'Anagrams of desire' : Angela Carter's writing for radio, film, and television

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Manchester University Press
MANCHESTER AND NEW YORK

distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 0 7190 5723 x *hardback*
0 7190 5724 8 *paperback*

First published 2003

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Scala with Meta display
by Koinonia, Manchester
Printed in Great Britain
by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the witness of a furious justice.

(Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*)

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement is due to Patricia Allderidge, the Richard Dadd archivist, Royal Bethlem Hospital Archives and Museum; Guido Almansi, for his correspondence about Carter's radio drama; Mark Bell, editor of Carter's dramatic writings, for generous access to proofs and archive material; Glyn Dearman, BBC Radio Drama, for clarifying the transmission dates of Carter's plays; producer John Ellis for allowing me extended access to archives at Large Door Productions Ltd and giving permission to include excerpts from the script and storyboard of *The Holy Family Album*; Kim Evans, BBC Head of Music and Arts, for her interview and allowing me access to the post-production script of *Angela Carter's Curious Room*; Elaine Jordan for her interest and support in getting this book published; director Jo Ann Kaplan for giving such an insightful and illuminating interview on *The Holy Family Album*; the late Lorna Sage for being instrumental in securing funding for this book; illustrator Corinna Sargood; Brian Stableford for his comments and encouragement; Jenny Uglow at Chatto & Windus for giving me astute advice and employment; David Wheatley for his rosemary, time and generosity in facilitating my research, as well his permission to use photographs of the production of *The Magic Toyshop*; Anne White at the University of Bradford for constructive feedback; and Mark Wolstonecroft at the Media Support Unit at Manchester University.

Special thanks go to Rachel Connor, both for her perceptive editorial help and the 'working lunches' which inform the theoretical foundation of my research; I am also very grateful to Joy Anderson, Elizabeth Hammond and Alison Metcalfe. Finally, love and thanks to all my family and Paul.

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Introduction: 'Anagrams of desire': Angela Carter's writing for radio, film and television

Angela Carter is best known for her novels, short fiction and journalism, but she also produced a large body of writing for media other than the printed page. Despite the current academic interest in her work, these dramatic writings have largely been ignored. This book redresses this lack of critical attention by examining her writings for radio, film and television and giving them a more central position in the Carter canon.

The book specifically examines those of Carter's dramatic writings which were actually realised and publicly transmitted in the medium for which they were intended, and with which she had a collaborative involvement, comprising five radio plays, two films, and two television documentaries. Primary emphasis is on these mediated texts, although extensive reference is also made to source texts and written scripts. Carter wrote a number of texts for stage and screen which are not fully discussed here, including two screenplays, 'Gun for the Devil' and 'The Christchurch Murder', an operatic libretto 'Orlando: The Enigma of the Sexes' and a stage play 'Lulu' (Carter, 1996). While I touch on them in the Envoi, these works do not form part of the major thrust of this book because they do not constitute mediated texts, either because they were never produced or, if they were realised, because Carter was not involved in their production.[1] However, they do illustrate Carter's ongoing experimentation with both modern mass media and traditional dramatic forms, such as theatre and opera, reinforcing the case for an examination of her dramatic writings.

The book is divided into three sections, each examining a particular medium. This structure is largely chronological, mapping the development in Carter's writing for media from her initial work in radio (1976–84, Chapters 1–3), through her adaptations for film (1984, 1986, Chapters 4–6) and then on to television (1991, Chapters 7–8). Each section is introduced with a chapter exploring the specific properties of the medium. Each of the sections has a different emphasis according to the extent of Carter's engagement with that particular medium, the range of criticism

and the utility of the theoretical approaches available. For example, the section on film is the most explicitly theorised because of the considerable amount of film theory with which it has been necessary to engage and because of Carter's extensive interrogation of cinema in her journalism and fiction. Conversely, the section on television is more descriptive and functional because of the amount of technical material garnered from interviews with producers and directors.

