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A CAGE BY ANY OTHER NAME:

ENCLOSURES IN ANGELA CARTER'S

NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

BY

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH
WITH A SPECIALIZATION IN WOMEN'S STUDIES**

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ABSTRACT

In this study of *Nights at the Circus*, I analyze Angela Carter's critique of the literal, figurative, and theoretical "cages" in which the system of patriarchy encloses women. I appropriate the three phases of Elaine Showalter's paradigm of a female literary subculture as a starting point for my own feminist analysis: the feminine, the feminist, and the female.

In my first chapter, I demonstrate that Carter deconstructs the various theoretical cages which enclose women in the label of Woman because defined 'feminine.' I analyze the enclosures of the brothel and the museum of woman monsters. Here, Carter uses the prostitute to disrupt accepted norms, dualisms, and stereotypes which reduce women to their bodily orifices.

In my second chapter, I analyze the inhabitants of the circus and the prisoners of the panopticon. Carter's feminist critique of these two enclosures provides a perspective which revises, subverts, and transforms current literary theories: specifically Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and Michel Foucault's critique of society and power.

In my third chapter, I analyze the arduous transformative journey that Carter will have her female *and* male protagonists undergo in order to become autonomous individuals. At the close of the novel, two autonomous individuals unite at the dawn of a new era, and begin their journey together in the hopes of creating a new society.



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Because of this hyphenated moniker, the lines between my academic/professional career and personal life often blurred and disappeared. Words cannot fully describe my indebtedness to friends and family. Thank you Birgit for your ready, though wacky humour and compassionate ear; to Brad, for your friendship and your unwavering commitment to the role as big brother, I can never adequately voice my gratitude; to Jan & Bob, for making it possible for me to invade their home in the Adirondack's to swim, relax, and revise/edit this thesis. To my mother, thank you for always being there for me, for giving me the determination to persevere.

However, it is to my two daughters that I am the most indebted. For it is they who have truly travelled this journey with me. And, for the last seven years, living in this household has often felt like living in the midst of our own three-ring-circus! As such, I wish to dedicate this attempt at scholarly discussion to my daughters, Jessica and Elizabeth Ratterman. In the words of Angela Carter,

no daughter of mine should ever be in a position to be able to write: BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I SAT DOWN AND WEPT, exquisite prose though it might contain. (BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I TORE OFF HIS BALLS would be more like it I should hope?). (qtd. in Sage AC 32)

Thus, it is my hope that my academic journey is as much an inspiration to my daughters as my own mother's was/is to mine.



ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES

- AC** *Angela Carter.*
- FT** *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales.*
- FM** *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter.*
- NC** *Nights at the Circus.*
- NS** *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings.*
- PNE** *The Passion of New Eve.*
- SL** *Shaking A Leg: Collected Writings: Angela Carter.*
- SW** *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*
- WC** *Wise Children.*
- WW** *Wayward Girls & Wicked Women.*



PROLOGUE

IMAGINATIVE TERRORIST AS RING MASTER¹

I think that one of the functions of fiction is to ask questions that can't be asked in any other way--is through constructing imaginary worlds in which ideas can be discussed. And speculations about the nature of our experience on this planet be conducted without crap about the imitation of life getting in the way, because whose life are you supposed to be imitating? Obviously a trapeze artist has got as much claim to be alive as a solicitor (Carter *SL* 35).

Yes, yet *another* post-graduate study of the life and times of Angela Carter. This surely is an irony that Carter herself would have appreciated. She intentionally placed herself in physical geographies and personal landscapes which would allow her to cultivate the "viewpoint of an alien in order to defamiliarize the landscape of habit" (*AC* 2). For Carter, this marginalized position allowed for a better perspective from which to critique the centre: to question the "nature of my reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off as the real thing" ("Notes" 38). Now of course, Carter's work is "alarmingly 'central'... [and] by far the most fashionable twentieth-century topic" for post-graduate students (Sage "Introduction" 3). Paradoxically, a study of Carter's cultural critique of the mainstream is now performed from a position that is uncomfortably central. Given this surge of interest in

¹The phrase "imaginative terrorist" has its origins in Carter's description of the moral pornographer, who has the "power to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notion of [sexual] relations" (*SW* 21). Carter too seems intent on overturning our most basic notions of what is considered feminine, feminist, and female.

Carter, a feminist critic must consider from which perspective--the margin or the centre--she will critique Carter's cultural critique. As well, because Carter juggles a great many theories and philosophies in her discussion of oppression, the critic must determine her own theoretical lens. I will attempt to outline the multiplicity of perspectives and approaches which I bring to this particular task. Most feminist literary critics will agree that the enterprise of literary criticism plays a "worthwhile part in the struggle to end oppression in the world outside of texts" (Warhol x). This theory, that the politics of the text extends far beyond the borders of the pages and the arena of academia, is a conviction also held by Carter. For her, the text itself is a cage, and she explicitly announces that she writes in the hope that "the story will escape from the cage of the text and live out an independent life of its own amongst the people" (FT xviii).

To state that my own perspective is feminist is hardly sufficient, given the multiple and varied philosophies housed under the feminisms umbrella. Moreover, many of these philosophies have become mainstream (Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, for example, can be found on many required reading lists), and many still remain marginalized (Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "SEX,"* for example, is generally relegated to the required reading lists of Feminist Theory courses). As Rosemarie Tong notes, feminism, "like most broad-based philosophical perspectives, accommodates several species under its genus" (1). However, these varied approaches do tend to intersect, "joining together both to lament the ways in which women have been oppressed, repressed, and suppressed and to celebrate the ways in which so many women have 'beaten the system,' have taken charge of their own destinies, and encouraged each other to live, love, laugh, and be

happy as women" (Tong 1-2). While this sounds rather idyllic, it does echo the sentiment of Carter's protagonist, Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus*. However, in the novel, Fevvers' idealistic prophetic hope is tempered by the pragmatic ironic pessimism of Lizzie, her foster mother.

Carter's feminism, like my own, travels between various points on this feminisms spectrum. In *Nights at the Circus*, one finds that because Carter exposes the marginalization of the oppressed within Western politics and philosophy, she will forge spaces within these traditional discourses. Though her expositions are often ruthless, bloody-minded, and grounded in materialism, the space they forge offers possibilities for change and therefore for hope in the future. Perhaps I was originally drawn to Carter's work because of what I believe is an affinity with her perspective(s). Though my ideals may be utopian (I too dream of a time when "all women will have wings...tear off their mind forg'd manacles, will rise up and fly away"), I do not lose sight of the historical reality that achieving such a goal will be "complicated" ("When I look to the future, I see through a glass darkly") (NC 285-286). A feminist literary critic must "contend" with "the long shadow of the *past historic*...that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present...It's not the human "soul" that must be forged on the anvil of history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to change humanity" (NC 240).

Though her work is often difficult to pigeon-hole, this idea of the relationship between history and humanity is consistent throughout Carter's oeuvre. Although her various genres (romances, fairy tales, science fiction, and Gothic tales) offer multiple perspectives, they do have at least one thread in common. Relevant to all her work is Carter's interest in the

"position of women in literature, in history, and in the world, and her corpus provides a large number of perspectives from which to see women and from which women may see themselves" (Lee ix). My decision to focus on Carter's representation of the institutions and traditions which enclose and confine women, particularly women in communities, was painlessly reached. However, the decision to limit the spotlight to just one novel, *Nights at the Circus*, involved a great gnashing of teeth.

When the idea for this analysis was first hatched, the intent was to utilize Elaine Showalter's terms in her three-phased paradigm of a female literary subculture to demonstrate that, in three of her works, Angela Carter analyzes notions of the "feminine" (*The Passion of New Eve*), the "feminist" (*Nights at the Circus*), and the "female" (*Wise Children*). In her groundbreaking work, *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter defines writing by women as the "product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant mainstream" (xiii). For Showalter, this 'body' of writing by women is described in terms of a linear evolutionary model which "moves in the direction of an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community" (xiii). This idea of a linear progressive model is not a direction that Carter's theoretical principles would have led her, and certainly, given her interest in the fantastic, her destination is not Showalter's terrain of the "all-inclusive female realism" (xiii). Moreover, Showalter's paradigm refers to historical phases of literary production. I am using the paradigm to refer to phases in Carter's increasingly sophisticated critique of repressive mechanisms. Obviously, Showalter's intent is to document the very real historical development of writing by women. In contrast, Carter's intent is to

critique, in fictionalized form, the institutions which oppress women and men who are marginalized in a patriarchal society. The difference in genre and intent between these two writers, accounts for my detour from Showalter's evolutionary map. However, what is relevant to Carter's work is the concept of each of the phases (without the presumption it is chronological or evolutionary in nature).

The first phase of Showalter's model, the *Feminine*, is defined as a "prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (13). The second phase, the *Feminist*, is specified as a period of "*protest* against these standards and values, and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy" (13). The final stage, the *Female*, is categorized as a period of "*self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (13).

In contrast to Showalter's categorization of the 'feminine' as a phase of imitation and internalization of the philosophies of the dominant culture, Carter is interested in redefining the 'official' definition of the feminine. As well, her purpose is to critique the institutions and systems which attempt to confine and control those labelled feminine. In part, Carter redefines the term because she will include biological males (the clowns of the circus and Touissant of the 'house of horrors') who are powerless. Moreover, she will exclude from her definition those women, such as Madame Schreck and the Countess P., who collude with patriarchal power relations. Thus, I am using the term to demonstrate the means by which Carter will illustrate just how women subvert and resist the enclosures created and maintained by 'official' culture. For example, the 'sisters' at Ma Nelson's do not internalize the

'teachings' of mainstream ideologies of femininity despite their education at the 'academy.' For Carter, the brothel, the fairy tale, and the circus offer a subversive subtext.

Conversely, Carter seems representative of the authors Showalter categorizes within her second phase, the feminist. However, I use the term 'feminist' to highlight Carter's feminist critique of patriarchal power relations which marginalize those deemed feminine. Specifically, my focus is Carter's feminist subversion of literary theories which oppress the powerless. Ultimately, Carter seems to apply her own brand of feminist theory--one that is grounded by materiality--to dismantle theoretical discourse which are exclusionary and confining. Lastly, Carter's discussion of the female's struggle for autonomy seems to closely resemble the last phase of Showalter's historical model, the female. Showalter's purpose is to describe a historical reality for women authors of a specific time period. In contrast, for Carter, the search for identity is one that must be undertaken by both the female and the male. Carter highlights the obstacles to autonomy, in order to demonstrate the reality that the union of two autonomous subjects is still a utopian ideal. However, one finds that Carter's solution to utopian nihilism is to *redefine* autonomy and, in so doing, she manages to create a space which offers hope for its possibility.

However, the danger of appropriating any paradigm is that one is tempted to make procrustean-like eliminations.² Such foreboding aside, it soon became apparent that attempting to *include* all three novels within the confines of

²It is interesting to note that recently Showalter's paradigm has been appropriated by many feminist critics. Most will cite the model as their own starting point. One recent example is Forsas-Scott in *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century* (3).

this one project would most certainly necessitate donning the mask of Procrustes -- Carter's fiction is notorious for many characteristics, and leaking over the boundaries and flying in the face of precribed frameworks is perhaps the most significant.

Ultimately, if one is to analyze to any degree, a specific focus is necessary. Narrowing the focus until just one novel is in the spotlight is still somewhat of a daunting task, considering Carter's penchant for dazzling flights of rhetoric. However, doing so does provide at least the illusion of a safety net for the analytical acrobatics that any critic of Carter must be prepared to perform. Moreover, the decision to focus on only one novel, *Nights at the Circus*, does not necessarily mandate donning a critical straightjacket.

As Showalter states of her theoretical paradigm, it does not constitute "rigid categories, distinctly separable in time, to which individual writers can be assigned with perfect assurance. The phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa. One might also find all three phases in the career of a single novelist" (13). I will take this idea further and suggest that one can find the concept of each of these phases within a single work of one novelist. In this instance, all three phases can be located between the covers of *Nights at the Circus*.

However, one should not attempt to thrust Carter's novel into the template of Showalter's model and hope to adequately analyze Carter's performance. Such an attempt is doomed to failure. In part, failure is predetermined because of their philosophical differences and theoretical concerns. For Showalter, once the evolution of the phases is complete, a "mature women's literature ceases to be part of a subculture" and moves into "a seamless participation in the literary mainstream" (xiii). In

is not content to slip silently and seamlessly into the boundaries established by the mainstream. Carter is more intent on exposing and unravelling the seams that bind the philosophical precepts of the literary and cultural mainstream. As such, in this thesis, I use each of Showalter's terms as a means of organizing this analysis rather than adopt her conceptual definitions as they appear in her paradigm.³

Defining the concepts, Feminine, Feminist, and Female, can be problematic. Showalter's definition of each phase does illuminate the characteristics of the concept. However, I would like to add the distinction whereby "the feminine designates the set of cultural attributes assigned to the female sex which the political discourses of feminism seek to critique" (Andermahr 75).⁴ This distinction highlights the fact that in Carter's novel *all* of the concepts (feminine, feminist, female) are analyzed through a definite feminist lens. Though the definition of each concept is neither static nor uncontested, in *Nights at the Circus*, Carter addresses the various inscriptions of these terms. First, she illuminates the construction of the feminine, and deconstructs the myths which distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate power, then, from a feminist standpoint, she critiques male-centred political, social, and literary theories, and finally, she offers a view of the self-inscribed, autonomous female, free from "mind forg'd manacles" (NC 96). These three terms correspond to Showalter's three phases, which in turn, correspond to the three geographical terrains within Carter's

³ Since the original submission of the proposal for this thesis (1998), several critics have also appropriated these terms and utilized them in relation to Carter's work. In particular, see the anthology of criticism, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminisms*, (1997), which adapts Showalter's organizing structure.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between these terms, see Toril Moi's essay, "Feminist, female, feminine," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*.

tripartite-structured novel.

The first section, "London," takes place in the city, a site of man-made structures and man-made ideologies of the feminine. The middle section, "Petersburg," takes place in St. Petersburg, a Russian city on the brink of revolution and chaos. This section confines the illegitimate within the structure of the legitimized circus, the site of a feminist deconstruction of power relations. The third section, "Siberia," is a "newly made" white world, "a blank sheet of fresh paper on which [the female] could inscribe whatever future [she] wished" (NC 219).

Consistent throughout the three geographical locations is the symbol "O," which unifies the terrain of the novel: the fringed hole of the feminine in the first section, the feminist analysis of the concrete "O" of the circus ring in the second section, and the confining "O" of the "hollow circle" and "round room" from which females break free in the third section. Though the tripartite structure of my thesis mimics Carter's structure, which mimics the structure of the three-ring-circus, the enclosures analyzed in my chapters differ from those of Carter's. The content of my first chapter is an analysis of Carter's first chapter. My second chapter analyzes the circus of Carter's second chapter, but also analyzes the panopticon of her third chapter. My own third chapter analyzes the transformation of Walser and Fevvers, and therefore it includes events from each chapter of the novel.

The analysis in the first chapter of this thesis, "The Feminine Apprenticeship of the Fringed Hole," does adhere to the plot of Carter's first section, "London," in *Nights at the Circus*. It is here that Carter first exposes and then deconstructs the various theoretical cages which enclose women in the label of Woman because defined "feminine." For Carter, to become

"Woman means to become naturalized into a subordinate position regardless of one's 'official gender.' That is, she disrupts an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender" (Robinson 77).

This equation is disrupted, in part, because Carter demonstrates, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an *Other*" (249). Carter will demonstrate both the nature and the practice of this intervention, which demands the apprenticeship of the biological female to become the ideological feminine.

However, as my first chapter notes, in *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter's representative 1970s novel, she makes this ideology concrete by fictionalizing the feminine apprenticeship. She clearly illustrates the apprenticeship which every biological female is to undertake in order to conform to society's ideal: the gendered construction of the feminine. According to Carter, the "'passion' of the title refers not only to the erotic attraction between two principal characters....but also to the process of physical pain and degradation that Eve undergoes in her apprenticeship as a woman" (NS 170). In *Nights at the Circus* we hear the booming, raucous, and rhapsodic voice of Fevvers, intent on graphically describing "the process of physical pain and degradation" of all women. In particular, Carter places two sites of such pain and degradation in the spotlight: Ma Nelson's whorehouse and Madame Schreck's "museum of women monsters" (NC 75).

For Carter, the brothel is a microcosm of the world in its present state

(*SW* 58), and therefore it is here where we find the structures and traditions which keep women enclosed within gilded cages. It is here that Carter graphically describes the apprenticeship the biological female (symbolized by the O) must undergo in order to conform to the cultural construction of "femininity." In so doing, Carter does indeed concur with Showalter's characterization of the feminine phase. However, though Carter shows women who, in Showalter's terms, imitate and internalize the traditions of the dominant culture, she also depicts women who resist and break free of the enclosure of society's version of femininity.

Following Carter's lead and Showalter's definitions, my first chapter analyzes the enclosures of the brothels: the whore house and the museum of woman monsters. As well, I analyze Carter's use of the prostitute to disrupt accepted norms and dualisms. As Magali Cornier Michael notes, the novel's presentation of "prostitutes in a positive light and of prostitution in non-moral terms" are "carnavalesque disruptions of established norms" (183). Moreover, when Fevvers' asks, "Wherein does a woman's honour reside, old chap? In her vagina or in her spirit?" (*NC* 230), she challenges traditional stereotypes which reduce women to their bodily orifices (Michael 181). As a corollary, this challenge emphasizes the ways in which the "biological body has been co-opted in the service of those in power" (Michael 181).

In "Petersburg," the centre of *Nights at the Circus*, though Carter spotlights the oppression of women, she also focuses on the necessity for breaking all "mind forg'd manacles" that hinder human agency and human relationships (*NC* 285). For Carter, society attempts to confine all those who are deemed dangerous, monstrous, freaks, or illegitimate. The metaphorical space occupied by those on the margin is literally described in terms of the

circus ring: "the O! of wonder; O! of grief" (NC 107). Here, Carter focusses on an analysis of the literal structure of the circus as well as the metaphorical significance of the spectacles who inhabit this space-- specifically the community of clowns, the "whores of mirth" (NC 119). Like the prostitute in Carter's first section, the clown challenges the traditional opposition between subject and object (Michael 196). In fact, in the second section of the novel, it is the clowns, not the women, who are the arch dissimulators. As freaks, "they are in the position to cross limits and boundaries (Robinson 126). In Showalter's terms, Carter is not content with just protesting against the standards and values of the dominant culture--she smashes and destroys Western ideological concepts upon which the limits and boundaries are constructed.

In Carter's feminist analysis of the circus and the clowns, she deconstructs the hierarchical opposition between civilized/primitive and human/animal; she challenges the notion of "Being" itself: the figure "of the clown functions as a locus of indeterminacy that threatens Western metaphysics. The clown's mask unsettles Being by calling into question notions of origin and selfhood" (Michael 195). Moreover, both the structure of the circus and the role of the clown suspend the distinction between reality and fiction. Within the discussion of the circus and its performers, Carter has the fantastic and the carnivalesque juxtaposed with the material reality of daily human existence.

In my own second chapter, "A Feminist Critique of 'The O! Of Grief'," I detour from Carter's geography to also include an analysis of Carter's revision of the panopticon which appears in her third and final section, "Siberia." Both the circus and the panopticon/prison (like the brothel) represent spaces

within which society will place those deemed dangerous or deadly. In her analysis of the Siberian prison, Carter chronicles just how women must break free of their enclosures. Though these women are imprisoned for acts of violence (killing their husbands), Carter emphasizes the "absurdity of a world in which violence is the only recourse for women, since they are dominated and oppressed by men through violence" (Michael 190). Ultimately, these women do break free literally from their cages. In part, the journey to freedom begins, first, with their refusal to accept blame for their actions (NC 215); next, they develop the "confidence" to reach out literally and touch the hand of their female guardians, and finally, they develop the "courage" to find desire and love in the eyes of the other women (NC 216). This new-found love closes the "great divide between the guards and the guarded" (NC 216). For Carter, the journey out of the enclosure allows the women to begin a new journey, one that is not scripted by patriarchy: the uncharted territory of the Siberian wilderness is a metaphorical "blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished" (NC 218).

My third chapter, "Rewriting the Female *and* Male: The Apprenticeship of the New ♀ and ♂," in part, charts a different but parallel journey; the destination is the celebration of the heterosexual union of the New Woman and Man. I analyze how Carter, in Showalter's terms, illustrates the process of self-discovery that does not rely on opposition, as well as her illustration of the apprenticeship that culminates in an autonomous subject. For Carter, the biological female and male bodies, when socialized as feminine and masculine, represent constructed prisons from which the individual must break free. This liberation involves a transformative journey which Carter will have both Fevvers and Walser undertake. Their journey will ensure that they are not

only worthy chroniclers of women's history, but worthy candidates for the role of the New Woman and Man for the New Century. Fevvers must undergo an apprenticeship that takes her from being a participant in the commodification of herself as an object, into being a self-authored subject. Walser must endure a rather rigorous journey--quite literally he will need to break free from his prison of masculinity, register his experiences as experiences, and become an autonomous subject. This transformation is crucial not just for his union with Fevvers, but also for his job as the scribe of the "histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten" (NC 285).

In my analysis of this journey, I adhere to Carter's map and follow the protagonists as they journey across the three geographical landscapes as presented in the three sections of the novel. The journey begins with an interview between Walser and Fevvers in the first section of the novel, "London." It is during this initial interview that we learn the story of Fevvers' experiences--as *she* chooses to relate them. Though Walser, as the interviewer, is asking the questions, it is Fevvers and Lizzie who control the situation. Immediately, then, Carter disrupts the binary logic which will associate the male with the active voice and the female with the passive. As well, Walser is not capable of asking the right questions because he is trapped within the cage of masculinity. He views Fevvers through the lens constructed by society; she is already inscribed as feminine. However, Fevvers refuses to allow Walser to objectify her. In fact, like the prostitutes in the first section and the clowns of the second, Fevvers upsets the opposition between subject and object. However, though Walser's journey will be more arduous (because he must be first reduced to the feminine) than Fevvers', she too must be transformed.

The transformation continues in the second section of the novel, "Petersburg." This section focuses more on Walser's transformation than it does on Fevvers'--she seems to continue her role as the nurturing angel of mercy, as she rescues and helps to transform the lives of numerous circus performers (Mignon from an abusive relationship, the Princess from her life of isolation, and the Strong Man from his own lack of intellect and sensitivity). Walser's experiences, however, provide for a very different story. Once he dons the mask of the clown, he begins his journey of self-discovery. Because the clown is able to invent his own face, he has the freedom to choose whom he will become (NC 121). As Michael notes, this "ability to juggle with being" (NC 103) undermines the "Western concept of an essential self or soul that exists prior to socialization" (196). However, Walser's initial "vertiginous sense of freedom" is but the beginning of his transformation (NC 103).

