eve*, Carter’s ‘elsewheres’ are located in these texts’ respective urges to escape origins: through either the utopian fantasy of self-creation (as seen in *Nights at the Circus*), which avoids a necessary confrontation with the historical discourses and/or myths in which the female body has been inscribed; or a repression of the maternal-feminine, which in *New Eve* leads to a dystopian nightmare, where the figure of Mother, as an instance of the return of the repressed, comes back with a vengeance. Similar to *Heroes and Villains*, the assertion of matriarchal power in *New Eve* takes the form of “terrorism as the desire for power.”⁵ *New Eve* demonstrates how this ‘feminism as terrorism’ hardly grants women access to power, but through its complicity with the underlying violence of patriarchy is highly ineffectual in radically subverting that order. Ultimately, Carter suggests that the only way of freeing oneself from the limitations of both patriarchal and matriarchal myths paradoxically necessitates a return to their source in order to challenge them more effectively.

As I will be examining throughout my analysis of *New Eve*, the subject’s desire to flee from his/her origins is shown to be a highly problematic departure or journey that merely ends in a regression to a suffocating maternal space. This journey is enacted in the text by its first-person narrator, the sexually ambiguous Eve/lyn, who is thrust into various dystopian spaces where s/he is forced to confront his/her own shifting relation to the maternal-feminine, literally and figuratively journeying through a labyrinth of gendered identity. Accordingly, I will first be analysing how the text challenges our notions of masculinity and femininity, as Eve/lyn often switches between a male and female positioning of voice. Through initially focusing on the character’s masculine perspective, which relies on a repression of the ‘feminine’, I will explore how his own

⁴ Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 15; quoted in Mahoney, p. 75.

⁵ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p. 205.

phallogocentric view prefigures his later experiences as a woman. Eve/Iyn is literally castrated in order to be (re)made into a woman, the text exposing how a phallogocentric discourse situates women as castrated or lacking, imposing a “violence of gender inscription on the [female] body”.⁶ This in effect creates a split-subject, as we discover in the text’s narrative voice, which is representative of “a site of struggle” within the (female) subject between a simultaneous “I” and “not-I”.⁷ Similar to *Heroes and Villains*, this struggle for a coherent female identity becomes one of desperate survival, which often problematically develops into a form of female complicity.

In light of this, my discussion will then turn to an analysis of the figure of Mother, whose assertion of an archaic maternal power does not overturn a phallogocentric order, as she believes, but keeps it firmly in place. Though this is closely related to *Heroes and Villains*, in *New Eve* Carter goes one step further. The text’s narrative journey returns us to the womb, which is representative of the original source of female repression, in that the history of patriarchal discourse has endeavoured to reduce female identity solely to women’s biological or reproductive status. As I will be arguing, Carter figures the womb itself as a dystopian space that enslaves women to their “biological iconography” (SW: 109). Through rigorously deconstructing the womb, as an imaginary locale for the subject’s origins in both patriarchal and matriarchal myths, Carter begins to seek out an alternative locus, or, a different imaginary; one that does not limit women to the maternal, but instead allows for multiple speaking positions with which the female subject might identify and articulate her desires.

Again, Carter seeks out this alternative locus or ‘elsewhere’ through utopian and/or dystopian tactics. Before I engage in a closer analysis of *New Eve*, it will be useful to discuss briefly how Carter’s use of feminist dystopia is directly related to her critique of matriarchal myths. Generally, the speculative nature of dystopia works by

⁶ Alison Lee, ‘Angela Carter’s New Eve(Iyn): De/En-Gendering Narrative’, in Kathy Mezei (ed.), *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 238-9.

⁷ Lee, pp. 242-3.

pushing areas of representation to their extreme limit, portraying a ‘bad place’ (as opposed to utopia’s ‘good’ place) through the negative projection of existing social relations as they might play out in the near future.⁸ According to Elisabeth Mahoney, feminist dystopia tends to be far more radical or subversive than its utopian counterpart in either of their different interrogations of oppressive power systems. Utopias primarily attempt to imagine a time and/or place outside of or beyond those systems, whereas dystopian texts, in envisioning an immediately foreseeable future, remain focused on asking how such systems might more effectively be challenged and possibly transformed in the present. Carter would perhaps agree that dystopia offers a more productively subversive tool. She seems to indicate this in *The Sadeian Woman* where she argues: “There is no way out of time. We must learn to live in this world, to take it with sufficient seriousness, because it is the only world that we will ever know” (SW: 110). That world, which neither Carter nor dystopian tactics shy away from, is one in which *both* men and women have inflicted extreme and subtle acts of violence on the ‘other’. Thus, through its depiction of sexual violence and desire, feminist dystopia is a far more discomfiting realm, implicating women as well as men in perpetuating those binary oppositions that keep gender relations confined to positions of “subject and object...master and victim.”⁹ Feminist dystopia often poses itself as a challenge to contemporary feminist politics, forcing various feminisms to confront their own fantasies of power as a possibly ‘bad place’ – “both in terms of how women emerge as objects of sexual fantasy *and* exist as subjects empowered through fantasy.”¹⁰

Both *Heroes and Villains* and *New Eve* might be read as feminist dystopias, though I think *New Eve* more obviously so, primarily because its projected future is located in an uncomfortably close proximity to our own present, whereas *Heroes and Villains*’ post-apocalyptic fantasy is more closely related to science fiction. Both texts, however, share striking similarities in their negative projections of a matriarchal order

⁸ For this and the following two sentences see Mahoney, pp. 74-5.

⁹ Mahoney, pp. 75, 73.

¹⁰ Mahoney, p. 75.

coming into power, exposing where this feminist fantasy, even if it originates in a desire to overturn the patriarchal order, might in the end further oppress women. Throughout many of Carter's texts, she explores how the inevitable disruption of female desires has the power to transgress the boundaries of the paternal law. However, it is what women do with those desires, the ways in which they articulate and act on them, which determines whether they achieve a radical subversion or remain complicit with the prevailing order. As noted above, feminist dystopia is extremely unsettling, and not only in its depiction of sexual violence directed towards women but also its accompanying scrutiny of women's collusion with their own oppression. Carter's dystopian novels tend to leave a proverbial bad taste in readers' mouths, primarily due to their ruthless interrogations into how women, as a means of survival, will use whatever power that is available to them under a patriarchal regime, and how that power is often directed through the imposition of pain and violence on others. This is perhaps why *New Eve* and *Heroes and Villains*, as dystopian texts, are often neglected in favour of Carter's more palatable novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, which many readers embrace for their greater accessibility and 'positive' feminist politics (though I will be arguing in the following chapter that Carter's utopias are not as celebratory as one might think).

Furthermore, *Heroes and Villains* and *New Eve* are disturbing because they force us to confront our own personal fantasies or fears unconsciously directed towards the mother. Carter offers us potent maternal figures, or myths surrounding the disruptive power of the (m)other, only to deflate them. In *New Eve*, she literally cuts the surgically enhanced, monstrous Mother down to size, with the aim of exposing how female identity is not in fact contingent upon the iconic status of motherhood, or the womb, that "most potent matrix of all mysteries" (SW: 107). As Luce Irigaray points out, because women's reproductive status is often privileged as the only guarantee of female identity, then motherhood "gets wrapped up in some weird kind of holiness".¹¹ In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues for "the secularisation of women", which necessarily involves a

¹¹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 84.

demystification of the womb, or “the biological iconography of women”, precisely because:

To deny the bankrupt enchantments of the womb is to pare a good deal of the fraudulent magic from the idea of women, to reveal us as we are, simple creatures of flesh and blood whose expectations deviate from biological necessity sufficiently to force us to abandon...the deluded priestesshood of a holy reproductive function. (SW: 109-10)

That reproductive function derives much of its power from those cultural myths or religious texts that elevate motherhood, or the womb, to a sacred status, which illogically is used to justify the subjugation of women: they are viewed as sacred because they possess the womb, yet that “is why they are treated so badly for nothing can defile the sacred” (SW: 109). In other words, women’s only place in the symbolic order is this maternal role, and to deviate from the ‘norm’, for a woman to play with the maternal function or to reject it, is to transgress the paternal law, requiring punishment and repression of her feminine desires. If women are not ‘natural-born mothers’, and if the womb is merely “an organ like any other organ,” relatively useful but not much use at all if one does “not wish to utilize its sole function, that of bearing children” (SW: 109), then the whole rationale behind a patriarchal order’s need to keep women in their assigned place begins to crumble. Thus, when a feminist discourse continues to rely on the “imaginary construct” of some mother goddess as the first and last refuge of female identity, this only ends up further mystifying women’s bodies as merely the receptacle and repository for phallogentric desires, which allow ‘woman’ no place on earth other than her womb (SW: 110). For Carter, then, matriarchal myths are more often than not just as oppressive as their patriarchal counterparts, since those feminisms that express a desire for the maternal as a source of inherent female power do not so much grant women freedom from phallogentric parameters but might in fact help keep them in place.

In her focus on the ways in which women’s reproductive status has been used to define and oppress them, Carter’s dystopian texts invest women with power precisely because they are in possession of a womb, yet the very thing that grants them potency also makes them slaves to a patriarchal ideology, subjects only in relation to their

reproductive roles. This is not to say that Carter is calling for the rejection of motherhood, or the significance of the mother's role in the process of subject identification. Rather she forces us to question the values that have been invested in motherhood; instead of it being only one of many possible identifications, the female subject has been permitted no other role. Luce Irigaray claims this is due to the fact that women's bodies function as objects of exchange in a patriarchal order, and so children become their sole form of currency "in exchange for a market status for *themselves*", ultimately revealing that the "*value underpinning our societies for thousands of years has been procreation.*"¹² As Irigaray points out, even with the technological advancements made in (artificial) reproduction, no text has ever imagined a world without mothers, and so we need to continue questioning and playing with the maternal function. What Irigaray warns against, and what I believe Carter also remains wary of, is a tendency towards nostalgia when returning to the old myths, stories, and sacred texts surrounding mother figures or goddesses, invoking a return to these narratives (or maternal archetypes) without any intentions of changing the social order or founding a new sexual ethics of identity. To continue nostalgically analysing or appropriating these narratives, as if "the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses" (SW: 5) might automatically confer upon women a means of socio-political empowerment, is to engage in a fantasy that evades a necessary confrontation with women's present-day, lived realities, which painfully enough have not been entirely emancipated from a patriarchal order (irrespective of those who claim we now live in a 'post-feminist' age).

Thus, as we saw in *Heroes and Villains*, and will later encounter in *Nights at the Circus*, in *New Eve* Carter is extremely wary of the dangers that accompany a female imaginary when it fails to remain highly self-conscious or critical of the position and/or premises from which it speaks. If anything, Carter's texts force us more thoroughly to think through the problems that arise when women attempt to assert a specifically feminine/sexual subject while continuing to define themselves according to male

¹² For this and the following two sentences see Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, pp. 84, 83, 86.

representations or symbols of femininity. *New Eve* proposes from the outset that “a critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives” (NE: 6). To engage in such a critique allows for a confrontation with the ways in which gendered identities are not rooted in biological differences but rather constructed and elaborated through complex cultural codes, which dictate appropriate or inappropriate behaviour linked to physical appearances for each gender.¹³ Throughout the text Carter effectively develops this inquiry into the slippage that often occurs between sex and gender in order to support her later deconstruction of the womb, which I discuss in detail at the end of this chapter. I will now turn to a closer analysis of how the text’s problematic positioning of narrative voice is used to contest the reduction of gendered identity to one’s sexual anatomy.

New Eve takes as its conceptual basis the experiment of turning a man into a woman. On the most obvious level, Eve/lyn does not become a woman simply because s/he is given female genitalia. Although s/he physically ‘passes’ for a woman, s/he continues to operate from a strictly masculine positioning, and must learn how to behave according to ‘appropriate’ modes of femininity. In this sense, Eve/lyn negotiates his/her identity according to a doubled gendered perspective, often presenting him/herself as both subject and object while shifting between male and female points of view. As a result, *New Eve* “produces a first-person narrator split into a singular third person within him/herself”.¹⁴ Generally, Carter employs this narrative tactic to reveal a gap between socially determined subject positions and more complex lived experiences; notions of masculinity and femininity are not fixed, closed, or limited to one’s biological sex but rather provisional and often performed by either gender.¹⁵ Therefore, through the use of Eve/lyn’s narrative voice Carter disrupts patriarchal definitions of masculinity and femininity, demonstrating how these are in fact gendered subject positions both men and women take up when negotiating the complex realities of their lives. However, we cannot discount the text’s underlying proposal that the sexes often tend to have very

¹³ Peach, p. 126.

¹⁴ Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Peach, p. 128.

different relations to these gendered positions. Eve/lyn's own relation to the 'feminine' undergoes a drastic alteration that is not so much contingent upon a biological sex-change but the cultural codes of power constructed around the *appearance* of one's sex.

The sexes' differing relations to masculinity and femininity are often determined by whether one is perceived as biologically male or female, and subsequently the ways in which a patriarchal order invests itself in the 'masculine' as the dominant positioning while convincing its subjects that the 'feminine' must be violently repressed. In this schema, which relies on the rigid defence of the superiority of the 'masculine', men are encouraged to repress the 'feminine' within themselves as well as others. This repression is not only limited to the female sex but also extends to any group or individual the prevailing order believes to embody and/or represent the 'feminine'. For instance, *New Eve* illustrates this in its depiction of the oppressive violence directed towards minority groups such as African-Americans and homosexuals. Moreover, the text demonstrates how women themselves are expected to conform to a position of femininity that demands the suppression of their sex-specific desires, encouraging them to behave according to an exaggerated mode of femininity that is dictated to them by phallogentric constructions of gender. As we see with the figure of Mother, if a woman should take up a masculine position it is viewed as a direct threat to male dominance and consequently that positioning becomes for women their only perceived means to power, a highly problematic stance that further requires a repression of the 'feminine'. Overall, these different relations to gendered positions are significantly played out in *New Eve* through its initial depiction of Eve/lyn's life as a man in order to directly contrast with his/her life as a woman; in this reversal of positions the narrator goes from being an arch-misogynist to a victim of that misogyny.

Indeed, when trying to untangle the shifting relationship to the 'masculine' and 'feminine' that occurs in the text's narrative, it is imperative to keep in mind that Eve/lyn's own point of view is often situated from an ironic positioning of hindsight, as s/he keeps interjecting presentiments of his/her future-present life as a woman. This

paradox of narrative voice, as Ricarda Schmidt observes, is due to the fact that Eve/lyn is never given “a concrete point of view from which to tell [his]her story.”¹⁶ The narrative itself twists and curves around in a labyrinthine structure, compelling both Eve/lyn and the reader to: “Descend lower; while the world, in time, goes forward and so presents us with the illusion of motion...through the curvilinear galleries of the brain towards the core of the labyrinth within us” (NE: 39). Through her use of alienating tactics located in the text’s narrative structure and voice, Carter aims to disrupt and unsettle our notions of masculinity and femininity, to unravel gender from sex, and to expose how both women and men are often seduced by a phallocentrism that relies on their identifications with gender roles operating according to a repression of the ‘feminine’. Ultimately, the relationship to one’s gendered identity, as the text proposes and acts out through its representation of physical spaces, is a labyrinth that leads each of us to an encounter with “that most elusive of all chimeras” – ourselves – and like Eve/lyn, we come to realise the ways in which “this self [is] a perfect stranger” (NE: 38). In other words, to borrow from Simone de Beauvoir, with whom Carter shares an affinity, we are forced to acknowledge how we are not in fact born our gender but rather made into a masculine or feminine subject according to the cultural myths imposed on us.

In *New Eve*, Carter problematises the urge to escape one’s origins; or rather, the text insists on the need to confront the myths upon which we establish our sense of identity. Throughout the novel, Carter exposes how the desire for evasion inevitably brings one back around to the very thing he or she attempted to escape. For instance, Evelyn’s persistent desire for evasion is directly linked to his often violent repression of the ‘feminine’; it is the ‘feminine’ that continuously returns to haunt him.¹⁷ *New Eve* begins with Evelyn leaving behind the dank claustrophobia of London for the “clean, hard, bright city” of New York, “where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could

¹⁶ Ricarda Schmidt, ‘The journey of the subject in Angela Carter’s fiction’, *Textual Practice* 3 (1990), p. 66.

¹⁷ My ensuing discussion here of Evelyn *before* his sex-change will refer to the character as male in order to emphasise the shift that later occurs in his relation to the ‘feminine’.

have found no cobweb corners to roost in” (NE: 10).¹⁸ Although Evelyn insists New York’s geometric, logical grid represents “a city of visible reason” (NE: 16), we should pay careful attention to what he leaves unsaid in his description of the city, as it only applies to Upper Manhattan. He ignores the cavernous, labyrinthine depths of Lower Manhattan, and these two aspects of the city are themselves situated as masculine and feminine spaces. Evelyn’s attempt to omit the dark underside of New York is indicative of his desire to keep the ‘feminine’ repressed. The city nevertheless sucks him into a claustrophobic space of “lurid, Gothic darkness”, where he is confronted by a pervasive stench of rot and decay, plague rats “black as buboes”, and madmen on every corner proclaiming imminent doom and destruction (NE: 10-12). New York is on the brink of apocalyptic chaos, seething with barely contained violence from militant groups of women and ‘blacks’ threatening mass riots and uprisings.¹⁹ In this eruption of oppressed groups, representative of the ‘feminine’ realm, Carter seems to be capturing here the inherent violence that accompanies the inevitable return of repressed desires, explicitly linking it to Evelyn’s evasion of the ‘feminine’. More revealingly, as Evelyn comes to realise, the “darkness and confusion” of New York is a “sickness” already present within himself, having brought it with him “from the Old World to the New World” (NE: 37).

We might read Evelyn as an apt example of Julia Kristeva’s foreigner, who by fleeing his origins gains a freedom of mobility in crossing borders, yet remains haunted by or “riveted to the origin”.²⁰ In other words, the foreigner is consumed by love for the lost mother (or lost homeland), a longing for the maternal body that must necessarily

¹⁸ In a 1978 essay, ‘Femme Fatales’, Carter offers the somewhat tongue-in-cheek observation: “Cities have sexes: London is a man, Paris a woman, and New York a well-adjusted transsexual...”, in *Shaking a Leg*, p. 536. Although Evelyn perceives New York as a distinctly masculine city, we should keep in mind that this derives from his own view that privileges the male; whereas for Carter, as she indicates throughout the novel, New York, and by extension America, operate as imagined cultural sites in which gendered identities become blurred.

¹⁹ In her interview with Lisa Appignanesi, Carter explains how *New Eve*’s vision of an ‘American Apocalypse’ is based on a bus trip she took through the United States in 1969, and that the novel’s description of a dystopian New York captures, at least for her, the atmosphere of both the city and country at that time, particularly in the contexts of the Vietnam War protests and the Civil Rights and women’s movements.

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 29-30.

remain repressed, at least in the oedipal scene. By freeing oneself from this desire located in the mother's body (as origin), one is also freed from sexual taboos; through a "shattering of repression" one is permitted a "sexual frenzy" in which "everything is possible".²¹ For instance, Evelyn believes he has escaped the sexual prohibitions of a stereotypically repressive English society: "Child of a moist, green, gentle island...how could I resist the promise of violence, fear, madness?" (NE: 15).²² As an 'Englishman in New York', and significantly a dystopian New York that is rapidly disintegrating into lawlessness, Evelyn is liberated to act out on his darkest desires and sexual fantasies. He becomes the kind of Sadeian libertine he had perhaps always aspired to be, but in that freedom from prohibitions, as Kristeva argues, repression ruptures and one is abruptly confronted by that which he/she desires most. Thus, in the eruption of repressed desires, one does not so much escape the mother's body (or the origin), but rather returns to it as the very source of desire. Ultimately, this enforces a confrontation with oneself, with that unconscious, desiring 'other' within each of us, indicating an alienated interiority in which we come to recognise "the hidden face of our identity".²³ This encapsulates the scope of my own reading of *New Eve*, which is aimed at demonstrating how Eve/lyn's perpetual desire to flee from his/her origins is prompted by the desire to repress the (m)other, a movement that inevitably brings him/her back to a suffocating maternal space. It is a space that not only threatens to consume his/her identity, but as an instance of the return of the repressed, also reveals his/her violent relation to and desire for the 'feminine', which s/he has attempted to keep concealed in both him/herself and others.

As a man, Evelyn violently asserts his masculinity through acts of sexual dominance over women, often taking a sadomasochistic pleasure in their suffering. This "sadistic streak" develops in Evelyn at a very early age, having "acquired an ambivalent attitude towards women" (NE: 9) through his specular and obsessive fascination with

²¹ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 30.

²² See Carter's 'Love in a Cold Climate', in *Shaking a Leg*, especially pp. 588-90, where she challenges this myth of the English as sexually repressed.

²³ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 1.

Tristessa, an MGM screen siren strikingly reminiscent of Dietrich and Garbo. For Evelyn, Tristessa is “necrophilia incarnate” (NE: 7), perfecting the cinematic role of “abused femininity” (NE: 35), since “suffering was her vocation” (NE: 8). Evelyn directly associates the “allure” of her “tragic and absurd heroism” (NE: 7) with his adolescent sexual awakening, which he refers to as “the twitch in my budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa’s suffering always aroused in me” (NE: 8). Although Tristessa embodies for Evelyn a supreme image of femininity, she is later revealed to be a transvestite, merely playing a woman in drag. On one level this exposes the ways in which the social construct of gender and accompanying notions of femininity and masculinity are not dependant on one’s sex: these notions, like Tristessa, are “an illusion in a void” (NE: 110). More disturbingly, as Sarah Gamble observes, the figure of Tristessa, who carries more than just “a hint of Sadeian solipsism”, ultimately “legitimises the spectacle of female suffering, creating a stereotype of masochistic femininity to which real women are educated to aspire and men to desire.”²⁴ In other words, Tristessa represents a masculine ideal of femininity made by and for men, as Evelyn himself comes to realise: “*That* was why he [Tristessa] had been the perfect man’s woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, he had made of himself the only woman he could have loved!” (NE: 129). This directly reflects back on Evelyn’s attitude towards women, before he becomes one himself, desiring them only for the image of suffering femininity that he projects onto their bodies because it reasserts the image he has of his own dominant masculinity.

Evelyn’s highly misogynistic (and phallocentric) view of women is made all the more explicit in his relationship with Leilah: “a perfect woman; like the moon, she only gave reflected light” (NE: 34). When Evelyn first meets Leilah, who is “black as the source of shadow” (NE: 18), he projects onto her the role of temptress, leading him against his will into “the geometric labyrinth of the heart of the city” (NE: 21). In a sense, Leilah is leading him into his own heart of darkness, as Evelyn is no longer

²⁴ Gamble, p. 126.

merely a voyeur taking specular pleasure in women's pain, as he did with Tristessa, but becomes an active participant in his fantasies of abuse and dominance. At one point he believes she is a "succubus", one of the "devils in female form who come by night to seduce the saints", and because of this, then proceeds to punish her by tying her to the bed, beating her, degrading her body, and then defending his acts of sexual violence by claiming she is "a born victim" (NE: 27-8). This scene significantly foreshadows Leilah's reappearance at the end of the novel, by which time she has renamed herself Lilith (the 'original' succubus), and we realise that she has perhaps been determining Evelyn's labyrinthine journey throughout the entire text. Also, like Leilah, Evelyn is later repeatedly raped and given "a bestial apprenticeship in femininity", whereby women are viewed as born victims since they are perceived as "sub-human".²⁵

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues that "the mutilations our society inflicts upon women" are encouraged by the symbolic wound projected onto their bodies, which is derived from the phallogocentric view of the female as castrated and thus fundamentally lacking in relation to the male (SW: 23). As we see with Evelyn, he desires Leilah for "the exquisite negative of her sex" (NE: 27), which grants him a sense of power over her in the sexual act: "My full-fleshed and voracious beak tore open the poisoned wound of love between her thighs" (NE: 25). Carter is specifically examining here the ways in which pain and violence are used to control women, when the boundaries between sexuality and violence become blurred in the intensity of sexual passion, and how the myth of the bleeding wound sets male desire to exercise domination.²⁶ Carter effectively illustrates this point in the following passage from *The Sadeian Woman*:

The whippings, the beatings, the gougings, the stabbings of erotic violence reawaken the memory of the social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by her castration, which is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus, to which it is related in the complex dialectic of imagination and reality that produces culture. Female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitudes towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed. (SW: 23)

²⁵ Schmidt, pp. 63-4.

