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### NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS: SUBVERTING MALE REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

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RESUMO: *Nights at the Circus*, de Angela Carter, apropria e reescreve representações tradicionais – portanto, masculinas – de sujeitos femininos, os quais se tornaram modelos de comportamento para as mulheres ao longo da história. Explorarei a desconstrução que Carter faz dessas representações, através do uso de intertextualidade e paródia, dando voz a mulheres silenciadas por centenas de anos. Focarei naquelas reescrituras que mais contribuem para a subversão de certa representação tradicional, patriarcal e masculina das mulheres: a revisão do personagem mítico de Helena de Tróia, de contos de fadas populares e, finalmente, da personagem Mignon, de Goethe.  
PALAVRAS-CHAVES: subversão, representações masculinas das mulheres, intertextualidade, paródia.

*Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter's penultimate novel, published in 1984, is centered on the character Sophie Fevvers, a winged bird-like woman. An ambiguous character, Sophie is neither fully a woman, nor fully a bird, or so she claims. As she travels around Europe on the brink of the twentieth century, more precisely in 1899, working as a trapeze artist as part of a circus troupe, newspaper headlines read "Sophie Fevvers – fact or fiction?", since nobody is able to ascertain whether she is truly a half-bird woman or simply a hoax. As the novel begins, an American journalist, Jack Walser, is trying to unfold the truth on Fevvers. However, as he will soon realize, this is not as simple a task as it seems.

A closer look at the novel will reveal, however, that the discussion about the boundaries between fact and fiction goes beyond Fevver's plot; it is itself the subject of the novel. Brian Finney, in his article "Tall Tales and Brief Lives: Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*", comments on the metanarrative aspect of the novel:

More than any other of her works of fiction, *Nights at the Circus* takes as its subject the hypnotic power of narrative, the ways in which we construct ourselves and our world by narrative means, the materiality of fiction and the

fictionality of the material world, and the contract between writer and reader.  
(Finney 1998: n/d)

Therefore, Carter not only calls the reader's attention to the fictional status of literary texts, but also – and more importantly – to the fact that the boundaries between reality and fiction are not as clear-cut as they may seem to the naked eye, that *reality* is also constructed through means of narration when events are turned into facts. According to Linda Hutcheon, “facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events” (Hutcheon 2002: 54). This means to say that reality is not as *real* as one may think, that that which one has always taken for granted as *the truth* may have actually been constructed, which means it might also be deconstructed.

In this article, I will discuss how Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* appropriates and rewrites certain traditional views – thus male views – of the female subject which have become models of behaviour for women throughout history. I will explore Carter's deconstruction of these representations through the use of intertextuality and parody, giving voice to women who had been silenced for hundreds of years. I will focus on those of Carter's rewritings who contribute the most to the subversion of a certain traditional patriarchal male representation of women, namely the revision of the mythical character Helen of Troy, of popular fairy tales and, finally, of Goethe's character, Mignon.

*Nights at the Circus* starts with an explicit reference to the legendary Helen of Troy:

Lor' love you, sir!' Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. 'As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the “Cockney Venus” for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me “Helen of the High Wire”, due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*. (Carter 1984: 7)

The mythological Helen is only the first of innumerable allusions Carter will make throughout her novel. In its more than three hundred pages, the reader will stumble on countless references to all sorts of texts, from Greek and Roman mythology to traditional fairy tales, from the works of Shakespeare to Melville's *Moby Dick*, from Goethe's poetry to that of Baudelaire.

The novel is, therefore, highly intertextual. As Michel Foucault states in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,

the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous

form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.

Angela Carter seems to have created the perfect example of what Foucault's words meant – not that this was her purpose, of course.

To the untrained eye, most of these allusions will go unnoticed. I myself have to admit I would not have been able to grasp many of them without outside help, and many other still remain a mystery to me. One might believe, therefore, that the reading of the novel depends immensely on one's ability to grasp all these references. In a way, it does not. The novel is a very well constructed literary piece; its web of references is interwoven in such a seamless way that, to the uninformed reader, they might harmlessly go unnoticed while the novel still keeps its artistic quality. However, one might argue that a reader with a wider cultural baggage will be able to have a richer reading of the novel.

