

**Re-visiting Angela Carter :
texts, contexts, intertexts**

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Texts, Contexts, Intertexts

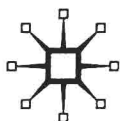
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palgrave
macmillan



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First published 2006 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-9705-0 hardback
ISBN-10: 1-4039-9705-5 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts/edited by Rebecca Munford.

p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-9705-5 (cloth)

1. Carter, Angela, 1940-1992-Criticism and interpretation. 2. Women and literature-England-History-20th century. I. Munford, Rebecca, 1975-II. Title: Re-visiting Angela Carter.

PR6053.A73Z84 2006
823'.914—dc22

2006046251

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Foreword

Jacqueline Pearson

Believe what you want to believe. What you want to believe is the truth.

(Angela Carter, *Shadow Dance*)

In Angela Carter's first novel, *Shadow Dance* (1966), the ambiguous Honeybuzzard takes out a 'small, plastic rose on a coiling rubber stem attached to a bulb [...] he pressed the [...] bulb and an obscene, ridged, pink, tactile, rubber worm leaped out, quivered momentarily, and then sank back into the crimson nest of plastic petals, detumescent' (65). In a novel so full of scraps of literary quotation, it is easy to recognize this as a joke-shop literalization of William Blake's warning of sexuality corrupted by 'the invisible worm' in "The Sick Rose" (1795). This is entirely appropriate to the ersatz world of the novel where sexual desire is twisted by violence or futility, and where literature and art are transposed into their most fragmentary and meaningless forms. In *Shadow Dance*, Carter creates through quotations a blackly hilarious demotic version of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), where allusions, explicit and implicit, jostle to be recognized and to gain priority in the novel's competing realities. Morris sees the world through a cascade of imperfectly remembered and understood echoes: 'A quotation floated from a vague corner of his mind. "Besides, that was in another country, and the wench is dead." Who said that?' (17); "'Revenge is a wild kind of justice" [...] Who said that?' (33).¹ Cut adrift from any aesthetic, political or moral context, fragments of Dante, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *King Lear* (ca. 1605), *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), "Goblin Market" (1862), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne emphasize the fundamental incoherence and moral bankruptcy, but also the wildly imaginative fertility, of the novel's world.

These intertextual strategies provide a comically exact textual equivalent of the junk-shop run by Honeybuzzard and Morris where false faces, junk of all kinds, dismembered bodies and dismembered phrases, imply a culture in collapse. In *Shadow Dance*, and elsewhere in Carter's early novels, the fragments of high culture create not a nostalgic yearning for better, more ordered times, as in *The Waste Land*, but a vigorous and abrasive celebration of ambiguity. The security of our knowledge

totters in the face of 'the fictionality of realism' (Gamble 23). The reality of reality becomes problematic, with Morris uncertain of whether he is dreaming or not, even whether he really exists or not, and Honeybuzzard explicitly denying the availability of objective truth: 'Believe what you want to believe. What you want to believe is the truth' (125). Again this seems to echo Blake, this time the Blake of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790–93), apparently now adopted by Honeybuzzard as the patron of total moral relativism.² While for earlier highly allusive writers, for John Webster, Alexander Pope or Eliot, the ability to deploy intertextual reference marked our knowledge of and our ability to control the world, for Carter it is part of a project which combines a lively appreciation of the literature of the past with a radical 'demythologising' project ("Notes from the Front Line" 71) which challenges our confidence in our social, cultural and psychic structures and the nature of reality itself.

From earliest to latest work, Carter plays with allusions from literature, art and film. From Shakespeare to Sade, from Baudelaire to the Brothers Grimm, from Proust to Poe, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Le Douanier Rousseau, from John Ford the seventeenth-century dramatist to John Ford the film-director, all is grist to her mill. For Carter, though, intertextual processes and the knowledge they encode seem always two-edged. At the end of *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), with the toyshop burning in an apocalyptic conflagration and losing her family for the second time, Melanie escapes on to the roof with Finn. An absolute break with the past is indicated: as Carter herself commented, the toyshop burns and 'adult life begins' (Sage 190) – though, ironically, even this scene merely replays the past, for Melanie has 'already lost everything, once' (199). Finn and Melanie can now 'only be like ourselves' (199): metaphors, allusions, and images can no longer be appropriate, for mature identity depends on multiple renunciations of the past (a literary as well as a psychological past). But, of course, this return to the womb of a pre-literate existence cannot really happen. Carter herself acknowledged the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden as a crucial intertext here (Haffenden 80), and there are others. 'At night, in the garden, they faced each other in a wild surmise' (200). This quotation, from John Keats's "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816), picks up and completes a quotation begun on the first page of the novel, where Melanie is seen exploring herself, 'a physiological Cortez' (1). In repudiating art (Finn's paintings are burned) and allusion in favour of a grittier, more mature knowledge and individualism, Carter's characters can do so here only in the intertextual language of allusion.