²⁶ Peach, pp. 118, 120, 127.

In *New Eve*, the myth of castration is central to Carter's exploration of "the making of the subject" in relation to desire and gender.²⁷ Evelyn is literally castrated in order to be made into a female subject; once he is given female genitalia, or at least the appearance of being a woman, he discovers his position of power is reversed, as he is now rendered the repressed 'other' of male desires and fears. According to psychoanalytic theory, those fears contribute directly to the making of the male subject, since he defines his identity in relation to the threat of castration. Women represent this threat because they are already 'lacking', and are thus a reminder of what the man also might lose. Furthermore, since women do not fear losing what they do not have, they are less likely to remain loyal to the law (of castration) and are subsequently capable of disrupting the symbolic order. Thus, as the above quotation from Carter suggests, in order to keep women submissive they themselves need to be convinced they are lacking the phallus; that they are no more than wounded creatures who are born to bleed, passively suffering the violence inflicted on them. For instance, Evelyn attempts to convince us of Leilah's own masochism, that "she systematically carnalised herself and became dressed meat" (NE: 31), yet Carter does not expect us to accept her as such. Leilah is, if anything, consciously playing a role of femininity, as Evelyn comes to suspect when he watches her putting on or invoking "this formal other" in the mirror, allowing "herself to function only as a fiction of the erotic dream" that Evelyn projects onto her (NE: 28, 30). Significantly, when Evelyn goes too far in his abuse, Leilah refuses to play her passive part, threatening him with "voodoo threats" of castration: "she told me a chicken would come and snap my cock off" (NE: 32), which of course is exactly what her own 'voodoo' Mother does in order to make Evelyn into a woman.

Evelyn abandons Leilah after a botched abortion, fleeing from the degradation and "universal pandemic of despair" that he has found in New York, which he locates in Leila's body, projecting onto her flesh a "corrupt languor" of rotting femininity (NE: 37).

²⁷ Schmidt, p. 56.

Rather than confront the dark corruption of his own desires, he chooses to blame Leila for his “disease”, claiming: “the slow delirious sickness of her femininity, its passivity, its narcissism, have infected me because of her” (NE: 37). This evasion is, if anything, prompted by his desire to save himself “from that most brutal of all assaults, the siege of the other” (NE: 34). He escapes to the desert, “where there were no ghosts” (NE: 38), believing in some masculine myth of the American desert as a symbolic condition rather than a place.²⁸ Or rather, as Jean Baudrillard proposes: “The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality,” ultimately allowing the subject an “immobility without desire.”²⁹ Evelyn himself believes the desert, “peopled only with echoes” (NE: 41), might offer him a suspension of all desire. This suspension is not only a further denial of one’s relation to the ‘other’, but also, ultimately, it is a refusal to confront the self: to recognise the alienated interiority, or strange heterogeneity, of one’s desires. Furthermore, Carter is perhaps giving a sly wink to the old adage, ‘Go west, young man’, via Kerouac’s *On the Road* and its mystification of the desert as a place of Adamic solitude and rebirth.³⁰ Evelyn certainly is reborn in the desert, but as a woman, and ironically the desert is figured as nothing more than “the abode of enforced sterility, the dehydrated sea of infertility, the post-menopausal part of the earth” (NE: 40). The desert is also representative of Leilah’s enforced sterility, since Evelyn has escaped from the overwhelming sensuality of her flesh “at the price of her womb” (NE: 34). However, in fleeing from that which he would like to repress Evelyn is merely “speeding towards the very enigma [he] had left behind – the dark room, the mirror, the woman” (NE: 39).

Ultimately, Evelyn fails to discover the clean sterility of an empty “landscape that matches the landscape of [his] heart” (NE: 41), precisely because repression ruptures in an overabundance of the ‘feminine’. He is confronted by his own nightmare of an

²⁸ Gamble, p. 123.

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1986), trans. Chris Turner (London/New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 71, 124. Although written ten years prior to *America*, Carter’s novel shares quite a few similarities with Baudrillard’s text, which unfortunately I do not have the room to explore more fully here.

³⁰ Kerouac also wrote a novel, *Tristessa*, but whether Carter read this is a matter of speculation.

excessively feminine realm, held hostage by the devouring, monstrous Mother, who signifies the return of the repressed, embodying as well as reinforcing a patriarchal order's worst fears in her self-appointed role as the "Grand Emasculator" (NE: 49). Mother is an artificial goddess who literally operates underground in a network of caverns that has been technologically transformed into a simulation of the womb. At one point Evelyn refers to this place, Beulah, in a strange slippage of tenses: "It will become the place where I was born" (NE: 47), reflecting on how Beulah is a "place where contrarities exist together", presided over by a profane goddess who is the incarnation of "a complicated mix of mythology and technology" (NE: 48). Mother has surgically "transformed her flesh" (NE: 49) into an exaggerated version of a maternal deity, stitching onto herself tiers of breasts donated by her acolytes and becoming "her own mythological artefact" (NE: 60). Both Beulah and Mother indicate a "slippage of the differentiation between what is natural and what is artefact"; as simulations they personify a gynocentric essentialism based on phallogocentric models of femininity.³¹

Thus, Mother is hardly a genuine subversion of a patriarchal order, and even if her "mythic vengeance" (NE: 50) is to reveal how myth itself "is a made thing, not a found thing" (NE: 56), she fails to achieve a truly remade myth that offers an alternative to a masculine positioning that is violently repressive of women. Beulah itself is represented by the insignia of a truncated phallus, and in "the synthetic apparatus of mystery that dominated this place" (NE: 57), we are continuously forced to ask: Why use a male symbol for a place of female power? Mother's seductive myth of female potency is as sterile as the artificial womb she inhabits, merely reiterating a phallogocentrism that situates the female always in relation to the male. Indeed, even though Mother claims she is "the Castratrix of the Phallogocentric Universe" who will bring about a "feminisation of Father Time" (NE: 67), Carter reveals how she has not in fact 'castrated' anything. Mother's project is fundamentally flawed, since her 'newly born woman' is no more than a literally castrated male (precisely the old Freudian myth). Moreover, Beulah is

³¹ Gamble, p. 124.

explicitly figured as a dystopian space, in which a radical feminism is negatively projected into a 'bad place', an exclusively female realm that ends up perpetuating the violence of a patriarchal order, which Julia Kristeva warns against in 'Women's Time'.

Kristeva insists that when confronting the myths or narratives that inform female identity, women need to challenge the place that is "bequeathed to [them] by tradition" while also remaining critical of the ways in which they attempt to transform that positioning.³² Or rather, we cannot evade the existing symbolic order in the fantasy of establishing a new one, but must negotiate our sex-specific positioning in relation to the law. In negotiating that relationship, women have two options: either to conform to the law or subvert it through actively seeking a specific discourse of the 'feminine', bringing into view that which has been designated as unnameable or repressed by the socio-symbolic order. This subversion, however, must avoid a repetition of violence located in a patriarchal system, its own violent urge towards the repression of the 'other'. As we see with the figure of Mother, rather than confronting the symbolic order, she believes she might do away with history itself through "the halting of the phallogocentric thrust so that the world could ripen in female space without the mortal interventions of male time" (NE: 77). Though she seeks out a specifically feminine discourse in reaction to that history of a patriarchal order's repression of women, she asserts this can only be achieved through the creation of an exclusively female society. Her subversion may be extremely disruptive, but like Marianne's in *Heroes and Villains*, it is highly destructive; she may have the power of creating a New Eve but can only do so by killing off "Old Adam" (NE: 16). Thus, in her own violent repression of the male, Mother does not merely reiterate phallogocentric inscriptions of femininity, but firmly reinforces a patriarchal order. She perpetuates a violence of difference between the sexes according to her entirely exclusionary premises.

Carter demonstrates here Kristeva's warning of the dangers that might arise in "the more radical feminist currents" that refuse identification (or confrontation) with the

³² For this and the following three sentences see Kristeva, 'Women's Time', pp. 199, 200, 202.

existing power schema.³³ By attempting to “make of the second sex a *counter-society*”, as an alter-ego of the official society, this in the end pushes feminist discourse into the refuge of fantasy, articulating itself as an a-topia because it remains outside the law. Ultimately, any feminism that defines itself through exclusionary practices will end up with an inverted sexism, creating its own scapegoats; in reiterating the phallogentric logic of the “guilty one”, the very logic of any matriarchal counter-power/counter-society will generate itself as a “simulacrum of the combated society”. Beulah itself is a simulation, and not only as an artificial womb but also as a place of power. Mother’s ‘radical’ feminism, founded on the symbol of a truncated phallus, can only derive its logic from the very thing she is attempting to overturn, and ironically enough, she can only wield her power from underground. In other words, according to her own terms and the place/positioning from which she operates, Mother ultimately keeps the ‘feminine’ repressed. What she believes is a female utopia is in fact a dystopian nightmare, where women remain enslaved to the phallogentric thrust of violence, which imposes upon their bodies and gendered identities a subjectivity not of their own making.

Just as Mother is ‘too much’ (as a grotesque caricature of the maternal), she turns Evelyn into an excessively male version of the ‘feminine’, modelling her New Eve after a Playboy centrefold (NE: 75). This is exactly the kind of woman that men (including Evelyn when he was one) are encouraged to desire through a specular phallic economy that projects onto women’s bodies a passive masochism. Significantly, though, even if Eve/lyn is now technologically altered into an ‘unnatural’ woman with all the necessary organs for female reproduction, s/he is hardly a ‘feminised’ subject. Initially, when Eve/lyn first discovers the new body s/he has been given, s/he does not experience any psychological or behavioural change, merely viewing his/her external appearance from an internal masculine positioning: “the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (NE: 75). On one level this indicates a paradoxical split in self-perception, in which the “desiring viewer and the desired object, usually distinct figures, are here

³³ For this and the following two sentences see Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, pp. 202-3.

confined within the one body.”³⁴ However, Eve/lyn does not think of him/herself as any less male than before Mother wielded her surgical knife, in spite of all her efforts to teach Eve/lyn how to be a woman. She attempts to do this through repeatedly showing Eve/lyn “non-phallic imagery such as sea-anemones opening and closing; caves, with streams issuing from them; roses opening to admit a bee; the sea, the moon” (NE: 72). Ironically, as Carter intends, these might just as easily reassert phallic images of the female body, explicitly figuring it as passive, receptive, cyclical, a dark cave trickling out streams of menstrual and ovular excretions.

Thus, Mother’s project of ‘feminising’ Eve/lyn essentially relies on symbols that a patriarchal order uses to shroud or veil women’s bodies in mystery. She may believe she is re-appropriating those symbols but she does so uncritically, seduced by their representative power that reduces women to their reproductive biology. Indeed, Mother’s ultimate goal is to impregnate Eve/lyn with his/her own preserved semen. In other words, Mother falls for patriarchy’s own propaganda, reinforcing its discourse in her belief that motherhood will provide the supreme proof and triumph of Eve/lyn’s femininity. Though Eve/lyn is forced to view reproductions of “every Virgin and Child that had ever been painted”, this absurd attempt “to subliminally instil the maternal instinct itself” (NE: 72) is answered by Eve/lyn when s/he retorts: “it takes more than identifying with Raphael’s Madonna to make a real woman!” (NE: 80).

In spite of Eve/lyn’s response, both s/he and Mother espouse an essentialist view of women, since they are both convinced that “one woman is all women” (NE: 58). For Eve/lyn, that one woman is reduced to the figure of Leilah, the dark temptress luring on the male in order to consume and obliterate his masculinity: “Leilah had always intended to bring me here, to the deepest cave, to this focus of all darkness that had always been waiting for me” (NE: 58). Though Eve/lyn claims Beulah signifies his/her “journey’s end as a man” (NE: 60), we cannot quite believe this statement, since as soon as s/he escapes

³⁴ Heather L. Johnson, ‘Unexpected geometries: transgressive symbolism and the transsexual subject in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*’, in Bristow and Broughton, p. 172.

Beulah, Eve/lyn claims to feel “almost a hero, almost Evelyn, again” (NE: 81). Later, s/he will realise that s/he has not in fact “reached the end of the maze yet”, and will have to “descend lower”, until Leilah brings him to the deepest cave for a final confrontation with Mother and her myths (NE: 49). Fleeing from Beulah, however, embarking on yet another evasion of the ‘feminine’, Eve/lyn is convinced that even if s/he has been forced to live in this unfamiliar female body, s/he is in complete possession of the old Evelyn’s “arrogant and still unaltered heart” (NE: 82).

It is however the symbolic castration projected onto women’s bodies by a phallogentric discourse, turning women into split-subjects, as ‘other’ within, that eventually makes Eve/lyn into a feminine subject. Ultimately, this female castration, located in the phallogentric gaze that renders women as objects (of male possession), is a patriarchal order’s attempt at denying them any identification with or articulation of their desires. This often occurs to the extent “where a woman’s sexual desire is so repressed that it can only find expression as rape, reflect(ing) a patriarchal misogynist culture which constructs femininity as passive and masochistic.”³⁵ Carter consistently explores this experience of self-alienation in the female subject within the contexts of rape, as seen in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Heroes and Villains*; and I would argue that Eve/lyn’s ‘real’ transformation begins with his/her painful recognition of that ‘otherness’ within. Eve/lyn is once again taken prisoner in the act of flight, this time by a crude caricature of some patriarchal god, Zero, from whom s/he receives a brutal education in femininity. As Carter herself indicates, this education is one that the female subject is often forced to endure, claiming that much of the novel was written as an exploration of “the process of physical pain and degradation that Eve undergoes in her apprenticeship as a woman.”³⁶ Zero repeatedly rapes Eve/lyn as a means for incorporating him/her into his harem of women (echoing Marianne’s own treatment by Jewel). Zero himself might be read as an exaggerated version of the young (male) Eve/lyn, as s/he acknowledges: “[He] forced me

³⁵ Johnson, p. 59.

³⁶ Carter, ‘Love in a Cold Climate’, p. 592.

to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation” (NE: 102).³⁷ Zero’s rape of Eve/lyn forces him/her into a position of femininity whereby s/he now objectifies his/her own body through a male gaze that is external to his/her self-perception, ultimately robbing him/her of any former sense of autonomy: “The mediation of Zero turned me into a woman. More. His peremptory prick turned me into a savage woman” (NE: 108). Furthermore, like Leilah, who appeared to be nothing more than “a visitor in her own flesh” (NE: 27), Eve/lyn realises s/he is now in the same position: “although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations” (NE: 101).

The irony of this is that Eve/lyn can only become a woman by *pretending* to be one; or rather, since Zero perceives her to be a woman simply because of her physical appearance, her only means for surviving that violence of gender inscription he imposes upon her body is to act according to the appropriate modes of feminine behaviour that is expected of her.³⁸ Eve observes this behaviour through the example of the other women in Zero’s compound, who also live as ‘imitations’. They willingly pretend to be the kind of women that Zero expects and demands of them: passive, masochistic, and sexually enslaved to his tyrannical rule. Just as he does with Eve, Zero turns them into ‘savage’ women, allowing them no other form of communication except to bark like dogs, and locking them up in a room together as if they were a herd of beasts (NE: 87, 97). Each of them are allotted one night of the week for the privilege of sharing his bed, and each of them are grateful and eager to be his adoring sex slave because it is their only means to power and freedom, no matter how minimal (NE: 99). Zero’s compound is yet another dystopian nightmare, as Carter pushes to an extreme limit this negative representation of how a patriarchal order operates in its violent oppression of women. Like Zero, patriarchy often attempts to deprive women of language as a means of controlling them,

³⁷ c.f. Peach, p. 130.

³⁸ Since from this point onward Eve/lyn takes up an explicitly feminine positioning, I will now refer to the character as Eve, and any subsequent references to her life as a man will refer to the character as Evelyn.

silencing their own disruptive desires; and like the group of women in Zero's harem, whose survival is dependant on seeking his sexual favour, Carter exposes a form of female complicity that often allows a patriarchal order to remain in place. When Eve questions how a crippled, peg-legged, obviously insane old man is capable of physically dominating a group of seven strong, healthy young women, she concludes: "his myth depended on their conviction" (NE: 99). In other words, like patriarchy, and similar to Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop*, Zero is only able to keep his power in place through his subjects' belief in his omnipotence.

Furthermore, Zero's power is all the more strengthened due to the women's inability, or even unwillingness, to establish a relationship of female commonality amongst themselves. In spite of the fact that they are more than aware they are living double lives, as subhuman for Zero but differently when alone with each other, fully capable of speech and individual identities, they continue to behave according to the savagery expected of them. In their struggle for survival, they violently turn on each other, competing for Zero's sexual favouritism, and when Eve shows up as a new member of the harem, her arrival is perceived as yet another source of competition. As a result they brutally beat her, uniting together only through a kind of animal instinct, a pack mentality that fears and rejects any outsider as a direct threat. This is perhaps where Carter's use of dystopia is at its most discomfoting. We might be able to laugh at the absurdity of Zero's bizarre myths and superstitions, by which Carter parodies patriarchy's own illogical premises, thus undermining that order's claim to power, but the text's representation of how the women violently turn on each other (as well as Eve and later Tristessa) is extremely disturbing. This is because Carter refuses to entertain any notion of women as victims, which she might say is yet another consoling nonsense, not only inhibiting the female subject from seeking out a viable means of agency, but also excusing women from an effective confrontation with the ways in which a patriarchal order violently constructs gendered identities.

The violence inflicted on the women by each other is in part due to their struggle to survive, as Eve recognises that “perhaps they were fighting for their lives” (NE: 89). On the one hand this is reflective of how a patriarchal system structures female relationships through intense rivalries for male desire. However, similar to *Heroes and Villains*, Carter forces us to question this form of female survival, exposing the problematic stance of women taking up a masculine positioning as a means for gaining and exerting power. This in itself echoes Mother’s own violence, as we cannot forget that she also virtually rapes Eve/lyn as part of that endeavour to teach ‘him’ how to be a ‘her’. The end result of conforming to such violence is self-destructive, allowing no alternative space for a female imaginary that might productively subvert the prevailing phallogentrism of a patriarchal order. For instance, when the women eagerly participate in Zero’s attempt to kill Tristessa, who is the consummate female impersonator, even living as an impersonation of him/herself in a mausoleum of wax effigies, they become trapped in Tristessa’s glass house. Through their own murderous impulses, exhibited in their desire to please Zero, the house becomes shattered, killing them in its wildly “spinning, transparent labyrinth” (NE: 116). By playing according to patriarchy’s rules, the women conform to an ‘imitation’ of femininity, and its transparent labyrinth ultimately destroys them (NE: 140).

As for Eve, throughout the text she has been attempting to evade a confrontation with the ‘feminine’, either by repressing women through misogynistic, sadomasochistic relationships with them (when she was a man), or by fleeing from Mother in her refusal to confront how she herself is now ensnared in patriarchy’s cultural codes of femininity. Although Eve manages yet another escape after the episode with Zero, when she finds herself at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, she is literally allowed no further room for evasion. There is nowhere else she might run away to, as the text forces both her and its readers to confront one final labyrinth: the womb. Although Eve had fled from Beulah, recognising its simulated womb as symbolic of the artifice of the myths constructed around femininity, the womb itself remains a mythological space that is highly pervasive

in its hold over the female imaginary as a source of power. For example, regardless if Mother herself has abandoned Beulah, realising the failure of her progressively technological goddess to bring about a new order of female power, “she could not abdicate from her mythology as easily as that” (NE: 179). If anything, because Mother’s power is founded on phallogentric representations of femininity, her identity collapses into that of a primitive, archaic mother, enacting her own regression to a primal space. Thus, just as Mother relies on the womb as the first and last refuge of female identity, Carter forces us to return to this imaginary locale as the very source of female oppression, as both the beginning and end-destination of the text’s journey through the labyrinth of gendered identity.

As I pointed out above, Mother’s attempt at progression has led to a regression: “She has retired to a cave by the sea” (NC: 174). This cave, which is “beyond consciousness” (NE: 184), is representative of the womb, as Carter herself suggests in *The Sadeian Woman*: “the unguessable reaches of the sea are a symbol of it, and so are caves, those dark sequestered places where initiation and revelation take place” (SW: 107). If the womb/cave is a site of initiation and revelation, then Eve’s experience of entering into this space is figured as a backwards birth, literally climbing back into the womb, as she is forced “to slide into the living rock all alone” (NE: 179). Ultimately, Eve’s progression, or rather regression, through the cave is not only a deconstructive but also a “visionary journey”.³⁹ As a deconstructive journey it is explicitly rendered as an “ordeal” (NE: 181), similar to the one in *The Magic Toyshop*. Instead of enforcing a confrontation with the figure of a monstrous patriarch, it is now a monstrous matriarch whose myth of female potency must be challenged and unravelled as equally repressive of the female subject. Eve’s journey through the caves/womb might also be read as a visionary experience since by the end of Carter’s deconstructive process the text suggests the revelation of a new subjectivity, one no longer tied to patriarchal or matriarchal myths. However, we need to keep in mind that this journey through the caves is also a

³⁹ Schmidt, p. 66.

parody of the mythical journey to the Underworld, ironically figuring its visionary quest as a return to the place of birth rather than the land of the dead.⁴⁰ Through this reversal, Carter interrogates how birth/death, or beginnings and endings, are often conflated, particularly in the masculine imaginary of the womb as representative of the ‘feminine’:

Men long for it and fear it; the womb, that comfortably elastic organ, is a fleshly link between past and future, the physical location of an everlasting present tense than can usefully serve as a symbol of eternity, a concept that has always presented some difficulties in visualization. The hypothetical dream-time of the foetus seems to be the best that we can do. (SW 107-8)

Carter does in fact attempt to imagine this hypothetical dream-time of the foetus, but with the aim of demystifying the womb as a symbol of eternity: as “the First and Last Place, earth, the greatest mother of them all, from whom we come, to whom we go” (SW: 108). This in itself, as Carter points out, is a dream or myth that “gets in the way of the experience, and obscures it completely” (SW: 108). Eve is thrust into this alienating temporal suspension. Her experience of travelling up through the womblike interior of the cave enacts a regression in both time and space, in which “Time is running back on itself” (NE: 183) until eventually “Time no longer passed” (NE: 184). The cave recedes into a smaller cave, and yet another cave within that, revealing a highly complex system (NE: 181), which is not unlike the Chinese box of female genitalia that Carter presents to us in her short story, ‘Peter and the Wolf’ (see Chapter One). Carter intends for this image of a receding network of caves to indicate both the complex mythology that has been elaborated around the womb, as well as the complexity of women’s bodies and desires, which that mythology attempts to suppress. She refigures the dream-time of the foetus, of being inside the womb, as a distinctly bodily space: “the extensible realm sited in the penetrable flesh” (SW: 107). By doing so Carter attempts to bring us back to a discourse of women’s bodies, but without mystifying their flesh according to notions of the womb as a sacred, inviolable space; she forces us to confront the biology, rather than the mythology, of reproductive bodies. As Luce Irigaray points out, the womb is often fantasised as a “devouring mouth”, precisely because it “is never thought of as the primal

⁴⁰ Peach, p. 128.

place in which we become body”.⁴¹ Or rather, this fantasy of a threatening, devouring womb, which completely obscures the realities of the flesh, is particularly located in a masculine imaginary’s endeavour to repress a female specificity in women’s attempts at articulating their experiences of gestation and birth.