Moreover, the highly intertextual status of the novel can be both interpreted as a weakness or as a strength. As Marita Kristiansen affirms in *The Ravished Reader: Angela Carter's Allegory in "Nights at the Circus"*, "the novel's overt intertextuality demonstrates the text's dependency on other texts to achieve its identity, giving the intertextually constituted reader an important role in the production of meaning. Still, this role, in relation to such a self-conscious text as Carter's, is one with a tight script." (Kristiansen 2000: n/d). That being the case, the reader has a very limited role, since the novel's intertextuality accounts for its closure. On the other hand, since a text is not a closed unit – and here I evoke Foucault's words mentioned previously –, the reader is independent to search for meanings which the writer herself may not have thought of and can participate in an active and creative way in the construction of the work, as co-creator. In this case, Carter empowers the reader with her writing.

The empowerment of the reader is not the sole consequence of Carter's use of intertextuality in *Nights at the Circus*. In fact, intertextuality is hardly a novelty in literature. This kind of appropriation of previous texts has been used in literature for centuries, many times as homage to previous artists or simply as a way of showing erudition. However, in Carter's novel, these intertextual elements carefully interwoven into the story of Sophie Fevvers do not merely have a decorative function. They contribute to the fragmentation of the narrative, which, in turn, is not simply a decorative element either. As Peônia Viana Guedes states in "Elementos parodísticos, grotescos e carnavalescos em *Nights at the Circus*, de Angela Carter":

one of the main aspects of Angela Carter's fiction is the fragmented, mosaic-like quality of her texts. In her novels and short stories, Carter breaks with and destabilizes the presuppositions of unity of style, thematic coherence and logical development of plot, aiming at demonstrating the constructed and arbitrary fictionality of the literary text. (Guedes 1999: 242, my translation)

As Carter calls attention to the status of literature as "constructed and arbitrary fictionality", she also foregrounds the fact that certain representations disseminated

by literature might also be constructed. Carter's fragmented writing has thus a specific political purpose. Still according to Peônia Guedes:

one of the metaphors frequently used by Carter is the need to decolonize the language and habits of thinking of a society marked by European and patriarchal traces. Carter's writing represents a transformation of language and forms of fiction, since she tries to avoid the use of what she calls "language of the oppressor". (Guedes 1999: 242, my translation)

Furthermore, Carter does not only deconstruct the "language of the oppressor" but also that which this language has spoken about for thousands of years. This is, in fact, another consequence of the appropriation of all those intertextual elements in her novel: their deconstruction. Carter installs those elements, so that she can immediately subvert them, by rewriting them through the use of parody, foregrounding their status of constructed fictions.

Generally defined as a satirical or humorous imitation of serious pieces with the mere intention of ridiculing the original, parody has recently gained a more serious tone. In fact, the kind of parody used by Angela Carter is very much like the one defined above, but it goes beyond ridiculing the original: it aims at subverting it. As Linda Hutcheon points, "postmodern art (...) uses parody and irony to engage the history of art and the memory of the viewer in a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through a reconsideration of their usually unacknowledged politics of representation" (Hutcheon 2002: 96). As Carter appropriates such consolidated male representations of women – such as that of Helen of Troy – and ironically rewrites them through a female point of view, she contributes to their denaturalization, that is, to showing that these are culturally constructed characters and, therefore, feminine behaviours inspired by them are also constructed. As stated by Susanne Schmid, in "'Black Venus' - Jeanne Duval and Charles Baudelaire Revisited by Angela Carter",

Whereas much feminist criticism has been centred on the making and breaking of images of women, the intertextual references by authors such as Angela Carter have been regarded as a secondary issue. If one wants to comprehend the cutting edge of Carter's criticism as regards male myths of femininity, however, one needs to concentrate on her playful way of dealing with mythic references. In a postmodern bricolage, Carter uses European literature as a "scrapyard" (Carter 1985: 92), from which she takes bits and pieces, rearranging them in a way that exposes the constructedness of the reality that they depict. (Schmid 2008: n/d)

As mentioned previously, *Nights at the Circus* opens with a clear reference to Helen of Troy, as Fevvers refers to herself as "Helen of the High Wire", since, like Helen, she claims to have not been born from a woman, but hatched from an egg. To prove that she was never borne, but hatched, Fevvers affirms that she does not have a navel. In Greek mythology, Helen is generally considered the daughter of Leda, queen of

Sparta, with Zeus, who assumed the form of a swan to trick the queen and rape her. After the rape, Leda produced two eggs, one which yielded Helen and Polydeuces, children of Zeus, and the other which carried Castor and Clytemnestra, children of her husband, Tyndareus, who also impregnated her later the same night. Helen then grew up to become a magnificently beautiful woman, with “the face that launched a thousand ships”, as she was described by Christopher Marlowe in his *Doctor Faustus*. She is supposed to be the cause of the Trojan War, as Paris kidnapped her from her husband, Menelaus, who, in turn, started the war on Troy. Stunning enough to have a war started over her, the figure of Helen became the epitome of the beautiful, yet powerless, woman who can turn men’s heads but does not have a voice; a male myth of femininity. This is the first male representation of women which Carter challenges in her novel.