Fevvers and Walser, after very divergent journeys, are ultimately reunited in "Siberia," the third and last section of the novel. As Michael notes, Siberia is neither an enclosure "nor a cultural artifact. It is an open space that dissolves the very notion of limits and boundaries that structure Western thought" (200). Because it is literally a "white world," it functions metaphorically as a "blank sheet of fresh paper" upon which to write the real history of the previously silenced (NC 218). As well, because it is a "limbo to which [they have] no map" (NC 218), this space represents uncharted territory which affords the marginalized an opportunity to create a future free of oppressive discourse, politics, and philosophy.

Although the Siberian section closely chronicles Walser's transformation, Fevvers, too, undergoes a shift in perspective. Walser's developing self, because of his amnesia and his adoption by a Shaman, is no

longer grounded in binary logic. No longer "bound by and trapped within binary logic, which the novel early on exposes as male-centered, Walser moves toward Fevvers's ideal of the 'New Man'" (Michael 201-202). Once Fevvers loses her sword (and Lizzie her clock), she is no longer in possession of the weapon she "has usurped from the dominant order; she must develop ways of empowerment that are "neither male-centered nor male-defined" (Michael 204). As Michael notes, Fevvers' existence as "a subject is dependent on both her own self-construction and the acknowledgment of that construction as read in the eyes of others" (204).

However, though the geographical space of Siberia seems to offer the possibilities of a new utopian world, Carter posts many signs which act as warnings for any free-flying rhetoric that is not thoroughly grounded in materiality. The blank page/space of the wilderness will act as a "moral magnifying glass, exaggerating the blemishes of some and bringing out the finer points in those who we thought had none" (NC 279). Those who "learn the lessons of experience" will break from all confining enclosures; some "who'll never learn are tumbling back to civilization as fast as they can as blissfully unenlightened as they ever were" (NC 279). To remain blissfully unaware is to remain enclosed within ideological prisons. Ultimately, Carter takes on the "claustrophobic enclosures of Woman within narratives of male desire and practices a deconstruction of the very terms on which that enclosure depends: masculinity and femininity" (Robinson 117). If she does not offer a wholesale solution to shattering these enclosures, she does forge gaps in the official discourse which constructs the cages--gaps from which the voices of others may be heard.

Perhaps one of the obstacles to recognizing the liberating spaces which

Carter forges is the one most noted by her critics--Angela Carter is an intellectual writer. Before one attempts to analyze her dialogue, one must be familiar with the ideas of the authors with whom she converses. Moreover, Carter approaches her re-presentations of women from what she terms a committed feminist angle, and these images often speak directly to traditional 'Western' representations of women and the theoretical interpretations of these traditions. As well, in order to accomplish her feminist analysis, Carter will utilize the theories and philosophies of others. The result, in Bakhtinian terms, is that in Carter's novels, not only does one often hear the echo of other authors, but one also sees that her own prose seems to anticipate the concerns of our contemporary theorists. Crucial to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* is the concept that every utterance has an intertextual dimension, it refers to previous dialogues and anticipates those yet to come. For Bakhtin, it is in the novel that the "dialogical reciprocal orientation becomes, so to speak, an event of discourse itself" (Todorov 65).

However, it is probably the adaptation of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque (originating from his analysis of Rabelais) and Michel Foucault's theory of power (particularly in his revision of Bentham's concept of the panopticon) which most overtly demonstrates Carter's ability to engage with previous dialogues. Carter utilizes Bakhtin's theories of carnivalesque discourse to "invoke textual travesty, parody, masquerade, displacement, and verbal tightrope walking" (Andermahr 24). As well, Carter introduces the concept of gender to Foucault's theories of sexuality, and in so doing, demonstrates that structures of power and authority are phallogentric institutions which will literally censure women. Also, at the centre of Foucault's work is the idea of a process of active self-fashioning, a theory

of practices of the self which parallels attempts by novelists such as Carter to "model the subjectivity of women in terms other than those of passive victims of patriarchy" (McNay 4).

Just as Carter's fiction engages with her contemporary theorists, so, too, does she seem to anticipate our own critical debates. As Teresa de Lauretis will later do, Carter goes beyond Foucault because his critique of the technology of sex does not take into account "its differential solicitation of male and female subjects in the discourses and practices of sexuality" (de Lauretis ix). As well, Carter preempts Donna Haraway's questioning of the ambiguity of the terms "nature" and "experience." Also, both writers demonstrate a *fin-de-siecle* sensibility that questions origins and investigates the possibility of autonomy in the late twentieth century; and both demand a feminism which often appears utopian, yet is grounded in political activism, socialism, and materialism.

Though the theories and philosophies are diverse, they do have in common the desire to deconstruct traditional relations of power. Not to deconstruct these images which enclose women, to resist seeing "sex utterly divorced from its reproductive function, its function as language and its function as warfare," is to repeat the behaviour epitomized by Linda Lovelace, the "star" in the pornographic film *Deep Throat* and author of the bestseller *Inside Linda Lovelace*.⁵ For Carter, she is "a shaven prisoner in a cage whose bars are composed of cocks. And she has been so thoroughly duped she seems quite happy

⁵In "Lovely Linda," Carter's rather scathing review of *Inside Linda Lovelace*, she refers to Lovelace as "our Lady of Hard-Core Porn" (180) and "a unique phoenix of fuckery" (181). Reminiscent of her cultural critique in *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter criticizes Lovelace because her brand of pornography shows "Sex utterly divorced from its reproductive function as language and its function as warfare" (183). A special thank you to Dr. Richardson for noting that Linda Lovelace has since, using her married name, Marchiano, become an anti-pornography crusader, and claims to have been systematically and overtly victimized in the making of her films.

there. Each age gets the heroines it deserves and, by God, we deserve Linda Lovelace" (NS 54).

Written with passionate conviction in the 1970s, the essay "Lovely Linda" is still relevant today: Carter can very well be asking just what type of heroine we of the twenty-first century deserve. If we remain complacent about traditional relations of power and the corresponding images which further enclose us then perhaps we deserve the fate of Linda Lovelace. However, within the pages of *Nights at the Circus*, Carter does indeed draw us an escape route. In order to illuminate the means by which women as a group are oppressed, Carter begins by reconnecting sex to its reproductive function, its function as language and its function as warfare.

That we have a battle on our hands is made abundantly clear with Carter's use of the naval metaphor which first appears in section one and continues throughout the pages of the novel. Indeed, we find that Fevvers cannot begin her transformation until she physically loses and is emotionally deprived of her phallic symbol--Ma Nelson's toy gilded dagger. Fevvers must be transformed so that she recognizes non-violent, non-patriarchal forms of empowerment. Having wings and the ability to fly away is certainly not possible for women in general, but "confidence" and love can empower. In highlighting the combative nature of Fevvers' journey in particular and the journey of all who are oppressed in general, Carter forces us to be very clear about our concepts, terms, and definitions.

One such crucial concept is oppression. The root of the word is the element 'press.' In Marilyn Frye's words, this root is used in the following instances: "*the press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button.* Presses are used to mold

things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gasses or liquids in them. Something pressed is something between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce" (2). Just as Frye makes the connection between terms and their definitions, so too does Carter. In particular, she will return ideas, myths, and concepts back to their historical roots; in so doing, she limits their ability to oppress, mold, immobilize, and reduce. Moreover, she also meticulously cuts those connections which have been artificially drawn for the convenience of the privileged (the connection between the biological body and the construct of the feminine and the masculine for example). In so doing, Carter allows us to break free of the cages which restrict and immobilize us. Once free, when "all women will have wings," the spectacle of Linda Lovelace in her cock-constructed cage can be relegated to history and nightmares.

①

THE FEMININE APPRENTICESHIP OF THE FRINGED HOLE.

It is understandable, I suppose, that someone could approach the fantastic and exotic surface of your fictions and not be able to bridge the gap to the central point that your theatricality is meant to heighten real social attitudes and myths of femininity (Carter qtd. in Sage *House of Fiction* 241).

According to Elaine Showalter, the first phase in the evolution of a female literary subculture is the "feminine." This period is defined as a "prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (13). However, rather than demonstrate how the dominant culture is internalized or how the imitation is manifested, Carter is more concerned with the origins of the feminine construct. As a corollary, she seems determined to illustrate the devastating consequences of just such a construct--on the female, the male, and on the relations between the two. For an understanding of Carter's theoretical position in regards to the feminine and the social attitudes and myths of femininity, one should begin by turning to *The Sadeian Woman: And the Ideology of Pornography*, her polemical discussion on the work of Sade.⁶ Before turning to *Nights at the Circus*, I shall briefly discuss Carter's treatment of the feminine in *The Sadeian Woman*, and also in her 1977

⁶As Sally Keenan rightly argues, discussion of *The Sadeian Woman* tends to focus mainly on its relationship to Carter's fiction, "and the ways in which she worked through the theoretical issues it raises in fictional form" (132). As such, it has not received the detailed and serious treatment it deserves because of the ways in which Carter worked out or reworked some of the issues it touches on in her fiction. Certainly, while I recognize the importance of this work, a thorough discussion is beyond the scope and outside the boundaries of this thesis. For a full analysis see Sally Keenan's "Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*: feminism as treason."

novel *The Passion of New Eve*.⁷ According to Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* is "a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems [Sade] raises about the culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it - an opposition which is both cruelly divisive in our common struggle to understand the world, and also, in itself, a profound illumination of the nature of that struggle" (SW 4). Carter begins her discussion of sexual differences and sexual relations with the declaration that "man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting. The male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes a something when the male principle fills it with meaning" (SW 4).

Carter takes the graphic symbols of the exclamation point and the zero from graffiti, believing that they explicitly represent the perceived essence of sexual difference. Graffiti offers the truth about the "mythologising of sexuality," because by its very nature it is the "crudest" of all versions depicting sexual difference (SW 4). Perhaps this early philosophy, that truth is made visible if it is presented explicitly and crudely, explains why her earlier novels, such as *The Passion of New Eve*, were labelled "raw and savage" (AC 36).

Ruthless and cruel it may be, but *The Passion of New Eve* foreshadows *Nights at the Circus* and Carter's critique of the gendered construction of the feminine. *The Passion of New Eve* literally performs the spectacle of the

⁷ Many critics, such as Lorna Sage (AC 36) link *The Sadeian Woman* with *The Passion of New Eve*, believing that the novel works out in fictionalized form the theories put forth in the non-fiction. As well, many critics seem to automatically connect *New Eve* with *Nights at the Circus*. Ricarda Schmidt, for example, states that the latter is a logical sequel to the former since, "in a way, the heroine Fevvers is Eve's daughter: Fevvers is the new symbol of femininity, the contribution to evolution Eve had expected her child to be. She is the archaeopteryz Eve had envisioned, that mystical being, 'composed of the contradictory elements of air and earth' (PNE 185)" (67).

feminine: it illustrates the apprenticeship which every biological female undergoes in order to conform to society's ideal. According to Carter, the "passion" of the title refers to "the process of physical pain and degradation that Eve undergoes in her apprenticeship as a woman" (NS 170). In turn, this apprenticeship begins from the premise outlined in *The Sadeian Woman*: a woman is symbolically defined as nothing: either because "between her legs lies nothing but zero" (SW 4), or because "she is a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled" (SW 5). This theoretical premise is given materiality in *The Passion of New Eve's* Zero, "the poet" and master, and his feminine menagerie of slaves (PNE 85).

Zero is called a nothing because he is physically impotent, believing he is the victim of a "spiritual vasectomy" (PNE 92). However, despite his metaphorical zero status, because he is a male, his girls dedicate "themselves, body, heart and soul, to the Church of Zero" (PNE 99). The menagerie live in a "state of terminal bondage" (PNE 100). As well, not one of these "girls had any of [her] own front teeth left because Zero had sent them all to the dentist" (PNE 88). They give flesh to Carter's theoretical assertion of the symbolic value of woman -- "a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled" (SW 5). However, as Carter states, Zero's authority and mastery depend on "their conviction: a god-head, however shabby, needs believers to maintain his credibility. Their obedience rules him" (PNE 99). Thus, their submission creates his "myth," and by himself, "he would have been nothing" (PNE 100).

In actuality, Carter seems to have little compassion for these "slaves," perhaps because they worship a god of their own making. Moreover, the tone of the novel "is one of detached interest and intellectual curiosity, not

indignation" for the place of women in a patriarchal society (Mackinen 154). Furthermore, as Carter admits, during her early career, she too suffered "a degree of colonization of the mind" (AC 25), which according to Sage, would "posit a male point of view as the general one. So there was an element of the male impersonator" in her early works (AC 25). Thus, the girls trapped within the "annihilating circle of Zero" (PNE 100) are unceremoniously dismissed because they have the same "dreary biographies; broken homes, remand homes, parole officers, maternal deprivation, inadequate father figures, drugs, pimps, bad news" (99).

In contrast to her declaration that these girls are "case histories, rather than women" (PNE 100), the communities of women in *Nights at the Circus* are accorded a biography, a history and a voice. As well, there appears to be a shift in authorial voice, if not from baritone to soprano, then from male impersonator to female magician -- from one who wears a mask to deceive to one who masquerades to reveal.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter is intent on revealing the lived experiences of women as they journey through their apprenticeship of the feminine. Her purpose here is to expose the reality that "a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick" (SW 12). For Carter, the main issue is that "relationships between the sexes are determined by history and the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men" (SW 6).

With this in mind, this chapter will focus on the first section of the novel, "London," and Carter's representation of two communities which confine and control women. Fevvers' autobiography begins with the "sisterhood" (NC 39) at Ma Nelson's Academy and moves to Madame Schreck's "museum of woman

monsters" (NC 55). This first chapter, of Fevvers' life and of the novel, concludes with her daring escape from the Gothic mansion of the neo-Platonic Rosicrucian, Mr. Rosencreutz (NC 77).

As Carter often does, "we begin from our conclusions" (PNE 1), and Fevvers' prophetic revelation at the climactic finale of the novel. Here, Fevvers' rhapsodic vision of a new dawn envisions a time when "all women will have wings," when women will tear off their "mind forg'd manacles, will rise up and fly away," and 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---" (285). However, this high-flying rhetoric is deflated by Lizzie, Fevvers' foster mother. As is typical of the dialogue between the two, Lizzie effectively grounds Fevvers' idealism with her pragmatic materialism. She warns Fevvers that her analysis needs improvement, for changing the world will "be more complicated" than Fevvers visualizes (286).

For Lizzie realizes that the experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped. (Frye 4)

Thus, in order to improve upon Fevvers' analysis and her metaphor of the "cages, gilded or otherwise," we need to explore the structure of the birdcage

and its relation to oppression.

As Marilyn Frye notes, if you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down, the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore...there is no physical property of any one wire, *nothing* that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back ...and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage...you will see ...that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers...their relation to each other, is as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.(4-5)

In light of Frye's analysis, the exchange between Fevvers and Lizzie highlights the former's almost naive belief in human agency (women need only remove their "mind forg'd manacles") to effect change, and the latter's equally passionate belief that only political revolution can end oppression. Paradoxically, it is Lizzie's earth-bound perspective which allows her to see what should be visible only from above. Though Fevvers has the advantage of an aerial panorama, her vision is myopic; according to her, the occupant can fly around the wire and escape. Though Carter's exploration affords the reader both the controlling bird's-eye view and the view from the underside, the reader is compelled to ask if these two views form a synthesis from which she

has constructed a vision of a new world. Given Carter's aversion to universals, any answer/solution is bound to be complicated.

Perhaps the answer can be found, in part, in the naval imagery which governs Carter's depiction of Ma Nelson's Academy, and resonates across the pages of the entire novel. The most prominent example, and one that Carter ensures her reader will not miss, is the namesake of the madame of this brothel: Viscount Horatio Nelson. He made his reputation during the French revolutionary wars and numerous battles thereafter. Off Cape Trafalgar in 1805, during his final victorious battle aboard the *Victory*, he died from a wound inflicted by a sniper's bullet (Magnusson 1072-1073). During the course of his illustrious military career he lost his right eye and his right arm. However, his glossy public career obscured a rather tarnished private life. While married he conducted an affair and fathered a daughter with a married woman. Nonetheless, Nelson managed to maintain a veneer of respectability during his lifetime; his reputation remains intact today and he is revered as a hero. Replicating this example, Ma Nelson's brothel camouflages its purpose and presents an air of respectability to the outside world. Every morning Lizzie "scrubbed and whitened" the front stairs so that an "air of rectitude and propriety surrounded the place" (NC 26).

The likeness between Ma Nelson and her namesake continues into parody. She is accorded the "soubriquet" because she "always dressed in the full dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet" (NC 32). She too has but one eye, "a sailor having put the other out with a broken bottle the year of the Great Exhibition" (NC 23). Ma Nelson refers to the brothel as a ship, "her ship of battle" (NC 32). Fevvers, in the guise of the Winged Victory, becomes the "flagship" (NC 31). To complete her costume, Fevvers is equipped with "the

very gilt ceremonial sword that [came] with [the] Admiral's uniform" (NC 37). Walser also places Fevvers in the context of this naval imagery when he describes her face, which "in its Brobdingnagian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build...figureheads for sailing ships" (NC 35). However, this imagery is more than just an example of Carter's intellectual playfulness.

When entering the brothel, customers turn a "blind eye to the horrors of the outside" (NC 26). This, as well as the characterization of Ma Nelson, "recalls the famous incident in which Nelson craftily holds a telescope up to his blind eye: a clear demonstration of the difference between sight and insight" (Bannock 211). Moreover, Ma Nelson "always kept the blinds pulled down," which reflects her partial sightedness (NC 26). As Bannock notes, this refusal to acknowledge the outside world also "suggests the danger of self-deception" (Bannock 211).

Both Fevvers and Lizzie may be tempted to be "sentimental about their unconventional experiences [and take] comfort and inspiration from their memories of that time," but the reader is not lulled into any such false sentimentality (Bannock 211). This brothel is more than a metaphorical battle ship; the battle is clearly the sexual relations between the masculine and the feminine, between the master and the powerless, between the client and the prostitute. Highlighting this relationship is Fevvers' comment that Ma Nelson always "kept [her] out of the battle"; she was never put on "the block" and so could be known as the "Virgin Whore" (NC 31). So Fevvers will claim with confidence that she manages to escape being sold into the trade that would give her the combatant status it gives the prostitutes, the other inhabitants aboard this "pirate ship" (NC 32).

According to Carter, prostitution can only exist when sexual relations are depicted out of context, and therefore not seen as an expression of social relations, "as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never a part of it" (SW 3). Moreover, Carter theorizes that prostitutes are the favourite heroines of the pornographer, but their performance is never depicted as work. Work, in this context,

is *really* dirty work; it is unmentionable. Even unspeakable. And we may not talk about it because it reintroduces the question of the world. In this privatised universe pleasure is the only work; work itself is unmentionable. To concentrate on the prostitute's trade as trade would introduce too much reality into a scheme that is first and foremost one of libidinous fantasy. (SW 13)

In the telling of her story to Walser, Fevvers' perspective on the trade is complex and more ambiguous than comments by critics such as Bannock would suggest. In part, this ambiguity is due to Fevvers' problematic role as both a participant in and critic of the libidinous fantasy.

On the one hand, as an occupant of the whorehouse, she participates in a societal construct that must be in place for the brothel to exist: the prostitutes are really just "poor girls earning a living" (NC 39), and the brothel itself is merely "a place in which rational desires might be rationally gratified" (NC 26). Certainly the trade is defined and labelled as work, but the requirements of the job are not explored, and therefore, the monetary exchange for the task *seems* economically equitable. However, a darker perspective of prostitution will have the prostitute, like the siren, use her

sexuality to "lure men to their dooms" (NC 38).

Whether the perspective will have whores "do it for pleasure" (NC 39) or be "damned souls" who do it to destroy men, Fevvers will have the myths originate in the consciences of men so "that they will feel less foolish when they fork out hard cash for pleasure that has no real existence" (NC 39). For Fevvers there is no doubt that the prostitute sells "only the simulacra" of pleasure (NC 39). Therefore, what she highlights is the actual lived experiences of the women contained within this female world. The libidinal fantasy is ultimately revealed for the construction that it is with the narrating of the reality. In reality, during her "long hours of leisure," Fevvers is "devoted to the study of aerodynamics and the physiology of flight" (NC 40). Because of the well-stocked library, the "girls" are bent over their books in their "free" time (NC 32). Moreover, "until Liz opened the door and let the men in, when all we girls need must jump to attention and behave like women, you might say that, in our well-ordered habitation, all was '*luxe, calme et volupte*,' though not quite as the poet imagined. We all engaged in our intellectual, artistic or political...pursuits" (NC 40).

This picture is certainly one that will have this private world "governed by a sweet and loving reason," and there appears to be a strong bond of "sisterhood" among these women (NC 39). An understanding of the significance of the use of the anachronistic term "sisterhood" provides insight into Carter's intent. Becoming commonplace in the 1970s, the term connotes political activity rather than "a definition of 'Woman' in her essence" (Andermahr 202). Certainly Lizzie is politically active, and the girls are "all suffragists" (NC 38). The question put to Walser, "Does that seem strange to you? That the caged bird should want to see the end of cages?"

(NC 38), demonstrates their awareness of their subservient position within the structure of power relations. Use of the term implies that in response to their marginalized position in official society the women forge strong supportive bonds--making their existence in the unofficial world driven by mutual love *and* political awareness.

However, one should not assume that Carter is suggesting that the brothel offers the possibility of a liberating utopia. A politically aware "sisterhood" this might be, but in the words of Carter, "Sisters under the skin we might be, but that doesn't mean we've got much in common" (*Fairy Tales* xiv). However, each girl within the Academy has in common with her sister the fact that she would not have turned "her belly to the trade unless pricked⁸ by economic necessity" (NC 39). Apparently, these girls are also blessed with foresight, for "Ma Nelson knew that the days of the grand old whorehouse were numbered and always urged the members of her academy to prepare themselves for a wider world" (NC 45). And prepare they did.