Carter articulates that experience according to its biological processes, refusing to mystify the womb through some romanticised, or sanitised, depiction of the mother’s body. Even if the womb is “the domain of futurity in which the embryo forms itself from the flesh and blood of its mother” (SW: 107), it is not merely a passive receptacle for neonatal growth and nurturance. In Eve’s case, during her passage through the womb, it is in fact shown to be extremely active and aggressive in its formation of the child. For instance, after Eve has travelled as far as she can within the caves, having completed her visionary journey (discussed further below), she is forced to fold her body into a foetal position. It is not a position that offers any physical comfort but rather pushes in on her from all sides, the living rock forcefully expelling her from its cramped, claustrophobic space. This most interior of the caves is explicitly figured as a womb going into labour: the cave’s walls “shuddered and sighed”, and as its “pulsations exert greater and greater pressure”, this movement develops into a “visceral yet perfectly rhythmic agitation”, rippling its walls of “meat and slimy velvet”, which at first seem to ingest Eve in one last inward pull before shoving her out “into the amniotic sea” (NE: 186). Ultimately, the womb is depicted here in all its messy reality, the flesh and blood of the maternal body. That body does indeed become a suffocating space, at least at the point of its expulsion of the child. Thus, according to the biological accuracy of this scene, Carter refutes the masculine imaginary that insists on figuring the womb as a devouring mouth. Just as Eve is expelled from the cave, so too is the infant once the womb no longer provides the room in which it needs to further develop and grow. To take this one step further, Carter indicates how each of us needs to be expelled from the womb as a fantasised, mythological space.

⁴¹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 16.

If anything, Carter's deconstruction of the biological iconography of the womb self-consciously avoids the impulse to romanticise its secret, unknowable interior: "This inner space must have been there before any of the outer places; in the beginning was the womb and its periodic and haphazard bleedings are so many signs that it has a life of its own, unknowable to us" (SW: 109). In other words, according to Carter's doubled meaning, we have to acknowledge the ways in which the womb takes on a life of its own through either myth or fantasy, taking on an imagined existence; and as distinctly removed from our fantasies, its own reproductive biology or reality has very little to do with the myths constructed around women's bodies. For example, the womb, and by extension female sexuality, is often inscribed in the myth of 'mother earth'. Although Carter claims she does not mind the idea of 'mother earth', she also points out that this becomes highly problematic in our tendency to equate 'mother' with nurturance since 'mother earth', or nature, is not benign.⁴² When nature shows its absolute indifference to us, that it does indeed have a life of its own, we are inevitably shocked. Thus, Carter suggests, and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that if we insist on relying on the notion of a mother goddess then perhaps Kali, the goddess of death, would be the most appropriate representation of the mother. Kali, however, like Mother in *New Eve*, is a grotesque, monstrous matriarch, which I think is precisely Carter's point, ultimately reminding us that the womb, as well as mother goddesses, are always a difficult thing to think through since we persistently have to guard against the danger of romanticising the mother.

For Carter, it is above all women's desires for maternal power that poses the greatest danger when attempting to assert their identities, as this is not so very different from a patriarchal order's claims to some inherent paternal power and/or law. Mother is just as much an hypothesis as father (something Carter more thoroughly explores later on in *Wise Children*). As we see with Eve, when she calls out for Mother to appear, as absolute proof of her existence, and only receives an empty reply of silence, we realise

⁴² For this and the following points throughout the rest of this paragraph, I am referring to statements made by Carter in her interview with Lisa Appignanesi; for the last sentence also see *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 115.

that “Mother is a figure of speech” (NE: 184, 186). The mother’s body is itself rendered redundant, at least in its ability to provide the female subject with a secure, autonomous identity; and perhaps one of the text’s greatest ironies is that Eve is the prodigal son turned daughter, forced to return to the womb, yet in the end that return is impossible.⁴³ So long as the womb remains figured according to a masculine imaginary, to which matriarchal myths contribute and help reinforce, then, as Carter insists: “Only men are privileged to return, even if only partially and intermittently, to this place of fleshly extinction” (SW 108-9). Eve is no longer a man, and must negotiate her relationship to the maternal body from an alternative feminine positioning since she is now the bearer of that symbolic place of fleshly extinction, as she herself admits: “I have come home. The destination of all journeys is their beginning. I have not come home” (NE: 186). Necessarily, then, Eve is ejected from the cave/womb, from its consoling fantasy of a safe and nurturing space, since “Mother, having borne her, now abandons her daughter forever” (NE: 186). Overall, Carter invokes the mother’s power only to denounce her potency.⁴⁴ Similar to *Heroes and Villains*, she is more interested in demythologising than resolving. By denying that the apocalypse, which seems to be the end result of *New Eve’s* dystopian explorations, might bring about renewal, Carter exposes Mother’s myth of matriarchal power to be artificial, infertile, futile.

What vision are we left with at the end of the novel, then, once we have completed the text’s deconstructive journey through the womb? Eve’s own vision in the caves, as she inches her “way towards the beginning and end of time” (NE: 185), describes a backwards evolution, in which extinct forms of life undergo “a process of reversal” (NE: 183). Accordingly, the text suggests the need for seeking out a new female subjectivity, one that would no longer locate itself exclusively in the womb or maternal body. Ironically, Eve’s revelation of this is received while trapped inside the claustrophobic womb of the caves, emphasising the necessity of moving outside of this

⁴³ Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, pp. 175-6.

⁴⁴ For this and the following two sentences see Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, pp. 177-8, 172.

mythological space towards an 'elsewhere' that would allow the female subject more room to fashion her identity. Furthermore, although the visionary journey through the caves is one that moves backwards in time, it does not end in a regression to an archaic matriarchal order as a source of female power predating patriarchal societies. Carter refuses nostalgia for some imagined 'prehistorical' moment in human communities, thoroughly rejecting the dream of return to a prelapsarian edenic paradise, as if this might provide us with an original model upon which to build new human identities. For Carter, gendered identities will always inevitably remain inscribed within socio-historical discourses. Thus, she attempts to imagine through that process of reversal a point of origin located beyond human constructs of time, which might allow for a more fluid subjectivity that is not yet trapped within the confines of any one specific discourse.

For example, Eve's visionary journey takes her back to a time long before humans evolved on the scene. Transported to a primeval forest, she envisions an archaeopteryx, a feathered, flightless dinosaur: "bird and lizard both at once" (NE: 185). For Eve, this creature is in fact not unlike herself: "One of those miraculous, seminal, intermediate beings", a cross-species "composed of contradictory elements" (NE: 185). Such a creature might provide a different model for conceiving a female subjectivity that is multiple, hybrid, and limitlessly free in the articulation of her desires. Ricarda Schmidt believes that the ending of the novel indicates the beginning of a new species, at least symbolically.⁴⁵ As Eve herself claims, certain that she has been impregnated by Tristessa: "I myself will produce a tribute to evolution" (NE: 186).⁴⁶ Schmidt offers the fascinating suggestion that we might read Fevvers as Eve's daughter, since in *Nights at the Circus*, Carter's fabulous bird-woman seems to represent "an evolution in femininity", a female subject who "fantasizes a beginning for herself outside...the Law of the Father".⁴⁷ I would add to this that the figure of Leilah also acts as a harbinger of

⁴⁵ Schmidt, p. 66.

⁴⁶ We should recall that Tristessa turns out to be a man, and that he and Eve share a night of sexual intercourse, a scene that I unfortunately did not have room to discuss in this chapter.

⁴⁷ Schmidt, p. 67.

Fevvers, as Carter links both of them to mythological as well as colloquial associations made between women and birds. Leilah first appears in the text, at least according to Evelyn's perspective, as "a strange, bird-like creature, plumed with furs, not a flying thing, not a running thing, nor a creeping thing, not flesh nor fowl, some in-between thing" (NE: 20-1). If anything, then, she seems to be the evolutionary descendent of the archaeopteryx, that seminal, intermediate creature.

Furthermore, Evelyn notes that "sometimes [Leilah] sounded more like a demented bird than a woman, warbling arias of invocation or demand" (NE: 19). Evelyn is disturbed by this observation, projecting onto Leilah his fears of the 'feminine', since he believes she is leading him on towards his death. Symbolically, Leilah does do this, as we discover at the end of the novel that she is in fact Mother's daughter; that her arias of invocation were but a lure, and in their insistence, ironically pushing Evelyn away from her and towards Beulah, where Mother demands that he give up his life as a man and become (re)born as a woman. Significantly, after Eve escapes from Zero, she reencounters Leilah, who now no longer appears to be Mother's daughter. Having renamed and transformed herself into Lilith, she is capable of recreating her identity without relying on her biology. Or rather, because her reproductive organs have been rendered insignificant after her botched abortion, she has been literally freed from the womb. Her character is an indication of the possibilities of the daughter forging her own identity as separate from the mother's; or, from having to identify with motherhood as the only possible source of female identity. In an ironic reversal, although Evelyn had attempted an evasion of the 'feminine' at the expense of Leilah's womb, Eve is now trapped by that same 'biological iconography': she is pregnant and has herself become Mother's daughter. Moreover, it is Leilah/Lilith who brings her to the caves for a final "rendezvous with [her] maker" (NC: 179), so that Eve might also free herself from Mother's matriarchal myth and its repressive inscription of femininity. Thus, Leilah is highly instrumental in determining much of Eve's journey throughout the text, an unseen presence pushing Eve towards a different relationship to the 'feminine'.

When Eve finally emerges from the caves/womb, she acknowledges: “I did not want my old self back” (NE: 188), clearly embracing rather than repressing the ‘feminine’, both within herself and the ‘other’. However, the moment Eve realises she does not want to go back to being her old (male) self, she also admits: “I began to wonder if I might not in some way escape” (NE: 188). Problematically, then, even if she is free from that desire for impossible return, she still desires some form of escape, which in itself stems from a desire for repression. Apparently, Carter deflates her own visionary promise of a new subjectivity, and although by the end of *New Eve* we are left “on the beach of elsewhere” (NE: 190), this is a highly ambiguous space. We are not quite sure whether this ‘elsewhere’ indicates a genuinely new beginning or if we will regress to yet another mythological, maternal space, as Eve offers a final incantation: “Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth” (NE: 191).

Thus, we are left questioning whether Eve’s continuing desire for escape, as she sails off towards an unknown destination, will ultimately lead to a further mystification of women’s bodies, the female subject becoming bound more tightly to simulation, to the unimaginable, the unrepresentable.⁴⁸ Sarah Gamble suggests that Carter’s lack of resolution poses two conflicting questions: Is it possible to assert a “multiple, malleable subject capable of an infinite degree of self-creation”? Or, will gender roles always remain limited to ideological structures? Carter more thoroughly explores these questions in *Nights at the Circus*, to which I will now be turning, investigating the ways in which the text deconstructs various utopian fantasies of the ‘New Woman’, embodied by Fevvers’ attempts at self-creation. As we shall see, though Fevvers herself is no longer enslaved to the womb, that subjective freedom must confront its own limitations.

⁴⁸ For this and the following sentence see Gamble, p. 129.

Chapter V: THE NEW WOMAN

Do the abnormal ones...anticipate the culture to come, repeat the past culture, or express a constantly present utopia?

~ Catherine Clément¹

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a...divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?

~ Hélène Cixous²

She laughed, she laughed, she laughed.

~ Angela Carter³

In *Nights at the Circus* Angela Carter provides us with a female subject who in creating her own origin narrative seems to have escaped the seductive hold of either patriarchal or matriarchal myths. Although many readers interpret Fevvers' 'lack' of origins as a wholly liberating move, embracing its myth of female self-creation, Carter herself seduces us with this figurative utopia only to disrupt it from within the text. As Marina Warner observes, in many of Carter's fictions she "needs to profane her own fabricated marvels, to blow the raspberries of sin in the artificial paradises of her own skilled invention."⁴ *Nights at the Circus* sets up a tension between the desire for self-creation and the imaginative need for origins in grounding the self. The text both literally and figuratively takes us on various 'flights of fancy' in order to bring us back down to earth. The scope of my inquiry into the utopian fantasies played out in the text will primarily focus on how Fevvers relies on her wings as a transcendental signifier for liberated female identity, which nevertheless comes close to trapping her in a phallogentric gaze that turns her into a spectacle of feminine excess. Her body itself becomes a grotesque utopia, where the lines between her positioning as producer of her own specular image and object of that image begin dangerously to blur. Thus, as I will be arguing throughout

¹ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 9.

² Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 246.

³ Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, p. 295.

⁴ Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag', in Sage (ed.), p. 247.

this chapter, even if Fevvers constructs her own origin myth in an attempt to assert a strong image of female self-determinacy, we need to pay close attention to how that narrative remains informed by a past in which women have been silenced or repressed according to patriarchal representations imposed upon them. Furthermore, as I will be concluding, in forcing a confrontation with those discourses that have contributed to the construction of gendered identities, Carter begins to offer viable (rather than utopian) alternatives for transforming relationships between the sexes.

Though my reading of *Nights at the Circus* is somewhat sceptical of its celebratory aspects, we should keep in mind that Carter engages with a form of feminist utopia not merely to expose its limitations but rather to emphasise the necessity of exploring those limits. Such an exploration is crucial precisely because it encourages us to stretch the limits of our own imaginations, to encompass what might be possible both now and in the future. Fevvers herself is representative of the possibilities of a New Woman, as her adoptive mother, Lizzie, emphatically insists: “You never existed before. There’s nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One. You haven’t any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create” (NC: 198). However, the promise of this positioning is undermined by its own blind optimism. Although Lizzie is usually the grounded one, always quick to provide a Marxist or materialist analysis, she is being uncharacteristically idealistic here, since of course Fevvers does have a history. We cannot forget, either, Carter’s insistent reminder: “Flesh comes to us out of history” (SW: 11). In other words, gendered identity is contingent upon socio-cultural variables, and because “relationships between the sexes are determined by history” (SW: 6), then it is imperative to never lose sight of the fact that sexuality itself “is never expressed in a vacuum” (SW: 11). Thus, before I engage in a closer analysis of the text, it is necessary to take a closer look at this notion of the New Woman, which Carter uses to problematise women’s positioning in relation to a history of patriarchal representations of femininity and the desire for future feminist figurations that might break free from the past.

Although Fevvers is generally representative of the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman, my reading of her as such is more specifically grounded in the context of Hélène Cixous' refiguring of feminine desires. For Cixous, the notion of a New Woman is representative of the making of a new feminine subject. Cixous' New Woman is located in the inherent possibilities of *écriture féminine*, which might provide access to the articulation of female desires as well as a different discourse allowing for alternative relationships to otherness, grounded in a reciprocity and respect of (sexual) differences. Cixous argues that a women's writing consists of two aims: "to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project."⁵ In other words, by simultaneously looking back and forwards from a stance rooted in the present, a women's writing works towards destroying past fictions of women while projecting towards the future, foreseeing possibilities for the New Woman to come into existence. Furthermore, in refusing to repeat the past by avoiding a confusion between biological and cultural representations of women, the new might break away from the old, the future no longer determined by past configurations of the 'feminine'. This break from the past is located in figuring the 'feminine' as affirmation, rather than lacking or unrepresentable; yet there is something slightly ambiguous in Cixous' command: "It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her".⁶ It is not quite clear whether she is calling for us to know the New Woman *or* the Old, or if she intentionally blurs this distinction. If anything, Cixous is indicating that the New Woman can only be known or liberated through the process of thoroughly confronting and doing away with the old myths constructed around 'woman'.

As I have explored in previous chapters, Carter consistently works through this same process in nearly all of her texts, exposing those myths that perpetuate a repression of the 'feminine' through fictions that exaggerate sexual oppositions rather than respecting differences.⁷ Where *Nights at the Circus* (and subsequently *Wise Children*) departs from Carter's earlier novels is in the positioning from which she writes,

⁵ For this and the following two sentences, see Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 245.

⁶ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', pp. 255, 248.

⁷ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 249.

indicating a change in the direction of her narrative voice towards a more feminine writing. Perhaps this is because Carter recognises the limits of deconstructing origin myths from within the parameters of patriarchy's own discourse. For instance, in previous novels such as *New Eve* or *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Carter masquerades behind male voices in order to expose the phallogentric view that constructs women's bodies as lacking or merely projections of males desires for the phallus. In contrast, *Nights at the Circus* offers a plurality of female perspectives, and Fevvers' embodiment of a feminine excess is suggestive of a powerful source for the articulation of female desires. Furthermore, Fevvers' explosive laughter at the end of the novel is highly reminiscent of the Medusa's laugh (as figured by Cixous), which not only blows up the law of castration in its affirmation of female sexuality but also clears the way for "the launching of a brand-new subject".⁸ I do not think, however, that it is so much a 'new' subject that comes into being but rather 'woman' as she has always existed outside of a phallogentric discourse. As Cixous urges: "If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man...it is time for her to dislocate this 'within', to explode it, turn it around, and seize it".⁹ Thus the 'old woman' is a construction of patriarchal inscriptions of femininity whereas the 'new woman' appears on the scene as soon as women themselves begin writing their own bodies/desires. As we see in Carter's later works, this is achieved by altogether avoiding writing 'woman' from a masculine positioning, because (as Cixous warns) no matter how ironic or self-conscious one might be in mimicking a male discourse, this always carries the risk of obscuring women or reproducing them according to phallogentric representations.¹⁰

Nights at the Circus, however, does remain problematic in Fevvers' physical representation. Even if her feminine excess is on one level liberating, in that it shatters patriarchal notions of femininity, it is also restrictive, since for readers and other characters in the novel the 'problem' of interpreting Fevvers' identity is often centred on

⁸ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', pp. 258, 261.

⁹ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 257.

¹⁰ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 248.

her wings/physicality. Fevvers may be in control of her voice and/or story, but her body remains a site of spectacle (or, speculation), and she is often threatened with becoming “Only a bird in a gilded cage” (NC: 14).¹¹ This is because even if she asserts herself as the literal representation of Winged Victory, Fevvers is nevertheless dependent on an audience that attempts to impose its own desires on her self-representation. Moreover, when she loses her appreciative audience her confidence and sense of identity begin to unravel, indicating that her promise of autonomous freedom will remain a fantasy as long as it is not grounded in an historical (or material) transformation in human relationships. The text proposes that autonomy itself is never achieved in a vacuum, but rather is established through an interplay of temporal and physical spaces in which relationships between self and other are constantly shifting. Furthermore, no matter how much one might prefer to read the novel as an entirely new departure for Carter, and though there is that shift in her use of narrative voice, *Nights at the Circus* is still primarily involved with a process of deconstruction that informs so much of her work. Just as many of her earlier novels invoke the power of maternal/paternal myths only to deflate their potency, Carter does the same here with the figure of the daughter and her myth of self-creation. As much as Fevvers claims she is free of the old myths, she cannot resist locating her origins in some ‘paradise lost’, and though she depicts her childhood as taking place in an edenic feminine space, this merely turns out to be a feminist utopia that literally fails to sustain itself by the light of day.

In light of all of this, then, I would acknowledge that the term *écriture féminine* should be cautiously applied to a reading of *Nights at the Circus*, and not only because Carter herself resists labels. The text forces us to remain extremely critical of where a women’s writing, in its attempts to appropriate the old myths or symbols of femininity,

¹¹ Carter is alluding to the traditional association of women with birds in myth and fairy tales, as well as perhaps Mary Wollstonecraft’s caged bird, which Wollstonecraft employed as a metaphor for women’s oppression, echoed in Lizzie’s question: “Does that seem strange to you? That the caged bird should want to see the end of cages, sir?” (NC: 38). See Marina Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde* for a lengthy discussion of bird-women in fairy tales; also see Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 258, where Cixous plays on the association of women with birds, linking an appropriation of this to subversive possibilities in women’s writing.

might fail to bring about an effective transformation in the representation of female bodies/desires. This is, of course, not dissimilar to Carter's critique of patriarchal myths (as discussed in previous chapters); where we see a difference is in the fact that unlike *Heroes and Villains* or *New Eve*, Carter's deconstructive tactics here do not leave us at a dead-end; or rather she does not merely lead us to the 'no place' of her utopia and then abandon us 'in a wild surmise' as to where we might go next. We are, if anything, left with that sense of dizzying freedom the novel has been promising all along, and with a clear direction in which to move forward. Freeing ourselves from the seductive lure of the old myths as well as the utopian fantasy is in itself the liberatory move the text proposes, allowing us to progress into an alternative space that is rooted in our present realities. In this sense we might more effectively transform those realities by engaging with our myths, our fantasies, but without becoming hostage to their underlying ideologies or illusions. The means for doing so, as Hélène Cixous insists, is through demonstrating where writing itself acts as the locus or site of change: "the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."¹² Though I am wary of my own proposal to read *Nights at the Circus* as an example of *écriture féminine*, I do think it is highly useful to associate Carter's aims in this novel with Cixous' project. Both are concerned with how a feminine practice of writing might "bring about a mutation in human relations".¹³ Or rather, they seek out the means by which it is possible to change our relations to the law: to evolve in our relations to each other (beyond the violence at the origin); to form mutual transactions of love between the sexes; and ultimately to embrace the freedom that exists in accepting ourselves as transitional, multiple subjects.

Nights at the Circus is itself located in a transitional space, standing on the cusp of past and future tenses: "at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history" (NC: 11).

¹² Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 249.

¹³ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 253.

Somewhat optimistically, Sarah Bannock claims that rather than looking back at the Victorian age the novel “gazes fearlessly into the new”.¹⁴ However, I would insist Carter is concerned with the old as much as the new, the text exploring a certain process of metamorphosis. According to Marina Warner, tales of metamorphoses are often located in transitional moments of time, when the progress of history has arrived at a confluence of disparate traditions and/or civilisations, thus allowing us to explore our own identities through figures who are situated “at turning points in culture and at moments of clash and conflict between one intellectual hegemony and another.”¹⁵ As we see with Fevvers, Carter specifically situates her at an imaginary and historical turning point when the women’s emancipation movement began making drastic strides, and initially she is representative of the optimism of the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman. Carter is of course writing from a positioning of hindsight, and on one level is celebrating the importance of this historical moment in opening up a space for the subsequent feminist discourses that contributed to shaping much of the twentieth century’s legislative and socio-cultural practices. However, she is also questioning the extent to which these discourses have achieved a disruption of the patriarchal hegemony, at least in so far as the New Woman has broken away from the old.

This inquiry is embedded in the narrative structure of the text’s transitions between temporal and physical spaces, as the action of the novel shifts from the thriving ‘new world’ of London, hurtling towards its own future-present incarnation of a modern cosmopolitan city, and the ‘old world’ of a Russia seemingly trapped in a backward-looking, primitive society. Both locations are figured as feminine spaces: London as a one-breasted Amazon queen (NC: 36); Russia as the archetypal *baboushka*, an old woman who is also representative of a pregnant hag about to give birth to its own violent and revolutionary future: “*what exemplary destiny are you knitting out of the blood and sinew of history in your sleeping womb?*” (NC: 96). Fevvers herself is intended to be a

¹⁴ Bannock, p. 206.

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 18.

revolutionary figure of women's *future* liberation, yet through the novel's recurring anachronisms, Carter forces us to question how far that spirit of feminist revolution has actually taken us. Thus, these spatial shifts in the text are meant to be reflective of the metamorphosis that Fevvers undergoes, from the utopian embodiment of the New Woman to "only a poor freak down on her luck" (NC: 290). If anything, she becomes like many of the women in Carter's previous novels, struggling to (re)establish her sense of self once she is thrust into an alien terrain where history and its narratives continue to act as an oppressive force.

Fevvers asserts her identity through a myth of self-creation in the belief that this not only allows her freedom from a patriarchal order's repressive treatment of women but also heralds the end of that order. Her faith in the power of this "revolutionary myth" is located in making a career out of becoming a "feminine figure who crystallizes around herself the swirling glances of a threatened culture".¹⁶ However, she is forced in the end to confront how that myth perhaps reduces her to "an object of the most dubious kind of reality to her beholders" (NC: 290). She cannot escape a history in which women have been defined by the phallogentric gaze simply by projecting herself into a utopian future. She goes from asserting herself as a spectacular harbinger of "the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground" (NC: 25), to recognising her inability to sustain this image as soon as she is confronted with the reality of her own positioning in a society where the patriarchal myths of 'woman' do continue to hold power: "Pity the New Woman if she turns out to be as easily demolished as me" (NC: 273). That irony of Fevvers' metamorphosis, from "fabulous bird-woman" (NC: 15) to poor freak, along with the text's transitions between physical locations, from urban London to Siberian wasteland, might be interpreted as yet another instance of Carter's familiar move of regression, forcing a necessary confrontation with those historical narratives that have shaped our present realities.