The first section focuses on Carter's five radio plays. Chapter 1, 'Aural hallucinations', draws on Carter's preface to her play anthology, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands: Four Radio Plays* (1985), examining her attraction to the medium, and discussing its formal and technical properties. In Chapter 2, 'Voices in the dark', I discuss the role of the various voices in *Vampirella*, *The Company of Wolves* and, to a lesser extent, *Puss in Boots*, linking radio to the oral tradition and Carter's feminist reworkings of traditional fairy tale in *The Bloody Chamber*.[2] In Chapter 3, 'Artificial biography', I explore *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, Carter's play about Victorian painter Richard Dadd, and *A Self-Made Man* on Ronald Firbank, examining how she uses the possibilities of radio as a medium to deconstruct biography as a genre and to challenge the concept of unified identity.

The film section addresses current debates in film theory in relation to gender, spectatorship and the gaze and examines Carter's two screen adaptations. Chapter 4, 'Anything that flickers', examines Carter's fiction and non-fiction writings about cinema which reveal an intelligent engagement with the concerns of contemporary feminist film theory, including a discussion of her little-known poem, *Unicorn*. While the emphasis in Chapters 5 and 6 is on the filmic texts, extensive reference is made to the short stories and novel on which these two adaptations are based. Chapter 5, '(Re)animating the body of the text', theorises adaptation through a discussion of the figure of the werewolf, yoking discourses around textual transformation, reanimation and abjection to offer a feminist re-reading of the film, *The Company of Wolves*. Chapter 6, 'Looking askance', posits a dual feminist strategy of looking in the film, *The Magic Toyshop*, investigating Carter's deployment of an active female gaze and exploring her use of life-like puppets and self-activating toys to unsettle the epistemological field of vision. The final section addresses Carter's work in television. Chapter 7, 'The box does furnish a room', examines her writings about television, outlining her equivocal relationship with the medium. In Chapter 8, 'Acting up on the small screen', I discuss her own involvement in an irreverent documentary on representations of Christ in Western art, *The Holy Family Album* and look at how Carter herself was represented in a BBC Omnibus documentary, *Angela Carter's Curious Room*.

The book draws extensively on exclusive interviews and correspondence with producers and directors with whom Carter collaborated, David Wheatley (director of *The Magic Toyshop*), John Ellis and Jo Ann Kaplan (producer and director of *The Holy Family Album*) and Kim Evans (director of *Angela Carter's Curious Room*) (transcribed in Crofts, 1998b).[3] These interviews offer a unique insight into the technologies of media production and processes of collaboration and adaptation, which may have eluded traditional research methods. Dealing with adaptations has presented a particular challenge. For example, in dealing with the film *The Company of Wolves* in Chapter 5 it has also been necessary to refer to the screenplay, the radio play in performance, the radio play script and the original short stories on which they are based. These multiple texts and the degree of collaboration involved in realising them raises complex questions of authorial control and responsibility, making it difficult to identify and describe the relationship between author and text.

If these questions seem outdated in this era of 'the death of the author', they nevertheless need to be addressed. As Lorna Sage (1994) observes, Carter 'had a position on the politics of textuality. She went in for the proliferation, rather than the death, of the author'. Carter's mediated texts perform this 'proliferation' both in terms of the multiple adaptations of texts and the collaborative relationships between Carter as original author/ scriptwriter and the various directors with whom she worked. My interviews with directors and producers help to clarify these processes of collaboration and emphasise Carter's intellectual generosity within the collaborative relationship. Not precious about her own work, she was prepared to share her material, whether collaboratively adapting a novel or writing directly for the medium, acknowledging the director's expertise (see Wheatley, 1996, and Kaplan, 1995, in particular). The interviews also reveal Carter's informed grasp of the various media for which she wrote. Aware of the complex processes involved in transforming a text from one medium to another, Carter understood the need to take both the aesthetic and the technologies of the new medium into account when adapting her own work. Those texts which were written directly for the medium illustrate Carter's media-literacy and her growing confidence in working directly with the language of communications media.