Though the catalogue of post-prostitute positions reads like a definition for the "Kind-Hearted Whore" convention, it does give voice to the experiences of the individual who is condoned but not accepted by "official" culture. The first two to jump ship are Louisa and Emily, two "resourceful girls" who establish and run a "boarding-house in Brighton"(NC 45). Next, Annie and Grace, "by dint of hard work and good management," own a "small agency for typing and office work"(NC 45). With fortuitous revolutions of the "wheel of fortune" (NC 107) the rest of the crew also find positions within official culture--though with a true Carterian twist. Jenny, whose "sole

⁸ Carter's use of the term "pricked" highlights the connection between the different variations of penetration, specifically, sexual and economic. A discussion of another form of penetration, the gaze, will follow.

capital was her skin alone," is rescued from her state of despair by a proposal of marriage from a wealthy Lord of the Realm. However, the groom "chokes to death on the *bombe surprise*," at their reception, and Jenny is left a wealthy widow (NC 47). There is yet another turn of the wheel, and Jenny meets and marries a wealthy but sickly entrepreneur. And Fevvers ironically wonders if "all his millions will console her for her loss" (NC 47).

Esmeralda, the flute player, works in the theatre as a snake charmer, and marries the handsome young performer known as the Human eel. They have "a brace of little elvers of their own," and live happily ever after (NC 47).

According to Peach, *Nights at the Circus* "reflects the way in which the prostitute during the Victorian period was beginning to be seen in more humane ways" (150). Prostitution is merely a "transitory state," where the prostitute could return to a "regular course of life -- through finding work of some other kind, opening small shops or lodging houses, emigration or marriage" (150-151). Peach concludes that prostitution is

seen in the novel as challenging traditional demarcations of reality and illusion. After all, the women assume a role and the men pay not for sex but for simulacra of sex. Hence, *Nights at the Circus* takes us through many positions of debasement, evidenced in worlds assembled and contained for the pleasure of men, and often betraying the influence of the Marquis de Sade. (150)

Certainly, Carter does challenge traditional demarcations and perceptions of reality and illusion. However, the reality of the brothel, as outlined by Carter, has a woman selling her body for sex--the sex is very real. What is illusionary is the concept that a woman sells her *pleasure*--this is the

prostitute's confidence trick. Contrary to what the male client presumes, she sells her body because of economic need--pleasure is the simulacrum and is not part of the transaction. As Fevvers states, the girls do their trade because "pricked by economic necessity." It is this economic necessity which is not addressed by Peach. To state that prostitution is merely a transitory state negates the systemic oppression of women. For if the women can move "up" so to speak, and only resort to the trade out of economic need, then why is this economic need not addressed? Why is it that it is women and not men who are expected to endure the occupation of "humiliation"? These are questions that Carter also ponders.⁹

For Carter, the answer is that in many respects, the brothel is a microcosm of "the world in its present state," with its "cash-sale ideology" (SW 58). Within this ideology the situation of the prostitute is ambiguous and precarious at best. Not surprisingly, the whore's exchange value is dependent upon and determined by the demands and needs of the 'dominant'¹⁰ in the economy. In the ideology of the feminine, the good girl has her hymen intact and the ruined woman is one who has lost her capital assets, "a virgin who has been deflowered and hence has nothing tangible to put on the market" (SW 59). However, if the ruined woman regards her sexual activity "as her capital, she

⁹ Writing of her experiences in Japan, Carter relates the world of the Hostess Bar and the power relations between male client and female hostess. Interestingly, this relationship is also described as a "battle." The hostess, "poor butterfly, is selling her youth and time and energy at a very cheap rate to people who could not afford to pay for them out of their own salaries. They usually charge her [services] to a firm which would refuse to give her enough money on which to live if she were officially on its pay sheet. Such are the ambiguities of acute capitalism" ("Poor Butterfly" NS 49).

¹⁰ I am using the term "dominant" as a synonym for "official." The dominant ideology thesis is "rooted in Marx and Engels's assertion in *The German Ideology* that the 'ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Andermahr 57). This thesis is challenged by many, particularly in cultural studies. My point here is that the ruling class is the dominant class and it is the dominant class which determines, creates, and maintains the cultural practices and theoretical ideologies which are deemed official conventions of the society.

may...utilize her vagina to ruin others, as though, in fact, the opening of it allowed her access to a capital sum which had been frozen by virginity. No longer a virgin, she may put her capital to work for her" (SW 59). However, one should not be carried away with Carter's rhetoric, and assume that she is reiterating the liberal humanist view¹¹ that the bird/prostitute has two options: she can make the confining cage work to her own benefit, or her conditions of confinement are merely transitory and she can fly away whenever she chooses.

Either view is, as Carter would say, conciliatory nonsense. If the prostitute accepts the "contractual nature of sexual relations, even if on her own terms, she imprisons herself within them just as securely as a wife does, though she may retain a greater degree of individual independence. If marriage is legalised prostitution, then prostitution is itself a form of group marriage" (SW 59). Viewed from this perspective, the prostitute is in a lose-lose, or caged-caged situation. That Ma Nelson's girls recoup some of their moral status because they assimilate into traditional, sanctioned feminine cages (shopkeeper, office worker, wife), does not negate the reality that both the brothel and the capitalist society which enables its existence are depicted as confining cages.

The brothel, in fact, is a microcosm of society because it mirrors its ideology of sexual relations. That this ideology literally destroys women is brought to the fore with the representation of Madame Schreck's "museum of women monsters" (NC 74). However, though Carter illuminates the connection

¹¹ Humanism positions "Man" as the centre of the universe and history. Liberal Humanism is grounded in the claims of "the classical liberal philosophy developed by Locke, Rousseau, Bentham and Mill for equal rights, individualism, liberty and justice" (Andermahr 123). Primarily, this view will state that human agency and subjectivity can overcome oppression and it tends to ignore systemic factors and cultural practices which reinforce oppression and inequities.

between the feminine body and the economic balance sheet within the world of the brothel to highlight sexual relations in reality, she also disrupts connections--specifically, the connection between the female body and the ideology of motherhood (Fevvers is the daughter of many mothers, not of the single biological mother who abandoned her at birth). While doing so, she highlights the constructedness of this ideology by demonstrating that within the world of the brothel, the unofficial world, this connection is made invisible. In this world, the female body is associated not with the womb but with the pleasure of the flesh.

Within this "wholly female world" where the prostitute will fulfil the role of the mother, where the virgin will co-exist with the whore, even the animals are female. As well, they are always in "kitten, or newly given birth, so that a sub-text of fertility [underwrites] the glittering sterility of the pleasure of the flesh readily available within the academy" (NC 38-39). The sub-text, the link between sexual intercourse and reproduction, remains obscured from vision and veiled in euphemistic language. Ma Nelson refers to her whores as her "girls," "daughters," or "chickies," and thus masks their role as potential mothers. According to Carter, prostitution can only exist when sexual relations are depicted out of context, "as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never a part of it" (SW 3). Certainly, Ma Nelson also attempts to shield Fevvers "from the tempests of misfortune" which exist beyond the threshold of the brothel. However, she cannot keep the outside world from invading their private sphere (25).

Ultimately, the unofficial world of the brothel can exist only if legitimized by the official world. Indeed the sudden death of Ma Nelson

heralds their "Judgement Day" in the form of Nelson's "stern and stony-hearted elder brother" and heir (44). Moreover, any woman who must rely on this form of "work" is always in a vulnerable position; Ma Nelson's "girls" are literally told that their "time is up," and are forced into the streets (44). However, what is also "up" is not just the fact that the brothel exists because sanctioned by official culture, but also the illusion that the brothel participates within the boundaries of official culture.

It is only when the girls open the curtains and shutters of their "home" for the first time that the constructedness of their environment is made apparent. For "with those drapes there had been made the artificial night of pleasure which was the perennial season of the salon" (49). In the "cold light of early dawn," the room takes on the appearance of a Spenserian House of Pride, for "the luxury of that place had been nothing but illusion, created by the candles of midnight, and, in the dawn, all was sere, worn-out decay" (49). They see now what the "deceitful candles made so gorgeous":

We saw the stains of damp and mould on ceilings and damask walls; the gilding on the mirrors was all tarnished and a bloom of dust obscured the glass so that, when we looked within them, there we saw, not the fresh young women that we were, but the hags we would become, and knew that, we too, like pleasures, were mortal. (NC 49)

However, it is only the women who are mortal, who are flesh; the pleasure is *always* an illusion. Also, the reality that the brothel is dependent upon official culture (represented by the Reverend in this instance) for its existence becomes evident. Once the "dissenting cleric" enters the "sisterhood," the temporal and illusionary status of the home is apparent (NC

44). Carter has the structure "waver and dissolve before [Fevvers'] very eyes. Even the solidity of the sofas seemed called into question for they and the heavy leather armchairs now had the dubious air of furniture carved out of smoke" (NC 49). It is not the literal structure which is illusionary, but rather, the idea that it is a safe haven of sisterhood. Certainly, they "cheat the Reverend out of his inheritance" (NC 49) when they create a funeral pyre of the building. But in so doing, this cluster of "sad birds" merely destroy one bar of the birdcage--they may escape, but the cage itself still exists.

However, the girls do not conspire to maintain the ideology of the confining cage. They refuse to aid the Reverend in his plan to transform the brothel into a hostel for "fallen girls...[H]e thought a repentant harlot or two would come in handy about the place, poacher turned gamekeeper, you might say. But not one of us would take up the wardress posts he offered" (NC 44-45). When similar offers are presented to Madame Schreck it appears that she accepts the role of poacher because she literally lays traps to ensnare exhibits for her museum. Likewise, the Countess P. accepts the role of gamekeeper because she personally selects the women she will imprison until they repent.

As Walser rightly determines, with the introduction of Madame Schreck the story takes "a grisly turn," for she does not preside over a brothel, but rather, this "Lady of Terror" is the procurer for, and curator of, a "museum of woman monsters" (NC 55). Moreover, this dark sadistic world is the inevitable consequence and extension of Ma Nelson's world, which appears to be another Goodship Lollypop rather than the ship of battle that it is. Perhaps the illusion of the happy house of hookers is intended to lull the reader into a sense of complacency, the shattering of which is all the more powerful with

the stark reality of Madame Schreck's.

In the "first chapter" of Fevvers' life, little information is forthcoming regarding the individual lives of the female cast of characters. In the chapter detailing her life as the "Angel of Death" at Schreck's museum, the individual lived experiences of the female exhibits/occupants are portrayed with great attention to particulars. Indeed, it appears that Carter emphasizes the differences within the category of 'Woman' in order to dispel the myth of just such a universalizing construct. Moreover, the more "monstrous" women appear, the more Carter takes care to illustrate that they all have "hearts that beat, like [ours], and souls that suffer" (69). According to Carter, the "old world" cannot turn "on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn," until the "histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been" are written, from their own birdcage perspective, into the annals of human history (NC 285).

As well, the recording of women's histories must also chronicle the lives of those women who actively collude with, and participate in, the systems that confine and oppress other women. Not to mention these women is equivalent to committing the same act of erasure that is criticized. Moreover, one can argue that Carter documents the experiences of the oppressors in order to show by example what women must *not* do to each other. Madame Schreck and the Countess P. who follows her, though female, are in positions of power and use these positions to oppress and confine women. However, for Carter, regardless of biology, the feminine principle applies to those who occupy an "inert space" within patriarchal discourse, just as the masculine principle applies to those in authoritative positions of power.

Schreck's servant, Toussaint, with his eyes full of the "sorrow of exile and of abandonment," is, despite his sex, as oppressed as the female inhabitants of the house of horrors. Carter describes the feminine principle as represented as a hole, "an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled" (SW 4). Yet this servant has no mouth at all. Touissant, like the prostitutes of the brothel, like the clowns of the circus, represents the feminine principle because marginalized and powerless. This demonstrates, in a very literal-minded way, that, for Carter, patriarchy is a system of oppression which (while it primarily victimizes women) enlists oppressors from both sexes and victimizes people of both sexes. In other words, Carter reveals that patriarchy is a system, not merely the sum total of individual acts of exploitation of women by men. However, Carter does reserve especially gruesome punishment for those women who do collude with patriarchal oppression.

Unlike Ma Nelson, Madame Schreck does not attempt to mask the nature of her business. Where the mention of Ma Nelson's Academy is greeted with "guffaws, leers, nudges in the ribs," the name of Madame Schreck's is accompanied by "bare, hinted whispers of the profoundly strange, of curious revelations that greeted you behind Our Lady of Terror's triple-locked doors, doors that opened reluctantly, with a great rattling of bolts and chains, and then swung to with a long groan as of despair" (NC 55). Where Lizzie will whitewash the front steps of the Academy in order to present a facade of respectability, no such attempt at illusion exists at the museum of women monsters:

It was a gloomy pile in Kensington, in a square with a melancholy garden in the middle full of worn grass and leafless trees. The facade of her house was blackened by

the London soot as if the very stucco were in mourning.

A louing portico over the front door, sir, and all the inner shutters tightly barred. And the door knocker most ominously bandaged up in crepe. (NC 57)

Where Ma Nelson "entertained" the elite of society who "were perturbed in their bodies and wished to verify that...the pleasures of the flesh were, at bottom, splendid," Madame Schreck catered "for those who were troubled in their soul" (NC 57). And their physical appearance provides an appropriate container for the troubled soul: "the men who came to Madame Schreck's were one and all quite remarkable for their ugliness; their faces suggested that he who cast the human form in the first place did not have his mind on the job" (NC 61).

For those enslaved within there is no illusion that they are part of one large happy family. They do not gather in a formal parlour nor lounge in private worlds where they hone their skills and talents. They inhabit the dark, lower regions of the house; literally they exist in a hell on earth. Madame Schreck's museum is organized thus:

downstairs, in what had used to be the wine cellar, she'd had a sort of vault or crypt constructed, with wormy beams overhead and nasty damp flagstones underfoot, and this place was known as 'Down Below', or else, 'The Abyss'. The girls were all made to stand in stone niches cut out of the slimy walls, except for the Sleeping Beauty, who remained prone, since proneness was her speciality. And there were little curtains in front and, in front of the curtains, a little lamp burning. These were her profane altars. (NC 61)

So, though this is a prison which houses freaks and monsters, Carter makes it clear that its origins exist in the evil of "official" culture. For there "was no terror in the house [their] customers did not bring with them" (*NC* 62). Nonetheless, ironically, behind these curtains stand those deemed monstrous on the pages of the literature of "official" culture--the Western canon.¹² Therefore, in her re-presentation of the lived experiences of women, Carter either deconstructs the images portrayed in the canon or ignores it completely. In contrast to the canon, according to Carter, for most of "human history, 'literature', both fiction and poetry, has been narrated, not written--heard, not read. So fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world" (*FT* ix). Therefore, it is not surprising that Carter turns to the fairy tale genre, a genre associated with unofficial culture, to give voice to women silenced in the literature of official culture. As well, because their stories are important, and because, as Carter notes, a "change of narrator can effect a transformation of meaning," she will have Fevvers introduce the characters who will, in turn, narrate their own experiences (*FT* xiv).

The stories in the fairy tale and the stories of the experiences of the inhabitants of the museum have in common their presentation of the female: the stories all "centre around a female protagonist; be she clever, or brave, or good, or silly, or cruel, or sinister, or awesomely unfortunate, she is centre stage, as large as life -- sometimes, like Sermerssuaq, larger" (*FT* xiii).

¹²The term refers to "a list of works set apart from other literature by virtue of their literary quality and importance." As Andermahr notes further, feminist literary criticism exposes the male-dominated character of the Western canon and challenges its selection procedures" (22). Elaine Showalter's identification of a tradition within women's writing which includes three distinct phases - the feminine, the feminist, and the female, is just one alternative to the Western canon (Andermahr 22).

Carter's purpose is to "demonstrate the extraordinary richness and diversity of responses to the same common predicament--being alive--and the richness and diversity with which femininity, in practice, is represented in 'unofficial' culture: its strategies, its plots, its hard work" (*FT* xiv).

In illuminating the individual experiences of Schreck's Freaks, Carter wedges a gap between the reality as presented in "unofficial" culture and the re-presentation of illusion as reality in "official" culture. It surely is no coincidence that Carter chooses her female characters from the catalogue of official culture's fairy tale heroines and hags. Carter is well versed in the conventions of the fairy tale genre and particularly in its ability to reflect "lived experience with a slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age; the telling of the story...gains credibility as a witness's record of lives lived, of characters known, and shapes expectations in a certain direction" (Warner xxiii). According to Warner, it is the "double vision of the tales, on the one hand charting perennial drives and terrors, both conscious and unconscious, and on the other mapping actual, volatile experience," which gives the genre its "fascination and power to satisfy" (Warner xxi). Moreover, for Carter, uncovering the context of the tales, their relation to society and history, can yield more of a resolution than the story itself delivers with its challenge to fate (Warner xxi). Therefore, for Carter, the historical interpretation of fairy tales will hold primacy over the traditional psychoanalytic or mystic approaches, because the historical reveals how human behaviour is embedded in material circumstances.

However, as Warner notes, the archetypal interpretation of the fairy tale receives the greatest currency. Perhaps the most authoritative voice of

the interpretation of the fairy tale is Bruno Bettelheim, who analyzes through the lens of Freudian principles. According to Warner, Bettelheim's theories have proved "extremely persuasive: pediatricians have restored harsh fairy tales including the Grimms' to children's bookshelves, and endorsed the therapeutic powers of fictional cruelty and horror" (Warner 212).¹³ In Bettelheim's interpretation, one source of such cruelty is the bad mother:

the bad mother has become an inevitable, even required ingredient in fantasy, and hatred of her a legitimate, applauded stratagem of psychic survival. Bettelheim's theory has contributed to the continuing absence of good mothers from fairy tales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them. His argument, and its tremendous diffusion and widespread acceptance, have effaced from memory the historical reasons for women's cruelty within the home and have made such behaviour seem natural, even intrinsic to the mother-child relationship. It has even helped to ratify the expectation of strife as healthy and the resulting hatred as therapeutic. (Warner 212-213)

Certainly, this is not to suggest that Bettelheim is the sole voice and proponent of official culture's interpretation of the stories within the genre. However, as Warner well notes, his voice has become the authoritative one. As such, juxtaposing Carter's interpretation with Bettelheim's highlights Carter's concern for materiality and historical relevancy and official

¹³ It appears that Carter revises Bettelheim's interpretations in her other novels as well. As Schmidt notes, Carter's description of the caves in *The Passion of New Eve* "is obviously influenced by Bruno Bettelheim's account of the layout of prehistoric caves which he interpreted as mimicking the womb" (75). Here, Schmidt refers to Bettelheim's *Symbolic Wounds. Puberty Rites and the Envious Male* (146-9).

culture's concern with ideology and the archetypal approach which "leeches history out of fairy tale" (Warner 213).

In official culture, *Sleeping Beauty* emphasizes the long, "quiet concentration on oneself," a period of "passivity" which will permit the "budding adolescent not to worry during his [sic] inactivity: he learns that things continue to evolve" (Bettelheim 225). According to Bettelheim, the sleep of the *Sleeping Beauty* is a frigid one; she is totally enveloped in the "isolation of narcissism. In such self-involvement which excludes the rest of the world there is no suffering, but also no knowledge to be gained, no feelings to be experienced" (234). Moreover, Bettelheim continues with the assertion that even in the shortened form in which the tale comes down to us, "in which *Sleeping Beauty* is awakened by the kiss of the prince, we feel-- without it being spelled out as in the more ancient version--that she is the incarnation of perfect femininity" (236). In this rendition, *Sleeping Beauty* passively remains in a cocoon of isolation from the world until awakened (both literally and sexually) by a kiss which provides her with re-entry into society. The unofficial story of *Sleeping Beauty*, where she is more a side-show freak than an exemplar of femininity, is far more gruesome. Once her story is historically situated and her lived experiences inserted into the template of conventions of official culture, then the reality is inevitably gruesome. With Fevvers' representation of the *Sleeping Beauty*, it becomes apparent that her representation of the situation is a far more accurate portrayal of actual women in society.¹⁴

¹⁴ In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, the first time Desiderio acts upon his desire in his waking life, he re-enacts the fairy-tale of the *Sleeping Beauty*. As Ricarda Schmidt notes, in "showing necrophily at the bottom of this male fantasy about making love to a virgin and the attraction of a sleeping woman, Carter reveals a sordid aspect of desire which is usually hidden under the beautiful roses of *Sleeping Beauty*" (57).

According to Fevvers, Sleeping Beauty is literally kidnapped from her "grieving parents watching and praying beside her bed" (NC 63). Once installed as a display at Schreck's, the Sleeping Beauty is described using naval imagery which highlights her status as an anachronistic remnant of a past time and ideology--she is not a ship who has found "rest in a happy harbour" (67), but rather, drifts like "sea-wrack" on a vast, "unknown ocean of sleep" (64). The myth of a peaceful and restful respite is also dispelled. For the real Sleeping Beauty does not slumber in a dreamless sleep:

her eyeballs moved continually this way and that, as if she were watching shapes of antic ballets playing themselves out upon the insides of her eyelids [perhaps witnessing a macabre dance, such as the clowns' last demonic dance of death which takes place in Siberia in the last part of the novel]. And sometimes her toes and fingers would convulse and twitch... Or she might softly moan or cry out, and sometimes, very softly, laugh. (64)

If she does dream of the future then the dawn of a new century is not a cause for celebration, for this re-incarnation of death-in-life will also ooze "out a few fat tears" (64).

Carter has the cusp of the new century as an appropriate time for killing off ideologies that literally and metaphorically kill off young girls and women. The characteristics in life and the conventions in literature that define femininity and oppress women are figured metaphorically in the novel as coffin-like enclosures. This Sleeping Beauty is neither truly sleeping nor truly beautiful; she is permanently perched on the threshold between sleep and consciousness, between death and life. As well, just as the Sleeping Beauty

cannot wake up, the Wiltshire Wonder cannot grow up.

Though the Wonder is not capable of growing in stature, unlike the Sleeping Beauty, she can at least narrate her own story, and ultimately, she does grow emotionally. Certainly, her life begins within a fairy tale: she is conceived on a Fairy Mound one midsummer's night, and her father is none other than the King of the Fairies (65). However, economic necessity 'pricks' this illusionary bubble, and for "fifty golden guineas cash in hand my own mother sold me to a French pastrycook with corkscrew moustaches, who served me for a couple of seasons in a cake" (NC 66). And with this description we leave the world of the fairy tale and enter the realm of the melodrama and finally, we cross the threshold into a Blakean hell.