¹⁶ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 26.

Carter's approach here should also be read in light of Marina Warner's suggestion that metamorphosis serves as a metaphor for narrative itself, "as a producer of stories and meanings", whereby our desire for stories to be told over and over is what allows them to be revisioned, remade, shape-shifted; through retelling the old myths or stories we might also work towards transforming them.¹⁷ In *Nights at the Circus* Carter returns yet again to the Genesis narrative, retelling it from a different perspective. The text's allusions to the myth of Leda and the swan, upon which Fevvers heavily relies when constructing the narrative of her origins, might be connected to the biblical creation story. In the scope of feminist revisions, both myths are highly problematic in their assertion of a paternal primacy, requiring the daughter's allegiance to the name of the father in order to gain access to the symbolic order and her own symbolisation (or representation). It would seem, then, that Carter remains intent on confronting the fact that perhaps we cannot ever escape the Genesis myth, or at least the basic elements of its narrative, since it answers a 'primal' need in all of us. In other words, Carter may be suggesting that in spite of its oppressive elements derived from socio-historical and religious interpretations, we cannot discount the importance of the ways in which this myth provides the subject with an imaginative vehicle for situating him/herself in relation to his/her origins. Overall, Carter continuously retells this myth in order to explore the possibilities of where and how it might be appropriated and remade into a narrative of female self-determinacy.

Fevvers uses the myth of Leda and the swan (which I will connect directly below to the Genesis myth) as a means of explaining both her origins and her wings, claiming that "just like Helen of Troy, [she] was hatched" (NC: 7). This trope of hatching sets up a certain amount of freedom for Fevvers in imagining her own beginning, freeing her from any speculative fascination with the womb as the lost source of her origin, since if she is, as Walser speculates, like any member of an "oviparous species", then she was not "nourished by the placenta" and so does not "bear the scar of its loss" (i.e. a belly-

¹⁷ Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, pp. 74, 211.

button) (NC: 18). Or rather, because Fevvers locates the site of her birth outside of the womb, she thus explicitly positions herself outside the ‘normal’ pattern of origins (i.e. the oedipal scene), which in effect would free the subject from the name of the father, as well as a suffocating relationship to or desire for the mother. Accordingly, Fevvers believes she is “unknown to nature” (NC: 21), and by extension is not required to conform to the ‘natural’ mode of femininity, liberated to fashion her self-representation solely according to her own desires. However, although she insists she “never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*” (NC: 7), like any ‘natural’ child, she is endlessly fascinated by the mystery of her birth:

I always saw, as through a glass, darkly, what might have been my own primal scene, my own conception, the heavenly bird in a white majesty of feathers descending with imperious desire upon the half-stunned and yet herself impassioned girl. (NC: 28)

In several ways Fevvers presents this myth in an entirely positive light, reinforcing it as a narrative that privileges the realm of maternal-feminine desires in its “demonstration of the blinding access of the grace of flesh” (NC: 28). However, Fevvers also glosses over its darker aspects, failing in her appropriation of the myth to remain self-critical of how it places her in relation to a history of patriarchal violence and misogyny. In her own reading of the myth, Marina Warner offers both perspectives, and so her analysis is highly useful here in a discussion of how Fevvers’ imagined primal scene might be both liberating and limiting. For Fevvers, the figure of Leda is a desiring mother, since even if the swan (Zeus) descends upon her with imperious desire, and even if she is half-stunned, Fevvers stresses at the end of this description that Leda is *yet herself impassioned*, willingly engaged in the pleasures of her flesh and the sexual act that leads to conception. She is not a suffering mother, and as Warner suggests, Leda’s desires could possibly represent an earthly Paradise continuing after the Fall.¹⁸ As a desiring mother, she allows access to a fallen world in which spiritual grace is set aside in favour of the physical (flesh). Representative of an unfallen Eve, she is still innocent

¹⁸ For my discussion throughout the rest of this paragraph see Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, pp. 108-12.

of good or evil, and her lush fertility remains a source of female pleasure, moving her beyond the need for grace, God, or transcendence. On the other hand, because she might also be situated as an anti-Virgin Mary, impregnated by a god and her hatching of children mimicking the virgin birth of Jesus, Leda is thus representative of a dangerous profanity, at least according to a Christian perspective. Since Leda's children are significantly matrilineal, reproduced in *her* form rather than the father's (Zeus/the swan), she poses a direct threat to the law's privileging of the name of the father.

Of course, this reading of the myth might be embraced or reviled depending on one's own positioning or point of view. For a patriarchal order it is highly threatening in its reminder of the potency of a maternal-feminine desire; yet for a feminist positioning it might be extremely liberating for exactly the same reason. Fevvers embraces the positive aspects of the myth, appropriating them for her own purposes when constructing the narrative of her origins, which she locates in "a wholly female world" (NC: 38). The brothel where she spends her childhood is figured as an edenic space, but it is an earthly paradise "in which rational desires might be rationally gratified" (NC: 26), inhabited by women who are perfectly happy in their 'fallen' state. The women of Ma Nelson's have little concern for achieving spiritual grace; they are all in favour of the flesh since their profession depends on it, and it is a profession that not only provides them with a decent income but also allows them the freedom to devote their spare time towards developing their intellectual interests and pursuits. Ma Nelson is a benevolent and generous Madame, her establishment offering a haven to women who might not be able to find such economic and personal independence in the outside world, where a Victorian morale still reigns in its restrictive hold over women's lives. In this female commune Fevvers herself is "the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers" (NC: 21), encouraged to fashion her independent identity by literally stretching her wings. Significantly, when she begins learning how to use those wings, her first attempt at flight results in failure, ending in a 'fall' (NC: 30). It is only after observing how the mother birds teach their young, and then relying on the help of Lizzie, "who took it upon herself the role of bird-

mother” (NC: 31-2), that Fevvers eventually succeeds. Thus, Carter offers a productive, alternative retelling of the myth of the Fall, as located in the myth of Leda and the swan.

The female paradise of Fevvers’ childhood is representative of the possible means by which the daughter might construct her own origin myth, and one where the maternal is figured as a desiring, liberating, and nurturing presence. For example, in spite of Fevvers’ extraordinary appearance, she is not unlike any adolescent girl who, when first encountering “the fantastic tumult of her drives”,¹⁹ is forced to confront the awakening of her desires and changing body. Fevvers fears discovering in herself some “irreparable *difference*”, and explains how just before her first successful flight: “I feared a wound not of the body but the soul...an irreconcilable division between myself and the rest of humankind. I feared the proof of my own singularity” (NC: 34). She is able to overcome that fear through Lizzie’s encouragement, as she unceremoniously pushes her out the window. Lizzie’s push is a gift that allows Fevvers the freedom to explore her “adolescent wings” (NC: 31), trusting her to “the transparent arms of the wind [as they] received the virgin” so that she might “be what she must become” (NC: 34). This relationship between Fevvers and Lizzie indicates the ways in which the mother might be an enabling force, allowing the daughter both the freedom and support to establish her identity as independent from the mother’s. Furthermore, like the reading of the Leda myth, in which the impassioned girl does not suffer from her loss of virginity, throughout Fevvers’ story her wings and the mystery surrounding them is often directly linked to the text’s “explosion of the virginity myth, and hence of the mystique of femininity.”²⁰ Fevvers’ first flight is her first sexual awakening, and she is entirely uninhibited by patriarchal views of what constitutes feminine desire: “I saw my future as criss-crossing the globe for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes; I only knew my body was the abode of limitless freedom” (NC: 41).

¹⁹ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 246.

²⁰ Bannock, p. 212.

However, this belief in her body as the abode of limitless freedom is significantly referred to in the past tense, and its utopia of desire located in the female body is inevitably disrupted by the text itself. Again, Carter sets up Fevvers' myth of self-creation as a positive, liberating narrative only to force us to contend with the ways in which Fevvers' flights of fancy are often lacking in sufficient critical analysis, just as Lizzie later warns her (NC: 286). Indeed, Fevvers experiences a truly irreparable Fall from the paradise of her childhood when it becomes clear that its magical female space cannot sustain itself, precisely because *that* particular abode of limitless freedom was built on very weak foundations. After the death of Ma Nelson, the brothel passes over to her male next-of-kin, who in the real world, which the women have succeeded in avoiding until now, has the power to forcibly remove them from their only home, which he does. Moreover, once the women view the rooms in the light of day, they realise "the luxury of that place had been nothing but illusion"; everything in the brothel is decaying with damp and mould, and in the tarnished mirrors they are forced to recognise even themselves as such: "not the fresh young women that we were, but the hags we would become" (NC: 49). Thus, the brothel is hardly a utopian but rather a fool's paradise, in which the women have been evading the harsher realities of the outside world while remaining shut away in their "artificial night of pleasure" (NC: 49).²¹ Moreover, even if Ma Nelson considered the women "her adopted daughters", she failed to provide for them beyond her own death because "she could not bear to think of death", an evasion in itself (NC: 44). Ma Nelson's death, then, ultimately indicates the loss of the mother, or at least the protective mothering fantasy, which Carter suggests limits the daughter from being able to establish effectively her autonomy or identity when confronted with the threatening realities of a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, Ma Nelson encouraged her girls "to prepare themselves for a wider world" (NC: 45), and so most of the women have trained themselves for professions in which they do not have to rely on their bodies as a form of currency.

²¹ Bannock, p. 210.

Furthermore, the text resists a “feminine nostalgia” for that lost maternal paradise, as the women unanimously decide to burn the house down, symbolically representing a destruction of the oppressive terrain of paternal/maternal myths through which the child must negotiate his/her adolescence.²² Fevvers acknowledges that “the first chapter of [her] life went up in flames” (NC: 50), indicating an acceptance of its false utopia, yet unlike the other women of the brothel, her only “apprenticeship for life” has been experienced through learning how to manipulate her self-image, since she is fully aware that like any woman she is left “to the mercies of the eyes of others” (NC: 39).

Although Fevvers believes she might avoid becoming sealed up in her appearance, it is precisely because of her appearance, her wings, that she insists she “had been feathered out for some special fate” (NC: 39). This is again another instance where Lizzie might advise Fevvers to “improve [her] analysis” (NC: 286), as Fevvers believes her wings might allow her to transcend a patriarchal gaze, and that her special fate is to help bring an end to the old world: “so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I” (NC: 285). Her visionary optimism, that as soon as women “tear off [their] mind-forg’d manacles, [they] will rise up and fly away” (NC: 285), often fails to consider, as Lizzie points out, that a “nobility of spirit hand in hand with absence of analysis” (NC: 232) will get you nowhere, merely taking you to the ‘no place’ of any utopian fantasy. Lizzie’s is the voice of reason in the text. Speaking perhaps as Carter’s own mouthpiece, she insists that the only possibility for radical change to come about in the future is through an understanding of how our present always exists in direct relation to our past:

You can only define the *future perfect* by the *present imperfect*, and the present, in which, inevitably, we all live, always seems imperfect to *somebody*...[.] What we have to contend with...is the long shadow of the *past historic*...that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present in the first place. (NC: 239-40)

²² Bannock, pp. 210, 212; this symbolic destruction of the house reoccurs throughout many of Carter’s texts, as seen in *The Magic Toyshop* (Philip’s toyshop), *Heroes and Villains* (the Barbarian’s crumbling mansion), and *New Eve* (Tristessa’s glass house). In the following chapter on *Wise Children* I will show how Carter returns to this same scene but in a very different way.

We can specifically apply this to the flaws in Fevvers' utopian fantasy, in that her wings (as symbolic of a feminist revolution) will inevitably fail to bring about a future change in women's lives because she has failed to analyse more thoroughly her origin myth and the history of patriarchal representations in which it places her. Just as Mother in *New Eve* uses a truncated phallus to serve as the symbolic foundation for her own myth, Carter continues to indicate the dangers of relying on male myths or symbols as a means for asserting female power. For example, Lizzie and Fevvers have a 'magic' clock and toy sword that they took from Ma Nelson's, keeping them as nostalgic relics from the past, which they then invest with a female potency. The clock, which they profess has the ability to make time stand still (NC: 48), seemingly allows for a disruption of the (patriarchal) symbolic order, offering a respite from its oppressive past and inexorable, violent march of progress so that they might feel briefly "plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum" (NC: 87). Fevvers uses her toy sword for "self-protection" (NC: 48) against unwanted sexual advances from male admirers, and it is, like her wit, a weapon used to keep men in *their* place. However, when Lizzie loses her clock and Fevvers' sword proves impotent when she needs it most, the confidence they had placed in themselves through these objects is rendered extremely vulnerable. Again, we are forced to question the effectiveness of appropriating traditional male weapons in the defence of female autonomy. This becomes all the more inherently problematic if we return to Fevvers' use of the Leda and the swan myth, which she relies on to assert her fantasy of self-creation, or at least her fantasy of being entirely free of the name of the father and its repression of the daughter's desire.

If Fevvers is hatched, as she claims, then she is freed from tying her origins to the mother's womb, and is thus free from any desire for (return to) the womb as an inviolable space of maternal potency (as discussed in the previous chapter). However, this in itself might be yet another repressive move of the mother's body, as it further removes her from any active participation in generation, the trace of her name incorporated by that of the father's. As Warner reminds us, and as Fevvers fails to recall,

the primordial egg of (her) origin is a swan's egg.²³ Her origins are in fact firmly located in a kind of paternal womb. Significantly, she proudly boasts to the journalist Walser at the start of their interview: "Not billed the 'Cockney Venus', for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire', due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore" (NC: 7). Walser is quick to observe to himself: "Evidently this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts" (NC: 7). In Fevvers' version of the myth, then, Leda is hardly representative of some matrilineal power, as Warner suggests we might read the myth, since Fevvers is *not* reproduced in her form but rather the father's. Like Helen or Venus/Aphrodite, the daughters of Zeus (and like Eve who was created by a male god), Fevvers' conception is solely derived from the seed/semen of the father, since the swan is figured in the original myth itself as the active, animating, inspiring agent (supporting Aristotle's view of reproduction).²⁴ Thus, metamorphosis becomes a masculine realm of reproduction or generation, the principle source of vitality, since it is the father god, Zeus, whose power to change form is contingent upon his sexual desire as an all-powerful impregnating force. Recalling Fevvers' description of her imagined primal scene, it is the swan's desire that is imperious and dominating, and she glosses over the relevant fact that in the myth Leda is raped. By stressing that the half-stunned girl is also impassioned, no matter how much this might be an attempt to grant her a willing, desiring role, it nearly verges on reinforcing female desire itself as masochistically surrendering to male violence.²⁵

Fevvers herself, in believing that she is the New Woman not tied down by a patriarchal history, often seems to evade the extent to which her identity, her desires, are circumscribed by its masculine will to power. She perhaps shares far more in common with Leda, the mother, than she cares to admit, in the sense that she is continuously

²³ Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 77.

²⁴ For this and the following sentence see Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 99.

²⁵ As I pointed out previously in my discussions of the various rape scenes in *The Magic Toyshop*, *Heroes and Villains* and *New Eve*, this is something Carter strongly critiques and exposes as an underlying misogynistic desire imposed upon women. Furthermore, though this is not something I have been able to explore more extensively, as it is a highly complex problem beyond the scope of my thesis, Carter also questions the extent to which women participate in this fantasy.

struggling to flee from men's desires to possess her. For instance, she falls into the same trap twice when both Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke attempt to violently take for themselves what they view to be her female power. Though she always manages to escape by the force of her own indomitable will and sense of confidence, as Sarah Bannock perceptively observes, freedom for Fevvers is often a negative experience, achieved only in moments of flight.²⁶ That is, her freedom is dependent on her utopian evasions, believing she is capable of transcending a patriarchal history through her somewhat uncritical fantasies of female autonomy (rather than her actual ability to physically fly, which in itself is often considered a dubious talent). I would like to make clear, however, that I am not arguing Fevvers is entirely unaware of the vulnerability of her positioning, that she is in some way naively or even willfully ignorant of those phallogocentric discourses against which she, like any woman, must struggle. She is in fact acutely conscious of the dangers of becoming enclosed by that discourse.

When she leaves Ma Nelson's and the safety of her childhood paradise, forced out into the world to make a living, Fevvers acknowledges that perhaps the most viable means for doing so, at least for a woman in a patriarchal society, is by trading on her appearance or looks. This is exactly what she shrewdly does, effectively exploiting the values of that society to her own benefit by learning how to take advantage of its specular economy that views women as objects of commodification. However, her first attempt in doing so is a harsh lesson in the double-edged reality of using a patriarchal order's weapons against itself: that they will in some way turn on herself. The next stage in her life apprenticeship towards learning how to distinguish herself from patriarchal views of what makes a 'natural' and 'unnatural' woman is when she joins Madame Schreck's "museum of woman monsters" (NC: 55). In this house of female grotesqueries, "this lumber room of femininity, this rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (NC: 69), Fevvers is forced to recognise that her wings do not grant her an entirely unique status; that she too is threatened with becoming sealed up in her appearance since

²⁶ Bannock, p. 211.

this is the 'unnatural' condition of 'femininity' required of all women, regardless if one is born a 'freak' or 'norm'. Furthermore, she realises that this threat of enclosure does not come from just men, but that women themselves are often responsible for not only conforming to the norms of femininity, but also dictating them to other women, thus imprisoning themselves.²⁷

Madame Schreck is discovered to be perhaps the most grotesque woman in her museum because she ruthlessly cashes in on *other* women's bodies to satisfy her greed, her own body revealed to be nothing "but a set of dry bones...a sort of scarecrow of desire" (NC: 84). Madame Schreck is if anything a warning to Fevvers' conspicuous desire for monetary profit gained at the expense of conforming to a patriarchal system and its violent appropriations of the female body. Fevvers takes this lesson to heart, and although her financial greed is what usually lands her into trouble, the one thing that definitively characterises her is her heart of gold, not the lust for gold but her overwhelming generosity, particularly towards other women in need. She may trade on her own body, but that is her business, and she would never dream of exploiting another. Fevvers does, however, continue relying on her utopian dream of a future when women will be entirely liberated from economic bondage: "The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed" (NC: 285). Though Fevvers becomes intoxicated with her prophetic visions, Lizzie soberly reminds both her and us: "It's going to be more complicated than that" (NC: 286). This is one of Carter's own interjections of hindsight, writing from the future Fevvers so fervently and idealistically dreams of, which has not entirely brought about her radical vision of freedom. Rather, it is Sleeping Beauty, one of the female grotesques from Madame Schreck's, whose dream reflects more accurately the reality. Lizzie and Fevvers both acknowledge their anxieties that "her dream will be the coming

²⁷ We later encounter this more explicitly in the text's rendition of a female panopticon, which I later return to though am not able to explore as much as I would like.

century”, and that it will be one full of pain and horror, since while she dreams “how frequently she weeps!” (NC: 86).

Although Carter’s continuous disruptions of Fevvers’ utopian fantasies seem to come from a positioning of cynical retrospection, that deflation of her protagonist’s myth-making is not aimed at merely providing a negative deconstruction. Rather, Carter is thoroughly engaged with exploring where “the symbolic meaning of woman remains open.”²⁸ Fevvers’ own body, distinguished by its feminine excess, symbolises a kind of grotesque utopia. The grotesque, as Mikhail Bakhtin defines it, is effectively achieved through “exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness,” whereby “displeasure is caused by the impossible and improbable nature of the image.”²⁹ The female grotesque often functions as an exaggerated and excessive symbol of male fears projected onto women. Accordingly, Carter plays with the grotesque in order to demonstrate how through the representation of outrageous, improbable, ironic images of the female body one might be capable of challenging patriarchy’s own distorted and spectacular images of femininity. However, it would seem that by choosing to present Fevvers as a monstrous freak, Carter is still working within the parameters of a phallogentric discourse, rather than outside or against such enclosures. On the other hand, if the grotesque is that which is generally marked by an ambivalence, as Bakhtin insists, then Carter’s use of the female grotesque takes on a greater complexity through its possibilities for subverting the traditional norms of femininity. These norms, again, are an illusion projected onto women’s bodies, and so perhaps by embracing the illusion one might also reveal it as such, opening up an alternative narrative space for women to play more freely with their self-representation.

For instance, Mary Russo claims the grotesque indicates “an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection,” and “as an interior event...[it is] a potentially adventurous one.”³⁰ Rosi Braidotti also points towards the promising

²⁸ Schmidt, p. 70.

²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 303, 305.

³⁰ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 7-8.

possibilities of the monstrous body which, “more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self...the monster is a process without a stable object.”³¹ Interestingly, Marina Warner directly links the grotesque to bodily metamorphoses, as these can provide potent metaphors for either monstrous abominations or appropriate transformations, revealing one’s proper form as an unfolding of personality towards fulfillment and/or closure.³² However, the natural world itself disrupts this desire for the perfection of form, since what often emerges from the transformation (such as the hatching of a butterfly from its chrysalis) is incongruous or discontinuous with its original form. Warner calls this a “scandal” of metamorphosis: “the same spirit/soul/essence appears to occupy different forms and yet remain itself”, thus producing a highly discomfoting experience that threatens our perceptions of a unified identity. Fevvers – circus performer, bawdy giantess, bird-woman – might be interpreted as this grotesque metamorphic creature, a monstrosity of female contradictions, as she is caught up in a continuous process of becoming without a stable object or unified identity. As Mary Russo observes, Fevvers is “born and born again,” offering through her marvellous, and ambivalent, anatomy the endless possibilities for change.³³

Fevvers forces us to question right up to the last page: “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (NC: 7), and this doubt or ambiguity as to her identity is often centred on the authenticity of her wings. However, regardless if her wings are the real thing or not, Fevvers herself places emphasis on the fact that she is not ‘natural’, for she remains acutely aware that to be a ‘natural’ woman is to live as an imprisoned woman. Therefore, in persistently forcing her audience, and us as readers, to continue questioning whether she is “Symbol *and* woman, or symbolic woman” (NC: 96, my emphasis), Fevvers

³¹ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences’, in Rosi Braidotti and Nina Lykke (eds), *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1996), p. 150.

³² For this and the next two sentences see Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, pp. 78, 83, 118.

³³ Russo, p. 166.

enjoys a certain amount of freedom in creating her own image or definition of femininity, which she achieves by employing the consummate “confidence trick” (NC: 8). She is ultimately “a deliberate production of unnaturalness”,³⁴ for as Walser observes: “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?” (NC: 17). However, Walser also points out: “As a symbolic woman, she has meaning, as an anomaly, none” (N: 161). In other words, without the spectacle of her illusion, Fevvers is merely a grotesque, deformed cripple. Her very excess, both in the physical and artificial sense, threatens to turn against her, reducing her to nothing more than a vulgar carnival side-show (NC: 19-20). Thus, if Fevvers were indeed *real*:

She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but – a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged. (NC: 161)

Fevvers’ ambivalent physicality forces her to walk the slippery slope of monstrosity, revealing how “the monstrous body, which makes a living spectacle of itself, is eminently disposable.”³⁵ Fevvers, whose repeated motto is “LOOK AT ME!” (NC: 15), scrupulously understands the power of the gaze, its inherent distortions, projections, and longing for recognition, particularly in the scope of her desires for freely shaping her own image of female self-determination. The condition of her freedom, however, is dependant on manipulating her (male) audience into endless fascination with “her conspicuous deformity” (NC: 19), and as Carter suggests in *The Sadeian Woman*: “A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (SW: 27). She will either be viewed as a monster, or she will turn herself into a monster, exercising her freedom in such a way that merely plays by patriarchy’s rules of violence and mastery. Indeed, Fevvers might be read as Carter’s fictional exercise through which she explores many of the theoretical propositions argued in *The Sadeian Woman*. Fevvers is that monstrously

³⁴ Russo, p. 159.