Although Fevvers compares herself to Helen, the latter was not more than a pawn in the hands of the gods and men in Greek mythology, a character without much say in a man’s world. Fevvers, in contrast, is an independent and confident woman, successful in her profession, who takes hold of her fate. Travelling around with a circus troupe – and being the main attraction – Fevvers does not depend on any man to provide for her or to protect her. The only one who she counts on is Lizzie, her dresser and the woman who took care of her after the brothel where she was raised closed down.

Angela Carter gives the world a new Helen and, therefore, a new paradigm of femininity, as she demythologizes the character. Fevvers is, indeed, much like Helen was, the most desired woman of her time, “heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise (...). Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger” (Carter 1984: 8). Nevertheless, although she is the femme-fatale of the moment, Fevvers is far from being ravishingly beautiful like Helen: she is much taller than most women, she does not have the best manners and her facial traits and make-up are such that Walser, when they first meet, even wonders if she is not in fact a man. Besides, she has grotesque bulges under her gown, a reminder of her freakish status of bird-woman. In short, the new Helen, as rewritten by Carter, is a desired woman, though not more beautiful than the average woman, who controls her own destiny and depends on no man to take care of her.

That Fevvers did not expect to count on any man to provide for her had been clear since her childhood, even before she grew her wings. Raised in a brothel, Fevvers worked as a living statue every night in order to entertain the clients, first dressed as Cupid and later, after the growth of her wings, as The Winged Victory. She already knew then that she was destined to a special fate and, although she did not know exactly which, she affirmed: “I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir!” (Carter 1984: 39). Subverting the role of heroines in fairy tales, which are invariably portrayed as passive beings waiting for Prince Charming – or another male character – to rescue them to a better fate, Carter’s heroine’s fate is in her own hands.

This brief reference to fairy tales is, in fact, not the single one in the novel. Fairy tales are prolific in examples of constructed archetypes of femininity and, therefore,

constitute vast material for Carter to work her deconstruction on. As Peônia Guedes asserts:

popular and fairy tales (...) are revised and rewritten to denounce the universalization of myths and archetypes that encourage stereotypes at the cost of individuality. False universalisms are ironized when Carter attacks the essential notions of masculine and feminine, showing the culturally defined nature of all relations between the sexes as being determined historically, in particular due to the economic dependency that leads to emotional and intellectual submission. (Guedes 1999: 243, my translation)

Another moment in the narrative when Carter works to challenge a traditional representation of women in fairy tales is when she appropriates the story of Sleeping Beauty. As the brothel where Fevvers grew up is shut down, she goes to work at Madame Schreck's Museum of Woman monsters. There she poses as another living statue, this time representing the Angel of Death, who guards one of the museum's attractions, the Sleeping Beauty. In the traditional fairy tale, whose most famous version was published by Charles Perrault in 1697, Sleeping Beauty is a young princess on whom a spell is cast by a wicked fairy. According to the spell, Sleeping Beauty would prick her finger on a spindle and die as soon as she reached adulthood. However, the spell is later reversed by a good fairy, but not totally. Now Sleeping Beauty is condemned to sleep for a hundred years until a prince kisses and awakens her. Despite her father's efforts to ban all spindles from the kingdom, the girl one day meets her fate. In short, Sleeping Beauty represents the young woman ignorant of her fate, which is first controlled by her father and later her future husband, the prince.

Angela Carter's Sleeping Beauty is a country girl who had had a joyful childhood until the day that her menses started. From this day on, she has only been able to stay awake for a few moments every day, just enough to eat and return to sleep. Though the cause of her narcoleptic condition is not explicit in the novel, one wonders whether she is physically incapable of remaining awake or if she has deliberately decided to retire from reality on the exact day she became a woman in order to escape the fate of most women at the time, that is, being given as a property by her father to her husband. In Carter's version of the fairy tale, Sleeping Beauty may be read as a character with immense power rather than fragile vulnerability, who does what is in her reach to escape the submissive role imposed on women, even if this means withdrawing from the living.