The villainous pastrycook encloses the Wonder in the same fashion as the Countess encloses the inmates of her panopticon. There the Countess will confine the prisoners within "a *hollow* circle of cells *shaped like a doughnut*...In the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a *round room* surrounded by windows" (my emphasis 210). Likewise, the Wonder is enclosed literally within food and metaphorically within feminine imagery. The Wonder, though incarcerated within the birthday cakes, "suffered from claustrophobia" and could not bear the "close confinement of those *hollowed cakes*" (66). Finally, unable to withstand her confinement, "half-fainting, sweating, choking for lack of air in that *round space*, she erupts from her coffin" (66). The Wonder is literally sickened by the sweetly suffocating feminine images of sugar and spice. However, her phallic "eruption" destroys both the actual container (the round space within the cake) and the figurative feminine images in literature which create and propagate such metaphors. In this instance, the Wonder symbolizes all "the wonders that create the

atmosphere of fairy tale [and] disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open spaces...for alternatives" (Warner xx). Moreover, the dimension of wonder "creates a huge theatre of possibility in the stories...This very boundlessness...represents a practical dimension to the imagination, an aspect of the faculty of thought, and can unlock social and public possibilities" (Warner xx).

The Wonder's active eruption does indeed open possibilities, for it shatters the cage of her previous life, leads her to a family that adopts her as "one of their own," and finally, gives her a "sister" who is also her "saviour" (67). The Wonder believes that her "ship had come to rest in a happy harbour!" (67). Again, this invocation of naval imagery and sisterhood draws the reader back to Ma Nelson's safe harbour, where the women become a family despite the lack of biological ties. However, the outside world enters, but in this instance life will imitate art. Carter's representation of Snow White highlights the danger for women who, like The Wonder, succumb and conform to the representation of the idea of Woman in literature.

The world enters by the way of a pantomime of Snow White. On seeing the dwarfs, her "natural kin," the Wonder has "a vision of a world in miniature, a small, perfect heavenly place such as you might see reflected in the eye of a wise bird. And it seemed to me that place was my home and these little men were its inhabitants, who would love me, not as a 'little woman' but as--a woman" (NC 67-68). Unfortunately for the Wonder, she mistakes for reality what is only the fictive world of the fairy tale.

The fairy tale suggests that "dwarfs are eminently male," but males who are stunted in their development. These "little men with their stunted bodies and their mining occupations--they skilfully penetrate into dark holes--all

suggest phallic connotations. They are certainly not men in any sexual sense-- their way of life, their interest in material goods to the exclusion of love, suggest a pre-oedipal existence" (Bettelheim 210).

In reality, these little men, despite Bettelheim's assertion that they are not men in any sexual sense, brutally and repeatedly rape and sexually abuse The Wonder. In the real world, she has no control over her economic exchange value and is passed from brother to brother and used by each as though a piece of communal property. As well, The Wonder believes that because these dwarfs are her "natural kin" they will automatically love and care for her: however, they do not "treat her kindly, for, although they were little, they were men" (NC 68). Certainly, the Wonder is the victim in this narrative. She is abused by men, but she learns the lesson that a community based solely on "natural kin," does not necessarily provide a guaranteed safe harbour. In contrast to the escapees of the panopticon, who seek an isolated refuge far from the gaze any man, the Wonder settles for an environment where she need show herself "to one man at a time [rather] than to an entire theatre-full of the horrid, nasty, hairy things" (NC 64). Within the confines of Schreck's "house of shame," the Wonder believes that she is "well protected from the dark, foul throng of the world, in which [she] suffered so much. Amongst the monsters, [she] is well hidden; who looks for a leaf in a forest?" (NC 64-65). The Wonder's experiences have her regarding herself "with utmost detestation" and feeling less worth "than a farthing in the world's exchange" (NC 68). Moreover, until she shares her story she will remain isolated within a monstrous forest that need not exist. For why should there be such a forest in the first place; why should the victim need the mask of the forest?

The telling of the story of the individual woman is important for all

women. As Marina Warner states, the "story itself becomes the weapon of the weaponless" (412). When women want to "undo error or redeem wrongdoing or defend the innocent, they raise their voices, if only in a conspiratorial whisper--hence the suspicion of women's talk that haunts the whole history of the old wives' tale" (412). However, Fevvers will refuse a whisper, conspiratorial or otherwise. For if the story is not shouted from the rooftops for all to hear then the lesson is not learned and the story and history will be repeated. Carter makes this point quite clear. For Fevvers will celebrate the end of the brothel and the prostitutes' integration into society with their new careers, yet from our (and her) perspective a century later, we know that these new found careers are now feminine ghettos, new cages from which we must break free. This reality is reinforced with the example of the Sleeping Beauty when she is used as an analogy for the Russian Revolution.

For Walser, the Russian city of St. Petersburg is a "Sleeping Beauty of a city...[It] stirs and murmurs, longing yet fearing the rough and bloody kiss that will awaken her, tugging at her moorings in the past, striving, yearning to burst through the present into the violence of that authentic history to which this narrative--as must by now be obvious!--does not belong" (97). Authentic history as we now know it tells us that the revolution in Russia did come--and momentarily people were freed from their cages--only to be subjected to new forms of oppression and enclosures. The lesson history teaches us is that oppression will keep repeating itself unless the story is told--the story itself must fly free.

②

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF
"THE O! OF GRIEF"

The ring is a concrete parenthesis. It is an area of privileged space inside which the rules of the game exert an absolute dominance, and are the only things that -- for the duration of the game -- are true. Into this ring, plummet harsh parallels of very white light. This light has the peculiar, theatrical quality of making bare flesh, however increasingly bedabbled with real sweat, or even blood, look like a costume. This light clothes the wrestlers (Carter "Giants' Playtime" 332-333).

Elaine Showalter's hypothetical model of an evolutionary female literary tradition needs "to be understood as a historically specific strategy rather than a dogmatic absolute" (xvii). Nonetheless, the original publication of *A Literature of Their Own* coincided with the rise and dominance of European theoretical models within the realms of academia and literary criticism. As a result, many feminist critics perceived her work as putting forth dogmatic absolutes and took her to task for her apparent "theoretical naiveté and stubborn American pragmatism" (xvii-xviii).¹⁵

Though she defends her analysis of writing by women, Showalter does state that if writing the book today she would certainly broaden her focus of

¹⁵ In her introduction to the revised edition of *Literature*, Showalter states that criticism of her work came from feminist critics such as Patricia Waugh, Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn. However, Showalter takes to task the most substantial attack on her work, which came from Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (xvii-xix). According to Showalter, for Moi, the "poststructuralist theory of French feminism in general, and of Julia Kristeva in particular, is the most sophisticated and far-reaching form of feminist literary analysis" (xix). Showalter admits that at the time of her publication (1974) she had "not read or even heard of Cixous, Irigaray, or Kristeva," who were virtually unknown in North America until the 1980 publication of *New French Feminisms*. For Showalter, the difference between the two critical camps is one of focus: for Moi the most important theoretical questions are philosophical and for Showalter the main questions are historical and cultural. It is not my intent here to join the Anglo-American VS French feminism debate. However, the debate does aptly illustrate the reality that feminism is not a monolithic structure. There is a plurality of perspectives housed under the feminism umbrella. Moreover, the debate highlights the reality that attempting to define what is feminist writing or feminist criticism immediately places one on very rocky terrain.

gynocriticism (as she named the study of women's writing) (xx). In the original introduction Showalter writes that "in the atlas of the English novel, women's territory is usually depicted as desert" (320). Twenty-five years later she adds that at the end of the twentieth century, "the success of British feminist publishers and the explosion of work from British and American feminist critics, literary historians, journalists, and biographers has filled in many of the blank spaces in the map of women's writing" (320). Thus, just as the "heroine of a New Woman novel in the 1890s was likely to be an artist or writer, the heroine of a New British Woman novel in the 1990s is likely to be a feminist literary critic" (321).

As Janet Lee states, the term "new woman" seems to reappear with nearly every generation -- it extends "from the 'new woman' of the late nineteenth century, who so shocked society with her 'independence', to that of the present day, who so preoccupies the theorists of 'post-feminism'" (168). Regardless of the era, the representations of the "new woman" are inextricably connected with the politics of identity. As Lee states, the "techniques change, but essentially what's happening is that women are being sold a variety of subject positions along with their new clothes and contraceptives. The self is being sold..." (168). So, though Fevvers' will claim that she has no time "for literary criticism" (244), the act of critically investigating society's sales pitch is a necessary act of survival for the new woman of her century (and ours).

And Showalter's literary study of the "evolution" from feminine to feminist writing, because it does identify and illuminate texts by women, is a necessary act of survival for literary criticism in general and feminist literary criticism in particular. In her hypothetical model of women's

writing, Showalter classifies the Feminist phase as the period from "1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote" (13). This phase is characterized as a period of "protest against [the dominant] standards and values, and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy"(13). The Feminist phase begins with the death of George Eliot and the appearance of a new generation of women writers. According to Showalter, these writers challenged many of the restrictions "on women's self expression...and constructed a theoretical model of female oppression...[T]hey demanded changes in the social and political systems" (29). Moreover, the "profound sense of injustice that the feminine novelists had represented as class struggles...becomes an all-out war of the sexes in the novels of the feminist" (29).¹⁶

Furthermore, according to Showalter, contemporary feminist writing is characterized as self-reflexive, no longer restricted to the social and domestic, and less insular in setting and consistency of style (320-322). Moreover, she claims that today's feminist authors have "joined the mainstream as postmodern innovators, politically engaged observers, and limitless storytellers" (323). For her, Angela Carter's work greatly influenced this transformation to feminist writing. As well, she speculates that Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* anticipated the "rise of French feminism" as it draws on the work of "Barthes, Foucault, Bataille, Breton, and Lacan, and most significantly, on Simone de Beauvoir's 'Must We Burn Sade?'"(327).

However, this praise should not suggest that Carter's brand of feminism is celebrated by all feminist writers. In order to establish Carter's position

¹⁶ See my Chapter Three for a discussion of the expectations/implications of Victorian sexual stereotypes which provide the ammunition for this 'war of the sexes.'

in regards to this phase of women's writing labelled the "Feminist," one should look briefly at the debate surrounding the work of and response to the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814). For Andrea Dworkin, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Simone de Beauvoir's critique of Sade is indicative of the philosophical and literary essays about his life and work. For Dworkin, this type of theoretical critique obliterates the reality of women's lived experiences: it makes the "crime and the victims nearly invisible....The victims of Sade's sexual terrorism are less important than 'philosophical disquisitions'" (81-82). She is clear in her assertion that pornography can never be just theoretical: "pornography is the orchestrated destruction of women's bodies and souls: rape, battery, incest and prostitution animate it; dehumanization and sadism characterize it; it is war on women, serial assaults on dignity, identity, and human worth; it is tyranny...pornography is captivity--the woman trapped in the picture used on the woman trapped wherever he's got her" (xxvii).

Dworkin particularly criticizes writers such as de Beauvoir, Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, and Angela Carter for "callously" robbing women of real life in order "to sustain Sade's legend in pretty, if meaningless, prose" (81-84). Speaking specifically of Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*, which Dworkin does not name by title, she states that such literary essays are "pseudofeminist" (86). For Dworkin, this essay places Carter in the "realm of literary affectation hereto reserved for the boys" (84-85).

However, writing from the opposite end of the spectrum, Showalter states that *The Sadeian Woman* "startled and offended feminist readers who regarded pornography as the theory, and rape as the practice" (328). She regards Carter's essay as a combination of "scholarly exegesis, postmodernist

theorizing, and analysis of popular culture" (327).¹⁷ For Carter, pornography, in the hands of a moral pornographer, can be of service to women:

A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of the true obscenity as he describes it (*SW* 19-20).

This "penetration" of the philosophies and politics which oppress and denigrate women cannot be done from a position that is outside. The verb 'to penetrate' implies that one must enter the very realm one is attempting to deconstruct. If the structures that oppress women's lives exist because of traditional theoretical precepts, then one will need to use theoretical tools to undo the cage of theory which confines and restricts--only then will the reality of lived experiences be set free.

And certainly Carter does use feminist theory to penetrate our cultural constructions in order to reveal reality. That "this reality may be very unpleasant indeed, a world away from official reality," is perhaps, in part, why Carter's earlier works did not penetrate into the literary mainstream;

¹⁷ Dworkin's stance on the issue puts her firmly in the camp of radical feminism (pornography-as-violence). Carter's stance (pornography-as-representation) places her within a second feminist critique which argues that the "pornographic gaze which objectifies and fragments women and their bodies is as much a part of the wider contemporary culture as of sexually explicit pornography, so that the same political critique should apply to both" (Andermahr 166). As Andermahr notes, a third feminist position has emerged which actively defends pornography as a source of sexual pleasure for women. For a brief outline of this debate see Andermahr (165-167).

their often graphic, harsh, violent portrayal of the reality of relations between the sexes kept them firmly on the margins of academia (*SW* 20).

Nonetheless, it would seem that Angela Carter was finally moved into the literary mainstream with the publication of *Nights at the Circus*. For many critics, this novel demonstrates "Carter's extraordinary capacity to tap into crucial critical debates relevant to feminism and cultural politics, long before these debates had been fully staged" (Kennan 132). However, the novel is also playful, exuberant, and celebratory as much as it is theoretical, critical and denunciatory. Whether Carter had preempted the focus of critical inquiry is perhaps open to debate. However, less doubtful is the fact that with the interest in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* has come a surge of interest in the carnivalesque--and Carter's circus is the site *par excellence* of the philosophy of 'inside-out'. Though one could certainly argue that this novel resonates with carnival laughter, it is Carter's second chapter, "Petersburg," and its detailed portrayal of the circus and its inhabitants which specifically points to Bakhtin and the theory of the carnivalesque.

In my own second chapter, I discuss Carter's analysis of the carnival and the carnivalesque and show that in her critique of society and social relations she adheres to Bakhtin's portrayal of the Romantic grotesque rather than to his description of the medieval carnival which is described as both liberating and emancipatory.

In juxtaposition to the analysis of the carnivalesque, this chapter also includes an examination of Carter's discussion of the panopticon, which appears in her third chapter, "Siberia." Again, one could certainly argue that the image of the panopticon--a space which contains the marginalized--appears

throughout the novel.¹⁸ The whorehouse, the freak show, the circus, and the prison are distinct arenas in which society will contain and control the marginalized (prostitutes, clowns, the disenfranchised, the poor). However, because Carter's portrayal of the female prison most obviously invokes Michel Foucault's theoretical critique of power, I have addressed it in the context of her theoretical discussion of the circus.

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of Bakhtin's distinction between the Medieval and Romantic interpretations of carnival and move to an analysis of Carter's interpretation and portrayal of the carnivalesque. This discussion of Carter's critique begins with an analysis of both the literal and metaphorical function of the circus as an enclosure and moves to an analysis of the figurative function and literal reality of the inhabitants of this enclosure.

My discussion of the panopticon begins with the disintegration of the circus and the creation of the prison. Beginning with a brief overview of Foucault's analysis of power in modern society, the discussion moves to an analysis of Carter's own critique of the power of modern society to oppress not just women, but all whom official society will deem necessary yet dangerous. Official society will safely contain these inhabitants so that, ironically, they are both simultaneously inside and outside official society: they are "inside" because they are contained within sanctioned enclosures, yet also "outside" because they are removed from the mainstream and seemingly imprisoned within these enclosures on the margins.

For all their dissimilarity, there is a great deal of common ground

¹⁸ Indeed, Joanne M. Gass, in "Panopticism in *Nights at the Circus*," argues that the panopticon is the "novel's dominant image" (71). For her, the literal Siberian prison provides a "model of observation that controls the novel as a whole" (72).

amongst Carter's critique of enclosures, Bakhtin's critique of the carnival, and Foucault's critique of society and power. In reality, all three analyze and criticize modern society's methods for controlling and containing the dissenting body, and they delineate the means by which the dominant will oppress the powerless and therefore the subordinate.¹⁹

However, Carter often blurs the boundaries of these theoretical perspectives to create her own critical discursive space. Within the discourses of both Bakhtin and Foucault she specifically inserts the ideology of gender in the form of the female body. In so doing, Carter's feminist critique in its fictionalized form constitutes "a kind of carnival space. The practice of criticism informed by this theory has taken a great license stylistically, and in its posing posed a threat of sorts" (Russo 221). According to Russo, feminist writing is permeated with "performances of displacement, double displacements, and more," in attempts to "survive or muscle in on the discourses" of male-dominated mainstream master narratives and theories (221). Thus, in Showalter's terms, though Carter, Bakhtin, and Foucault protest against the standards and values of official culture, they necessarily traverse different terrain in order to do so.

As the carnival ground dominates Carter's second chapter, it is helpful to begin with an overall map of this territory. Mikhail Bakhtin's terrain is the historical carnival ground of early modern Europe. The term "carnavalesque" derives from his account of the carnival in his study of Rabelais in *Rabelais and His World* (1965). For Bakhtin, Rabelais is "not only a great writer in the usual sense of the word but also a sage and a

¹⁹ It must be noted that it is not necessarily Bakhtin's intent in *Rabelais and his World*, to specifically critique political structures. Rather, it is our contemporary theorists who use the theories of Bakhtin and the insights of Rabelais to inform their own critiques.

prophet...who influenced the fate of world literature" (1-2).

A dominant characteristic of his writing, one that Carter would no doubt truly celebrate, is his nonconformity to the dominant literary norms and canons of his time: "No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook" (2).

In Bakhtin's description, medieval carnivals were distinct from "serious official ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world [in] which all medieval people participated...during a given time of the year" (Bakhtin 6). During carnival, life is subject "only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part" (Bakhtin 7).

Even a brief foray through Carter's theoretical terrain should warn the reader that she will oppose all that is deemed universal, for in her words, the "notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick" (SW 12). For Carter, universals enclose women within "mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother" (SW 5). Moreover, because these mythic images are "conciliatory nonsenses," any emotional satisfaction they provide is done "at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life[;] they merely dull the

pain of particular circumstances" (SW 5).

Therefore, Carter is intent on highlighting the often harsh reality of life and the particular circumstances which oppress the marginalized. Thus, in *Nights at the Circus*, carnival is not a celebratory feast that occurs during certain times of the year. The inhabitants *are* the "moveable feast" (NC 100). As such, if the spectacles are literally the feast, then like the Countess in her ill-conceived doughnut-shaped panopticon, they exist to be consumed by and within the structure in which they perform. Moreover, for the inhabitants of the circus there is no sense of renewal, revival, or rebirth; they are trapped within a world that is permanently upside down. For these inhabitants, there is no life outside of the carnival.

Carter's circus is not a world of regeneration and renewal, but rather, the realm of despair and pain glossed over with the illusion of hope and laughter. Clearly, in her description of the structure of the circus and its inhabitants, we are not in the landscape of the carnivalesque in its "pure" state. For Carter, any idea that the circus can offer a hope of regeneration is illusory because non-existent in modern society. In *Nights at the Circus*, we enter the world of Romantic grotesque, "a terrifying world, alien to man" (Bakhtin 38). Where the medieval grotesque was related to folk culture and "thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private 'chamber' character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation" (36).

In the medieval carnival, because it belonged to all the people, there was no distinction between actors and spectators: "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of

footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very ideas embrace all the people" (Bakhtin 7). For Carter, in the circus of the twentieth century, existing within the conventions of the Romantic grotesque, there *is* a distinction between actor and spectator. For all those who watch, the actors are the spectacles--despite the *absence* of footlights, even Buffo's very real descent into madness is greeted with laughter and applause because it is deemed part of the spectacle--as not real.

As Carter's quotation in the epigraph states, despite the existence of footlights, the very real is perceived as illusion: "This light has the peculiar, theatrical quality of making bare flesh, however increasingly bedabbled with real sweat, or even blood, look like a costume." In her description of the literal structure of the circus, Carter appropriates Bakhtin's theory, but the description of the concrete structure seems to adhere to Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of theatricality.

The purpose of the invocation of Lyotard's theory is to reinforce Carter's assertion that our perception of reality is based on illusion. Specifically, Carter is concerned with Lyotard's concept of representation. He thematises the problem of representing reality as a problem of theatricality. For Lyotard, the literal structure of the theatre is a metaphor for the difficulty of representing history, of representing the reality of lived experiences. Thus, according to Lyotard, "[t]he historian is supposed to undo all the machinery and machination, and restore what was excluded, having knocked down the walls of the theatre" (qtd. in Bennington 10). As the chronicler of the enclosures which oppress the marginalized, Carter does indeed knock down the walls of the theatre. However, though Carter does

implicitly invoke Lyotard's theories to reinforce her own concept of representation, it is her appropriation of Bakhtin's theories which is most apparent in *Nights at the Circus* and the most relevant to an analysis of the novel.²⁰

As Pam Norris illustrates, appropriation is a key concept for Bakhtin. He sees individual words "as well as whole texts as sites of dialogic²¹ or intertextual conflict, where various social sections--classes, genders, age, ethnic and professional groups--struggle to inscribe their way of seeing things, and their meaning, on language. Words therefore can have no unitary definition; each is a microcosmic dialogue of all the sectional voices echoing within it" (156). Norris continues with the assertion that one of the most "triumphant examples of a woman writer's dialogic engagement with male literary language is Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, a brilliant tapestry of parodied snatches from every conceivable form of novel: Dickensian eccentricity and comedy, Zolaesque realism, hard-boiled American detective fiction, travel narrative, popular sentiment and romance" (156). Certainly, Carter is not hesitant about her practice of parody and dialogism, and her

²⁰ Perhaps best known as the author of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard critiques the production and condition of knowledge in modern society. He not only vehemently criticizes structuralism in all of its forms, in the name of a 'libidinal economy,' he also, as does Carter, works to dispel the myth of universal ideas. As Bennington notes, however, it would be a 'gross mistake to assume that because Lyotard is engaged in questioning unities and totalities, he is necessarily promoting some form of individualism. If it is true that totality is a negatively marked term in his thought, the corresponding positive term is, rather, *singularity*. A singularity is not so much an individual as an *event* (9). Carter, too, is concerned with the concepts of singularity--see my discussion in Chapter Three of Fevvers' transformation and her fear that she will be perceived as a singularity and not an autonomous individual.

²¹ "Clearly linked to the term 'dialogue', the concept derives from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and refers to the inherently social character of language. Bakhtin (1981) argues that all linguistic utterances, far from being neutral, carry the traces of social interaction and negotiation. Words are always second-hand and, in engaging in dialogue, individuals struggle to wrest language from its former owners and imbue it with their own usage. Dialogism applies to literary as well as conversational and interactive forms of discourse" (Andermahr 49).

adaptation and appropriation of canonical texts is well noted by critics. So too, in fact, is her utilization of work by male theorists. However, as noted previously, the critic of Carter must look below the surface of her apparent intertextuality. Certainly, Carter is both celebrated and criticized for her use of masculine theoretical discourse. However, as Carter's adaptation and appropriation of Bakhtin and Lyotard demonstrates, she transforms the theories (masculine or feminist) for her own purposes.