³⁵ Braidotti, p. 136.

free woman, whose freedom is bought at the price of making a grotesque spectacle of herself that must endlessly be regenerated and sustained in order for her freedom to continue existing. As Mary Russo points out, the text questions the extent to which women are capable of making “spectacles of themselves”, self-consciously producing their own specular image without *reproducing* non-derogatory or misogynist viewpoints: “*Nights at the Circus* is unique in its depiction of relationships between women *as* spectacle, *and* women as producers of spectacle.”³⁶

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter clearly endorses the disruptive *possibilities* of a woman being able to assert herself as producer of her own spectacular image, pragmatically acknowledging that “the real value of a sexually attractive woman in a world which regards good looks as a commodity depends on the degree to which she puts her looks to work for her” (SW: 57). Fevvers is, if anything, a working-woman who lucratively manipulates what could be her freakish looks into the mirage of “a fabulous bird-woman” (NC: 15). In this sense she consciously constructs her image according to a deliberate artificiality, and through her masquerade plays the role of a female impressionist as impersonator of her own exaggerated femininity, which achieves what Carter calls “a superior kind of double bluff” (SW: 61). It is impossible to ignore here the connections between Fevvers and her real-life counterparts, those outrageous blondes, Mae West and Marilyn Monroe. I would argue that Carter is consciously presenting Fevvers as a cross between West and Monroe, the bawdy, obscene blonde and the “Good Bad Girl” (SW: 63). Carter openly admires Mae West, who was “in reality a sexually free woman, economically independent”, and so “the dramatized version of herself she presented to the world was based on the one she both invented and lived for herself” (SW: 61). However, Carter is somewhat troubled by West’s “castratory, if tender” wit, her sexuality often having very little to do with the pleasures of the flesh, since “the part of her mind which is not scheming for libidinal gratification is adding up her bank accounts” (SW: 61). This, in a nutshell, is Fevvers, and like Mae West she is “universally

³⁶ Russo, pp. 53-60, 165.

desired, absolutely her own woman, [and can] pick and choose among her adorers with the cynical facility of the rake, inverting the myth of female masochism” (SW: 61). However, we also need to keep in mind that even if Fevvers is potentially subversive in her ability to expose a femininity that is imposed upon women by a phallogentric gaze, she often remains trapped by her own excessive masquerade.

Fevvers doubles on herself, for while she disrupts patriarchal stereotypes of femininity, she comes dangerously close to accepting that she is “always more like her own image in the mirror than she is like herself” (SW: 63). For instance, at one point she claims: “My being, my me-ness, is unique and indivisible...[,] the essence of myself may not be given or taken, or what would there be left of me?” (NC: 280-1). Only a few pages on, however, she admits that without her audience, she is feeling somehow lacking in herself, that it is only through the reflective gaze that she might “become whole”, or, once again feel “more blonde” (NC: 285). Carter satirically describes “blondeness [as] a state of ambivalent grace, to which anyone who wants it badly enough may aspire” (SW: 65). Fevvers is after all a bottle blonde, yet she is also unsettled by her desire to “be the blonde of blondes” (NC: 290). That title belongs to Marilyn Monroe, whom Carter fears, because of the comic excess of her flesh, produced for and dependant on the predominantly male gaze of her audience, may have “never perceived her appearance as a quality of herself but as something extraneous to her” (SW: 70). In other words, Monroe never seems to be in possession or control of her own image, having failed to comprehend that the production of herself as a spectacle, as an exaggerated image of femininity, was no more than an illusion. This in itself is the aim underlying Carter’s exploration of the female grotesque: to expose how it is merely a charade, and that if women are capable of putting on such an exaggerated femininity with a vengeance, then they might also assume the power of taking it off.³⁷

Ultimately, it is Fevvers’ comic excess that allows her to negotiate the hazards of her specular image, transforming her grotesque body into an affirmation of female

³⁷ Russo, p. 70.

desire. As a result, she reveals “the potential monsters have for creating embodied and never unambiguous sites for displacing and transforming actions on many levels.”³⁸ Her explosive laughter at the end of the novel demonstrates how more often than not a woman’s “laughter is allied with the monstrous”, revealing “the unique power to invent her own body” by embracing a feminine imaginary that allows for play and ambiguity.³⁹ This sense of play can often be found in moments of festival or carnival, which turn social life “upside down” so that everything appears backwards, including bodies, and grotesquely so. Carter’s last two novels explore the possibilities of the carnivalesque and the extent to which it is capable of disrupting the symbolic order. Although many readers embrace this aspect of her later writing as highly celebratory, Carter herself is far more wary of the limitations of carnival and its ability to sustain itself as a subversive tool. She sees that in many ways it ends up supporting the law or authority of a patriarchal system even in its attempts at undermining it. For example, Carter offers the circus itself as yet another failed utopian space, her deconstructive tactics aimed at revealing a noticeable difference between a masculine and feminine approach towards the carnivalesque (which I also return to in my discussion of *Wise Children*).

The figure of Buffo the clown starkly contrasts with Fevvers’ desire for self-creation. Where Fevvers engages in a productive fantasy, in that it allows for imagining possibilities, Buffo represents a nightmare of disintegration: “Things fall apart at the very shiver of his tread on the ground. He is himself the centre that does not hold” (NC: 118). As an instance of carnival, in which everything is backwards, Buffo “wears his insides on his outside” (NC: 116), and unlike Fevvers’ attempts at constructing herself, Buffo violently “starts to deconstruct himself” (NC: 117). His resurrection act is a precursor to those pulled off by Uncle Perry and Gorgeous George in *Wise Children*, yet unlike their revitalising reinventions of the self, Buffo is not concerned with rebirth but rather death. His repeated charade of resurrecting himself is a repeated attempt at killing off not only

³⁸ Nina Lykke, ‘Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science’, in Braidotti and Lykke, p. 17.

³⁹ For this and the next sentence see Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, pp. 22-3, 33.

himself, but ironically, all possibilities for play, since play for him is work, as he insists: “Despair is the constant companion of the Clown” (NC: 119). Furthermore, Buffo’s philosophy of self-creation is exclusionary, claiming with a masculine authority that confers genius upon only the chosen members of his fraternal drinking society (as all of the clowns in his troop are male, a boys’ club if there ever was one): “It is given to few to shape themselves” (NC: 122). Buffo’s shaping of the self is in fact an unmaking or unravelling of identity:

am I this Buffo whom I have created? Or did I, when I made up my face to look like Buffo’s, create, *ex nihilo*, another self who is not me? And what am I without my Buffo’s face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy. (NC: 122).

If anything, Buffo is a supreme nihilist, his act a chaotic demonstration of obscenity, sadism, and the scatological, reveling in its own “celebration of the primal slime” (NC: 125). In other words, his carnival is not a celebration of life but a disintegration and regression into madness and murder, a primal violence that he is in the end incapable of controlling. Buffo demonstrates an instance of when the Imaginary enters the disturbing realm of the Real, which leads to psychosis. After a failed attempt at slaughtering his fellow clowns, Buffo is carried out of the circus ring in a straitjacket of his own making.

Though Carter exposes the destructive impulses underlying the desire for carnival/chaos, she also allows for a feminine disorder that is productive. It is Fevvers who is the star attraction, and since her act follows Buffo’s, she is capable of resurrecting the magic, wonder and illusion of the circus that Buffo has threatened to destroy, as if through the strength of her own creative power “the circus could absorb madness and slaughter into itself with the enthusiasm of a boa constrictor and so, continue” (NC: 180). Her wings provide an image of a feminine-maternal impulse towards sheltering and nurturing life, and she is figured in one of her circus posters as a “Madonna of the Misericordia” (NC: 125). Fevvers is above all things a vitalist, her performance a triumph over Buffo’s principle of male nihilism, as she “snatched victory from disaster, erased the memory of the madman and the carnivore by the winged miracle of her

presence” (NC: 182). However, her own magic also deconstructs, since Carter reveals how not only Fevvers’ illusions, but also the illusions of the circus/carnival, are extremely tenuous. The circus is not some utopian space of limitless freedom, where the imagination is allowed to reign purely for the enjoyment of its own existence. As the circus owner Colonel Kearney reminds us, with his dollar-sign belt buckle holding up his “trousers striped in red and white and a blue waistcoat ornamented with stars”, the circus is a business, running purely on the desire for the American dollar (NC: 99). Likewise, the only reason Fevvers joined the circus is because, as Lizzie has to remind her when she becomes caught up in the illusions of her own performance: “All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself” (NC: 185).

Fevvers’ greed for financial profit nearly seals her forever in her appearance when she becomes trapped in the house of the Grand Duke. She escapes by fleeing from the Duke’s promised diamond, which he had used to lure her into becoming his private plaything, as she realises that diamonds are *not* a girl’s best friend (with the text’s implied allusion to Marilyn Monroe). In the process of running away, though, Fevvers loses her magic toy sword, and once she is stuck in the Siberian tundra, no longer able to rely on her performative miracles or the enraptured gaze of her audience, she begins to feel as if “she had truly mislaid some vital something of herself” (NC: 273). Fevvers fears she has been fooled by her own confidence trick, yet by the end of the novel the text provides us with “a fable of *achieved* female self-confidence”.⁴⁰ We are left with the sound of her voice, as “she laughed, she laughed, she laughed”, affirming that regardless of whether Fevvers is fact or fiction, she has come to understand that “it just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence” when it comes to (re)asserting her identity (NC: 295). As Marina Warner observes, in its “peculiar blend of romance and cynicism”, *Nights at the Circus* shows how “glamour is a girl’s brave stratagem”, and that even if “its magic has its limits”, Fevvers’ illusions are a necessary tool of survival.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Bell, p. 213, my emphasis.

⁴¹ Warner, ‘Bottle Blonde, Double Drag’, pp. 244, 249.

More than anything, “Fevvers’ great triumph is that she is *both*” (fact and fiction), precisely because the text reveals how bodies are both fleshly and socially constructed.⁴² Rather, it is both Fevvers’ feminine excess of desire and that desire’s dependence on the other that forces us to examine the ways in which female autonomy does not merely establish itself through one’s own imaginative power of self-creation (though self-belief or confidence is by all means a vital and useful thing to have in one’s corner). Carter demonstrates that autonomy is not located in asserting one’s identity as independent of the historical discourses surrounding the embodied subject, but is achieved by negotiating the shifting relations between self and other as well as the ways in which the self is inevitably engaged in a constant dialogue with the socio-cultural discourses that contribute to the constructions of subjectivity. Thus, as Anne Fernihough argues: “*Nights at the Circus* lures us...into a search for the origins of Fevvers’ identity and sexuality, metonymically represented by her wings, only to reveal it as the wrong kind of search”.⁴³ We are challenged to recognise, as readers, that our mistake is in attempting to locate the ‘problem’ of her identity in her anatomy rather than in her audience. Our own positioning as audience is represented by Walser, who like the reader attempts to analyse and interpret the ambiguities surrounding Fevvers’ story, trying to pin down the ‘truth’ of her identity, just as the critical reader is concerned with pinning down an overall coherent meaning that might be found in any text. Walser, however, is his own character; thus it is also necessary to read him in order to comprehend the ways in which Carter explores the making and unmaking of both the male and female subject.

Walser is first presented to us as “a male spectator oblivious to the transcendent powers of the circus”,⁴⁴ that is, until he himself becomes transformed by his comically grotesque performances as clown and shaman-in-training. Like Buffo, he undergoes a process of disintegration until he is entirely unmade, literally regressing to “the invisible

⁴² Anne Fernihough, “‘Is she fact or is she fiction?’: Angela Carter and the enigma of woman”, *Textual Practice* 11:1 (1997), pp. 105, 102.

⁴³ For this and the following sentence see Fernihough, pp. 96, 99.

⁴⁴ Russo, p. 174.

child inside the man” (NC: 10). From the start there seems about Walser “something a little unfinished”, and perhaps because “subjectively, *himself* he never found, since it was not his self which he sought” (NC: 10). Walser is too busy trying to debunk Fevvers’ myth to pay attention to how he constructs his own identity; in trying to prove that Fevvers’ excess in fact indicates that she is less than she appears, he himself fails to understand that there is perhaps something lacking in him. In this sense Walser is representative of the phallogentric gaze that projects the male’s lack (of a unified identity) onto the female body, and through such a projection forces a woman to play that exaggerated masquerade of femininity.

Significantly, once he joins up with the circus and is recruited as a clown, Walser’s sense of superiority is made in itself to seem clownish. He is dragged into this world of illusion, forced to confront his own illusions; when he looks into the mirror, his face plastered with clown paint, he feels as if he is looking at a complete stranger (NC: 103). That stranger, though, is only a confrontation with himself, with his own alienated interiority, since “his disguise disguises – nothing” (NC: 145). Even if he comprehends “the freedom that lies behind the mask” (NC: 103), unlike Fevvers who embraces that freedom in an effort to invent herself, Walser has been thrown “off his equilibrium”, slowly becoming unhinged to the point where his confused sense of reality and fantasy reduces him to “a state of mental tumult, conflict and disorientation” (NC: 145). This is precisely because that confrontation with himself is a sudden confrontation with the other. He has fallen in love with Fevvers, and love itself is a terrifying fall into the irreducible difference of the other, one that Walser is not capable of adequately handling, since he can only feel humiliated and “much diminished” in Fevvers’ eyes (NC: 114).

As Carter concludes in *The Sadeian Woman*: “It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women” (SW: 150). Both Fevvers and Walser must learn not only how to negotiate their identities in relation to the other, but also how to love the other in a way that does not attempt to appropriate his or her differences. For instance, after their

separation in Siberia, and after Fevvers has decided she is also in love with him, she discovers Walser has reverted back into that childlike state, in which “a girl could mould him any way she wanted” (NC: 281). Fevvers believes that he will give himself to her without expecting the same from her in return, that she will “*sit on him...hatch him out [and] make a new man of him*” (NC: 281). Fevvers’ suggestion here is extremely problematic in several ways. First, this makes their relationship a hierarchical one, by extension keeping the relationship between the sexes at an impasse. Rather than hoping for a love between equals, Fevvers’ instinct is to deny the possibility of engaging in a mutual reciprocity. She fears surrendering herself to the other as much as Walser feared, which led to his own madness. Second, Fevvers’ desire to make Walser into the “New Man” (NC: 281) is an appropriative act, one that does not allow for a different economy of feminine desire, which Cixous insists “desire[s] the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female”.⁴⁵ This “*Other love*”, as Cixous calls it, is one that exists without the fear of limits, “rejoices in the exchange that multiplies”, and ultimately accepts that:

In the beginning are our differences. The new love dares for the other, wants the other, makes dizzying, precipitous flights between knowledge and invention. The woman arriving over and over again does not stand still; she’s everywhere, she exchanges, she is the desire-that-gives.⁴⁶

Lastly, Fevvers can hardly become the fulfillment of the New Woman if she is too busy trying to make a New Man. Cixous herself is quite insistent on the fact that “woman must write woman” and not concern herself with writing ‘man’.⁴⁷ Since women have been absorbed by a literary tradition that privileges men’s stories, then women need to persist in returning from the margins of history to make their voices and desires heard, as this might allow for the possibilities of “starting the history of life somewhere else.” Though *Nights at the Circus* suggests that we need a ‘newly born man’ as well as a ‘newly born woman’ in order to achieve what Cixous feels is a necessary mutation in human relationships, Carter would also agree that if there is to be a New Man, then that

⁴⁵ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 262.

⁴⁶ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 264.

⁴⁷ For this and the following sentence see Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, pp. 247, 264.

is men's business, since women themselves continue struggling to fulfil the promise of a New Woman. Though they might work together in learning how to engage in that *other* love, it will only be through the sexes' differing processes of metamorphoses that this might be achieved. Carter clearly indicates this in her rendition of a female panopticon, in which the women are all imprisoned by their own silence, finding the means to break free as soon as they learn the disruptive and liberating power of establishing a female discourse amongst themselves. The moment they escape their prison, they discover a "white world around them [that] looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished" (NC: 218). When they discover Walser, who in his amnesia has become "like the landscape...a perfect blank" (NC: 222), the women leave him behind, as they moved off "towards the radiant uncertainties of love and freedom" (NC: 223).

In other words, Walser has his own quest, and though it has the same goal as the women's, he needs to make that journey of discovery on his own. Thus, like the women who have learned how to free themselves from their self-imposed prison, Carter proposes that men also need to discover a means for breaking away from the restrictive boundaries of a masculinity that has been imposed upon them by a patriarchal order. In the meantime, women need to (re)write their own stories while they let men take care of themselves. Therefore, we might read Carter's approach here as a vital contribution to Cixous' insistence on a feminine practice of writing: "Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement."⁴⁸ More importantly, and working against a phallogentric desire for unity in the text, a feminine writing is marked by its very multiplicity of voices and perspectives; it is not representative of *one* woman, but what women have *in common*. We have to ask, though, what would this female commonality consist of? Carter, like Cixous, seems to indicate that if women share a common history of oppressed silence, then it is through speaking or writing their stories that they might share in a common goal of liberation.

⁴⁸ For this and the following sentence see Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 245.

Carter reminds us of that history of female silence with the mute figures of Mignon and the Princess of Abyssinia, their 'lack' of speech starkly contrasting with Fevvers' overwhelming volubility. The Princess, who spends the majority of her time with her tigers, thus rejecting the need for language, has chosen her own silence, and so "her history...was only mysterious in that she told it to nobody because she never spoke" (NC: 148). Her self-imposed silence frees her from answering to a past that might hinder her from playing the role she chooses for herself; yet the Princess never speaks precisely because she has exiled herself from human relationships. Furthermore, in keeping her tigers caged and subservient performers in an 'unnatural' dance, she remains complicit in a power structure that silences the other. In contrast, Mignon is mute because she has been battered by too much contact with people who have sexually and economically abused her, and she seems to be the archetypal female victim of a long history of male violence. However, Mignon is also a survivor who resists our pity since she rarely suffers from the punches thrown her way, exhibiting "the febrile gaiety of a being without a past, without a present, yet she existed thus, without memory or history, only because her past was too bleak to think of and her future too terrible to contemplate" (NC: 139-40). Like the Princess, though, Carter shows us where Mignon is complicit with her abuse, in that she continues to fall prey to the same repetitive violent relationships with men, doing little to defend herself or alter that pattern in her history.

Although this might seem a somewhat harsh criticism, I would maintain that it is in line with Carter's critique of a feminist idealism that invests too much of itself in a desire for self-creation without sufficiently problematising or taking into consideration our relationship to the past, or to the other for that matter. Mignon and the Princess may enjoy a certain freedom from being determined by their pasts, but they remain isolated in themselves until they eventually discover a more productively assertive voice that allows them to connect with others. Significantly, both women choose alternative forms of language, communicating through music, and out of this their shared silence becomes a shared past, which they both acknowledge in their recognition of each other. Moreover,

in enjoying together a nurturing and intimate female relationship, one that is outside yet not exclusive of masculine and/or heterosexual parameters, they might begin to imagine a different future for themselves in relation to the past. This in many ways captures the spirit of Cixous' project of *écriture féminine*, since above all, a women's writing is concerned with articulating a specifically feminine relation to language, ultimately seeking out alternative relationships to otherness. Operating from that feminine positioning, a women's writing might undermine a patriarchal history through its refusal to appropriate the other's voice and/or truth.

For Carter it is not only women who must be allowed to speak but she stresses how men themselves must learn how to listen to that speech. *Nights at the Circus* sets up a reversal of traditional gender roles with regards to masculine and feminine positioning in the text. Walser serves as the interlocutor or receiver of a female narrative, and though initially he is intent on debunking Fevvers' representation of herself, eventually he learns how to be a good 'reader', resisting that desire to impose his own truth on the 'feminine' text. He comes to accept rather than repress the other's difference, allowing the other to speak according to her own terms. In stark contrast to his interview with Fevvers, in which she commands the conversation, Walser later comes into contact with an array of mute female figures, animal and human alike, whose silences often articulate a history or inner life that lies beyond his grasp. Playing on the (male) association of women with animals (Fevvers as bird-woman being the primary example of this), Walser is paired with various female animals, forcing him to confront an otherness he cannot know or possess for himself. For instance, when he dances with the female tiger, looking into her eyes, "he saw reflected there the entire alien essence of a world of fur, sinew and grace in which he was the clumsy interloper" (NC: 164), and when he is befriended by one of the female apes:

Walser never forgot this first, intimate exchange with one of these beings whose life ran parallel to his, this inhabitant of the magic circle of difference, unreachable...but not unknowable; this exchange with the speaking eyes of the dumb. It was like the clearing of a haze. (NC: 108)

Overall, then, Carter demonstrates the need for both a New Woman and a New Man, which would allow for a transformation in relations to otherness. She explores how this might be possible through various relationships of “interdependence with the ‘Other’, whose recognition is vital for the constitution of the subject”.⁴⁹ As we see with Fevvers, she comes to realise that since meeting Walser, she has “been acting more and more *like* herself” (NC: 197). When she observes how Mignon is transformed by love, by the *other* (NC: 276), she readjusts how she defines her autonomy. It is not merely a matter of asserting her independence but that through her love for Walser, this allows her to become even *more* herself: “she longed for him to tell her she was true. She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes” (NC: 273). This is not to say that she needs to be defined solely by the gaze of the other. Rather, in the moment they see each other after their separation, it is as if they are meeting again for the first time. Walser gazes upon her with awe and wonder, returning to Fevvers her own diminished sense of self-confidence.⁵⁰ Likewise, Fevvers sees Walser with fresh eyes, acknowledging that “he was not the man he had been or would even be again”; yet instead of wanting to make him into *her* idea of the New Man, she is simply curious though “anxious as to whom this reconstructed Walser might turn out to be” (NC: 291). They are capable of recognising a mutual reciprocity between them because they have confronted that holy terror of love: “fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love” (NC: 293). It is precisely our acceptance of this fear that allows us to risk discovering “the radiant uncertainties of love and freedom” (NC: 223).

Perhaps love itself is the utopia the text ultimately proposes, and one that Carter would endorse as being entirely worthwhile in its pursuit. We should keep in mind, though, that Carter never allows her texts, or herself, to become carried away with that nobility of spirit, and remains self-critical to the very end. Again, using Lizzie as the vehicle for her own authorial views, when Fevvers gushes over her newly realised love

⁴⁹ Schmidt, p. 73.

⁵⁰ See Chapter One where I explore Irigaray’s discussion of the need for awe and wonder when establishing a relationship between the sexes that is founded on a respect of differences.

for Walser, pining away for him in his absence like any love-struck girl and desperately wishing for a happy ending, Lizzie warns her: “Don’t you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes? True lovers’ reunions always end in a marriage” (NC: 280). In other words, if we have not yet achieved a different relationship between the sexes (as Fevvers and Walser have yet to achieve at this point in the text), and if the patriarchal order still operates through promoting that fear of ‘other love’, then the emancipation of women will continue to remain a utopian fantasy. In this sense, just as the text shows where “the freedom of self-creation has its limits”, the romance between Fevvers and Walser is in itself “a fantasy which ends up by negotiating its way out of the fantasy”, emphasising both the desirability and perils of romantic love.⁵¹

Though *Nights at the Circus* does not provide us with any definitive solutions to the problems it poses, since like most of Carter’s narratives its ending refuses closure, the ambiguity located in Fevvers’ burst of laughter opens the text into multiple possibilities for (re)figuring and (re)writing women’s desires. That laughter is her most effective weapon in disrupting a patriarchal history that has repressed women’s voices, and its subversive power spills over into Carter’s next and final novel. In the closing pages of *Nights at the Circus*, as Lizzie observes Mignon and the Princess writing new songs with the help of the old reclusive music professor, we are given a prophetic vision of *Wise Children*: “It’s as though he’s found his long-lost daughter...[.] As at the end of one of Shakespeare’s late comedies. Only he’s found *two* daughters. A happy ending, squared” (NC: 272). That happy ending is discovered in *Wise Children*’s rewriting of the family romance, as the Chance sisters, like Mignon and the Princess, learn how “to invent new, unprecedented tunes...an altogether new kind of music to which they [might] dance of their own free will” (NC: 250). Dora’s and Nora’s irrepressible joy in singing and dancing is the means by which they hold back the violent forces of history, just as Mignon’s own survival depends on her singing in defiance of her abusive past,

⁵¹ Gamble, pp. 163, 166.

which has muted her voice. Mignon sings of “the Eden of our first beginnings, where innocent beasts and wise children play together under the lovely lemon trees” (NC: 155). She does not want to know if you know that land, but only if you know that it exists, and if not now then at least as a possible reality waiting for us in the future (NC: 249). Although Mignon herself might not understand the words of her song, it indicates a different myth upon which to build alternative relations to otherness; and in its persistent tone of questioning, urges us on towards discovering that ‘elsewhere’ of Fevvers’ utopian dreams.