Yet another fairy tale character rewritten by Carter is the traditional evil stepmother – present in tales such as Snow White and Cinderella – who is inevitably a rival to the heroine. In *Night at the Circus*, Sophie Fevvers does not have a rival, but an ally: Lizzie. The character is not an explicit allusion to fairy tales, since she is not exactly Fevvers's stepmother but her adoptive mother. She found Fevvers on the steps of the closed brothel and took care of her from this day on. Having erased the character of the father – as Fevvers seems to be an orphan – Carter's narrative allows room to women's sisterhood, instead of the traditional rivalry for the attention of a man, de-

constructing another male representation of women as constant rivals for the love of men.

Incidentally, Carter also appropriates and rewrites the story of another woman character from classic literature who dies as a consequence of a man's inability to love her: Goethe's Mignon, from his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, published in 1795. In Goethe's novel, while wandering leisurely around the world, Wilhelm Meister sees this girl being abused by the leader of a troupe of itinerant acrobats. Since she seems to have been kidnapped by them, Wilhelm Meister rescues her. She becomes his loyal servant and later falls in love with him, who is completely oblivious of her love. Though she, being Italian, only speaks broken German, she sings beautifully in German. She is prone to have seizures, which aggravate as Wilhelm Meister starts spending time with other women. Later, she finally has a fatal seizure when she sees him kissing a woman.

For a twenty-first century reader, Mignon may be read as a character with no individual identity apart from that of Meister. She literally does not have a voice in Goethe's novel, as she cannot speak German. She moves from a battered existence within the troupe of acrobats to a self-effacing existence by Meister's side, and is incapable of governing her own life. Furthermore, she dies of love.

Carter's Mignon enters the story of Sophie Fevvers and Jack Walser in a very similar fashion to Goethe's. She is a member of the circus troupe and married to the Ape Man, who continually abuses her. Before marrying him, she had had a long story of abusive relationships. Like Goethe's Mignon, she sings beautiful songs without any understanding of their words. Moreover, when Walser saves her from an attack from a tiger, he "inherits" her from the Ape Man as Meister had "inherited" his Mignon. However, Carter challenges the traditional representation of Mignon as she gives the character not only a happy ending, but a subversive one. With the help of Fevvers, Mignon meets the Abyssinian Princess, with whom she can finally have a relationship of complicity and love. Besides, Carter also gives her a complete biography, whereas in Goethe's novel her story before she meets Meister is obscure.

In a symbolic level, Carter also challenges Goethe's representation of Mignon. To the German author, Mignon was a personification of lyric feeling, which should be abandoned with maturity. As Carter writes an ending in which Mignon finally finds happiness in another woman's arms, one may read it as an affirmation that lyric feeling nowadays lies by women's side. In other words, after two hundred years, women have finally been accepted as writers and poets, which at Goethe's time was very rare.

It is of great importance, at this point, to highlight that I do not intend to accuse Goethe of chauvinism – neither do I believe it was Angela Carter's intention as she wrote the character Mignon. Nevertheless, Goethe's character presents a set of characteristics liable to be appropriated and subverted by a feminist author such as Carter, especially because the character is part of the canon of Western literature, which has helped shape a certain patriarchal representation of women.

This patriarchal representation of women is brilliantly challenged by Angela Carter in *Nights at the Circus*, as she appropriates and subverts canonic characters and texts, such as Helen of Troy, Sleeping Beauty and Mignon. The subtle, though extensive, use of intertextuality allows her to foreground the status of constructed representations of these characters, as she parodically rewrites them, showing that in a postmodern feminist work, they might gain voice and a new life.

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ABSTRACT: Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* appropriates and rewrites certain traditional views – thus male views – of the female subject which have become models of behaviour for women throughout history. I will explore Carter's deconstruction of these representations through the use of intertextuality and parody, giving voice to women who had been silenced for hundreds of years. I will focus on those of Carter's rewritings who contribute the most to the subversion of a certain traditional patriarchal male representation of women, namely the revision of the mythical character Helen of Troy, of popular fairy tales and, finally, of Goethe's character, Mignon.

KEYWORDS: subversion, male representations of women, intertextuality, parody

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