Though Carter's description of the physical structure of her circus presents a grand facade that announces the spectator's entrance to the world of illusion, the physical environment of the spectacles presents the reality of this "forlorn place" (106). The performers pass through a "modest wicket gate" into a courtyard empty but for a "smashed bottle, a rusting can; a pump dripped water which froze as it hit the ground" (106). From this forlorn courtyard Walser "[ducks] down the tunnel" which empties into the ring (107).²² Certainly there is no ceremony to mark the entrance into a magic world.

Conversely, however, the magic of the illusion continues for the spectator. Once the "paying customer successfully negotiated the ticket window, one left one's furs in a cloakroom that, during performance, became a treasury of skins of sable, fox and precious little rats, as though there one left behind the skin of one's own beastliness so as not to embarrass the beasts within" (105). Though the spectator can symbolically leave his beastliness at the door, the spectacle must enter through the same tunnel as

²²The depiction of the carnival/circus as a forlorn and desperate place is reiterated in her short story, "The Loves Of Lady Purple." Here, as the marionette escapes her prison, the fairground is described: "Now it was so late that the sideshows, gingerbread stalls and liquor booths were locked and shuttered and only the moon, half by drifting cloud, gave out a meagre, dirty light, which sullied and deformed the flimsy pasteboard facades, so the place, deserted with curds of vomit, the refuse of revelry, underfoot, looked utterly desolate" (266).

the animals. The main auditorium door is for the paying customer; when this exit is closed from the outside by the Strong Man, Walser realizes that the inside becomes "a perfect death trap" (112).

The reality of this perfect death trap, despite the fact that all appears "elegant, even sumptuous" (105), is that it is a "rather queasy luxury, that always seemed to have grime under its fingernails" (NC 105). As well, the "aroma of horse dung and lion piss permeated every inch of the building's fabric, so that the titillating contradiction between the soft, white shoulders of the lovely ladies whom young army officers escorted there and the hairy pelts of the beasts in the ring resolved in the night-time intermingling of French perfume and the essence of steppe and jungle in which musk and civet revealed themselves as common elements" (NC 105). Here, Carter highlights the contradiction between the illusion and the reality represented by this structure, "constructed to house permanent displays of the triumphs of man's will over gravity and over rationality" (NC 105). In so doing, she also intentionally blurs the boundaries between humanity and beastliness.

The reality of Carter's carnival demonstrates that within the grand facade, human behaviour is far more brutish and beastly than the behaviour of the menagerie of animals. This reality is made apparent with the description of Monsieur Lamarck, his chimps, and their trainer, Mignon. Monsieur Lamark is portrayed as a "feckless drunkard" (107) who leaves his chimps in the care of an uninterested keeper whom he regularly beats "as though she were a carpet" (115). In contrast, the chimps are described as well dressed, intelligent, and eager students (107). The contrast between animal and human becomes sharper as Carter juxtaposes the chimps' anatomy lesson with the sexual activity of the "Ape-Man's woman" and "Samson the Strong Man" (109).

It is no wonder that Walser, like Shakespeare's Hamlet whom he quotes (111), struggles with the "uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (110). For, while the chimps, under the tutelage of the Professor, attempt to analyze human anatomy with Walser as the guinea pig, the copulating couple, in a "torrent of brutish shrieks," are far more animal-like than the chimps (111). In a final irony, the couple make no attempt to hide their sexual activity--which is portrayed as devoid of the distinctly human qualities of love and emotion. In contradistinction, the chimps attempt to hide their distinctly human quality of intelligence, and revert back to performing their "'apes at school' number" with a "desultory, mechanical air, longing, perhaps, to be back at their studies" (108).

Between the "rhythmic grunts of the copulators" (110) and Walser's "intimate exchange with one of these beings whose life ran parallel to his" (108), it is quite clear that the reader is navigating the terrifying, alien, and forlorn carnival ground of the Romantic grotesque. And as Bakhtin notes, images of bodily life, such as copulation, lose their regenerating power and are "turned into 'vulgarity'" (39). However, it is the principle of laughter which clearly illustrates the transformation of Romantic grotesque. Laughter is no longer joyful; it is "cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm...Its positive regenerating power [is] reduced to a minimum" (Bakhtin 38).

A corollary to the disappearance of the regenerating power of laughter is the transformation of the theme and image of the mask. In carnival in its pure form, the mask is "connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and the merry negation of uniformity and similarity" (39). In Romantic grotesque, the "mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and

renewing element and acquires a somber hue" (40). As representatives *par excellence* of the gay relativity and merry negation associated with the carnival, the clowns aptly demonstrate the forlorn and pathetic existence that is the reality of the circus inhabitant.

In reality, the world of the carnival, like the world which contains it, is based on a rigid hierarchy of power and class. The clowns, the "whores of mirth" (119), are relegated to the bottom rung in carnival society and to the margins of the larger society. Housed in the lowest part of the city, in "Clown Alley, the generic name of all lodgings of all clowns,...where reigned the lugubrious atmosphere of a prison or a mad house" (NC 116), they come into contact with other circus spectacles only "upon the brick barracks of the Imperial Circus" (NC 104). In contrast, the privileged performer Fevvers has seen "swans of ice with a thick encrustation of caviare between the wings; she has seen cut-glass and diamonds; she has seen all the luxurious, bright, transparent things, that make her blue eyes cross with greed" (NC 104). Walser on the other hand, must "skulk along the back ways, along stinking alleys hung with washing, past gloomy doors of stark tenements. Of this most beautiful of cities, Walser, as it turns out, has, in reality, seen only the beastly backside--a yellow light in a chemist's window; two-noseless women under a streetlamp; a drunk rolled under a doorway in a pool of vomit...In a scummed canal, ice in the pelt of the dead dog floating there" (NC 103-104).

However, this forced isolation and confinement does not breed a sense of brotherhood. Amongst themselves, the clowns "distilled the same kind of mutilated patience one finds amongst the inmates of closed institutions, a willed and terrible suspension of being" (116). However, in contrast to the prisoners of the panopticon, the prostitutes of the brothel and the freaks of

the "museum of woman monsters," the men of clown alley resign themselves to "mugged pain, resentment, despair, agony, death," to the hell of their existence (NC 123). In the "dance of the buffoons"(123), they are far more beastly, obscene and violent than any animal of the circus. They represent the worst of human nature:

A joey thrust the vodka bottle up the arsehole of an august; the august, in response, promptly dropped his tramp's trousers to reveal a virile member of priapic size, bright purple in colour and spotted with yellow stars dangling two cerise balloons from the fly. At that, a second august, with an evil leer, took a great pair of shears out of his back pocket and sliced the horrid thing off but as soon as he was brandishing it in triumph above his head another lurid phallus appeared...(124).

Despite the different responses of the clowns and whores to their marginalized positions, Buffo describes their predicaments as being alike. For like the whore, "we know what we are; we know we are mere hirelings hard at work and yet those who hire us see us as beings perpetually at play. Our work is their pleasure and so they think our work must be our pleasure, so there is always an abyss between their notion of our work as play, and ours, of their leisure as our labour" (NC 119). Moreover, where Fevvers adamantly proclaims that the prostitute has a soul like us all, Buffo proclaims that the clowns "are the sons of men" (120).

Certainly, the parallel description of prostitute and clown is not accidental. The clowns, like the other spectacles--the cast of women and freaks--"are produced as powerless within the terms of a dominant culture that engender the object of the gaze as feminine; but they also produce themselves

as social subjects, agents who turn the gaze on themselves and on their position in relation to that dominant culture" (Robinson 118). In part, in order to act as active agents, they perform a masquerade. Fevvers will flaunt femininity, by creating an "excess of femininity" (Doane 81). According to Doane, the masquerade, "in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic....Masquerade is a strategy for self-representation that disrupts the very thing that it apparently inscribes: the reduction of women to a normative representation of Woman" (qtd in Robinson 119-121).

The clowns, too, use masquerade as a strategy for self-representation. According to Buffo the one thing which makes his outcast status bearable is that he can invent his own face; he can make himself. However, this "rare privilege" is ultimately a death sentence. For once the clown determines his unique face, his "fingerprint of authentic dissimilarity," he is condemned to remain such forever (122). Without his mask he is merely a "not-Buffo, an absence. A vacancy" (122). This negation clearly adheres to the theme of the mask in Romantic grotesque: it is a "terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it" (Bakhtin 40). Clearly, then, unlike the brothel for the prostitute, the circus for the clown is not a transitory state. For the clown there is no option of returning to society. Once a man transforms into a clown he is forever doomed.

As well, unlike the fish imagery associated with Fevvers, the fish imagery here does not signify a transformation to autonomy. The fish of which Buffo speaks are "fish that will rise up out of the profundity when they spot

the one who anxiously scrutinises his own reflection for the face it lacks, *man-eating* fish waiting to gobble up your being and give you another instead" (NC 122).

Buffo is detached from his face, his self, and his pleasure. Depicted in this light, he is as much an echo of Sade as he is of Bakhtin. As Keenan notes, the "figure of the circus clown, Buffo, whose mask is described as a 'fingerprint of authentic dissimilarity, a genuine expression of [his] own autonomy': is perhaps an avatar of the libertine in his ultimate Sadeian form, Sovereign Man, splendid in his isolation, detached even from his own pleasure" (133). However, "Buffo the Great, the Clown of Clowns" (NC 117), is also, perhaps, the finest representative of the demonic and annihilating aspects of the Romantic grotesque. Not only does his mask represent the nothingness of this alien world, but also his physical materiality, his parody of divinity, and his descent into madness all adhere to the conventions of the grotesque. That he is "seven feet high and broad to suit" (NC 116) ensures that Buffo adheres to the material bodily principle as outlined by Bakhtin (18-19). His insistence that the "clown is the very image of Christ" (119), and that he "takes up his Christ's place at the table" (117), ensures that he conforms to the Romantic adaptation of the medieval derision of divinity: we have the image of the "sardonic laughter in church of a lonely eccentric" (Bakhtin 41).

However, it is his descent into madness that truly exemplifies the pathetic despair which "is the constant companion of the Clown" (NC 119). According to Bakhtin,

the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms,
because madness makes men look at the world with different
eyes, not dimmed by 'normal,' that is by commonplace ideas

and judgements. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of 'official truth.' It is a 'festive' madness. In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation. (Bakhtin 39)

Certainly, Buffo's final exit from the circus, in the coffin of his madness from which there is no escape, is portrayed as tragic and somber (NC 178). The "semi-conscious, fearfully hallucinating" (178) Buffo, in a "fitting climax to [his] career, chases and attempts to kill Walser, the "Human Chicken" (177). Perhaps the final irony is that Buffo is allowed to leave the circus (and thus, vanish "from the face of the earth"), for the first and only time, "by the front entrance" (NC 178).

With these images of the circus in general and with the images of Buffo in particular, one is left with little doubt that for Carter the theory of carnivalesque has little to offer the marginalized and the oppressed. As well, Carter well understood the carnival pleasure of the text not as an ideal openness, but as having necessary limits:

It's interesting that Bakhtin became very fashionable in the 1980s, during the demise of the particular kind of theory that would have put all kinds of questions around the whole idea of the carnivalesque. I'm thinking about Marcuse and repressive desublimation, which tells you exactly what carnivals are for. The carnival has to stop. The whole point of the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped. (qtd. in Sage AC 43)

The world of the circus does stop and is literally torn "apart in

a multitude of fragments," and immediately ceases to exist (NC 204). Once the train containing the circus is literally derailed, all illusion of magic and fantasy are discarded, and "ripped open like the wrappings of a Christmas toy by an impatient child" (NC 205). In their place is the harsh reality of "twisted metal, so many screams and cries [and] pile upon pile of broken shards of mirror" (204-205).

The pathetic image of the dying elephants is both ironic and cautionary: "For, poor things, it turns out this very moment should be the fated moment, the moment of destiny, when indeed their chains all parted and they were free! Yet free for what? They achieve their longed-for liberty at just the moment when it won't do them any good" (NC 207). As Carter suggests, "the jumbos [are] a lesson to us all," for surely they serve as a rather grisly warning to all those who choose not to throw off their "mind forg'd manacles" (NC 284). The clowns of the circus fare little better than the animals of the circus.

Though they survive the train crash, the clowns do not survive the barren wilderness of Siberia. The clowns literally disappear in a storm as though they "had been blown off the face of the earth" (NC 243). However, this disappearance is foreshadowed by and is perhaps the inevitable consequence of their "dance of death" and its representation of "disintegration, disaster, chaos" (NC 242). According to Michael, Carter's emphasis on chaos and disintegration in some of the clown scenes "veers away from either a criticism of the dominant system or an offering of new possibilities. At those points where a movement toward unrestrained deconstruction and chaos surfaces, the narrative severs its connection to the novel's feminist reconstructive aims" (197).

However, since they are representatives of the circus and the

carnavalesque, it is perhaps only fitting that they are "blown off the face of the earth" (NC 243). Though Michael determines that their total destruction does not adhere to feminist reconstructive aims, one could argue, as Carter does, that the circus and all it represents must be destroyed in order to further those goals. As Carter states, if it is only temporarily stopped, things will go on as they did before. Left to exist, the clowns are "trapped in the circles of hell" (NC 243). During the "dance of death," they invoke all that is negative: "the whirling apart of everything, the end of love, the end of hope" (NC 242-243)-- they make an "invocation to chaos and chaos, always immanent in human affairs, came in on cue" (244). As Lizzie sardonically states, "'Good riddance to bad rubbish'"-- for feminism is not just in the business of reconstruction, but it is also in the business of construction (NC 244). Once the clowns and the storm have blown away, "the freshly fallen snow made all as new" (NC 243). Once the theory of the carnivalesque and its representatives, the clowns, are destroyed, the "survivors" are left with "a bundle of blank paper" (252) upon which they can "set boldly forth and rescue themselves" (244).

In this final section of the novel, "Siberia," both the clowns and the female prisoners finally break free of their enclosures. However, in contradistinction to the final exit of the clowns and their "bitter laugh...of those trapped in the circles of hell" (NC 243) is the final sight of the escapees from the pantopticon, "set off hand in hand" and singing for joy (NC 218).

Ma Nelson's brothel is a place of confinement with figurative bars, and its function as a haven from the outside world is only temporary. The museum controlled by Madame Schreck literally imprisons women, and Schreck makes no

attempt at illusions; it is the inevitable dark underside of Ma Neslon's ship of 'sisterhood.' In the penitentiary conceived and administered by the Countess P., each prisoner is isolated within a cell, and the only means of escape is penitence for the crime of murdering her husband. However, according to Carter, there are many reasons, "most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband; homicide might be the only way for her to preserve a shred of dignity at a time, in a place, where women were deemed chattels, or in the famous analogy of Tolstoy, were treated 'like wine bottles that might conveniently be smashed when their contents were consumed'" (NC 210-211).

Seen in this light, the prisoners of the panopticon are as much victims of an unjust society as are the prostitutes of Ma Nelson's, the freaks at Madame Schreck's, and the clowns of the circus.²³ Ma Neslon seems to recognize this fact and does at least attempt to create a sense of family and sisterhood. Madame Schreck, on the other hand, uses the 'freak's' marginalized status for her own monetary gain. The Countess P. uses the women, not for monetary gain, but for her own salvation: she believes that "by their salvation, strenuously achieved through meditation on the crime they had committed, they would have procured hers" (NC 212). Perhaps this is the reason why Carter demands such cruel retribution for the Countess: Ma Nelson dies in an accident, Schreck disintegrates, but the Countess must suffer for her crimes for the duration of her existence.

The manner of death would seem to illustrate the degree of guilt to which Carter assigns each for her collusion with the system of patriarchy. The

²³ Ma Neslon is also described by Fevvers as a victim of an unjust society. As Fevvers' states, it is "the irony of fate" that the very "stern and stony-hearted elder brother who cast her from his hearth when as a girl she first slipped, and so ensured her ruin," was "by due process of the law," legally "entitled to "begger her posthumously" (NC 44).

description of the death of Ma Nelson is a blending of the comic with the tragic. In true burlesque fashion, Ma Nelson slips on the proverbial banana peel (or was it "dog turd"?)(*NC* 43). Though Schreck disintegrates, it is doubtful she was ever truly alive. As Toussaint notes, "It came to me that there was nothing left inside the clothes and, perhaps, there never had been anything inside her clothes but a set of dry bones agitated only by the power of an infernal will and a voice that had been no more than the artificial exhalation of air from a bladder or a sac, that she was, or had become, a sort of scarecrow of desire" (*NC* 85). It would seem that her role as "the old procuress" of women ensured her an existence of a death in life.

However, the Countess, not a "mother" offering temporary sanctuary, nor merely a procuress of women, is punished for the "crime" of imprisoning the female convicts (*NC* 210). Carter's description of the panopticon clearly demonstrates the consequences for any woman who attempts to participate in the systemic oppression of other women. The Countess, however, veils her complicity with the oppressor by insisting that her intent is to become a "kind of conduit for the means of the repentance of the other murderesses" (210). However, the "possibility of salvation" is offered only to those select few determined salvagable by a phrenologist. Ironically, this dispenser of "science" commits these women to an "institution for the criminally insane" (240).

Clearly, it is the Countess who is the insane murderess, for she is free because of her class and her privilege: "she suffered sufficient leisure to be bored; her husband's wealth provoked her greed" (211). The Countess, "pricked" by her conscience, will have a "low peasant" such as Olga Alexandrovna, repent and take responsibility not for her own crime (she "took a hatchet to the

drunken carpenter who hit her around once too often"), but for the Countess' own crimes of "boredom and "avarice" (215).

According to Carter, "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of their own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder" (SW 27). Though Carter is speaking literally here, the Countess P. does attempt metaphorically to kill off these women. In exchange for their freedom they would need to deny the reality of their own lives: they would need to deny the existence of the violence perpetrated against them; they would need to accept society's view that they are useless "chattel," there for the consumption of official society. However, these women cannot accept responsibility for the crime of an unjust society. As Olga Alexandrovna contemplates "her" crime she remembers "childhood in the tenement. Her weary mother stooped with toil, marriage, birth of the son she would never see again, the way her husband repeated with relish old Russian proverbs in praise of wife-beating, how she pawned her wedding ring to buy the food only to have him rob her of the cash for drink-- blame it on vodka! Blame the priest who married them! Blame the stick that beat her and the old saws that helped to shape it!" (NC 214-215). Ultimately, for Carter, these women cannot be free until they exonerate themselves; until they refuse to see themselves in the mirror held up to them by society. It is not until Olga learns to say "don't blame me" that the stage is set for the destruction of the cage, for her escape, and for her flight to freedom (NC 215).

The structure/cage built to house the murderesses is described in terms that *directly seem* to paraphrase Jeremy Bentham's plan for the "panopticon as

the paradigm of a disciplinary technology" (Rabinow 18). In particular, Carter appropriates Michel Foucault's analysis of this apparatus. For Foucault, the panopticon is a "generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men...[I]t is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form...it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (qtd. in Rabinow 18).

As Rabinow notes, Foucault's analysis of the panopticon serves as "a shorthand for the other technologies that he analyzes" (18). In *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, for example, Foucault scathingly critiques modern society. He argues that an unprecedented discipline directed against the body is a result of the rise of parliamentary institutions and of new conceptions of political liberty. As a result, "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138). These "docile bodies" are as much fodder for consumption by society as is the Countess P. and the female prisoners. In her own conscious critique of her culture, Carter appropriates not just Bentham's panopticon, but also Foucault's analysis of the structure.

As Lois McNay notes, Foucault's theory of power and the body allows for an analysis of women's oppression that does not collapse back into essentialism or biologism (11). Foucault's idea that sexuality is not "an innate or natural quality of the body, but rather the effect of historically specific power relations, has provided feminists with a useful analytical framework to explain how women's experience is impoverished and controlled within certain culturally determined images of feminine sexuality" (McNay 3). However, feminist authors, though embracing much of Foucault's theory, do stop

short of performing celebratory sommersualts; for in Kolodony's terms there are certainly landmines within his theoretical landscape.

Foremost, the critical landmines centre on the "difficulties of assimilating a primarily philosophical form of critique into feminist theory which is rooted in the demands of an emancipatory politics" (McNay 3).

Primarily, Foucault does not address the individual and how one may act in an autonomous fashion. As McNay notes, the emphasis which Foucault places on the "effects of power upon the body results in a reduction of social agents to passive bodies" (3). Furthermore, sexual difference simply "does not play a role in the Foucauldian universe, where the technology of subjectivity refers to a desexualized and general "human" subject" (McNay 11). However, Carter will subvert what McNay refers to as a "gender-neutral social theory" by planting a few landmines of her own; in so doing, she "un-desexualizes" the theory by placing sexual difference at centre stage. In Foucault's theory of power and control, the subjects -- the guard (victimizer) and the prisoner (victim) are invariably sexed male. However, in Carter's revisoning of Foucault's analysis of Bentham's theory, there are striking differences when the subjects -- both the victimizer and the victim -- are sexed female.²⁴

The subtle yet deadly alterations to Foucault's analysis creates a different paradigm for the representation of the female body. Foremost, the panopticon of the Countess is bound to fail because of the reason for the laying of its foundation. For the Countess, the panopticon is "a machine designed to promote penitence" (NC 212). For Foucault, the panopticon

²⁴ Foucault does not address Bentham's digression into sexual difference. As Robinow notes, "Bentham suggests, apparently without humor, that the panopticon would be an extremely effective arrangement for a harem, since it would cut down the number of eunuchs necessary to watch women in the cells" (19).

represents an objectification of the subject in a mechanics of power. The purpose of the mechanism is not to pass judgement and it does not follow any particular program. It aims "to be a tool for distributing individuals in space, for ordering them in a visible space" (qtd. in Rabinow 20).