The challenge of dealing with mediated texts has encouraged me to embrace a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives rather than employing any single theoretical framework. This follows Douglas Kellner's 'multi-perspectival approach' (1995: 98) which 'draws on a wide range of textual and critical strategies to interpret, criticize, and deconstruct the artifact under scrutiny'. Kellner favours 'a pragmatic contextualised approach to theory' and argues that 'the more perspectives that one brings to bear on a

phenomenon, the better one's potential grasp or understanding of it could be' (1995: 26).

While I utilise an overwhelmingly feminist frame, this is not incompatible with a multiperspectival approach. In fact, current feminist theory is becoming increasingly multiperspectival in its growing recognition of a number of previously disregarded theoretical axes, such as sexuality, race and class, and in its tendency to combine Marxist, psychoanalytical, poststructural and postcolonial paradigms. The usefulness of a multiperspectival approach for contemporary feminism is obvious. It offers a critical arsenal with which to interrogate grand theoretical narratives which have traditionally either essentialised 'Woman', such as psychoanalysis, or have tended to ignore gender as a political axis, such as Marxism. This is not to suggest that these theoretical approaches cannot be illuminating in their own right, but that an informed awareness of the complex interactions between a range of theories is likely to be more illuminating. As Kellner suggests, 'combining powerful approaches like Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism and other contemporary theoretical optics might yield more insightful and useful analyses than those produced by one perspective alone' (1995: 26).

It is worth acknowledging the potential pitfalls of such a multiperspectival approach, which, as Kellner argues, might end in an '"anything goes" liberal pluralism' if not securely grounded in an awareness of historical contexts (1995: 100). Furthermore, it is important to confront the fact that, however multiperspectival I attempt to be, I am ultimately limited by my own partial perspective.[4] But this partiality need not be antithetical to theory if read in the context of an anti-essentialist feminist strategy which recognises personal experience as an alternative to the universalising tendencies of ahistorical master narratives. In employing a multiperspectival stance in this book, I have attempted to bring an awareness of both historical and personal contexts, as well as utilising a range of theoretical axes.

I also embrace Kellner's related notion of a 'transdisciplinary' approach, crossing the borders of literary, film, media and cultural studies (1995: 27). Researching Carter's work in media, it has been necessary to engage with a range of theory outside the usual scope of literary study. In particular, feminist film theory has proved very productive not only in the discussion of Carter's two film adaptations, but also in theorising her work in radio and her fictional exploration of spectacle. I have also found media, communications and cultural theory useful in thinking anew about audiences and contexts, as I go on to discuss below. Such a multiperspectival, interdisciplinary stance is particularly productive when discussing Carter's mediated texts, not only because of the imperatives of

discussing a wide range of media, but also because Carter's writing practice and feminist strategy are similarly polyvalent.

The rest of this Introduction will concern itself with a number of overlapping issues which cross-fertilise to generate a multiplicity of meanings around gender and representation: feminism's engagement with the mainstream, the intricacies of Carter's demythologising feminist project, the problematics of appropriation and the relationship between cultural production and consumption. It has been necessary, for the purposes of linear argument, to tease out the strands of this complicated web into some semblance of order, but I want to stress the interconnectedness and complexity of the arguments and acknowledge that the following is only one way of drawing the various threads of the argument together. This interweaving of ideas is indicative of both my own multiperspectival approach and Carter's oscillating, 'paradoxical' feminist strategy of writing, which I will come to discuss at the end of this Introduction.