Chapter VI: FAMILY ROMANCES

If the child is father of the man...then who is the mother of the woman?

~ Angela Carter¹

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

~ *The Tempest*, I.ii.397-402

[Ariel's song is] one of those keys to writing, writing as the key to death – with father or mother, with the sea, and transfiguration, with the transposition of dead parent into beautiful metaphor...with the economy of suffering and transformation of mourning into a strange joy – that's writing.

~ Hélène Cixous²

Angela Carter's last novel is often read as a comic tour-de-force, yet it is necessary to keep in mind that this comic tone is specifically employed to resist the forces of tragedy. As I suggested in the previous chapter, Fevvers' disruptive laughter at the end of *Nights at the Circus* spills over into *Wise Children*, picked up by Dora Chance as she reconstructs her family history. Her vivacious, often bawdy humour is a vital tool of survival; through joyfully embracing both the best and worst in life her laughter allows her to confront the violence of the past, as well as her own and others' mortality. Notably, Carter was writing this novel as she was dying, and many readers interpret Dora's narrative as an extension of the author's voice, as a defiant refusal to go "gently into that good night" (WC: 6). However, this approach in reading the text has the effect of making it seem discontinuous with the rest of the author's *oeuvre*. *Wise Children*

¹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, p. 224.

² Hélène Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', in Helen Wilcox, Keith McWatters, Ann Thompson and Linda R. Williams (eds), *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 19.

continues to address themes Carter was dealing with throughout her life, particularly her exploration of the ways in which “family is the origin of stories”, and how the family itself is the vehicle through which our origin myths are perpetuated.³ By examining the various means by which *Wise Children* engages in an unveiling of the (Freudian) family romance, I will be arguing that Carter attempts a transformation of this myth.

Wise Children further explores the ways in which the daughter might construct her own origin narrative but without remaining loyal to the paternal law in its repression of the (m)other. My analysis of the text will begin by investigating how Dora achieves this from a positioning of marginality that allows her to disrupt the symbolic order through a specifically feminine relation to writing. However, as I have been examining throughout this study, Carter persistently questions the limits of transgression. Because Dora’s narrative is founded on an *illegitimate* authority, this forces her into a difficult confrontation with a paternal law that exerts a seductive hold on the female subject. The name of Carter’s protagonist is after all a subversive play on Freud’s Dora, and the text works to undermine Freud’s seduction theory by allowing the daughter (Dora) to articulate her desires. Both Chance sisters are eventually forced to come to terms with the painful knowledge that the father they had romanticised throughout their lives, from whom they had longed to receive a legitimate identity, turns out to be nothing more than a fraud. In confronting her family’s history, Dora also comes to recognise the significance of the role her adoptive mother has played in contributing to hers and Nora’s identities. With this in mind, I will then closely consider how Dora’s narrative allows for a recovery of the mother who has been repressed. Ultimately, as I will be concluding, the Chance sisters realise that biology itself has nothing to do with fathering *or* mothering, a myth that has been perpetuated by the patriarchal order. By acknowledging how the mother and father form a complex unit, both in our imaginations and lived realities, Carter demonstrates how one might successfully negotiate the boundaries of the law or symbolic order in order to devise alternative relations to the origin and the other.

³ Gamble, p. 183.

Similar to many of Carter's texts, *Wise Children* begins with an ending, as it sets up the trope of a degenerating family line.⁴ One of Dora's refrains throughout the novel, "Lo, how the mighty have fallen!", continuously refers back to "the imperial Hazard dynasty that bestrode the British theatre like a colossus for a century and a half" (WC: 10). The "House of Hazard" (WC: 9) is on its "last gasp" (WC: 10). Thus, Dora takes it upon herself to serve as the chronicler of her family history, to recover its lost glory as well as its murky past, exploring the question of origins as her own life approaches its end: "whence came we? Whither goeth we?" (WC: 11). She does not waste any time on the second question since she already knows its answer: "Bound for oblivion, nor leave a wrack behind" (WC: 11). She and her twin sister, Nora, "never spawned" (WC: 11), and though by the end of the novel they start a new family, discovering themselves in joint parental roles, for the most part they negotiate their identities as illegitimate daughters in relation to their origin: their father. Dora offers us the narrative of the sisters' lives on their seventy-fifth birthday, which they share with their father who is celebrating his centenary year. Their shared birthday also falls on April 23rd, the date of Shakespeare's death and birth. We should keep in mind, however, that this is only the traditionally held assumption, as Shakespeare's date of birth is not definitively known. If anything, Carter is subtly playing on this in order to reflect on the questions she raises surrounding origins: the problematic conflation of beginnings and endings, as well as doubts cast on paternity or 'authority'.

As I pointed out above, Dora's is the voice of *illegitimate* authority. Though she is situated on the margins of the accepted social order, born on "the wrong side of the tracks" (WC 1), this also allows her a certain amount of freedom to transgress the Father's Law. Kate Webb observes: "*Wise Children* is like the proverbial Freudian nightmare", in which incestuous and murderous desires are unveiled, if not acted upon.⁵ Dora's narrative is subversive in its desire *not* to cover up the oedipal scene: "let's have

⁴ Peach, p. 136.

⁵ Kate Webb, 'Seriously Funny: *Wise Children*', in Easton, p. 203.

all the skeletons out of the closet” (WC: 5). In articulating her own desires, which often centre around the figure of her father, the text plays out “the magnetic relationship that exists between the legitimate and the illegitimate”.⁶ Dora’s desire to reveal all secrets, to resurrect the past, coexists with the allure that the family romance offers: to repress, keep hidden, shroud in mystery those ‘illegitimate’ forces that threaten the Father’s authority. Thus, Carter sets up “a tension between desire for openness and equality – a world without secrets or bastards – and the seductive pull of romances from unofficial places”.⁷ Dora herself must negotiate this tension: even though she and her sister experience the pain of “love locked out” (WC: 70), they also embrace their illegitimacy, since as ‘orphans’ free from the oedipal scene, they are allowed more space to fashion themselves. On the other hand, Dora often yearns for legitimate acceptance: “I longed and longed to push through the glass doors and feast my eyes on the sight of my father” (WC: 70). Similar to previous texts I have discussed, rather than celebrating women’s marginal positioning to the law as an effectively disruptive force, Carter remains focused on the difficulties faced by the female subject when having to define her identity in relation to an exclusionary system that endeavours to invalidate her voice and/or desires.

Though we are never in doubt that this is Dora’s story, *her* version of family history, we are often left uncertain as to what is based on fact or fantasy.⁸ As she herself warns us: “I always misremember” (WC: 157), and, “At my age, memory becomes exquisitely selective” (WC: 195). In pointing out the selectivity of memory, its urge to repress, Carter problematises our need to locate or invest ‘truth’ in the voice/narrative. She reminds us that regardless of who is speaking, the narratives we construct often operate according to a repression of the other. Furthermore, precisely because Dora stands *outside* history, she herself is representative of the repressed other. Though her marginality guarantees her a greater degree of mobility, in that she is less limited in her loyalty to the symbolic law, that law also restricts her to a positioning of exile. Dora is

⁶ Webb, p. 193.

⁷ For this and the following sentence see Webb, pp. 203, 205-6.

⁸ Peach, p. 137.

more than aware of this and is quick to dispel any seductive romanticism surrounding her status as an outcast:

Romantic illegitimacy, always a seller. It ought to copper-bottom the sales of my memoirs. But, to tell the truth, there was sod all romantic about our illegitimacy. At best, it was a farce, at worst, a tragedy, and a chronic inconvenience the rest of the time. (WC: 11)

Hélène Cixous does not view exile or female marginality as something entirely negative or 'inconvenient'. Though this positioning often requires women to conform to the rules of a legitimate (male) authority in order to gain access to the socio-symbolic order, it is also something that might be used to their advantage, as "a source of creation and of symbolic wealth."⁹ Cixous suggests that exile serves as a metaphor for depropriation, allowing the writer more freedom to reinvigorate language or transform the ways in which we approach narrative. In *Wise Children*, however, Carter reveals how the narrative freedoms promised by exile, whether real or imagined, indicates a privileged masculine positioning, since for a woman writer this is a far more complex and difficult experience. I would argue that Carter perhaps has James Joyce in mind here, as the text makes several significant allusions to Joyce, which I discuss further below. Overall, Carter is suggesting that Joyce's self-imposed exile is quite different from the 'exile' that patriarchy imposes on women in their relations to language and the symbolic order. For instance, as Cixous herself acknowledges, when a woman writes she becomes "a double exile": as the repressed other of a patriarchal symbolic order, rendering her foreign within herself since she is not permitted to articulate her desires; and as a foreigner once she enters "the strange country of writing where most inhabitants are men and where the face of women is still not settled."¹⁰ For both Carter and Cixous the theme of exile is directly related to how this positioning reflects on the problems faced by the female writer when negotiating her relation to both literary and biological origins. Cixous argues that the writer's identity is defined in relation to his or her origins, both in the familial sense and other writers or texts that have provided a formative influence:

⁹ Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', p. 13.

¹⁰ Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', pp. 12-13.

Thus the personality of the writer is composed of a large family of living and dead persons, sometimes with the majority of that family composed of 'women', sometimes composed of men. Now if you're a woman writer and you're mostly composed of men, then you've got a problem.¹¹

To illustrate Cixous' point, I would suggest that on one level Carter's text reads as an exploration of the ways in which a female writer might successfully come to terms with a predominantly male literary heritage. We should keep in mind that Dora Chance is writing down her story, not only constructing the narrative of her origins but also asserting herself as a woman author. Through the act of writing, she is acutely aware of her relation to a literary past that has often privileged a masculine authority over the text, in effect marginalising women's voices or a feminine practice of writing. Like Fevvers, however, Dora's confidence in her voice is irrepressible, and she refuses to fall under the 'anxiety of influence' that a masculine tradition endeavours to impose on the female writer. We might interpret this as not only Dora's but also Carter's confrontation with those literary origins that contributed to the shaping of her identity. The text alludes to a wide range of male authors who might have been directly influential on Carter's writing and, if anything, are certainly leading players in the western canon: Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Proust, just to name a few.¹² There are also references to Lewis Carroll, child pornographer (WC: 13), and Nabokov the lepidopterist, who becomes transfigured as Uncle Peregrine chasing butterflies in the Amazon.¹³ Carter's attitude towards all of these writers is both respectful and irreverent, a brisk nod of thanks for teaching her what she needed to know about writing before either discarding what was of no use to her or shamelessly stealing from them to suit her own purposes.

This in itself is not dissimilar to Dora's literary 'education', or rather her literary crash course in the 'great' authors, which she literally learns from A to Z thanks to her lover, Irish, who teaches her (somewhat tongue-in-cheek): "one end of a pen from the other" (WC: 13). Irish is a kind of literary pastiche himself, an amalgam of Faulkner,

¹¹ Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', pp. 14-15.

¹² c.f. Webb, p. 204.

¹³ This could also allude to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but perhaps more as a stab at those critics who insisted on pigeonholing Carter herself as a writer of magic realism.

Fitzgerald and Nathaniel West, the “wasted genius” (WC: 123) who succumbs to alcoholism and the Hollywood studio system.¹⁴ He is also a sly wink at Joyce. At one point Irish and Uncle Perry give a roaring rendition of “that old song about the man who resurrects”: “Lots of fun at Finnegan’s Wake...Thunder and lightning, do ye think I’m dead?” (WC: 122). In *Wise Children*, people are always returning from the dead, either as memory, ghosts, or in the flesh, and the literary past is yet another resurrected presence. Writers are composed of other writers, books from other books, and Carter participates in this form of *bricolage* as a tactic for displacing the notion of an origin located in the text, in the author’s voice, but also as a means for subverting a male literary tradition that represses the female voice.

Moreover, Carter’s numerous allusions to Joyce, though quite playful, carry serious implications in the context of women’s relations to writing. In particular, the figure of Joyce provides Carter with a vehicle for challenging the myth of the female muse. Although women have inspired some of the greatest works of art, those works do not so much represent their subjects as turn them into objects. Nora Chance takes her name from Joyce’s own muse, and like the novel inspired by his wife (supposedly after a hand job on their first date), the events of *Wise Children* cover a vast history in the course of a single day. Similar to Joyce’s muse (via Molly Bloom), Nora Chance is sexually voracious and uninhibited: “She said: ‘Yes!’ to life” (WC: 5). In the expression of her sexuality, she “was always free with it and threw her heart away as if it were a used bus ticket” (WC: 80). She gives away her virginity in an alleyway with a married man twice her age, but Dora, always quick to overturn our presumptions, insists: “Don’t be sad for her. Don’t run away with the idea that it was a squalid, furtive, miserable thing...[.] He was the one she wanted, warts and all” (WC: 81). Nora is allowed a sexual agency that enthusiastically engages in the pursuit of her pleasures, yet without any accompanying (patriarchal) notions of shame or guilt. Though her lustiness often inspires obsessive sexual desire in others, she never becomes an object of that desire. Thus, by

¹⁴ Webb, p. 205.

situating Nora Chance as a kind of literary descendent of Joyce's muse, Carter provides an alternative perspective that not only returns to her a subjectivity but also demystifies the sexual phantasy and/or 'guilt' that the male narrative attempts to impose on women.¹⁵

Dora also has the role of muse thrust upon her, but like Nora, she refuses to be any man's object. Unwillingly, she serves as Irish's inspiration for his *Hollywood Elegies*, and though she is "still indecently hale and hearty if by the world forgot...he's dead and gone and immortal" (WC: 123). She may have provided this "burned-out case" with his last "glorious light", but she "never rate(s) more than a footnote in his biographies", and as she claims: "my best friend wouldn't recognise me in the far-from-loving portrait he'd penned" (WC: 119). Irish wanted "an infinitely renewable virgin" (WC: 153), an object he could elevate to his own aesthetic tastes. He makes them read Henry James together after sex to assuage his own guilt for sleeping with a woman of such "conspicuous unrefinement" (WC: 123). When Dora no longer plays the submissive student to his lessons in Culture, revealing herself to be an all too real woman, he turns nasty. He chooses to represent her in his memoirs as the "treacherous, lecherous chorus girl...sexy, rapacious, deceitful. Vulgar as hell" (WC: 119), and that, she dryly sums up, "turned out to be the eternity the poet promised me, the bastard" (WC: 120).

Dora is however much kinder to Irish in her own memoirs. She attempts to give a full and honest account of him, one that is both generous and critical, taking the good with the bad, which is her approach to life in general. She remains grateful to him for teaching her how to write, acknowledging that "he did wonders for my grammar, not to mention my grasp of metaphor, as witness the style of this memoir" (WC: 120). However, she cannot help challenging his own metaphors: "how can sunlight be insincere, Irish?" (WC: 121). She does not concern herself with *his* (literary) standards, and never doubts her own voice: "he kept on insisting on forgiving me when there was nothing to forgive" (WC: 123). Furthermore, with reference to questions of literary

¹⁵ I will be further elaborating on this in my discussion of how Dora's irrepressible desires explicitly subvert Freud's seduction theory.

authority, Carter indicates how men's biological uncertainty in procreation leads them to create a mystique around artistic or literary creativity, in turn often "transforming sex into something other than it is".¹⁶ Dora, on the other hand, hardly concerns herself with the question of whether or not the pen is a phallus; she enjoys sex simply for what it is and, being a "straight-thinking woman, Dora would never mistake a pen for a penis." Through Dora's irrepressible confidence in her voice and desires, Carter therefore subverts not only male criticisms against female writing, but also provides tactics for shrugging off the anxiety of authorship: take what you need, get rid of what you don't, and make up your own story.

Taking her cue from another female author, Dora invokes Jane Austen: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" (WC: 163). She resists the authority of tragedy through the transgressions permitted by comedy, bringing into play a feminine disorder or creativity that is highly disruptive of the symbolic order. As I pointed out earlier, Dora's narrative fearlessly interacts with all the unconscious desires the Freudian romance attempts to conceal. At the same time, though, Dora struggles with the seductive pull of the family romance, the one legitimated by the paternal law. I would argue that Carter explicitly links literary origins with the question of biological origins in order to explore the daughter's desires for paternal acceptance and legitimacy. *Wise Children* is presided over by that literary daddy of all daddies, William Shakespeare. Significantly, Dora's father is the most celebrated Shakespearian actor of his day, and both figures are representative of High Culture and the legitimacy it confers upon either the male writer or the father. In this sense, both Shakespeare and Melchior Hazard might be viewed as "the author of [Dora's] being" (WC: 196). However, Dora eventually discovers her father is not the highly romanticised figure she had always believed, and in the end his authoritative allure is entirely deflated. Likewise, Carter works to show how Shakespeare is equally, if not more, on the side of Low Culture, celebrating the illegitimate as much as the legitimate. As Linden Peach observes, throughout the novel

¹⁶ For this and the following sentence see Webb, pp. 207-8.

Carter is mocking the Shakespearean plot of disguises and false trails, but primarily the search for true parentage.¹⁷ Dora herself points out that this is one of the main themes of her story: “there is a persistent history of absent fathers in our family” (WC: 35).

In spite of Dora’s own clue, that her memoir is if anything a family romance, Peach, like many critics, somewhat problematically focuses on Carter’s playful treatment of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is transformed into a Hollywood “masterpiece of kitsch” (WC: 111).¹⁸ The cinematic play on this play is of course highly relevant to the text’s exploration of the power of illusions, as Carter reveals how *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is itself predicated on an absence, the darkness of the dream-world/forest continuously threatening the comic world of the play in its undertones of tragedy.¹⁹ Dora’s narrative attempts to create a safe comic space, embracing the magic that lies in human desire, just as the *Dream’s* comic world is made timeless by its spirit of love and reconciliation.²⁰ However, we are never allowed to forget that comedy receives its authority from tragedy, as at one point Dora remarks: “Tragedy, eternally more class than comedy” (WC: 58). Significantly, the Chance sisters, dance-hall girls, bit players on the stage and in their family, are barely acknowledged by their father, whose recognition they desire in spite of being on the subversive side of comedy.

If we recall Lizzie’s vision at the end of *Nights at the Circus*, she imagines the old man has recovered his long-lost daughter (times two), which reminds her of one of Shakespeare’s late comedies. Shakespeare’s late comedies, such as *The Tempest*, *Pericles*, or *A Winter’s Tale*, are family romances. These texts are generally focused on father-daughter relationships, the mother either entirely absent or resurrected at the end of the play. In *Wise Children*, the majority of Carter’s allusions to Shakespeare are directed towards his family romances, which I would argue points towards another

¹⁷ Peach, p. 139.

¹⁸ Carter herself professes an excessive love for this play; see especially ‘Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, in *Burning Your Boats*, pp. 273-83.

¹⁹ Peach, p. 146.

²⁰ Beth A. Boehm, ‘*Wise Children*: Angela Carter’s Swan Song’, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4:3 (1994), pp. 87-8.

Shakespearean text that *Wise Children* explores far more extensively than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I would like to propose that we might also read *The Tragedy of King Lear* as a romance. This play functions as the driving thematic force behind Dora's story, and not only because the presence or authority of tragedy continuously threatens to disrupt the comic world of the text. Many of the fundamental themes in *Lear* are also central to the concerns of *Wise Children*: the degenerating family line; legitimacy vs. illegitimacy – that “gigantic question mark over the question of...paternity” (WC: 21); generational strife; the unnatural bonds and betrayals between parent and child; and the reconciliatory power of love, as well as its failure – “time does not necessarily heal everything” (WC: 204). Furthermore, Carter is not so much *mocking* the Shakespearean plot, as Peach states, but locates in Shakespeare those elements that have always belonged to the family romance, the origin of stories. This is not to say that Carter is accusing Shakespeare of perpetuating patriarchal myths. Rather, she finds in him an ally for interrogating these myths, using elements from his own texts that work to disrupt the accepted social order through their exploration of alternative relationships to otherness. As Cixous might say, Shakespeare often takes up a feminine positioning in his texts.²¹

Just as Dora employs comedy as a tool of feminine disorder, revealing the subversive power of an illegitimate authority, in *Lear* the overturning of the ‘natural’ order is a primary structuring element of the plot, bringing into question the function of the paternal law. Carter elaborates on this question of “just what it was that fathers did” (WC: 56), exposing how the paternal law itself is predicated on an absence, or, a façade of power. For instance, Lear's absurd test of his daughters professes a desire to relinquish his responsibilities without giving up the title and benefits of his authority, placing himself in an ambiguous positioning of power that instigates many of the parent-child conflicts in the play. In *Wise Children*, Melchior Hazard plays the role of Lear,

²¹ See especially ‘Sorties’, in *The Newly Born Woman*, pp. 122-30, where Cixous gives a reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*, suggesting that Shakespeare, “who was neither man nor woman but a thousand persons”, demonstrates a feminine writing that allows for multiple, reciprocal exchanges between self and other.

both on stage and off: “Mad with pride and ambition and nothing in the world except...a toy crown with the gold paint peeling off” (WC: 23). Melchior’s paste-board crown, a stage prop passed down to him by his own father, functions as the symbol of his authority. Dora, however, is capable of seeing through the charade: “I was amazed to see him so much moved, and on account of what? A flimsy bit of make-believe. A nothing” (WC: 105). This ‘nothing’, paradoxically, lies at the core of *Lear*, revealing a non-centre from which the father’s authority operates. Cordelia’s response to her father’s demand for an empty flattery of love is ‘nothing’, prompting Lear to reply, “Nothing will come of nothing” (I.i.90). Lear is then reduced to nothing, and even in his madness, from which he never seems to recover, we have to ask whether he grieves the loss of a daughter or the loss of the man he had once been. He seems, if anything, to cling to the illusion of power that had defined him, without which he is truly nothing.

In Carter’s allusions to *Lear*, her text problematises the father-daughter relationship to unveil what lies behind the paternal law: an absence that is substituted with a presence; an incestuous guilt that is transferred onto the daughter. For example, Cordelia is responsible for conferring upon her father his authority through submitting to his law. When she refuses to play his game, as it were, this ultimately reveals the tenuous nature of his power. Significantly, Lear shifts all blame for the loss of his power onto Cordelia, as well as her sisters, indicating that his authority, like that of the patriarchal order, is in fact entirely dependant on his (female) subjects’ blind devotion. In other words, the paternal law is not an omnipotent, absolute authority, but in fact derives its power, its legitimacy, from an illegitimate (incestuous) source: a seduction of the daughter. As Dora shrewdly observes, there is a recurring pattern in her family’s history of Lears marrying their Cordelias: “An old man and a prodigal daughter, the stuff that dreams are made of” (WC: 15).

It is certainly the dream that Freud came up with in his seduction theory. After analysing a wide range of female patients who confessed to incestuous fantasies of their

fathers, Freud hypothesised there was some basis in reality to this psychological phenomenon, believing initially that the fathers of Vienna were actually seducing their daughters. However, as Catherine Clément argues, for Freud to include paternity in some kind of perversion was unthinkable, as this might undermine the authority of the Father.²² Thus, Freud retracted on his original theory, recoiling from assigning an active role to the father while placing all blame on the daughter. Consequently, the daughter becomes the ‘real’ seducer in his theory, while the father, as representative of some omnipotent law, becomes removed, absent, excused from any participation in this scenario. For Freud, then, an incestuous guilt was disseminated and preferably attributed to the female patient, whose fantasies remained indecipherable to the analyst. Ultimately, he ascribes to her a female hysteria, as she endlessly suffers for her incestuous desires.