In contradistinction, for the Countess, the panopticon is indeed a form of judgement based on a particular program--her salvation. The structure, "her private prison," is not "intended as the domain of punishment but, in the purest sense, a penitentiary--it as a machine designed to promote penitence" (NC 212). For Foucault, the mechanism offers a logic not only of efficiency but also of normalization. A system of "normalization is opposed to a system of law or a system of personal power. There are no fixed pivot points from which to make judgements, to impose will" (qtd. in Rabinow 20). However, the Countess, conceives "the idea of a therapy of meditation," and believes that she can literally will the women to accept "responsibility" for their actions: "And she was sure that with responsibility would come remorse" (NC 212). For, "by their salvation, strenuously achieved through meditation on the crime they had committed, they would have procured hers" (NC 212). This revision of Foucault's theory of power, is due, in part, to the fact that both victim and victimizer are sexed female. However, the Countess P. does more than just misinterpret the function of the mechanism; inevitably she will also ensure that its very architectural design does not follow the panopticon blueprint. Thus, Carter ensures that its construction will metaphorically devour the Countess.

As Margaret Higonnet states, "architectural and landscape symbolism have been of special importance for the representation of a feminine economy in the writings of both men and women" (9). She suggests that images such as round

rooms, round houses, baskets, and even beds may "signify alternatively confinement or the possibility of self-definition" (9). However, she also suggests that though such images offer a "shorthand sexual vocabulary...their connotations remain slippery" (9).

What is less slippery is the reality that the Countess P. alters the original layout of the panopticon to conform to feminine imagery. As Foucault describes the panopticon, it "consists of a large courtyard, with a tower in the center, surrounded by a series of buildings divided into levels and cells" (qtd. in Rabinow 19). In Carter's description, the Countess P. forces the female inmates to build a "hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a *round room surrounded by windows* (NC 211). Thus, Carter replaces the phallic image of the tower with the feminine image of the round room. However, despite the physical absence of the tower, the Countess attempts to name her space according to the paradigm's conventions, calling it alternatively, her "observatory" (211), the "watchtower" (214), and the "watch-room" (217). Despite the pseudonyms, this is merely a room in which she watches and observes, at eye level, the inmates and the clock--the clock which will ultimately "remind *her* only of the time that her time ended, the hour of [the inmates'] deliverance" (NC 218).

According to Paul Rabinow, the architectural perfection of the panopticon paradigm is such "that even if there is no guardian present, the power apparatus still operates effectively. The inmate cannot see whether or not the guardian is in the tower, so he must behave as if the surveillance were perpetual and total" (19). However, the inmates in Carter's panopticon know that the Countess is trapped in her observatory, and therefore the only

means by which she can control the inmates is to perpetually watch and observe.

Though the Countess believes the inmates are the "objects of her gaze" (213), she is as entrapped in the mechanism of power as they because they engage in "reciprocal observing" (215). Because the Countess colludes with a system that will penalize women, Carter ensures that this guardian of patriarchy, as the object of the gaze of a feminist reading, cannot "escape from the tyranny of their eyes" or ours (NC 214). Although she was the "inventor and the perpetrator of this wholesale incarceration," the only escape the Countess has from the gaze of the inmates is to draw her venetian blinds (214). However, this exercise of freedom is illusory. With the blinds drawn the inmates are free of the Countess' gaze. As well, the inmate has the area "surrounding the bars...which could not be seen from the outside" (215). Once again, the Countess' panopticon does not adhere to two prerequisites of this mechanism of power: her control is neither "continuous" nor "anonymous" (Rabinow 19).

Another fatal mistake the Countess makes is that she allows the inmates to connect with others. According to the mechanism, the inmate should be "cut off from any contact" (qtd. in Rabinow 19). The wardesses who serve the Countess, as required by the structure, are "imprisoned by the terms of their contract just as surely as [are] the murderesses" (214). These silent guards wear hoods that cover their faces, gloves that cover their hands, and they are forced to keep their eyes cast down to the ground. According to their fixed routine, the guards slide food to the inmates by way of grilles in the cages. Literally, the inmates are doubly imprisoned, for they are confined to cages that are contained within the panopticon. However, it is Olga Alexandrovna who

first grasped the chance at human contact and physically "clasped the hand in the leather glove that pushed in the tray from the other end" (216).

Just as Carter revises Foucault's theory to incorporate gender, so too does she revise Hélène Cixous'²⁵ theory of women's writing. While Carter will not deny the specificity of the female body, she will deny Cixous's linking the female body to its role of reproduction. Thus, while Cixous will claim that women write with white mother's milk, Carter will have women write with red menstrual fluid. After the first touch between inmate and wardress, further communication is inevitable. Though without a pen or pencil, Olga dipped a finger in her menstrual flow, and wrote a letter to Vera Andreyevna. Later, and in "her womb's blood, on the secret place inside her cell, she drew a heart" (NC 216).

Here, Carter will not deny a woman's biological difference: a woman does have a womb and does have the potential for motherhood. However, Carter will not give primacy to female biology. She stresses the human-ness of the inmates rather than their biology, for the women use all manner of substances in order to communicate: they write or draw "in blood, both menstrual and veinous, even in excrement, for none of the juices of the bodies that had been so long denied were alien to them, in their extremity--drawings, as it turned out, crude as graffiti, yet with the effect of clarion calls" (NC 217). Though the women are enveloped by reflections of spring, "ripened seeds of love," and

²⁵ From Helene Cixous's writing is derived the term *écriture féminine*, which designates an experimental and marginal mode of discourse, characterized as feminine, which is repressed by and subverts the phallogocentric symbolic order. According to Andermahr, this mode of writing "deconstructs the opposition between theoretical and literary/poetic modes of writing, blending criticism and polemic with fantasy and wordplay. It foregrounds the semiotic or material aspects of language. Its often lyrical invocation of the female body has much in common with utopian writing and serves a similarly inspirational and political purpose" (60). However, Carter will argue against any theoretical stance which will essentialize women's identity through the conflation of female biology, psychology and language.

"bridal" walks, these images appear to celebrate human contact and love as well as sexual desire (NC 217).

Inevitably, "Judgement Day" arrives for the Countess just as it did for Ma Nelson's girls, for the guards and inmates unite to overpower the Countess (NC 44). As a result, it "was an army of lovers who finally rose up against the Countess on the morning when the cages opened for the final exercise hour, opened--and never closed. At one accord, the guards threw off their hoods, the prisoners came forth all turned towards the Countess in one great, united look of accusation" (NC 217-218). Ironically, the Countess' last act as warden also marks "the time that *her* time ended," for she accidentally shoots and breaks the clock (NC 218). The women leave the Countess "secured in her observatory with nothing to observe any longer but the spectre of her own crime, which came in at once through the open gate to haunt her as she continued to turn round and round in her chair" (NC 218)

Joy and ecstasy come with the escape from their cages, and with the "kisses, embraces and the first sight of unseen, beloved faces." For these women have a plan: "to strike off by themselves and found a primitive Utopia in the vastness round them, where none might find them" (NC 218). This terrain, with its "wilderness that seemed a bundle of blank paper to the ignorant, urban eye was the encyclopedia, packed with information" (252). Certainly, the women have the opportunity to write their own history and their own present on these blank pages. However, there are no signposts to point the way. And, as Carter suggests, this blank open space is celebratory, but also, "by virtue of its distance from humanity," contains nothing "to assuage the infinite melancholy of these empty spaces" (228).

Moreover, this community of women seems just as exclusionary as the

society from which they have escaped. With female biology as a criteria for inclusion, the women attempt to exclude not just men but also "use of the patronymic" (221). As usual, Lizzie offers a quip that is both pragmatic and satirical: "What'll they do with the boy babies? Feed 'em to the polar bears? To the *female* polar bears" (240-241). Carter seems to offer little input to the feminist debate on the theory of Utopia.²⁶ As Toril Moi states, utopian thought assumes that change is both possible and desirable, and while Carter will agree that it is desirable, she would no doubt argue that the utopians will need to rethink their analysis if they assume that exploitation can be overcome by merely opening the cages of oppression.

However, Mignon's song, while it cannot draw a map of this utopian space, and while she does "not ask you if you know that land of which she sings because she herself is uncertain it exists--she knows, oh! how well she knows it lies somewhere, elsewhere, beyond the absence of the flowers. She states the existence of that land and all she wants to know is, whether you know it, too" (NC 249). Ultimately, this is Carter's aim--not to provide all the answers and solutions, but to plant the seeds of critical enquiry which will demand that women (and men) start asking the right questions.

²⁶ As Moi states, "Utopian thought has always been a source of political inspiration for feminists and socialists alike. Confidently assuming that change is both possible and desirable, the utopian vision takes off from a negative analysis of its own society in order to create images and ideas that have the power to inspire against oppression and exploitation" (121).

③

REWRITING THE FEMALE AND MALE:

THE APPRENTICESHIP OF THE NEW ♀ AND ♂

A place on the map is also a place in history, where writers, women and men, stand in the fullness of their identities and create texts (*Rich On Lies* 27).

Laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism (Butler 115).

Just as the brothel, the freak house, and the prison represent enclosures from which women must break free, so too does the biological female and male body, when socialized as feminine and masculine, represent constructed prisons from which the individual must break free. The initial apprenticeship of the biological female--to conform to society's definition of the feminine--is analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis. Though she speaks specifically of the female writer, one can utilize Showalter's definition of the literary feminine phase to include the feminization of the female in general: it is characterized as a period in which the female author internalizes and imitates the traditions and conventions of official culture (13).

In the first section of the novel, "London," with her discussion of the enclosures of the wholly female worlds of the brothel and the freak house, Carter demonstrates both the construction and consequences of the apprenticeship of the feminine. In the second section of the novel, "Petersburg," it is apparent that Carter's definition of the feminine is not restricted to biology: the system of patriarchy feminizes both the female and the male, who are powerless and oppressed. According to Showalter, the

feminist phase of her model is characterized as a period in which the female author protests against the traditions of official culture, and advocates for the rights of those who are marginalized within the system of patriarchy. In particular, we see their call for autonomy (13). In the second chapter of this thesis I concentrate on the inhabitants of the circus (Carter's second section) and on the inhabitants of the panopticon (Carter's third section), because Carter critiques both enclosures from an acerbic feminist perspective--a perspective which revises and subverts current literary theories. Both the clowns and the inmates protest against, because they subvert, the standards and values of society. Whether autonomy is achieved by either group is debatable; nonetheless, it is this third chapter of my thesis which truly analyzes the concept of autonomy.

Given my use of Showalter's paradigm which outlines the feminine, the feminist, and the female phases of writing by women, it follows that this final chapter will focus on Carter's analysis of the female, the final phase of Showalter's literary model. According to Showalter, the female phase is characterized as a "period of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (13). Therefore, it is in this final chapter of my thesis that I analyze how Carter illustrates this process of self-discovery and the apprenticeship of becoming an autonomous subject.

In order to become autonomous subjects, both Fevvers and Walser must undertake a transformative journey. Just as Showalter's terms are used to organize this thesis, so too are the feminine, feminist, and female phases used to organize the transformative journey of the protagonists within this chapter. In my analysis of the "London" section I begin with a discussion of

Walser and his role as both the partner for the New Woman and the worthy scribe of women's history. Walser's transformation is only hinted at in this section. Here, he takes the necessary first step of his journey: his preconceived notions of reality are unsettled to the extent that he begins to question the distinction between fact and fiction. The analysis then focuses on the history of Fevvers and her apprenticeship of becoming Woman. Specifically, through the retelling of Fevvers' life experiences, we learn *how* the female and male are oppressed in a patriarchal culture, and therefore, just *why* a transformation is so desperately needed. In Showalter's terms, Carter demonstrates the extent to which the dominant traditions are entrenched, imitated, and internalized. Thus, the "London" section tells the silenced history of oppression in the hope that the retelling will ensure its demise.

As my chapter two analysis of the circus in the "Petersburg" section demonstrates, the demise of oppression will require arduous transformations. The road to transformation truly begins in this part of the novel. Carter, in Showalter's terms, protests against and subverts the standards and values of official culture. However, in this feminist critique of power relations, Carter expands the definition of feminine to include all those who are marginalized and oppressed within a patriarchal society. Thus, my analysis of this phase of the transformative journey focuses on Walser's metamorphosis into a clown, "as he becomes subsumed within the magical circus world and recognizes that he has fallen in love with Fevvers" (Michael 174). The world of the circus forces Walser to undergo an "apprenticeship in *being looked at*" (NC 23) in the occupation of "humiliation" (102). Because this is a territory already traversed by Fevvers, her own transformation seems to be temporarily

suspended; as though she is waiting for Walser to catch up to her. However, there is a foreshadowing of what her journey entails. Though she seems to remain caged within her role as the guardian angel for women who are oppressed and marginalized, the realization that she is falling in love with the young reporter unsettles her and begins to crack her veneer.

However, the literal derailling of the circus train in the final section of the novel signals the release of the female and male from the constructed prison of the feminine and the masculine. It is here that Carter, echoing Showalter's definition of the female phase, has the protagonists undergo a period of self-discovery as they search for a sense of identity. Moreover, as my analysis demonstrates, "Siberia," the isolated frontier which closes the novel is neither "an enclosure nor a cultural artifact. It is an open space that dissolves the very notion of limits and boundaries that structure Western thought" (Michael 200). It is in this final section of my chapter that I analyze Walser's transformation while in the company of the Shaman and Fevvers' transformation away from the gaze of, and objectification by, the Other. Ultimately, the transformative journey closes this novel, but this closing is also a beginning. Two autonomous individuals unite at the dawn of a new era, and begin their journey together in the hopes of creating a new society.

However, this ending/beginning should not suggest that in the pages of her fiction Carter prophetically provides solutions for feminist writers and readers of the twenty-first century. What she does demonstrate is that one must not become such a slave to theory that she stops asking questions about the materiality of lived experiences. Though a theoretical writer herself, Carter's comments about the consequences of the surge of interest in the

theories of Bakhtin (see my chapter two) indicate that she is not a proponent of theory for its own sake. As well, her commentary seems to echo Nancy Hartsock's questions about the surge of theories which negate the possibility of the autonomous subject. Hartsock asks,

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us /
 who have been silenced begin to demand the right to
 name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects
 of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood
 becomes problematic? (163-164).

Carter refuses to be silenced and views these questions as challenges. The challenge is to create a fictive world which literally depicts the oppression and relations of power which dominate our world. For Carter the challenge is met, in part, by distinguishing between the journey of the female and the male, by altering the conventional destination, and finally, by redefining the concept of autonomy.

Although both Fevvers and Walser must undertake transformative journeys, Carter demonstrates that the map for the female is quite different than the map for the male. As Anca Vlasopolos notes, "the female hero's success or failure rests on her ability to acknowledge, or create, and sustain relations with other women, who function as sister/mother figures. In other words, exceptionality, singularity, and isolation, which mark the male hero and authenticate his quest to set the boundaries of his autonomy--whether successful or no--become for women the markers not of heroism but of victimization and loss of autonomy" (74). Thus, although the ultimate destination is the same for both, the terrain they must traverse is different. However, just as Carter alters the journey, so too does she alter the

destination.

On the surface, *Nights at the Circus* has the structure of a double Bildungsroman--the action moves toward the self-knowledge of two central characters. The traditional genre tells the story of growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth "process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both an 'apprenticeship to life' and a 'search for meaningful existence within society'" (Cuddon 25). However, where the traditional genre will emphasize eventual conformity within the existing social order, Carter will insist on illuminating and dismantling all that is oppressive *within* the existing social order. Her transformed, autonomous protagonists are meant to transform the social order and create a New Society appropriate for the New Woman and Man.

However, the idea of autonomy is much debated within literary theory in general and within feminist theory in particular. Initially, Carter's standpoint on the concept seems pessimistic. In "Alison's Giggle," for example, she analyzes the "happy ending" in fiction by and for women and determines that the notion of an autonomous individual is "at best problematic in a society with little available space for anybody's autonomy" (545). Because the concept of autonomy is crucial to a reading of *Nights at the Circus*, the term, though rather slippery, needs to be somewhat defined and grounded. According to Christine Di Stefano, there are two contrasting views of "subjectivity, agency, empowerment, and emancipation" within feminist theory and politics. One privileges "equality" and the other is motivated by the ethos of "female autonomy" (97).

The concept of equality is viewed by the second category of feminist theorists with scepticism, for it "commits its feminist users to pre-

established, male-defined norms, whereas autonomy--'women's right to political, social, economic and intellectual self-determination'--implies the right to see oneself in whatever terms one chooses" (97). However, recent work by feminists such as Judith Butler, inspired by Foucauldian and Lacanian theories on the status of the subject, "suggests that autonomy should be reconceived as an illusory effect rather than as a substantive achievement or foundational grounding" (Di Stefano 98). As Di Stefano rightly determines, this approach takes us to the "vanishing point of autonomy as a normative political concept" (98). Carter's statement that society offers little space for anybody's autonomy suggests a scepticism for the possibility of its attainment, and seems to place her within the ranks of the Foucauldian and Lacanian theorists.

However, one finds that Carter's solution is to *redefine* autonomy and, in so doing, she manages to create a space which offers a hope for its possibility. In her 1984 introduction to a collection of stories by the Australian author Christina Stead, Carter states that "For Stead...private life is itself a socially determined fiction, the 'self' a foetus of autonomy that may or may not prove viable and 'inner freedom', far from being an innate quality, is a precariously held intellectual or emotional position" (qtd. in Sage AC 44). As Sage rightly determines, for Carter, talking about the self "as socially determined is liberating: it means that you are part of history, caught up in change. It is from this angle, and with a characteristic mixture of effrontery and modesty, that she describes herself as 'A new kind of being, a new kind of woman writer who has been made possible by contraception'--able to nourish her 'foetus of autonomy' without giving up on sexual experience'" (Sage AC 44).

It makes sense that only a new kind of woman writer could make possible

the fictive creation of a new woman and man for a new society. Moreover, Carter's perception of subjectivity does indeed present the possibility of forging a space in society for autonomy: as part of history one is constantly changing and can, in turn, effect change.

That this plot does indeed focus on change and transformation is signalled early in the first chapter of the novel. According to the analytical psychologist E. Aeppli, "the person that has a profound transformation to undergo, like the legendary prophet Jonah, is for a while swallowed up by his or her unconscious, by that huge fish with jaws like those of a whale, before being disgorged--a transformed being--upon the bright shore of a new consciousness" (qtd. In Biedermann 132).²⁷ Perhaps this analysis helps to explain the numerous sightings of fish during the initial meeting between Fevvers and Walser. Apart from the obvious pun on the word (there is "something fishy about the Cockney Venus"), her room seems engulfed with a "marine aroma" (NC 8). Walser starts to believe that his "brain is turning to bubbles" as he sights a fish, "a little one, a herring, a sprat, a minnow, but wriggling, alive-oh, going into the bath when she tipped the jug" (NC 20).

This rather unsettling sighting, and Walser's sudden disorientation, well represent the nature of the transformative journeys in *Nights at the Circus*. The first encounter between Fevvers and Walser begins in London, the site of the "stink and bustle of humanity" (NC 8). For Fevvers, the city is "home" and she is the "prodigal daughter" who belongs in the place where the

²⁷ Jonah is invoked by Carter as the kidnapped Fevvers is about to begin her own transformation, and is led "further into the margins of the forest, which, not hasty gulper, swallowed us up at its primeval leisure. It took me a long while to somewhat recover my composure and by then we were inside it as securely as Jonah in the belly of the whale and in almost as profound a darkness, for the close boughs of the evergreens blotted out the sky..." (NC 225). Conversely, the fish imagery is also used to illustrate the destructive journey--the transformation to nothingness as demonstrated by Buffo's sighting of "man-eating fish waiting to gobble up [his] being" (NC 122).

"principal industries are the music hall and the confidence trick" (NC 8). For Walser, "from the other side of the world," the city is foreign territory. Nonetheless, Walser smugly believes his "New World" perspective is significantly more progressive than "the old" world's. However, his statement about whores and decent women "reemphasizes the dichotomy between good women and bad women" (Michael 180). Thus, the Western concept of Woman is as entrenched in the new world as it is in the old. Carter rejects this opposition and the ideology of marriage upon which it is based. In so doing, she also "undermines the Western ideology of marriage" (180). Nonetheless, Walser's naive smugness does seem to desert him while he is enclosed within the hot, clogged "mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor" that is Fevvers' dressingroom (NC 9).

Smug and misinformed he may be, but he is portrayed as ripe for a deconstruction. He is a young man of "five-and-twenty summers," who has the innocence of a child (NC 10). His physical description rounds off the "green" image: "a thatch of unruly flaxen hair, a ruddy, pleasant, square-jawed face and eyes the cool grey of scepticism" (NC 10). Like Sir Gawayne, he may be innocent and true, but he remains untried; his journey will help him find not the green girdle, but himself.²⁸ For, although Walser "had a propensity for 'finding himself in the right place at the right time,'...it was almost as if he himself were an *objet trouvé*, for subjectivity, himself, he never found, since it was not his self which he sought" (NC 10).

The scepticism is superficial because he remains untouched and

²⁸ Carter has referred to this allegory in relation to her philosophy of writing and reading: "I do put everything in a novel to be read-read the way allegory was intended to be read, the way you are supposed to read Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight-on as many levels as you can comfortably withstand at the time" (qtd. in Britzolakis 44).

unaffected by his experiences.²⁹ His concern is with revealing the "Great Humbugs of the West" and recording their duplicity. Yet, he remains blissfully unaware of his own erroneous status: he is "unfinished" (10). He is compared to a "handsome house that has been let, unfurnished. There were scarcely any of those little, what you may call *personal* touches to his personality, as if his habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being" (NC 10).³⁰ Presumably, it will be his experiences while trying to prove that Fevvers is a fake that will help him find his true self, that will finish him--hopefully, without finishing him off.

However, recording Fevvers' story and attempting to prove her a fake will be considerably more difficult than Walser imagines. Firstly, he is not equipped to record a true history. For as befitting his green image, he has not "experienced his experience *as* experience...In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection" (NC 10). Secondly, contrary to convention, though Walser is supposedly conducting the interview, Fevvers' is the "controlling voice even to the point where the male voice is

²⁹Specifically, Carter states that "Walser had not experienced his experience as experience" (10). Carter previously quoted this line in *The Sadeian Woman*: "'It was no accident that the Marquis de Sade chose heroines and not heroes,' said Guillaume Apollinaire. Justine is woman as she has been until now, enslaved, miserable, and less than human; her opposite, Juliette, represents the woman whose advent he anticipated, a figure of whom minds have as yet no conception, who is rising out of mankind, and will have wings and who will renew the world" (50). Clearly, Fevvers resembles the Juliette model and Walser the Justine. Justine is "not in control of her life; her poverty and her femininity conspire to rob her of autonomy. She is always the dupe of an experience that she never experiences *as* experience; this is the common experience of most women's lives" (SW 51). Thus, despite his smugness, in "official" culture, Walser is classified as "feminine" because he lacks the power to control his own life.