Carter, media and the academy

Carter is becoming an increasingly popular subject for academic research, postgraduate and undergraduate teaching, and at A-Level. In 1994, more students applied for funding for doctoral theses on Angela Carter than on the entire eighteenth-century literary offering (Sanders, 1994: 6).[5] Yet her work in media still remains on the periphery of the Carter canon. Three book-length studies on Carter which have appeared since her death in 1992 either ignore her mediated texts entirely, or mention them in passing. In *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, Aidan Day acknowledges Carter's versatility as a writer, 'she wrote children's stories, radio plays, film scripts, poetry, journalism and criticism of various kinds', but decides 'she is principally a writer of fiction', and consequently limits his discussion primarily to her novels (1998: 1).[6] While Linden Peach recognises Carter as 'more than a novelist', in *Angela Carter*, he similarly neglects her mediated texts, concentrating, instead, on 'Carter's contribution to the development of the novel' (1998: 2–3). In *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* (1997), Sarah Gamble cites the radio and film adaptations of 'The Company of Wolves' and the screen version *The Magic Toyshop*, but does not offer any sustained analysis.

Another recent publication, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, a collection of essays edited by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, also marginalises Carter's writing for media. Bristow and Broughton acknowledge that while 'the work of evaluating and historicizing Carter's achievement has now begun ... many aspects of Carter's work remain to

be broached in a systematic way', but do not list her work in media among them (1997: 19). While some of the contributors mention Carter's work in film or radio, once again it does not form the main focus of discussion.[7] Elaine Jordan's 'Afterword' to the collection points out its emphasis on 'political argument' at the expense of 'formal and generic' analysis (Bristow and Broughton (eds), 1997: 217). I do not think Jordan was specifically referring to Carter's media, here, but nevertheless she points to a gap in the current 'canonisation' of Carter.[8] This book proposes to address this gap, both in terms of its discussion of the formal properties of the range of media for which Carter wrote in addition to the printed page, and in terms of how such an analysis must inform any discussion of her writing practice. The majority of research which does engage directly with Carter's mediated texts can be found in isolated articles, most of which have focused on her film adaptations.[9] Guido Almansi (1994) has been alone in writing on Carter's work in radio. There has been little, or no academic study of Carter's work for television.

There is therefore clearly a need for a full-length study which addresses these texts as a body of work worthy of critical attention in its own right. Moreover, there is a specific need for a feminist analysis of the interrelationship between Carter's self-declared feminism and her work in media. Of course, Carter's feminist politics should not be taken as read and it is necessary to delineate her feminist strategies and their critical reception before assessing their translation to the mainstream.

The reception of Carter's feminist strategies

While Carter's fiction has received an extensive feminist critique, the diversity of which indicates a healthy dialogue within the feminist sisterhood, her work in media has received a limited feminist explication. In 'Pleasure and Interpretation', for example, Catherine Neale discusses Carter's work in film, asserting that Carter generally receives 'sympathetic explication, commentary and contextualisation' from the feminist sisterhood, but remains frustratingly vague about exactly what has been written (claiming that there are 'a limited range of articles and chapters, and it is fairly easy to gain a sense of their general drift'): 'what her work does not receive, it seems, is that element of critique that might examine the implications and potential contradictions of her projects, or place her work within a framework that is not dictated by Carter herself' (Neale, 1996: 99).[10] Having dismissed the feminist critique of Carter's work as either limited, hagiographic, or bamboozled by Carter's critical persona, Neale neglects to address feminism in 'the shift from writing to image' in

her own critique of Carter's two film adaptations which, she argues, 'emerge as curiously downbeat hybrids' (1996: 101).