Regardless of whether the incest was real or imagined, Freud nevertheless locates in both the individual and collective history “the infinite repetition of the relations of the original child to the unforgettable, perverse, seductive figure”.²³ Or rather, according to the “forbidden, endogamous circulation of desire within the realm of kinship”, the Father, in his over-possessiveness to retain the legitimacy of his authority, embodies a perverse Law in its façade of power, relying on the very thing it forbids: the daughter’s desire.²⁴ As Jane Gallop points out, the only way the daughter might possibly seduce the father is by pleasing *him*, by submitting to his law; so it is in fact the father who enacts “a veiled seduction in the form of the law”, rather than the daughter being the little temptress Freud makes her out to be.²⁵ This seduction is veiled precisely because the law is supposed to be free from desire; it is never the body/flesh that makes the Patriarch, so to speak, but his word/law that masks, or sublimates, his desire.²⁶ Thus, the circularity of familial desire reveals its own reductive logic: the father’s law forbids an

²² For this and the following points throughout the rest of this paragraph see Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, pp. 45, 47-8.

²³ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, pp. 47-8.

²⁴ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 53.

²⁵ Gallop, pp. 71, 75.

²⁶ Gallop, p. 77.

incestuous desire which by its own authority is responsible for putting into place. As we see in *Wise Children*, Carter exposes how the paternal law is itself based on this illegitimate authority (or desire), ultimately sustaining itself according to a paternal function that relies on nothing more than “the absence of practising fathers”.²⁷ It is precisely through his distance, his mask of authority, that the absent father takes on a mysteriousness, an allure, thus becoming for the child an object of longing and romance, which is directly responsible for the confusion of fatherly feelings with sexual ones (on either the part of the parent or child).

As young girls the Chance sisters develop a crush on their father precisely because he represents a legitimacy that he withholds from them, and they are taken in by his magnetic allure of power, if not sexual charisma. Furthermore, because he always remains removed as an active participant in their lives, they are never quite sure what a father was supposed to do, so that paternal love comes close to being confused with sexual love: “the curiosity turned into a yearning, a longing...[.] You could say he was our first romance” (WC: 57). Likewise, though Dora admits Uncle Perry attempted to play the paternal substitute, he only “*passed* as our father” (WC: 17). This is not only because he pretends to be their legitimate father but it is also a role he is incapable of sustaining. He is always vanishing from their lives, since: “For him, life had to be a continuous succession of small treats or else he couldn’t see the point” (WC: 61). Dora is suggesting here that raising a child is not necessarily a succession of small treats, that it requires sustained commitment and responsibility, and thus Perry’s perpetual absences fail Dora and Nora in both their desire and need for a father’s presence. Furthermore, we cannot forget, even if Dora seems to, that Perry also failed her in his role as father when he seduced her at the age of thirteen. Perhaps the biggest generational family secret in *Wise Children* is incest. However, although Dora seems to have repressed her memory of being seduced by Perry, when she does recall this scene, she certainly does not suffer from the memory of it, in effect subverting Freud’s scenario of the daughter’s seduction.

²⁷ For this and the following sentence see Webb, p. 207.

For Freud, the daughter's incestuous fantasies, which he believes are derived from a traumatic memory located in the oedipal phase, is "initially one of pleasure but later transformed into suffering"; and because her incestuous desire for the father is a subversion of his law, then the daughter (or hysteric) "suffers from Symbolic transgression as much as she suffers from memories".²⁸ As I have argued above, though, the daughter's desire for the father is hardly a subversion of his law if that is exactly what keeps his law in place. Thus, Dora's only transgression of the paternal law would be for revealing its own perverse desire, as that father-daughter desire comes full circle when, on her father's bed, she and Uncle Perry, who is both her "first" and "last time", riotously, joyously, nearly fuck the house down during a family reunion (WC: 219). In this sense, Carter goes beyond merely unveiling the Freudian romance, but also undermines it through Dora's refusal to take on the daughter's guilt. As Kate Webb observes, "unlike her Freudian namesake, Dora suffers very little psychic damage from lusting after her father", not to mention all the substitute father-figures with whom she has affairs.²⁹ This in itself might be read as the daughter's defiant attempt "to gain access to the power and legitimacy" of the paternal law, "to fuck her way inside, or at least bring it to its knees by transgressing its laws of order and hierarchy". However, this is a problematic reading, as at this point in the novel Dora is not so much concerned with gaining access to the power or legitimacy represented by the paternal law. She realises that this in itself is built on shaky foundations and if anything is highly restrictive in its demands for the daughter's allegiance.

It is perhaps no accident that Dora's partner in 'crime' is Uncle Perry, who plays Falstaff to Melchior's Lear, often disrupting the paternal order in his own bacchanalian lust for life. Like Perry, Dora's 'real' transgression is located in her endeavour to laugh away all tragedies, overturning the authority of history's master narratives. She believes her last sexual romp with Perry just might have "destroyed all the terms of every

²⁸ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, pp. 42, 44.

²⁹ For this and the following sentence see Webb, p. 202.

contract, set all the old books on fire, wiped the slate clean” (WC: 222). On the other hand, just as Perry himself is incapable of sustaining his own disruptive presence, disappearing as soon as life demands of him some kind of responsible action, Dora also has to admit that it takes more than transgression to change the old order:

While we were doing it, everything seemed possible, I must say. But that is the illusion of the act. Now I remember how everything seemed possible when I was doing it, but as soon as I stopped, not, as if fucking itself were the origin of illusion...[.] The carnival’s got to stop, some time... (WC: 222)

As Carter acknowledges, the carnival only lasts for a day, its very essence a “transience” that allows for “a release of tension...after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened”, the masters becoming the same masters as soon as the holiday is over.³⁰ Carnival is a supreme illusion, in the end disrupting nothing, and perhaps not at all conducive to a productive form of feminine disorder. This is because, as Kate Webb suggests, carnival itself is sanctioned by the paternal law. Or rather, it is fatherly absence that creates the carnival: “its transgressions are both allowed and disallowed” by the symbolic order, and may very well be more suited to masculinity rather than femininity.³¹ After all, war is a disruption of the social order, yet it is one that patriarchy legitimates to sustain itself, and “when women become the object of this disorder – as they are in war, or in rape...then the idea of carnival becomes much more problematic for them”.³² Thus, transgression does not always guarantee a different social order, and Carter seems to imply here, as she does in earlier novels, that transgression will always implode if we continue to be drawn back to the same violent patterns in history, which she indicates lies at the heart of all tragedies:

Every twenty years it’s bound to happen. It’s to do with generations. The old men get so they can’t stand the competition and they kill off all the young men they can lay their hands on. They daren’t be seen to do it themselves, that would give the game away, the mothers wouldn’t stand for it, so all the men all over the world get together and make a deal: you kill off our boys and we’ll kill off yours. So that’s that. Soon done. Then the old men can sleep easy in their beds, again. (WC: 28-9)

³⁰ Angela Carter, ‘In Pantoland’, in *Burning Your Boats*, p. 389.

³¹ Webb, p. 208.

³² Webb, p. 211.

This observation comes from Grandma Chance, who presides over the text's desire for love and reconciliation. Her own brand of feminine disorder allows for an alternative to those violent forces (in history) that operate according to a repression of the (m)other, as well as the murderous rivalry between family members (as dictated by the oedipal scene). Dora reminds us that she and Nora were born into a world of war (in 1914), their earliest memories of London being "a female city, red-eyed, dressed in black" (WC: 28), and it is during another war (1944) that Grandma dies, "taken out by a flying bomb on her way to the off-licence" (WC: 79). One of the text's most iconic scenes, capturing Grandma's defiant rejection of a patriarchal order that relies on the principle of generational strife, is when during the War, as "the bombardments began, Grandma would go outside and shake her fist at the old men in the sky. She knew they hated women and children most of all" (WC: 29). Contrasting with these destructive impulses, Grandma is emblematic of a will to life, rather than a masculine will to power. As a vegetarian naturalist who believes that even flowers suffer pain (she does take a few of her notions to eccentric extremes), her principles are founded on a respect rather than repression of the other. Grandma in fact provides Dora and her sister with an alternative family romance, one that is not based on the generational strife perpetuated by a patriarchal order in its endless repetition of the oedipal scene of incest and cannibalism, parent against child, in which man "makes his generation messes/To gorge his appetite" (*King Lear*: I.i.116-17).

Dora is eventually capable of seeing past the romantic allure of her father, realising "the loss of a natural daughter weighed less heavy on his heart than the loss of [his crown]", yet she also acknowledges that "for a weak moment, there, my unreconstructed daughter's heart wished I could have saved it for him" (WC: 104). In other words, Carter is suggesting that the allure of the romance will always be there as long as a patriarchal order remains in place; that no matter how self-critical or liberated one might be, there is the risk of becoming seduced by the father's law. Dora does resist playing the role of Cordelia, admitting of her father: "What an old fraud he is!" (WC:

231). However, she does not discount the need or possibility for discovering a different relationship between them, since in their reconciliation scene she nearly falls in love with him all over again. This alternative relationship would be founded on a reciprocity allowing for both the daughter's and father's differences, whereby neither would impose their desires on the other. If anything, this might allow the daughter freedom from that desire for legitimacy or paternal acceptance, freeing her from those illusions surrounding the paternal law. Significantly, Dora's new-found love for her father is tempered by her recognition and acceptance of his flaws: "I fear our father's softening of the heart was not unconnected to the softening of his brain" (WC: 203). Melchior may play out the role of a mad Lear, clinging to his illusions, but Dora can cheerfully accept that she herself has been making him up all along. If her father had been "just a collection of our hopes and dreams and wishful thinking" (WC: 230), then this also indicates the possibilities of making up new stories.

Thus, Dora rewrites the father-daughter romance with a happy ending, yet throughout her narrative there remains a story beneath that story, to which she keeps returning in her desire to resurrect the past. On the surface *Wise Children* may be concerned with fathers and daughters, but underlying this there is another presence in the text, one that the paternal law works to conceal and which Dora brings back into view. Part of Dora's subversion of the law is her attempt to include the mother in her narrative, not to repress her. As Catherine Clément points out, the patriarchal narrative, locked up in fathers/sons, was invented to get rid of 'woman', to escape being born (of woman).³³ Dora's narrative is a quest for the daughter's origins, but because the "family apparatus" fails to include the daughter, "from this isolation she will open up forbidden passages".³⁴ In articulating that which is forbidden by the oedipal scene, a desire for the mother, Dora reveals how Freud's family romance requires the daughter to transfer her desires onto the father in order to reinforce his law. At the same time, Dora struggles with this urge to

³³ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 56.

³⁴ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 54.

repress, and not only due to her ambivalent longing for legitimation (from her father), but because the mother in the text is dead. However, Dora eventually achieves a recovery, or resurrection, of the mother.

According to Cixous: “We constantly believe we must repress, forget and bury. Yet this isn’t true. The desire to bury hides a much more twisted desire...*to be seen burying*...to be discovered in the middle of hiding.”³⁵ In other words, to be discovered in the middle of hiding something allows us to see *what* is being buried. Dora’s narrative may be focused on her ‘romance’ with her father, which hides the mother’s absence/presence, but regardless of her selective process of (mis)remembering the past, she keeps returning to the figure of Grandma Chance, who in spite of being dead and buried persists in disrupting that closed circle of paternal desire. Carter’s autobiographical essay, ‘The Mother Lode’, provides a relevant parallel to *Wise Children*. Though Carter admits that in recalling her early childhood she tends to romanticise it (ML: 6), signifying a compulsion to repress, she also remains focused on retracing the “seams” of her maternal roots, digging up “the archaeology of [her] mother’s life” (ML: 2). She explores the formative influence that her maternal relations had on her while growing up, with particular emphasis on her strongly “matriarchal” grandmother: “She came from a community where the women rule the roost and she effortlessly imparted a sense of my sex’s ascendancy in the scheme of things” (ML: 6). Her grandmother’s severe principles of embracing one’s feminine strength often directly clashed with the young, insecure Carter’s desire to conform to, or at least fit in with, a femininity dictated by patriarchal standards:

When I was eighteen, I went to visit her rigged out in all the atrocious sartorial splendour of the underground high-style of the late fifties, black-mesh stockings, spike-heeled shoes, bum-hugging skirt, jacket with a black fox collar. She laughed so much she wet herself. ‘You wait a few years and you’ll be old and ugly, just like me,’ she cackled. She herself dressed in dark dresses of heavy rayon crepe, with grey Lisle stockings bound under the knee with two loops of knotted elastic. (ML: 8)

³⁵ Hélène Cixous, ‘The School of the Dead’, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 44.

Carter's grandmother seems to have provided the model for Grandma Chance, who always goes out wearing black (though being a naturist prefers wearing nothing at all when home), as well as those same "grey lisle stockings, that she secured below each knee with two lengths of knotted elastic" (WC: 27). When Dora and Nora suddenly become "two teenage sexpots" (WC: 94), fully enjoying their sexuality (and simultaneous stage success in their father's musical revue), Grandma Chance suspiciously eyes their frivolous purchases: "silk underwear, cashmere sweaters, silk stockings...we couldn't get enough of stockings" (WC: 91). She takes away their "floral tributes", acting on the "notion that flowers suffered pain", and generally disapproves of the expensive gifts from their suitors and admirers (WC: 91). The sisters believe, in their "youthful, heedless vanity, that the old bag was jealous of us" (WC: 91), yet later on in their old age, Dora comes to understand "why Grandma didn't like us at eighteen – we felt no irony; how easily we were impressed!" (WC: 96). In another scene that repeats nearly verbatim the one quoted above, a naked Grandma walks in on Dora stepping out of the bath. As the two women catch their reflections in the mirror, one "young and slim and trim", the other "vast, sagging, wrinkled", Dora cannot help but have a "giggle", prompting Grandma to respond: "That's all very well, Dora...but one fine day, you'll wake up and find you're old and ugly, just like me" (WC: 94). Grandma Chance then has her own cackle, but it does not stop her from covering up, and Dora forever regrets the unkindness of that giggle, wishing she could have taken it back.

Now that she is the old and ugly woman Grandma predicted, Dora certainly appreciates the irony. Speaking from the position of old age, no longer so impressionable in her desire for paternal acceptance, she attempts to recover how it might have been Grandma who was far more responsible for the making of the woman Dora would become. In remembering "how we'd mocked her nakedness in her old age" (WC: 164), Dora and Nora feel ashamed, also realising their betrayal of Grandma in repressing her own role in informing their identities. Therefore, Dora's narrative act attempts to resurrect Grandma, allowing her a leading role denied her by the patriarchal order in its

insistence on locating the daughter's origins solely within the name of the father. At one point, Dora poses the question: "has it ever occurred to you to spare a passing thought as to the character of the deceased *Mrs. Lear*...[T]hat Cordelia might have taken after her mother while the other girls..." (WC: 224-5). The other girls, Saskia and Imogen, Dora's and Nora's half-sisters, reject their own mother in their exclusive loyalty to the paternal law, and the irony of this is that as the 'legitimate' daughters, they are the ones "who end up emotionally crippled by their family relationships".³⁶ Their mother, Lady A (Wheelchair), plays the role of a female Lear, betrayed by her daughters, who force her to sign over all her property before leaving her homeless and crippled after most likely pushing her down the stairs (WC: 179). The only reward they receive for playing by the rules of a patriarchal narrative, which often sets up and relies on a bitter rivalry between mothers and daughters, is further rejection from their father. This lack of paternal love or recognition pushes Imogen to isolate herself in the safety of a child's play-world, and Saskia to carry forward the family cycle of incest, seducing her half-brother in revenge for her father marrying her best friend.

In 'The Mother Lode', Carter recognises how this mother-daughter rivalry or drama played out in the relationship between her own mother and grandmother. In a reversal of the daughter's repression of the mother, the domineering force of her grandmother's personality ended up suppressing her daughter's ambitions. Because Carter's grandmother never understood her daughters, forcing upon them her own 'feminist' ideals, "with her rough tongue and primitive sense of justice", she did not permit them room to define for themselves their desires and/or identities (ML: 8-9). With hindsight, Carter observes: "I would have defended my mother with my grandmother's weapons" (ML: 9). She gives Grandma Chance those weapons, yet also modifies them so as to provide the daughter with a safe space in which she might determine her own narrative, and without the interference of a rivalry between mothers and daughters. As Carter insists, it is only through a "tolerant acceptance of the involuntary nature of family

³⁶ Webb, p. 202.

life” (ML: 9) that we might engage in relationships encouraging a mutual respect of the other’s differences.

It is precisely through the connective force of a feminine communality that Carter provides an alternative to the degenerating (and degenerative) patriarchal family line. The text establishes a network of relations outside of those ‘natural’ bonds, since “it is a characteristic of human beings...that if they don’t have a family of their own, they will invent one” (WC: 165). Grandma takes in a whole *mélange* of abandoned strays, and out of this she forms a more inclusive and flexible familial structure, putting “it together out of whatever came to hand” (WC: 35). Soon after adopting Dora and Nora, and although she had not planned “on running a hostel for fallen women” (WC: 34), Grandma opens her door to an unwed mother, Our Cyn, whose subsequent generations of daughters make up the Chance sisters’ extended family members, right down to their godchild, Tiffany. There is also Old Nanny, that “indestructible old girl” (WC: 36), who looks after three generations of Hazards, but feeling no particular loyalties, also strikes up a chummy relationship with its ‘illegitimate’ half. Perhaps being in on all of the family secrets, she knows there is no such thing as genuine legitimacy. When the Chance sisters go to Hollywood, Daisy Duck, who does not have “a shred of malice in her” (WC: 161), generously takes them under her wing, immediately recognising them as kindred spirits in their positioning on the margins of acceptable society. When their father’s first wife, the Lady A, ends up homeless and crippled, Dora and Nora adopt her as one of their own, and not only because “nobody else would have her. Least of all her own two daughters”, but because they also “owe her one from way back” (WC: 7). Rather than shun her husband’s illegitimate daughters, it is Lady A who attempts to include them in the Hazard family while they are growing up. She offers them a recognition and acceptance their own father refuses to give. Thus, Carter presents us with a long line of female survivors who carry their own force of history through successive generations built on love and acceptance.

As for biological origins, Dora admits: “our maternal side founders in a wilderness of unknowability”; however, her roots are traced back through women, since it is their paternal grandmother, Estella, who serves as “the one fixed point” (WC: 12). Their paternal grandfather, Ranulph Hazard, like many of the fathers in the text, is a mere hypothesis (since Melchior and Peregrine might be illegitimate sons themselves). However, even if “a mother is always a mother, since a mother is a biological fact, whilst a father is a moveable feast” (WC: 216), Dora also questions the ways in which ‘mother’ is just as much an invention as ‘father’. For instance, Dora and Nora have no substantial evidence of their ‘real’ mother, who died in childbirth, and so they rely on Grandma Chance as the only witness to this scene. For the most part, Grandma makes up their mother for them, and in a double sense.

Grandma, who is seemingly “no blood relation at all” (WC: 12), invents the story of the Chance sisters’ mother, an orphaned girl taken in by Grandma. Their mother was either “full of desire” for their father or seduced/raped by him (WC: 24), depending on how Dora’s imagination prefers to embellish on this story, making up her own version. In any case, it is Grandma who raises them, and though she never allows them “to call her ‘mother’, out of respect for the dead” (WC: 26), she serves as the only mother they ever had. Thus, just as there remains a looming question mark over paternity in the text, the same goes for maternity. Grandma Chance may in fact be Dora’s and Nora’s biological mother, which we are led to conclude by the end of the novel, yet she also always remains a mystery, since all “references to that forbidden country, her past, were taboo” (WC: 92). Grandma invents herself, detached from all ties to her own family history/roots when she “arrived at 49 Bard Road on New Year’s Day, 1900, with...the air of a woman making a new start in a new place, a new century and, or so the evidence points, a new name” (WC: 26). Grandma would seem to be the embodiment of the New Woman, and though she creates a mysterious romance out of her own as well as Dora’s and Nora’s origins, as Kate Webb observes, this serves “to protect them from their

repudiating father, to allow them the freedom of making themselves up rather than being determined by Melchior's dismissal."³⁷

Grandma's inventions are a disruption of a patriarchal order that relies on male genealogies, on the name of the father, something she impresses on Dora and Nora they are just as well without. For instance, the only (accidental) gift they receive from their father is a "castrato grandfather clock" that always tells the wrong time, though it had worked fine "until Grandma fixed it. All she did was tap it and the weights dropped off. She always had that effect on gentleman" (WC: 4). The feminine (dis)order in Grandma's house (and it is a very messy house) is representative of a 'castrated' paternal law, where the temporal/symbolic order is 'fixed' only when it stops telling the 'right' time. As a result, that house, in which the twins were born (and will most likely die), is always full of laughter, dancing and singing. This is the Chance sisters' legacy left to them by Grandma, because above all, she is the one who "invented this family" (WC: 35). Contrary to the House of Hazard, which is located in a paternal order rather than a maternal space, the house (and by extension Grandma) offers them the only solid roots on which they might rely.

In many of Carter's texts, as I have pointed out in previous chapters, the house often serves as a metaphor for the mother. Whereas earlier novels present dilapidated houses, which are either burned or razed to the ground, indicating a distrust in matriarchal myths and/or a critique of women's complicity in patriarchal definitions of femininity, Grandma's house is a solid structure standing on firm foundations. Grandma is, if anything, instrumental in providing the Chance sisters with that safe space for developing their sense of identities. However, after her death, Dora claims "the heart went out of this house" (WC: 165), and the sisters believe they have lost more than just Grandma but also their connective link to the past: "our childhood went with her into oblivion, so we were bereft both of her in person and of a good deal of ourselves, too" (WC: 164). They seem to forget that Grandma gave them a solid foundation upon which

³⁷ Webb, p. 206.

to build up their own lives, and Dora's narrative rapidly skims over the next forty-five years, "the days of our decline" (WC: 165).

Dora and Nora abruptly turn into old women over night, which is what Carter seems to indicate will happen if one becomes mired in a nostalgia that refuses to accept the present or look towards the future. While they mourn their youth, Dora "tapping away at that bloody word processor lost in the past" and Nora "shut up in the basement with old age" (WC: 189), they forget the power of (re)invention. The spirit of Grandma remains repressed until their seventy-fifth birthday when they go in search of something to wear for their father's party. Rummaging through all their old clothes stored in a closet in Grandma's room, they are hit by an "avalanche" of "Grandma's bits and pieces...corsets, bloomers like sails, stockings hissing like snakes", knocking them to the ground before the "door closed of its own accord upon its own emptiness with a ghastly creak" (WC: 190). Grandma apparently resurrects herself, and her message is simple enough: "Memory Lane is a dead end" (WC: 190). Dora and Nora respond by going out and buying themselves new outfits: star-spangled stockings, silver minis, boob tubes, gold stilettos, costume jewelry, all of it "cheap and cheerful" (WC: 191). After getting properly tarted up and sharing their first good laugh in years, Dora claims: "we painted the faces that we always used to have on to the faces we have now"; or, as Nora observes, nothing like keeping "up with the times" to recover one's youth (WC: 192).