³⁰Despite the fact that Fevvers and Walser have been socialized as feminine and masculine, Carter demonstrates that they do have elements in common. Where Walser has nothing to hide because he is as empty as an unfurnished house, Fevvers has learned to hide and conceal as though she is an unfurnished house: "Fevvers' dressing-room was notable for its anonymity...a reminder to the visitor of that part of herself which, off-stage, she kept concealed...[There is n]othing to give her away" (13-14).

emasculated. Fevvers carefully evades all attempts by Walser to try to fix her identity and, in so doing, she not only challenges male definitions of women but...notions of truth and reality" (Peach 133). Despite his attempts to "keep his wits about him," the hunter becomes the hunted, and Fevvers, "his quarry [.] had him effectively trapped" (NC 9).

The irony is that Walser must literally lose his "wits" before he can be transformed. Although his disintegration does not occur until he dons the clown's mask in the second section of the novel, it is foreshadowed here with his beginnings of doubt. Watching her show at the Alhambra theatre, Walser "almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box" (NC 16). Although Walser detects the "inescapable whiff of stage magic which pervaded Fevvers' act," she still manages to make a slight crack in his veneer of scepticism (NC 16). For Walser rightly determines the paradox of Fevvers' existence: "in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world" (NC 17). As well, Walser is unsettled by the spectacle of her performance for what it lacks, for her limitations. Fevvers seems to move in slow motion and even the leisurely speed at which she completes the triple somersault seems to defy gravity. Though it is only for a brief moment, Fevvers' act does force a gap in his sensibilities, for he does "contemplate the unimaginable--that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief" (NC 17).

However, the young innocent reporter sitting in Fevvers' dressing-room returns to his belief in logic and scepticism. She runs so counter to his expectations of the feminine that he speculates that perhaps she might be a man (NC 35) or a "marvellous machine" (NC 29). Furthermore, he sceptically

views Fevvers as either a fraud or a freak. His cynicism is apparent in the questions that he asks her--questions that are aimed at highlighting her anomaly status and proving her singularity. Moreover, his inability to accept the answers to his questions, his discomfort in her presence, and his inability to handle the tools of his trade--the pen and paper--indicate the extent to which he must be transformed.³¹ Indeed, although the events in this first section of the novel manage to create the occasional chink in his armour of masculinity, it is evident that this apprentice scribe and partner has an arduous journey ahead.

Regardless of the legitimacy of Walser's speculations, Fevvers is not only frighteningly intimidating, but also she defies all that is deemed feminine. Speaking specifically of the ideology of femininity during the Victorian period, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that the model woman was often seen "as delicate, frail, ethereal. To certify her spirituality and refinement, she must look and act like a fragile creature" ("Introduction" 289). Within this construct of the ideology of femininity, the ideal woman is pure, submissive, and angelic. Certainly, Fevvers, as the resident angel-in-the-brothel, is not the image that Coventry Patmore had in mind when he penned *The Angel in the House*, his popular and representative poem about femininity

³¹In her presence Walser seems to be constantly juggling with his notebook and pencil(9). Watching her act at the theatre causes him to temporarily lose his place (16). As well, Walser needs to reverse his notebook in "order to give himself a fresh set of blank pages" (57).

("Introduction" 289).³²

As Margaret Higonnet ascertains, feminist thinkers have "called attention to physical images such as the 'angel in the house' that imply the domestic confinement of women" (1). In defiance of these images, and in order to escape confinement in the body, writers like Monique Wittig may "imaginatively spin wings and webs from the female body, a use of interconnecting physical imagery symptomatic of lesbian utopian enterprise" (Higonnet 6). Moreover, as Ellen Moers notes, birds are the creatures "that women writers use to stand in, metaphorically, for their own sex" (245). Traditionally, littleness as a physical fact "is inescapably associated with the female body, and as long as writers describe women they will all make use of the diminutive in language and the miniature in imagery" (Moers 244).

Furthermore, Moers notes that birds are also "frightening and monstrous as well as tiny and sweet, and the former aspect of the bird metaphor dominates the grotesqueries of modern women's literature" (247). Even a quick peek through the pages of the novel will determine that Fevvers belongs to this latter category. In part, she is so frightening and grotesque because Carter intentionally creates her as the "over-literal" manifestation of the bird/angel metaphor (NC 16). In so doing, Carter demonstrates the absurdity of

³² However, rather than that of religion, writers such as John Ruskin in his "Of Queen's Gardens", characterized the feminine ideal through a vocabulary drawn from a rhetoric of chivalry (289). Just as Carter very literally brings to life the angel-in-the-house construct, so too does she play with the possibility of Fevvers becoming a very real queen. In the last chapter of the novel, Fevvers is kidnapped by "the brotherhood of free men" (NC 229), who believe the Colonel's advertising that Fevvers is engaged to the Prince of Wales. As men who live outside "a law that shows [them] no pity, they hope that Fevvers can intercede on their behalf with "the great Queen Victoria, the well-loved baboushka who sits on the throne of England" (NC 231).

the literary construct.³³

Not only is the construct brought to life, but also Fevvers' growth from girl to woman is marked by her representation as an ever larger image with wings: she begins as Cupid, grows to the Winged Victory, and graduates to the Angel of Death.

However, in the "London" section of the novel it is not just the literary metaphor which Carter deconstructs with the depiction of Fevvers. She also uses Fevvers' apprenticeship to subvert Western psychological and philosophical doctrine. Fevvers proceeds through an identification process which differs radically from Freud's theories on the acquisition of identity. Rather than suffer any trauma due to a sense of pre-Oedipal lack, Fevvers acquires "little feathery buds" on her shoulders" (NC 23). Moreover, Fevvers unsettles Lacanian discourse of the Symbolic Order and the acquisition of language. In Fevvers' case, the Lacanian initiation as a speaking subject is replaced by an "apprenticeship in *being looked at*--at being the object of the eye of the beholder" (23). For seven years, Fevvers is "painted, gilded" and enclosed within the masquerade of Cupid, "the *sign* of love" (23).

When Fevvers starts her "woman's bleeding," she also "spreads" her wings: "my titties swelled behind...broke forth my peculiar inheritance" (23-24). The concurrent developments of spreading and bleeding result in a shifting of sexual taboos associated with the female body. Moreover, these developments also lead to her graduation from a sign (Cupid) to that which is

³³ Carter also illustrates the ultimate irony in the bird metaphor--male authors use the image to highlight a woman's smallness, her helplessness. Female authors will give a woman wings to highlight her ability to fly free. To counter such images, Carter gives her 'old bird' monstrous proportions, and she also demonstrates that any construct will enclose women--wings or no. I would argue that in so doing, Carter demonstrates that she is not content just to critique patriarchal symbols, but also intent on subverting them.

being signified ("The Winged Victory"). Fevvers now masquerades as "the perfection of, the original of, the very model of that statue, which, in its broken incomplete state, has teased the imagination of a brace of millennia with its promise of perfect, active beauty that has been, as it were, mutilated by history" (37).

Just as importantly, this juxtaposing of the ideal (virgin) with the real (whore) has Ma Nelson nickname Fevvers the "Victory with Wings" (38). She does so in the belief that in this image Fevvers is an appropriate "spiritual flagship [for] her fleet, as if a virgin with a weapon was the fittest guardian angel for a houseful of whores" (38). However, this literal juxtaposition highlights the constructedness of the ideal and the corporeality of the real. For those men who choose to believe that "whores do it for pleasure," the sight of a virgin protecting a whore would call into question the whole paradigm within which their actions are validated (39).

However, the discomfort of the clientele could also be due to Fevvers' change in props; she becomes more Amazon warrior than guardian angel. She replaces her toy bow and arrow with a very real weapon, a "gilt ceremonial sword" (37). With such an authentic prop it is difficult to disguise the nature of the whorehouse--it is the site of a battle, and she is armed. Not surprisingly, business dwindles shortly after her debut. For the idea that all women are virgin/whores, which has "teased the imagination of a brace of millennia," is terrifying when manifested in reality in the shape of a very large, fully-armed female (37). Fevvers finally graduates from the role of guardian of the living to the guardian of the dead: as "Death the Protectress" she becomes the "Angel of Death," the "tombstone angel" for the Sleeping Beauty (70). Moreover, one can also describe Fevvers as the angel of

destruction, as her presence seems to signal the destruction of all institutions which attempt to enclose women.

However, in the multi-layered characterization of Fevvers, she is a frightening parody of the bird/angel metaphor, but she also exemplifies Rabelais' material bodily principle. With her appropriation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and the image of the grotesque body, Carter completely defies and subverts the convention of the feminine. According to Bakhtin, the material bodily principle is "deeply positive...[and] represents all the people" (19). This material bodily principle, "that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role. Images of the body are offered, moreover, in an extremely exaggerated form" (18). As Walser observes, there is not a "gesture of [Fevvers] that did not have [a] kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it" (NC 12).

Of course, Fevvers enjoys making "a spectacle of all she does" and thrills in the reaction that she evokes from her observers (22). She proudly shifts "from one buttock to the other and...let a ripping fart ring around the room" (11). She eats with "gargantuan enthusiasm" in a display that can only be described as extreme:

She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; ...she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched...she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety.(22)

Her physical appearance reinforces this image of the grotesque body. She is a large woman, "six feet two in her stockings," with a face that is "broad and oval as a meat dish," that looks like it "had been thrown on a common wheel

out of course clay" (NC 12). As Mary Russo states, Fevvers is "an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque" ("Revamping" 228). As a result, her presence seems to spill over and defy the portrayal of the female contained within the boundaries of official narratives.

With this defiance and subversion, Fevvers turns herself from the object of official narratives to the active subject. As Sally Robinson notes, *Nights at the Circus* is "particularly concerned with enacting the contradictions between Woman as object of official narratives and women as subjects of self-narratives" (23). Therefore, though Fevvers is the object of the male gaze, in telling her own story to Walser, she places herself as the subject of the narrative. Her strategy is to turn the gaze on herself and thereby disrupt the 'woman-as-object' construct. According to Robinson, Carter will have Fevvers employ what feminist film theorists call the feminine masquerade and what Irigaray calls mimicry: "a self-conscious performance, by women, of the place traditionally assigned to Woman within narrative and other discourse. It is by this and other similar strategies that Fevvers appropriates the gaze to herself as an index of her subjective agency, and simultaneously, gains control over her narrative" (23-24).

However, before Fevvers' transformation can begin, she must come to the realization that the story, language itself, is the best weapon for the weaponless. She must rid herself of the idea that relations between the sexes are a battleground. This realization will mark the first step on her journey to attaining true autonomy. Still, this realization will be difficult for Fevvers because she is twice marginalized: she is a woman in a patriarchal society, and yet she is not a woman--she is a "freak" in a society which

values conformity and conventional femininity. This tension, between her "value" as a woman and her "value" as a symbolic woman, comes to a climax at the conclusion of the second section of Carter's novel.

As my discussion of the "Petersburg" section demonstrates, Carter's circus adheres to the characteristics of the Romantic grotesque as it lacks the liberating principle of laughter and has no regenerative power. Carter's circus is "to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man" (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 38). In this "forlorn place" Fevvers continues to sing her trademark song, "Only a bird...in a gilded cage," because in joining the circus she replaces one metaphorical cage for another (NC 106-107).

For Fevvers, the carnivalesque world of the circus is a microcosm of the one in which she has already undergone an apprenticeship. Thus, it is unlikely that she could be forced into a drastic transformation while she is on familiar turf. If she often places herself in dangerous and precarious situations in pursuit of the almighty dollar, she still serves as the Great Protectress for the marginalized existing within this already marginalized space. She still tends to Walser's wounds, she rescues Mignon and then unites her with the Princess, and she helps the Strong Man undergo a transformation that is no less dramatic than Walser's.

Most importantly, she also continues in her role as the voice of oppressed women. And Mignon's story is the story *par excellence* of passivity, victimization, and oppression. When naked, Mignon carries the scars of the victim: her skin is "mauvish, greenish, yellowish from beatings...it was as if she had been beaten flat...and the beatings had beaten her back, almost to the appearance of childhood, for her little shoulderblades stuck up at acute angles, she had no breasts and was almost hairless but for a little flaxen

tuft on her mound" (NC 129-130).

As well, thoughts of childhood can offer little escape for Mignon. Her childhood was bleak and brutal: her mother was murdered by her father, she was raised in an orphanage, separated from her sister, became a run-away, a beggar, a thief, an impersonator of the dead, the object of the gaze of the grief-stricken, and finally, at the age of fifteen, she was married to the Ape-Man, who has a "fine nose for a victim" and takes "her on solely in order to abuse her" (NC 140). This retelling of Mignon's story gives voice to the reality of the lives of many women. Thus, as Walser is currently undergoing his apprenticeship as scribe for the new century, it is crucial that he hear the story that traditional accounts will silence.

As well, Carter makes it clear that Mignon's story is not the exception, but rather it contains the "anguish of a continent"--a continent of the silenced and the oppressed (141).³⁴ Moreover, her story serves as a warning for all the marginalized. Mignon is 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; she was the broken blossom of the present tense" (139-140). This, then, is the fate to which we are doomed unless we remember, record, and learn from our own histories.

However, Mignon is not the archetype of the beaten and oppressed woman, a figure valorized in "official" culture. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter critiques the public persona of Marilyn Monroe. For Carter, Marilyn Monroe is

³⁴ In her depiction of the baboushka which opens this section, Carter uses the same metaphor to describe the plight of women: "All Russia was contained within the thwarted circumscription of her movements; and much of the essence of her abused and withered femaleness. Symbol and woman, or symbolic woman, she crouched before the samovar" (96).

the epitome of the passive victim, and she compares her to Sade's own Justine:

their dazzling fair skins are of such a delicate texture that they look as if they will bruise at a touch, carrying the exciting stigmata of sexual violence for a long time, and that is why gentleman prefer blondes.

Marilyn/Justine has a childlike candour and trust and there is a faint touch of melancholy about her that has been produced by this trust, which is always absolute and always betrayed...

Connoisseurs of the poetry of masochism...immediately recognize those girls who will look most beautiful when they are crying. (63)

One can certainly alter the perimeters of this stereotype so that it reads Justine/Marilyn/Mignon. As a construct they tell the story of the passive, perpetual victim.

However, the "tart with a twenty-four carat heart" (114) can also learn from Mignon's story. Certainly, on the surface, Fevvers and Mignon appear to represent the polarities of the Woman construct. For just as Mignon can be seen as a model for the passive docility of Marilyn Monroe, so too can Fevvers be seen as a worthy replica of the very real figure of Mae West. For Carter, Mae West's sexuality,

the most overt in the history of the cinema, could only be tolerated on the screen because she did not arrive in Hollywood until she had reached the age associated with menopause. This allowed her some of the anarchic freedom of the female impersonator, pantomime dame, who is licensed to make sexual innuendos because his masculinity renders them a form of male aggression upon the women he impersonates (*SW* 60).

Both Fevvers and Mae West cash in on their anomaly status. As well, Walser questions whether Fevvers is a man, and comments on her aged haggard look (*NC* 87). However, the similarity between Fevvers and Mae West continues beyond a surface resemblance.

According to Carter, Mae West's joke upon her audience was "a superior kind of double bluff. She was in reality a sexually free woman, economically independent...and subsequently exercised an iron hand on her Hollywood career" (*SW* 61). Symbolically, Fevvers is the epitome of the free woman because she has wings. Also, Fevvers is certainly economically independent--almost to a fault, because her greed nearly finishes her off. As well, like Fevvers, Mae West's wit is "castratory, if tender; and the part of her mind which is not scheming for libidinal gratification is adding up her bank accounts" (*SW* 61). Nonetheless, as Carter argues, Mae West "represents a sardonic disregard of convention rather than a heroic overthrow of taboo" (*SW* 61-62). It will be up to Fevvers to undergo a metamorphosis so that she is capable of overthrowing the taboos which restrict women.

However, Fevvers will not be capable of overthrowing any taboos until she realizes that she is trapped within the construct that she herself has created; out of necessity though it may be. As Lizzie tells her, "All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure to the eye, or else you're good for nothing. For you, it's always a symbolic exchange in the market-place" (185). And as Fevvers determines, if "all the women in the world had wings," her "value" in the economic exchange market would diminish. It is this very real paradox that she must attempt to solve. However, while she resides in the all-too-familiar world of the circus, she continues to participate in this symbolic exchange.

For the most part, Fevvers does not make a distinction between the world of the circus and the boards of the theatre. In both worlds she is on display. In contrast, Walser ignored the reality of the circus and "thrilled, as always, to the shop-soiled yet polyvalent romance of the image" (107). However, Carter does see the circus as distinct, but her depiction is not romanticized as is Walser's. In Carter's depiction, the world of the circus is alien, frightening, and wrought with despair:

What a cheap, convenient, expressionist device, this sawdust ring, this little O! Round like an eye, with a still vortex in the centre; but give it a little rub as if it were Aladdin's wishing lamp and instantly, the circus ring turns into that durably metaphoric, uroboric snake with its tail in its mouth, wheel that turns full circle, the wheel whose end is its beginning, the wheel of fortune, the potter's wheel on which our clay is formed, the wheel of life on which we are all broken. O! of wonder; O! of grief (107).

And, certainly, the narrative contained within Carter's chapter details the grief of the lives of the broken. Walser will lose all control of his world and will indeed be broken. The circumstances of Fevvers' birth (like "Helen of Troy, [she] was hatched") foreshadows Walser's own transformation (NC 7). The circus is the site where he will be hatched--perhaps thoroughly scrambled is more apt. His re-birth is metaphorically depicted as a journey "down the tunnel" and to the world of the circus (NC 107).

That Walser has a long journey ahead is apparent with his attempts at recording his "experiences" in St. Petersburg. His sight is lacking in insight: where there is dirt, poverty, hopelessness, he will see only his

historically preconceived "idea" of the city. His lack is made all the more apparent with Carter's juxtaposing the reality with his illusion. The reality shows the "toil- misshapen back of the baboushka humbly bowed before the bubbling urn in the impotently submissive obeisance of the one who pleads for a respite of a mercy she knows in advance will not be forthcoming" (NC 95). However, from Walser's romanticized Western perspective, the city is a dream: *"put together brick by brick by poets, charlatans, adventurers and crazed priests, by slaves, by exiles...a city built of hubris, imagination and desire...its boulevards of peach and vanilla stucco dissolve in mists of autumn..."* (NC 96-97).

If his perspective is initially distorted because he totally ignores the reality, his perspective is ultimately split in two: "Walser-the-clown" separates himself from "Walser-the-foreign-correspondent" (NC 98). When he first witnesses his clown reflection in the mirror he does not recognize himself. He experiences "a vertiginous sense of freedom...that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque" (NC 103). Little does Walser realize that this split-being will ultimately break down further to a total fragmentation.

Just as Fevvers and Lizzie recognize that he is green and naive to the realities of the world of the oppressed, so too does Colonel Kearney recognize that he will need to undergo an "apprenticeship" as an august young man, as one of the "virgins in the ring" (NC 102). Walser, like the other "whores of mirth," like the prostitutes of the brothel, will be subjected to humiliation as he learns the "art of playing" (NC 102).

Within this "Ludic Game," Walser will transform from "a sceptical man of

action who tries to establish and co-opt Fevvers' identity to a man who accepts indeterminacy and seeks to explore the complexities of humanity itself" (Michael 193). And humanity is indeed complex within this world: "Like the chimps, the women circus performers rebel against the men that dominate them: Fevvers foils the ringmaster's advances, Mignon rejects both the Ape Man and the Strong Man in favour of the Princess, and the Princess keeps aloof of human beings altogether" (Michael 195). In reality, Walser connects more with the animals of the circus than he does with the human inhabitants. As the episode with the chimps demonstrates, Walser wins the heart of the "Green Hair-Ribbon" and soon looks to the Professor as his "new friend" (109). This encounter, when juxtaposed with the brutish behaviour of the Strong Man and Mignon, produces in Walser that "dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (NC 110).

Just as this episode puts into question the divisions and hierarchies between humans and animals, so too does Walser's experience with the mask of the clown call into question the nature of *Being* itself (Michael 194). As Michael rightly determines, the figure of the "clown functions as a locus of indeterminacy that threatens Western metaphysics. While the clown's makeup and costume are a mask, this mask takes on a life of its own and as such has a liberating potential: it undermines notions of the self as predetermined, fixed, unitary, and centered" (195).

For Walser, the mask functions in the same manner as the construct of femininity functions in "official" culture. However, donning the clown's makeup/mask begins his deconstruction of the masculine construct within which he has been imprisoned. As a clown, Walser suffers humiliation as the "human chicken" and very nearly loses his life (177). His humiliation is similar to

that of the prostitutes who are "subjects who consciously make themselves into objects...they defy the conventional opposition between work and play...it is [their job] to foster illusions by suspending the distinction between reality and fiction" (Michael 196).

Walser's near escape from the mad Buffo is very real, though seen by the audience as illusion. As well, this escape at the end of Carter's second section mirrors Fevvers' own narrow escape. Fevvers very nearly becomes imprisoned as one of the objects in the Grand Duke's collection of "unnatural artifacts" (NC 187). In part, her downfall is also a consequence of her own confusion between fact and fiction: she starts to believe her own publicity. As the "Madonna of the Arena" she seems invincible (125). Refusing to see her own greed until it is almost too late, she continues as the literal embodiment of the Colonel's poster: the inhabitants of the circus are portrayed so that "they all seemed sheltered by Fevvers' outspread wings in the same way that the poor people of the world are protected under the cloak of the Madonna of Misericordia" (125).

Clearly, in a patriarchal culture, there is little distinction between those women who, Mae West-like, actively mock ideological concepts by controlling their own objectification, and those who, Marilyn Monroe-like, passively adhere to prescribed conventions. Fevvers' fantastical escape from the Grand Duke's mansion leaves her shaken and apparently a great deal wiser. She believes she has learned her lesson and willingly gives Little Ivan her once prized diamonds. However, the portrait of Fevvers as she speeds across the tundra is not unlike the portrait of Mignon: she is "raddled with tears, hair coming down, again, gypsy dress ripped and clotted with semen, trying as best she could to cover her bare breasts with a filthy but incontrovertible

tangle of pin feathers" (193). Fevvers' distress marks the beginning of her transformation to autonomy. Though she is upset about the loss of "her magic sword" (192), the loss of her reliance on a phallic symbol is a necessary first step.