While Neale outlines 'the struggle that feminist criticism in particular has to identify a methodology' (1996: 99), Christina Britzolakis identifies a hegemony of 'gender-performance' criticism in response to Carter's work in her article 'Angela Carter's Fetishism' (1995). She proposes that Carter's writing lends itself to this type of analysis because of its densely theatrical quality:

> If there is a single theme that appears central to criticism of Carter's writing, that theme must surely be theatricality. This is not surprising, since dramatic performance in all its varieties – masquerade, carnival, burlesque, travesty, cross-dressing, drag – leaps out at the reader from the pages of Carter's texts as both style and subject. (1995: 459)

Britzolakis claims that there is too straightforward an elision between these dominant notions of performativity, Carter's fictional theatricality and her 'self-proclaimed "demythologising" project' and questions whether 'the staging of femininity as spectacle [can] indeed be linked with a liberatory feminist project' (1995: 459–60). Certainly, performativity has become common currency within contemporary feminist theory, developing from Joan Riviere's seminal essay, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' ([1929] 1986), through Irigarayan concepts of mimicry and Judith Butler's theories of 'gender performance' (1990, 1993). But, while much of the feminist criticism of Carter's work takes theatricality as its point of inspiration, this does not mean, as Britzolakis seems to suggest, either that theories of gender-performance are deployed uncritically, or that Carter's feminism is held up as inherently liberatory.[11] But if these complex, interconnected issues around gender, theatricality, performance, spectacle, audience, fetishism and objectification are already fraught, how then, do they relate to Carter's mediated texts?

Carter's demythologising practice

It is necessary to address Carter's self-defined demythologising project before we can evaluate its translation to the mainstream. In 'Notes From the Front Line', she claims 'I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business' (1983d: 71). Seeing the act of writing as the 'investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives', Carter maintains that her appropriation of hegemonic structures is part of 'the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought'

(1983d: 71, 75). The act of reappropriating language to express experience outside the dominant culture is also pertinent to postcolonialist literary theory. In fact, Carter sees herself as linked to such postcolonial writers as Gabriel García Márquez and the black South African writer, Bessie Head, 'who are transforming actual fictional forms to both reflect and to precipitate changes in the way people feel about themselves' (1983d: 76). Supporting the argument that a 'reactionary' form can indeed be rewritten, Makinen cites the postcolonial appropriation of the novel as an example of successful decolonialisation: 'when the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology ... then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions' (1992: 4–5).

In interview with John Haffenden, Carter puts forward an argument for a type of 'moral curiosity', a kind of cultural investigation which exposes social constructs and opens up new areas of discourse: 'I would see it as a moral compunction to explicate and to find out about things. I suppose I would regard curiosity as a moral function' (1985: 96). Carter sees writing as a 'moral function', not in the didactic sense, but as a process of challenging cultural assumptions, raising questions, exploring experience and making room for the expression of things traditionally silenced or unheard by society:

> it has nothing at all to do with being a 'legislator of mankind' or anything like that; it is to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed. (1983d: 75)

In an interview with Anna Katsavos, she further defines her demythologising project as the job of 'trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them', defining myth both in 'a sort of conventional sense; also in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in *Mythologies* – ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean' (1994: 11–12). For Carter, then, this is a defamiliarising process. As Lorna Sage observes in an interview for the BBC Omnibus documentary, *Angela Carter's Curious Room*:

> She took apart the pictures we have of ourselves with a very sceptical eye. We live nowadays surrounded by images of ourselves – blow ups of ourselves, representations of ourselves, shadows of ourselves through the media, through film and of course through books – a much older medium. But a lot of the time our art ignores this fact, but she took it on and her books introduce people, if you like, to their images, introduce people to their shadows, introduce them to their other selves. (Evans and Carter, 1992: 11)