Perhaps the sisters' most significant revelation, though, is their recognition of the gift for survival that Grandma gave them. In remembering all that she passed on to them, they in turn keep her alive: "we owe her everything and the older we grow, the more like her we become. Triumph of nature over nurture, ducky. Only goes to show" (WC: 28). Regardless of whether or not she gave them life in the biological sense, she is responsible for helping to make them who they are precisely because of *who* she was, and that is Dora's meaning of 'nature over nurture'. Dora and Nora may share their birthday with their father, and he may have been the 'author' of their being, but "he was doomed to wear the paste-board crown", while they "were doomed to sing and dance"

(WC: 193). In other words, in spite of their father's rejection, they recognise that his absence is hardly a loss. This is because they received not only an abundance of love from the woman responsible for raising them but also the gift of resilience, which allows them to seek out the joys in life in spite of its tragedies. In 'The Mother Lode', Carter captures this process of recovering the mother through memory, which we might also directly link to *Wise Children*. Both texts attempt to grant the mother a vital presence in the daughter's origins by situating her as a connective link between the daughter's present and future selves. In this reciprocity between self and other, Carter locates a continuous gesture of love:

She once gave me a rose tree...[.] I misunderstood my mother's subtleties. I did not realise this rose tree was not a present for my tenth birthday, but for my grown self, a present not for now, but to remember. Of all the presents of all the birthdays of a petted childhood, the rose tree is the one I remember best and it is mixed up, now, with my memory of her, that, in spite of our later discords...once she gave me a perennial and never-fading rose tree, the outlines of which, crystallised in the transforming well of memory, glitter as if with properties she herself may not have been at all aware of, a present like part of herself she did not know about that she could still give away to me. (ML: 14-15)

Though Dora and Nora mourn the loss of their old idealisations, Grandma's resurrection in the text forces them to wake up from their nostalgia for a dead past. In doing so they gain a new life, which is the continuous gift that Grandma gives them, allowing them to live in a present-future tense in which death, both physical and metaphorical, is not a final closure but transfigured into 'something rich and strange'. Thus, the "difficult joys" of *Wise Children* arise from this "transformation of mourning into a strange joy", which Cixous claims is a position that women often take up in writing, since "women don't know about total despair. They know about despair that brings us back to hope."³⁸ Put differently, in writing from a feminine position, the text works against closure by addressing an other, speaking to someone, whether physically present or not. This is precisely because the despair of not having someone to address is unbearable, cannot be lived: "the person who sends away can only send if she or he

³⁸ Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', pp. 19, 25.

believes that there will be somebody else, somewhere else in another time, to receive.”³⁹ This is directly involved with Cixous’ belief that writing structures a reciprocal relationship between self and other, since both the author and reader form an “alliance”, implicating each other in giving meaning to the text.⁴⁰ It is a kind of “rebirth”, as Cixous calls it, whereby the author throws his or her voice “into the sea of time”, and the act of reading, or receiving, transforms the narrative, giving new life to the text.

In *Wise Children*, Dora often addresses the reader as if he or she is immediately present, adopting an intimate, bantering, conversational tone: “There I go again! Can’t keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative. Where was I?” (WC: 158). In spite of the comic effect that this has, Carter is being playfully serious in offering us a narrator who speaks to us directly. Dora gives us the story of her youth in an attempt to resist despair in the face of old age and death, since “tomorrow *does* come all right, and when it comes it lasts a bloody long time” (WC: 125). Her fears, of mortality, loneliness, and the loss of vitality and passion, are our own. Thus, her narrative works as a connective force, between the past and present, between self and other. She reveals the need for sharing our stories in order to give them new meaning and life. Dora also implicates us as participants in her story precisely because it is a family romance, the origin of all stories, to which each of us has belonged in one form or another. The text, therefore, forces us as readers to confront those narratives that keep us locked in a repressive past so that we might create new romances, or new stories, that allow for a transformation of our relations to the origin and the other.

Ultimately both Dora and Nora learn how to redefine their familial and personal relationships in non-repressive terms, and as female twins they provide a different model for relationships to otherness. Because Dora and Nora perceive their positioning as twins to be both the natural origin of their identity as well as an artifice, this in itself allows for a disruption of a patriarchal system where the phallus is the guarantor of meaning: their

³⁹ Cixous, ‘Difficult Joys’, pp. 13, 26.

⁴⁰ For this and the following sentence see Cixous, ‘Difficult Joys’, p. 26.

“specular appeal is based on bodily superabundance, for they are more than one, yet not quite two”.⁴¹ As Dora herself points out: “identical we may be, but symmetrical – never” (WC: 5). The specular appeal or illusion of their doubled bodies is located in the fact that: “By ourselves, neither of us was nothing much but put us together, people blinked” (WC: 60). Thus, in serving as each other’s reflections, the twins not only disrupt the patriarchal paradigm that requires women to define themselves as ‘lacking’ in relation to the phallus, but their different relationship to otherness also provides a more productive model for gender relations founded on a respect of differences. For instance, when Perry cruelly mocks Melchior for being so foolishly attached to his crown (WC: 108), their fraternal rivalry is directly contrasted with Dora’s affirmation of love for her sister (even though Dora has just slept with Nora’s boyfriend): “To tell the truth, I love her best and always have” (WC: 102). Although the twins often switch identities, playing on the Shakespearean bed-trick, and though Dora claims, “We don’t share” (WC: 2), their relationship is always motivated by generosity.

However, even if Carter provides an alternative to phallic modes of identification, she remains cautious and/or critical of her subversive premises. For instance, although Dora insists her sister is “faithful as my looking-glass” (WC: 95), when they look into a mirror at their father’s house, they are forced to see themselves according to an external perspective: two geriatric women dressed up as “parodies” of girls more than half their age (WC: 197). Regardless if they are able to laugh it off, “fortified by sisterly affection” (WC: 198), Dora must admit: “our age and gender still rendered us invisible” (WC: 199). Luckily, Dora and Nora are eternal optimists, and so they boldly strut their stuff, confident that together: “we could still show them a thing or two, even if they couldn’t stand the sight” (WC: 198). Similar to Fevvers, Dora and Nora provide examples of an achieved female self-confidence. Carter indicates that this is perhaps one of the most viable means for asserting feminine desires and/or identities, which in turn might allow for a sustained opposition to patriarchal authority.

⁴¹ Gamble, pp. 172, 174-5.

In his interpretation of the novel's title, Michael Hardin claims the text proposes that a wise child is one who can create his or her own identity, making possible a new personal identity that is communal rather than relying on gender (or at least gender stereotypes).⁴² I am not in full agreement with Hardin, since Carter herself rejects the notion that we could ever be removed from gender, nor does she even propose this to be an ideal. She does explore a more communal identity in the text (i.e. the network of female relations outside of the traditional nuclear family), but she also concludes that we will inevitably return to some kind of family structure, in which the individual/child must negotiate his/her identity in relation to maternal/paternal figures. Just as Carter accepts that the human imagination cannot do away with its need for origins, she also suggests that it is never simply a matter of getting rid of the family. Rather, we need to discover ways of changing our relations to the origin/family. Although her texts persistently seek out alternative narratives to those that have been handed down to us by a patriarchal history, in *Wise Children* Carter nevertheless acknowledges the importance of the family as the origin of stories. As Sarah Gamble points out, through its "dismantling [of] boundaries" the notion of family is denaturalised in the text, so that our definitions of the family are always shifting, yet without rendering the family itself as unnecessary.⁴³

Thus, unlike *New Eve* or *Nights at the Circus*, which primarily remain focused on the problematic desire to escape origins, or the socio-historical narratives that construct identities, *Wise Children* explores more thoroughly the means by which we might engage in a necessary confrontation with how each of us construct our origins. Dora herself tells us: "It's a wise child that knows its own father...But wiser yet the father who knows his own child" (WC: 73). On the obvious level this simply reiterates the idiom: father is a hypothesis, while mother is a biological fact (something Freud himself had to acknowledge, though inevitably tried to cover up). However, this also directly relates to the overall process I have been following in Carter's texts, which

⁴² Michael Hardin, 'The other Other: Self-definition Outside Patriarchal Institutions in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4:3 (1994), pp. 77-83.

⁴³ Gamble, pp. 180, 182.

deconstruct (patriarchal) origin myths while attempting to provide alternative narratives that work against a repression of the (m)other. For the female subject (and Carter is generally focused on the positioning of women in a patriarchal system), knowing one's 'father' can be read as knowing how the paternal law operates. Only by becoming wise to 'his' myths (or confidence tricks, as Carter might say) is one capable of defining for herself a feminine identity that is no longer dependant on the mirror of phallogocentrism. As Dora claims: "I may have never known my father in the sense of an intimate acquaintance, but I knew who he was. I was a wise child, wasn't I?" (WC: 196). Moreover, in finally going public with hers and Nora's paternity, she observes: "we looked like wizened children got up in our mum's clothes" (WC: 217). They may still view themselves as daughters whose sense of self relies on their paternal/maternal identifications, but they have also learned with the help of Grandma (the 'mother' in the text), that these roles are inventions, and it all depends on what you make of them.

With this knowledge, Dora and Nora finally 'grow up', and the text ends with a new beginning. At the age of seventy-five they become parents of orphaned twins (their nephew and niece), sharing a joint paternity/maternity: "We're both of us mothers and both of us fathers...They'll be wise children, all right" (WC: 230). They will be wise children because Dora and Nora, in adopting the roles of mother and father as interchangeable positionings, will provide them with a more flexible model of parental identifications, one that does not rely on a repression of the (m)other. They will have the freedom to "make up their own romance" (WC: 230), and as the first twins of opposite sex to be born in their family, they might come up with an entirely new romance that allows for a reflection of gender differences founded on reciprocity and love.

Conclusion: FURTHER DEPARTURES

For the point is this: not that myth refers us back to some original event which has been fancifully transcribed as it passed through the collective memory; but that it refers us forward to something that will happen, that must happen. Myth will become reality, however sceptical we might be.

~ Julian Barnes¹

In this study I have investigated the extent to which Angela Carter's deconstruction of patriarchal myths opens up new representational spaces that might allow for alternative narratives providing more productive models for gendered identities and relations. My analyses of Carter's texts have specifically focused on the author's engagement with origin myths. Although she predominantly challenges those received mythologies that have been handed down to us by a patriarchal history, her fictions also question how we participate in creating or reinforcing the origin myths that contribute to the construction of our identities. Thus, the aim of this study has been to demonstrate how an examination of the ways in which Carter problematises our notions of origins also allows for a more thorough comprehension of how the author attempts to reconstitute the female subject, particularly in relation to motherhood and the articulation of feminine desires encouraging more reciprocal exchanges between self and other. The importance of such a study rests not only in showing how Carter's texts reveal the extensive influence that origin myths hold over us, whereby myth indeed becomes reality in its ability to determine our relations to the origin and the other, but also how a feminist discourse might work towards changing those relationships.

As I set out in my introduction, Carter's critical engagement with origin myths follows a two-fold process. Her texts simultaneously work towards demythologising and remythologising. In her use of these narrative tactics, Carter recognises the importance of not only deconstructing the oppressive elements located in patriarchal myths but also the

¹ Julian Barnes, *The History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (London: Picador, 1989), p. 181.

necessity of offering alternative, more inclusive narratives. Merely exposing the underlying phallogocentrism that exists in our most pervasive cultural myths does not in fact guarantee we will free ourselves of a patriarchal order. For instance, although in *The Magic Toyshop* Carter thoroughly demolishes patriarchy's façade of monolithic power, and in *Heroes and Villains* she exposes the artifice of the boundaries patriarchal myths construct between self and other, these texts seem to end with an imaginative void in regards to offering representative spaces outside of or beyond patriarchal paradigms. As I argued, however, this is precisely Carter's point: as long as we fail to seek out viable alternatives to a patriarchal system the same power structures and gendered relationships will remain in place. Thus, Carter may claim she is in the "demythologising business", determined to do away with those "social fictions that regulate our lives", but she is also just as much engaged in the act of remythologising.² As she herself admits: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode."³

However, one of the reasons why Carter, as well as my reading of her work, remains cautious towards applying this term of remythologising to her overall fictional aims is because the term itself indicates inherent problems that arise when attempting to fashion new myths. Myth tends to assert itself as a reflection of reality, yet it is more often than not a distorted reflection, used to support ideological interests; and Carter is first and foremost "interested in myths...because they *are* extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree."⁴ On the other hand, Carter accepts that the human imagination, and by extension human communities, cannot live without relying on some kind of myth system; that myth provides us with the primary medium through which we construct our identities and relationships to others. Thus, any writer who is engaged in an attempt to transform the fundamental relation that exists between myth and reality, as Carter

² See 'Notes from the Front Line', in which Carter attempts to situate herself as a writer, both politically and creatively.

³ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 37.

⁴ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 38.

certainly is, needs to remain rigorously self-conscious of the ways in which “all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice.”⁵ In other words, the practice of remythologising, providing new myths that would allow for more flexible, or multiple, constructions of identity, also requires the conscious development of an ethic of myth. Such an ethic, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is located in Carter’s own self-conscious mythopoeia, as her texts persistently remind us of the need to remain critical of how we construct our identities and/or narratives, particularly in their urge to repress or exclude the ‘other’.

In each chapter of this study I have developed an analysis of the various tactics Carter employs in order to challenge those origin myths that operate according to a repression of the (m)other, or feminine desires. Many of Carter’s earlier texts focus on deconstructing biblical and Freudian myths as analogous tales that represent and help reinforce the construction of violent relations between the sexes in a patriarchal order. The origin myths located in Genesis and Freud’s theories of sexual maturation explicitly situate the female sex as a disruptive threat to masculine control, unsettling patriarchy’s demand for strict obedience and/or allegiance to the Law of the Father. In her short stories, ‘Peter and the Wolf’ and ‘Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest’, Carter attempts to rewrite this scenario, offering male characters whose Fall into sexual knowledge refuses to reduce female differences, undermining Freud’s castration complex. As a result Carter shows how this alternative way of seeing might bring into play a masculine economy of desire that would respect sexual differences, in turn allowing for the possibilities of a desiring maternal-feminine space that encourages more reciprocal relations between self and other.

Although this study began by examining more positive examples of Carter’s rewriting of patriarchal myths, I primarily turned my attention to those texts where the author explores the inherent difficulties that exist for the female subject when attempting to subvert the paternal law. The protagonists of *The Magic Toyshop* and *Heroes and*

⁵ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 38.

Villains are figured as adolescent Eves thrust into alienating, claustrophobic spaces; both girls are trapped in a nightmarish Eden that is representative of the delimited, cultural terrain of patriarchy and its myths of femininity. Melanie struggles to articulate her desires while negotiating her sense of identity in relation to a symbolic system that endeavours to suppress female autonomy. Just as Melanie is forced into “kicking blindly for a safe, solid thing in a world all shifting leaves and shadows” (MT 21), Carter exposes the ways in which patriarchy requires women to submit to the phallogentric mirror in order to gain a precarious positioning for themselves in a world that is hostile towards the ‘feminine’. Likewise, though Marianne is more easily able to traverse the boundaries of the law, her power of transgression ends up enclosing her in a system that operates according to a violent repression of women. In an attempt to defend her autonomy, Marianne engages in a violent suppression of her relation to the ‘other’ (Jewel), yet her survival is bought at the expense of conforming to patriarchal myths of the Monstrous Mother. Though she is able to wield power over others her actions further alienate her from articulating what she might have desired for herself, outside of and differently from phallogentric configurations of the maternal-feminine.

Significantly, both Melanie and Marianne are without mothers, yet have maternal roles imposed upon them. Thus, *The Magic Toyshop* and *Heroes and Villains* expose the failures of a patriarchal imaginary in providing positive models for mother-daughter relationships, while also critiquing the ways in which the maternal role is ultimately limiting for the female subject. As long as the maternal remains inscribed within a symbolic system that reduces female sexuality to biology, then those feminist discourses that attempt an appropriation of the maternal as an inherent source of female power will be highly problematic. As I demonstrated in my analysis of *Heroes and Villains*, and more extensively in *New Eve*, Carter takes specific issue with maternal archetypes, as they play out in both masculine and feminine imaginaries. By locating women’s identities solely in their reproductive status, which Carter asserts many feminist fantasies of matriarchal power end up doing, then this continues to keep women trapped

in a phallogentric economy. Accordingly, Carter contests both patriarchal and matriarchal myths as highly restrictive, foreclosing any possibilities for the refiguring of female desires that might open up an 'elsewhere' of feminine discourse.

The latter half of this thesis was engaged in an examination of those possible 'elsewheres' that Carter's texts set up as potential spaces encouraging new ways of reconstituting the (female) subject. However, Carter also deflates many of her own attempts at remythologising, as she remains focused on the limitations of transgression. She questions the ways in which a feminist discourse might practice a productive form of subversion, unsettling the authority of the paternal law while refusing to assert itself as an authoritative voice. For Carter, these forays into figurative 'elsewheres' of female desire often uncover more problems than resolutions, as she exposes where various feminisms fail to remain self-critical of their own premises. With this in mind, my analyses of Carter's later texts were primarily linked through their exploration of the following question: How might one engage in a feminist myth-making without reiterating the phallogentric urge to repress the (m)other?

The chapters on *New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus* were similarly focused on the problems that arise when the female subject attempts to escape origins or the patriarchal myths and/or discourses that historically have been used to define gendered identities. This act of evasion, as I argued, indicates a further repressive move that exiles women to the margins of the symbolic order, restricting them from entering into history as active participants in determining their narratives and/or identities. *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* were then shown to be closely related in their investigations of the ways in which the female subject might construct her own narrative of origins. Though I demonstrated how *Nights at the Circus* was aimed at disrupting feminist fantasies of self-creation, questioning the limits of feminist utopias, and argued for reading *Wise Children* as not so much a celebratory novel but one that engages in the difficult realities of confronting one's origins, both of these texts suggest positive tactics for imagining a 'newly born woman'.

Indeed, Carter's attempts at remythologising are centred around her explorations of how we might construct a New Woman, or new figurative spaces that embrace the heterogeneity of female desires. In my discussion of *New Eve*, I argued for reading the text's deconstructive tactics as equally (re)constructive: Carter demythologises the womb as a sacred, inviolable space that functions as an imaginative locale for origins while also returning to the maternal body a specificity that allows for the realities of the female flesh. The text's ending, which is suggestive of the possibilities of a new feminine subjectivity coming into form, opens out into the narrative pleasures of *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, which *are* celebratory in their assertions of strong female voices. As I argued, in these texts Carter engages in a feminine practice of writing, providing us with female protagonists who "learn to defend their desire, especially through speech", yet without reverting to a phallocratism.⁶ Fevvers and Dora are capable of freely articulating the daughter's desires while successfully negotiating their relations to the paternal law and maternal body. Dora's narrative undermines the seductive hold of the Father's Law while seeking out a recovery of the mother; yet in the end she refuses to privilege either the father or mother in their contributions towards shaping the woman she has become, allowing both of them mutually significant yet differing roles in her life. Likewise, although in *Nights at the Circus* Carter forces us to question Fevvers' problematic stance when she claims she is "nobody's daughter" (NC: 280), the text reveals through the positive mother-daughter relationship that exists between Fevvers and Lizzie an alternative feminine discourse that encourages a respect rather than repression of (sexual) differences.

At the start of the novel, both Fevvers and Lizzie are engaged in telling "their joint stories together", and in their shared narrative they become "not one but two Scheherezades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night" (NC: 40). This in itself foreshadows Fevvers' journey of discovery, as she comes to accept how one's autonomy is nevertheless dependent on one's relation to the (m)other. By the

⁶ cf. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 33.

end of the novel, Fevvers' laughter is the laugh of the Medusa, disrupting a patriarchal history that attempts to sever the daughter from the mother, or the self in relation to the other. Thus, as I have argued, Carter demonstrates the inherent possibilities of Cixous' New Woman: "Because she arrives, vibrant, over and over again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another."⁷ If anything, *Nights at the Circus* celebrates the power of shared narratives between women, which might allow both the mother and daughter to articulate their desires, encouraging them to move *between* their differences. Moreover, in telling her own story to Walser with the help of Lizzie, Fevvers' narrative creates a sustainable feminine space of discourse, an 'elsewhere' that ultimately works towards a refiguring of the relationship between the sexes:

Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialiste* were a pair of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold. (NC: 30)

Walser's fall into this world of difference is directly reminiscent of the falls experienced by Peter and Emile, bringing my examination of Carter's engagement with origin myths back around to its starting point, as she suggests the need for making a new man as well as a new woman.

The journey towards the (m)other in Angela Carter's texts is one that negotiates differences. Thus, for Carter, the only way that we might circumnavigate, or more appropriately shatter, the impasse that exists between the sexes is by continuously confronting those myths that operate according to a fear of the 'Other'. Through challenging the ways in which each of us attempt to claim our identity through the exclusion or repression of others, Carter holds each of us responsible for the myths that we construct around our identities. It is my argument that this is precisely the liberatory aspect of Carter's texts, indicating the freedom that is available to all of us in being able to make up our own myths. Or rather, we might construct new stories that do not pay

⁷ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 252.

allegiance to the old stories that have kept relations between the sexes trapped in repetitive and repressive cycles of violence. Carter herself indicates that it is only by changing our attitudes towards the (m)other, thoroughly disrupting the prevailing myths of femininity, that we might achieve a transformation of gendered identities and relationships.

A confrontation with patriarchal myths of femininity, particularly those structured around the figure of the mother, continues to present itself as a necessary challenge, as we live in a culture that still attempts to define women according to their reproductive status. The socio-political debates surrounding motherhood seem increasingly insidious when they remain centred on women's private and individual choices to reproduce. For Carter, the only means by which a feminist discourse might assert a "new kind of being" is through a refusal to privilege the maternal as the source of female sexuality, since this is precisely what makes women "slaves to history":

The voluntary sterile yet sexually active being, existing in more than a few numbers, is a being without precedent and, by voluntarily sterile, I don't necessarily mean permanently childless; this category includes women who are sterile not all, just most of the time, after all.⁸

In light of this, it is not so odd that the most positive maternal figures in Carter's texts are Lizzie and Grandma, who are specifically situated as desiring mothers, not strictly bound to their reproductive status. As post-menopausal women they literally represent Carter's insistence on a metaphorical sterility that would guarantee women the freedom to define for themselves their sexuality. Although Lizzie and Grandma are adoptive parents, both of them at an age beyond any reproductive capacity, there is no reason to assume that they are not 'real' mothers. To make such an assumption points towards a problem in our own perceptions or definitions of motherhood. Thus, I would argue that Carter succeeds in radically opening up the idea of the 'mother' to indicate that this is above all a positioning rather than an identity, and one that any woman might adopt or reject according to her own voluntary desires.

⁸ Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 41.

Although this study has examined Angela Carter's investigation of the ways in which origin myths determine gendered identities, and the possibilities for transforming those myths, Carter was equally interested in how myths of origin contributed to the formation of geo-political identities. She was increasingly examining American folklore and nationalist myths, as seen in later texts such as *New Eve* and her last collection of short stories, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*. An extensive study of this area of interest in Carter's texts would prove a valuable addition to the critical territory I have initiated here. Furthermore, in *Wise Children* Carter explores how our literary past, or the literary canon, comes to represent cultural myths of legitimacy and illegitimacy. Not unlike her deconstructions of origin myths, she raises the question: "Should those left outside trash the house of fiction, or try to renovate it?"⁹ For Dora Chance, articulating Carter's own perspective: "There was a house we all had in common and it was called, the past, even though we'd lived in different rooms" (WC: 226). Thus, even if many of Carter's fictions, through their repeated demolitions of myth, demonstrate a desire to escape the past and its oppressive narratives, she insists on the impossibility of doing so. Just as she argues for the need to change our relations to the origin as a means of changing relations between self and other, we cannot destroy the house of fiction, nor should we want to, but we do need to transform *how* we live in that house together. Although *Wise Children* concludes Carter's textual journeys, we should keep in mind when returning to her stories that their endings always indicate the birth of new possibilities. Ultimately, Carter resists closure, relying on the power of narrative to provide the hope of life even in the midst of death:

I've got a tale and a half to tell, all right! But, truthfully, these glorious pauses do, sometimes, occur in the discordant but complementary narratives of our lives and if you choose to stop the story there, at such a pause, and refuse to take it any further, then you can call it a happy ending. (WC: 227)

Carter would not want a neat, happy ending, but a messy multiplicity of beginnings; further, inconclusive points of departure that lead us on into other journeys.

⁹ Webb, p. 211.

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