Once the two protagonists literally explode on to the alien territory of Siberia, the transformative journey does not unfold in small steps, but rather it pushes forward with fantastical and dizzying speed. However, it is apparent that the transformative journey in the final section of the novel will be radically different for the key characters. In contrast to Walser in his witless wanderings, Fevvers is all too aware of her surroundings and her circumstances. And Siberia is a terrain that frightens Fevvers. As she states, she is "out of sympathy with landscape" (197) which does not offer the "bustle of humanity" (8).

Despite the barren landscape and the fantastical events which take place here, the inequities of "humanity" have not been left behind. As noted in my second chapter, this final section of Carter's novel retells the fates of the female prisoners of the panopticon. As well, she also introduces the "brotherhood of free men" to illustrate that society does not just oppress women. Just as society marginalizes women because of their biology, it also marginalizes individuals based on their economic "value" and their class (229). According to these kidnappers, they are "here in flight from a law which would extract punishment from us for the vengeance we took upon those minor officials, army officers, landlords and such like petty tyrants, who forcibly dishonoured the sisters, wives and sweethearts of flesh and blood we all once had" (230). However, Carter counters the utopian nature of this vision with Fevvers' analysis of their plight: "What idle folly is this, that

you fancy these great ones care a single jot about the injustice you suffer? Don't the great ones themselves weave the giant web of injustice that circumscribes the globe?" (232).

This bleak accounting of past and present oppression seems to negate the utopian possibility for a new society. This pessimistic view is reinforced with the arrival of the Escapee who talks not of "yesterday" but of "tomorrow" (239). For this utopian idealist, tomorrow will bring "peace and love and justice in which the human soul, ever through history striving for harmony and perfection, would at last achieve it" (23) Lizzie effectively deconstructs the Escapee's analysis. Ultimately, according to Lizzie, the anvil of history must "be changed in order to change humanity. Then we might see, if not 'perfection', then something a little better, or, not to raise too many false hopes, a little less bad" (240). As if to concur with Lizzie's bleak outlook, the Escapee ultimately joins the Colonel and "contemplates the prospect of a new [capitalistic] life in the New World" (275).

As Carter's description of utopian idealism illustrates, naive idealism without concern for the material reality is doomed to failure. The Escapee proves to have no "defences whatsoever against the Colonel" (274). The "brotherhood of free men," unable to face the harsh reality of political and economic inequity, literally disintegrates as "if all together had been blown off the face of the earth" (243). There is also somewhat of a caution for the women who plan to "found a female Utopia" (240). For even they need men to "ensure the survival of this little republic of free women" (240). However, Carter does not negate the possibility for true happiness. In her discussion of the minor characters we see that love can transform the individual, and does offer a possibility for a new world. As well, the transformations of the

minor characters foreshadow the final transformation of Fevvers and Walser.

Mignon and the Princess ultimately find love and decide to remain with the Maestro in the isolated, frozen terrain. For as Fevvers ponders, "Love, true love has utterly transformed [Mignon]" (276). According to Mignon, she and the Princess were born to make music together. They have "been brought together, here as women and as lovers, solely to make--music that was at the same time a taming and a not-taming; music that sealed the pact of tranquility between humankind and their wild brethren, their wild sistren, yet left them free" (275). With their geographical isolation and their method of communication with the language of music, they remain firmly outside the realm of patriarchy.

It is the relationship between the Princess and Mignon which forces Fevvers' to question the nature of her own experiences: "what of my own journey, what of that? Bereft of my sword, as I am; crippled, as I am... yesterday's sensation, a worn-out wonder" (NC 247). What becomes apparent is that Fevvers, though Mae West-like in that she is a participant in the creation of her own objectification, has few choices or alternatives. As well, one can argue that she has become imprisoned within her own creation--without the gaze that enables her to be the object, she literally fades and withers. Not only is she "moulting," but everyday "the tropic bird looked more and more like the London sparrow as which it had started out in life, as if a spell were unravelling" (NC 271).

Because of her physical "deformity" (NC 19) Fevvers believes she "owes it to herself to remain a woman....As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none" (NC 161). Certainly, she is a liminal creature; she can become more idea than reality. Like other women before her, she might be more

valuable as symbol than as an actual being. It is as symbol or freak that she has been sought after and displayed in Ma Nelson's whore-house and Madame Schreck's house of horrors. It is her very liminality that leads Mr. Rosencreutz to want to capture, possess, and kill her. It is he who describes her as "Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species" (81). These are the qualities that make her valuable, a collector's item to both Rosencreutz and later the Grand Duke.

As a performer and lover, she feels whole only when seen and appreciated, but there is a danger in this need to be held in the eyes of the Other. At the climactic moment in the novel Fevvers experiences such a danger when in the Shaman's hut: she "felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imagination in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea" (289). It is this terrifying prospect which leads her to ask "Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am. Or am I what [Walser] thinks I am? (290). As Roberts notes, to feel "oneself turn from woman into idea is to exist solely in the mind of another and to lose all other subjectivity. To prove herself, to find herself, and to find her answer, she spreads her wings. She notes with satisfaction the thrill such a spectacle provides her audience"(141): "the eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was"(NC 290). However, as Lizzie notes, it is in the light of Walser's eyes that "her foster-daughter was transformed back into her old self again, without an application of peroxide, even" (NC 293). Fevvers, then, though she may not realize it, needs not just the gaze of the audience in general--where she is the object, the spectacle. She needs the

acceptance and love of Walser--the newly transformed Walser who will ask her "What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?", because for him she is no longer the object of his gaze but a woman (NC 291).

As Carter states, the New Woman needs a New Man, for without him, she feels herself diminishing. She needs the young American who "kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true. She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes. She longed; she yearned" (NC 273). Nonetheless, unless Walser successfully breaks free of his masculine perspective, the only image she would see reflected in his eyes is monstrous, "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" (161).

However, Walser is about to begin his re-construction. The train crash buries him under a mound of snow, and in his "profound sleep" he mimics the tale of The Sleeping Beauty. He is awakened with a mother's kiss and like "the landscape, he was a perfect blank" (222). Walser literally undergoes an entire childhood in moments: he was utterly dependent on his rescuers, he was without language, he "toddled" like an infant, and like a child he "was pleased with everything and cooed, gazing round him with eyes the size of saucers" (223).

And his experiences with the Shaman will guide his apprenticeship in reversing his perspective--he is literally carried upside-down, and cannot distinguish between hallucination and memory. Even time is upside-down here. For after only a few days Fevvers meets Walser, who appears to be transformed into a native woodsman with long flowing hair and beard. It is during his time with the Shaman that Walser acquires an "inner life, a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own" (260-261). He was no

longer an empty house but now was "tenanted at last" (261). Walser finally became, like Fevvers, "the little bird hatched from an egg" (264).

As Ricarda Schmidt rightly determines, the Shaman has important things in common with Fevvers. "Both their livings depend on the fact that their society accepts them, believes in them, and gives them food/money in return for the spiritual vision they offer. The Shaman *provides* concrete manifestations of the spirit world,...Fevvers is the concrete manifestation of an idea, the free woman" (71-72). However, Fevvers is on rather slippery terrain because she belongs to the future; her time has not yet come.

Moreover, just as it is not her time, so too is Siberia not her intended landscape. Although there is a liberating sense to the vision of a world without the patronymic, there is also something rather lacking in the open spaces of Siberia. As Sage notes, it is central to Carter's philosophy that this "lack of 'a place in the world' is not women's genuine condition but a piece of mystification, a myth, a nonsense" (*FM* 13). Moreover, any strategy "that valorises women as outsiders is suspect" (13).

Siberia is portrayed as a liberating space, because it literally offers freedom from oppression and figuratively because it offers an opportunity to create women's history on a blank sheet of paper. It is during this time that Lizzie offers Fevvers a history lesson on the oppression of women. Lizzie highlights the restrictions of the institution of marriage: a girl must be willing to say, "'[t]o you I give myself, for I am yours'...And that...'goes for a girl's bank account, too'" (280). As well, stumbling upon the mother and child isolated from humanity in "a little shelter built of branches" provides Lizzie with an opportunity to give Fevvers another lesson. As Lizzie states, "this tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system, a woman tied

hand and foot to that Nature which your physiology denies, Sophie, has been set here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman" (283).

With these lessons in mind, both Fevvers and Walser are transformed to the point where they are ready to unite. As Lizzie notes, it is "in the light of [Walser's] eyes, [that] her foster-daughter was transformed back into her old self again, without an application of peroxide, even" (293). However, her old self is really a new self, because it is in his eyes alone that she finds herself "swimming into definition" (290). For Walser, the final lesson is to find "the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love" (292-293). However, Siberia cannot be the final destination for these newly transformed lovers.

To remain in Siberia is to remain a marginalized outsider. Siberia, as a symbolic space, is a necessary stopover on the transformative journey to autonomy. It symbolizes the destination for the being constructed by and for societal norms, and the beginning of the journey for the autonomous individual--for the New Woman and New Man.

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Speculative Finale

However, the study of the representations of women in unofficial culture, in orally transmitted songs and stories, even in bar-room anecdotes, may prove a fruitful method of entry into the lived reality of the past. So may research into those forms of fiction that pre-date the bourgeois novel, in which the giggle of Alison, however disingenuous, suggests the possibility that, at some time in the past, a male narrator has been able to laugh at the pretensions of his own sex and therefore it is possible this may happen, again, in the future (Carter "Alison's Giggle" 553).

According to Elaine Showalter, "feminine, feminist, or female, the women's novel has always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces that relegated women's experience to the second rank" (36). In part, Carter's struggle against the oppression of women often involves the graphic portrayal and deconstruction of the cultural traditions and political philosophies which confine and restrict the marginalized. In her conclusion to *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter states that twentieth-century women writers have both "forged female mythologies and transcended them" (323). In so doing, they have joined the "mainstream as postmodern innovators, politically engaged observers, and limitless storytellers" (323). Moreover, according to Showalter, Carter's writing was a pivotal force in the evolution of British women authors. She believes that Carter's "cult" status is due, in part, to her appearance as one of the first authors to engage openly with the women's movement in general and with feminist criticism in particular.

However, this is not to suggest that in her engagement with feminist theory and criticism, Carter promises nor offers any definitive solutions to the construction of the feminine and the masculine. Nonetheless, as Bristow notes, few "contemporary writers have looked as long and hard as Carter into

the cultural construction of male and female sexuality" ("Introduction" 2).

In my discussion of Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, I analyzed the constructed enclosures which oppress those deemed feminine by official culture. Showalter's three-phased concept of a female literary subculture is used to organize the three geographical sites of Carter's novel. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter defines writing by women as the "product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant mainstream" (xiii). Although the idea of a linear progressive model is not a direction in which Carter's theoretical principles would have led her, I appropriated Showalter's terms and paradigm as a means of organizing the concepts within each of Carter's three sections.

The first phase of Showalter's model, the feminine, is characterized as a period in which the female author, and by extension, the female in general, internalizes and imitates the conventions and norms of official culture (13). In the first chapter of this thesis, "The Feminine Apprenticeship of the Fringed Hole," I examined the feminine enclosures of the brothel and the museum of woman monsters, in "London," Carter's first section. In her portrayal of the female inhabitants of these enclosures, Carter is intent on revealing their lived experiences as they journey through their apprenticeship of the feminine. Carter demonstrates that "the relationship between the sexes is determined by history and the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men" (SW 6). Thus, a discussion of the prostitute focuses on economics rather than morality.

The image of the prostitute exposes and then deconstructs the various theoretical cages which enclose woman in the label of Woman. For Carter, to become "woman means to become naturalized into a subordinate position

regardless of one's 'official gender.' That is, she disrupts an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender" (Robinson 77). Moreover, according to Carter, the brothel is a microcosm of the world in its present state (*SW* 58), and therefore, it is here where we find the structures and traditions which keep women enclosed within gilded cages.

However, as well as depicting women who resist and break free of society's construct of femininity, she also severs the connection between sex and gender. With the example of Madame Schreck's servant, Touissant, Carter demonstrates that regardless of 'official' gender, in a patriarchal society those without power are feminized. In the second section of Carter's novel, "Petersburg," Carter's feminist critique of oppressive patriarchal structures becomes most apparent. According to Showalter, the feminist phase of her model is characterized as a period of protest against the conventions of official culture, and a demand for equality and autonomy (13). In my own second chapter, "A Feminist Critique of 'The O! Of Grief,'" I concentrated on the inhabitants of the circus (Carter's second section) and on the inhabitants of the panopticon (Carter's third section). Carter critiques these two enclosures from a perspective which revises and subverts current literary theories. As my analysis demonstrated, Carter's feminism is not restricted to a construct that will have the female the victim of the male victimizer: the male clowns of the circus are marginalized by official culture, and the female prisoners are imprisoned by a female guard. Both the clowns and the inmates protest against, because they subvert, the standards and values of society.

However, it is the third chapter of my thesis, "Rewriting the Female *And* Male: The Apprenticeship of the New ♀ and ♂," which truly analyzes the concept of autonomy. According to Showalter, the female phase is characterized

as "a period of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (13). In the final chapter I analyzed how Carter illustrates this process of self-discovery and the apprenticeship of becoming an autonomous subject. This chapter analyzed the arduous transformative journey which Carter will have both Fevvers and Walser undertake to become autonomous individuals and, therefore, worthy candidates for leading society into the New Century.

Although both require transformative journeys, Carter demonstrates that biology necessitates that the two will traverse different paths. Moreover, Carter also changes the eventual destination because she insists on illuminating and dismantling all that is oppressive within the existing social order. Ultimately, Carter's destination is the creation of a new social order appropriate for the new century. Though the transformative journey begins in London and traverses the landscape of St. Petersburg, the destination is realized in the wilderness of Siberia, the final chapter of *Nights at the Circus*.

Though the novel and the journey end in the vast expanse of Siberia, in reality, the "blank page" of Siberia is yet to be written. As such, Carter does not offer the reader any solutions or answers. Her conclusion is but our beginning. Thus, just as Carter concludes with a beginning, this thesis will also conclude with a beginning. It is argued throughout this paper that Carter's critique is feminist and that one cannot separate her feminist fiction from her feminist theory.

However, what does it mean to say one "does" feminist literary theory? How can such a theory and practice effect change? The definitions that inform this paper will have feminism a political perception based on two crucial

premises. First, gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality by which women suffer systematic social injustice. Second, this inequality is not the result of biology, but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. With this philosophy, the political agenda must be to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them (Morris 1). Therefore, when a feminist literary critic such as Angela Carter approaches literature, she does so with the intent of making visible the mechanisms which imprison women within oppressive structures and institutions.

One may very well ask why it is important to evaluate literature from a feminist standpoint. Simply put, literature is a cultural practice which produces meanings and values. Indeed, our perception of reality is shaped largely by our representational systems, the predominant one being language -- "it becomes clear that the distinction between literature as a body of texts and life is complex...and the boundaries between the two may well be permeable, allowing interaction and influence" (Morris 8). Therefore, a feminist literary practice will make visible oppressive mechanisms and in so doing will change our perception of reality.

If our understanding of actuality is based, in part, on literature, then Carter will also determine that the representation of women in literature is based on the sex of the author. In her introduction to *Wayward Girls & Wicked Women*, Carter states that the women who inhabit the stories of myths and fairy tales would be characterized far differently if "men had invented them. They would be predatory, drunken hags; confidence trickers; monstrously precocious children; liars and cheats; promiscuous heartbreakers. As it is, they are all presented as if they were perfectly normal" (viii). However, Carter claims

that on the whole, "women writers are kind to women. Perhaps too kind" (viii). Certainly, one could hardly accuse Carter of creating delicate, passive victims skilled only in the art of suffering (viii). As Sage notes, Carter "feared and loathed and found hilarious the spectacle of the suffering woman, and her cruelty is a measure of her fear. One of the images that haunts her fiction, one of the most poignant and persistent borrowings, is the image of crazy, dying Ophelia...The drowning mad girl floats along her narrative streams through the years; no novel is without her since she is the icon of pathos you must exorcise again and again and again" (*Angela Carter* 32-33).

Carter's exorcism takes many forms. A representative example can be found in her short story "The Lives of Lady Purple." Here, Carter will equate the function of the puppet-master to that of the male author who creates the fictive female based on his own desire. Unfortunately, for the puppeteer in this story, his creation, Lady Purple, comes to life and kills him: she sucks the "breath from his lungs so that her own bosom [could heave] with it" (265).

If the male author can create a feminine image based on his own desire, yet pass it off as real, then what if these images could spring to life from the pages of fiction just as the Lady Purple escapes from the strings which moor her? According to Carter, as the character of Fevvers attests, the construct come to life would be a terrifying spectacle. However, although Carter's description of the puppeteer/author is ruthless, she does not necessarily celebrate the freedom of the marionette/feminine representation. For the Lady Purple, "now manifestly a woman," has but one option: she makes her way toward town "like a homing pigeon, out of logical necessity, to the single brothel it contained" (266).

Given Carter's assertion that in a capitalist, patriarchal society the

situation of the prostitute is as precarious as the situation of the wife, one can determine that she will not allow Fevvers to suffer the same fate as that of Lady Purple. Although Walser dreams of presenting Fevvers to the world as his wife, "Mrs Sophie Walser," this novel does not conclude with a wedding (294). For this to be a true romance, it should culminate in a marriage. As Lizzie reminds Fevvers, "[t]he Prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon's lair is always forced to marry her, whether they've taken a liking to one another or not. That's the custom. And I don't doubt that custom will apply to the trapeze artiste who rescues the clown. The name of this custom is a 'happy ending'" (281).

As well, Carter demonstrates both in her essays and in this novel that for a woman to marry in fiction is to grow up; "all the same, there is something rather honourable about the simple reluctance of fiction by and for women to accommodate itself to that kind of maturity" ("Alison's Giggle" 543). However, the conventional "happy ending" of the wedding in fiction by and for women "may signify not so much the woman's resignation of her status as autonomous individual, a status that might be at best problematic in a society with little available space for anybody's autonomy, but the woman's acquisition of a licence to legitimately explore her own sexuality in relation to a man"(545). Fevvers' assertion that she can not give her self away, because her "me-ness is unique and indivisible," indicates that the problematic nequitable relations of power represented by the institution of marriage are not easily solved in fiction or in reality.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes, the romance plot--"one that ends with either heterosexual union in marriage or the sexual failure of the heroine, marked by death--has served as the predominant mode of narrative since the

eighteenth century" (qtd. in Silbergleid 156). As Robin Silbergleid states, contemporary feminist authors subvert this paradigm and redefine the stories "our culture produces about women" (160). For Silbergleid this revisioning of narrative is a crucial precursor to social change: "if we accept that narrative is our governing epistemology, the very mode of human consciousness, then any amount of social change or subversion necessitates a new narrative structure, a new way of envisioning the world" (160). Thus, feminist utopian novels of the twentieth century "provide an alternative story for women, one that opens a space for feminist constructions of citizenship through its critiques of patriarchal capitalism and heterosexual coupling" (160). Certainly, Carter does indeed critique the systemic oppression of women in a patriarchal culture. However, she does not condemn heterosexual coupling nor necessarily celebrate all-female communities. As well, according to Silbergleid, feminist utopian narratives serve "a vital political function by providing a prescription and approach for social change" (160).

However, though Carter does state that the dream of a new world must endure, that the possibility is there, she does not didactically prescribe a formula for attaining this new world. Certainly, the union of Walser and Fevvers seems to provide a conventional "happy ending," and there seem to be no drastic obstacles to a revisioning of a new world. However, perhaps it is Fevvers' jubilant and raucous laughter which forces an elision within traditional narratives and thus creates a space for a new world for the new woman and man. However, Carter does not fall into the depths of clichés, where the bottom line reads something to the effect that love conquers all. For it is the laughter of the woman, of Fevvers, which "rose up from the wilderness in a spiral and began to twist and shudder across Siberia. It tickled the

sleeping sides of the inhabitants of the railhead at R.; it penetrated the counterpoint of the music in the maestro's house; the members of the republic of free women experienced it as a refreshing breeze...The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that loved and breathed, everywhere, was laughing" (NC 295).

The most obvious example of mischievous woman's laughter is the parody and mockery of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Throughout, Woolf adopts a tone of mock humility and reverence toward the institutions and traditions of the male colleges in order to make fun of their patriarchal assumptions of authority and knowledge. However, "even while she mocks time-honoured pedagogic forms, her references and statistics are aimed at bringing those minds long 'smoothed' and 'freed from any contact with facts' sharply up against the rough justice of women's economic and social inequality" (Morris 74). Clearly, Carter will not hold with a gynocriticism that emphasizes women's interaction with a patriarchal canon (or even a maternal one) which becomes a Poetics of suffering and victimization (Morris 73). In response to misogynistic myths and monstrous women, Carter, like Woolf, will mock and parody, but she goes further, and with a subversive and celebratory laugh, she will 'fly' in the face of artifice and tradition.

However, the precursor for Fevvers' laughter predates Woolf, and can be found in the giggle of Chaucer's Alison. This giggle, according to Carter, "sets up a series of echoes disturbing our preconceptions whilst echoing our experience" (NS 542). Carter speculates that Alison giggles when she plays a

practical joke on a young man to spurn his advances.³⁵ According to Carter, Alison's giggle is "not a sound which is heard very often in literature, although, in life, it can be heard every time a young girl successfully humiliates a would-be admirer" (542). And as Carter speculates, perhaps, "given the traditional male narrator in literature, the sound is so rarely heard just because it expresses the innocent glee with which women humiliate men in the only way available to them, through a frontal attack on male pride" (543). And certainly, on his journey to uncover the truth of Fevvers, Walser is tricked, beaten, nearly killed, and assumes the role of a chicken -- humiliating indeed. He is humiliated because he is fooled by Fevvers: by the myth of her virginity, but more importantly, by assuming that her advertising--"is she fact or is she fiction"--actually has a definitive answer.

One perceives that regardless of the question, Fevvers' response will be laughter. Even Walser laughs, though he is not "quite sure whether or not he might be the butt of the joke" (295). This laughter is not a delicate titter nor a gentle giggle, but rather, an earth-shattering, mind-blowing eruption. This laughter releases Fevvers' message and resonates across time and place. The laughter reverberates from Fevvers because she has escaped from the confines of femininity, the one bar of the birdcage that was previously invisible.³⁶ For Carter, the text itself is a cage. Just as the laughter must escape so too must the story "escape from the cage of the text and live out an

³⁵ Fevvers's "buss aloft" position seems to mimic Alison's act of tricking her suitor into kissing her own exposed and aloft "check."

³⁶ As Nora in *Wise Children* states, "There are limits to the power of laughter and though I may hint at them from time to time, I do not propose to step over them" (220).

independent life of its own amongst the people" (*FT* xviii).

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