The problematics of a feminist politics of cultural appropriation

Some feminist critics, however, have questioned the success of Carter's self-proclaimed demythologising feminist project. Indeed, the issue of whether feminism can reappropriate patriarchal forms has been a major concern of much recent feminist theory. Naomi Schor, for example, describes mimesis as 'a parodic mode of discourse designed to deconstruct the discourse of misogyny through effects of amplification and rearticulation' (1994: 67, see also Irigaray, 1985: 220 and Vice (ed.), 1996: 176).[12] This is descriptive of the way in which Carter attempts to reappropriate supposedly misogynistic genres, such as pornography and fairy tale, and put them in the service of women. But, mimicking patriarchal structures in order to subvert them, there is always the danger that mimesis might be mistaken for endorsement. Similarly, irony as a subversive narrative practice can easily be inverted for reactionary ends. But, as Schor argues, 'mimesis signifies not a deluded masquerade but a canny mimicry ... a joyful reappropriation of the attributes of the other that is not in any way to be confused with a mere reversal of the existing phallocentric distribution of power' (1994: 67). Indeed, Anne Fernihough emphasises 'how politically complex the issues of mimicry and masquerade really are, and how they cannot be understood as straightforwardly radical *or* reactionary' (1997: 100, all emphasis in the original unless stated otherwise). Paulina Palmer astutely pinpoints the problematics of a feminist politics of appropriation: 'how does one distinguish between a text which constitutes a serious consideration of the topic and one that is an exercise in pornography? The question is complicated by the fact that ... the meaning of a visual image or fictional episode is frequently ambiguous' (1987: 189).

This is a point which Clare Whatling takes up in her consideration of 'the appropriateness of appropriation' (1997: 13), arguing that, while holding an obvious attraction for a lesbian/feminist politics, 'appropriation remains a strategy whose potential for subversion is always under contention':

> On the one hand, appropriative reading seems a valid strategy of wilful misreading. On the other hand, there is a danger that appropriative reading merely sustains, as it were by default, the reproduction of the status quo. (1997: 22)

Similarly, Fernihough acknowledges that Carter's reappropriation of male-constructed images of women, such as Fevvers' impersonation of the Winged Victory in *Nights at the Circus*, is a risky strategy because it is open to misreading:

> The fetishistic responses of the Grand Dukes and other eccentric admirers of dubious intent show how vulnerable the transgressive sign is, and how crucial the notion of 'right' and 'wrong' reading is to the semiotics of the body. (1997: 99)

As Fernihough argues, 'the transgressive body, the body that subverts cultural stereotypes, creating its own paradigm, is always at risk of being read as freakish. Performance implies an audience, and to some extent that audience is beyond the performer's control' (1997: 99). Britzolakis (1995) similarly questions a feminist politics of gender as performance when she suggests that, because spectacle requires an audience, it therefore fails to escape the very voyeuristic structures of looking which Carter claims to demythologise.

But, as Fernihough argues, while 'there will always be the fetishistic Grand Dukes who read on their own terms. Carter is alert to these complexities' (1997: 101). Audiences, it seems, are becoming increasingly important. This is never more explicit than in the critical reception of Carter's engagement with pornography, one of the most mediated of discourses, in her fiction and non-fiction.[13] Pornography, like adaptation, foregrounds the theoretical rift between modernist and postmodern figurations of media culture, but also, importantly, highlights the fact that gender is central to these debates around representation. Endeavours to differentiate between pornography and erotica often lead to futile attempts to pin down the meaning of artistic representation itself. Carter caricatures this modernist tendency to hierarchise between erotic art and pornography: 'bad dirty books never did anyone any harm, except make their teeth rot or give them hairy palms. But *good* dirty books do the real damage ... And it isn't the dirt that does it. It's the art' (1977: 9). As Jennifer Wicke argues (1993: 63), 'pornography is a secret sharer in the canon debate, and a hidden partner of the high art/mass culture conflict that rages beyond the perimeters of the canon':

> I'm not proposing anything utopian about this transfigured pornographic consumption, nor making the familiar claim that sexuality is always and everywhere transgressive and consequently liberatory. Rather I want to direct attention to what is usually left out of the equation in discussing consumption, let alone pornographic consumption, which is the work of consumption. (1993: 70)

Furthermore, as Makinen argues, anti-pornographic readings of *The Bloody Chamber* ignore 'the notion of consent within the sado-masochistic transaction' (1992: 12). As Makinen goes on to suggest, it is precisely these 'debates around the marginalized and pathologized "perversities" that are breaking up the phallocentric construction of sexuality' and while