If for Carter allusion helps to provide a language for ambiguity, one way of achieving this is to tell and retell certain central narratives. I have in mind especially her use of fairy tales. *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) contains three engagements with "Little Red Riding Hood" (in which respectively the grandmother, the hunter, and the girl herself prove to be the wolves)³ and two radically different retellings of "Beauty and the Beast". In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", the cosiness of the fairy story happy ending is so exaggerated, the underlying theme of emotional blackmail so naked, that irony is inescapable. In the last lines, Mr and Mrs Lyon, the ordinary bourgeois married couple who were once Beauty and the Beast, walk 'in a drift of fallen petals' (51), evoking at once the garden of Oscar Wilde's *Selfish Giant* and the Garden of Eden, overblown images of transience which challenge the very fairy tale security they seem to affirm. "The Tiger's Bride", Carter's exhilarating recreation of "Beauty and the Beast", concludes not, by contrast, in the socialization and humanization of the Beast, but in her accepting her inward, deepest, essential Beastly nature and becoming transformed herself: 'each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world [...] I shrugged the drops of my beautiful fur' (67).

Carter's practice with allusion changes over the course of her career. In *Shadow Dance* especially, but also to some degree in other early novels like *The Magic Toyshop*, *Heroes and Villains* (1969), and *Love* (1971), a prodigal, apparently unstructured stream of allusions evokes lives, families or cultures, that have collapsed into fragments. (Conversely, in *Several Perceptions* an apparently chaotic world and narrative may come into a newly, though perhaps ironically, clear form when we see it through the prism of its main intertext, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [1865]).⁴ The later novels tend to limit or at least to redirect this lush undergrowth of allusion. In her last novel, *Wise Children* (1991), the whole work is structurally shaped by its intertexts. As a novel 'about English culture' and about Shakespeare 'as one of the originating myths of English culture' (Day 95), *Wise Children* simultaneously demythologizes and remythologizes. English culture is depicted as saturated with commodified, fetishized versions of Shakespeare, evoked by the repeated reference to Shakespeare's head on a £20 note (*ibid.*). But at the same time Carter appreciated Shakespeare, and not only as the apotheosis of low culture, 'the intellectual equivalent of bubble-gum' (Sage 186). Self-confessedly a 'rather booksy person' (Haffenden 85), she acknowledges the continuing power of his narratives, and their ability to shape both the legitimate culture of the great Shakespearean

actors and the illegitimate, both literally and metaphorically, culture embodied by Dora and Nora Chance. The story of Shakespearean actors takes on the form of Shakespearean comedy, with its multiple pairs of identical twins evoking *The Comedy of Errors* (ca. 1594) and numerous other Shakespearean allusions. Dora and Nora Chance's lives are even comically overdetermined by their residence in Bard Road, Brixton.

The earlier *Nights at the Circus* (1984) mimics, feminizes and makes strange the Dickensian biographical novel, and continues to be rich in allusions, to *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Tempest* (ca. 1610–11), Charles Baudelaire, W.B. Yeats, *Hamlet* (1599), Lord Byron, Leo Tolstoy and *As You Like It* (1599). The sense however is 'Ludic' (99) rather than sinister, and its structure, although wildly episodic, evokes not so much fragmentation as luxurious excess, to some extent disciplined by an allegedly 'straightforward allegorical' framework (Haffenden 87). Questions continue to be asked about the reality of reality – 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' (7) – but the novel ends with Fevvers's triumph over reality, her triumphant assertion that she has 'fooled' not only Walser but us readers. Fevvers, the larger-than-life heroine, appropriates both Mae West and the Kristevan woman who is 'outside naming and ideologies' (Kristeva 21; qtd. in Moi 163).

It is now fourteen years since Carter's tragically premature death, and her influence is still discernible on much contemporary fiction, and on those of us who read her so avidly, and delighted in her scepticism about all orthodoxies, including feminism itself. We are now ripe for a reassessment of her work, and a full-scale examination of her intertextual strategies is a promising way forward. This volume examines Carter's intertextual practices in relation to film (Jean-Luc Godard) and literature (Marcel Proust, William Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe), and also allows her to be contextualized within broader cultural movements (gender politics, surrealism, Orientalism). These essays will challenge our assumptions about Carter and her world and enlarge our understanding of her political and literary preoccupations. Carter's 'fiction is often a kind of literary criticism' (Haffenden 79), with representation itself thematized through quotation, allusion and intertextuality. Until the end she challenged the reality of the real, the truthfulness of literary texts, and the scope of our ability to know the real world. The reader might, finally, discern tension between Carter's 'committed materialism' ("Notes from the Front Line" 70) and her delight in 'the shop-soiled yet polyvalent romance of the image' or allusion (*Nights at the Circus* 107). But ambiguity is Carter's most distinguishing feature, the 'ambiguity of the mirror' (*Nights at the*

Circus 8) one of her favourite images, and the two-edged quality of her literary allusiveness and appropriation constitutes a key strategy for embodying that ambiguity.

Notes

1. The answers, of course, are Christopher Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta* (ca. 1592 and 1633) and Francis Bacon in the *Essays* (1625) respectively.
2. 'Everything possible to be believ'd is an image of the truth' (184).
3. These are "The Werewolf", "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice".
4. For a fuller account, see Pearson (252–53).

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the contributors for their correspondence about Angela Carter's work – not to mention their quick responses to editorial queries. Thanks also to Michelle Parslow for her assiduousness in preparing the index, to Paula Kennedy for her support of the project, and to Joanna O'Neill for kindly granting permission to use her artwork for the cover. Lastly, thanks to Paul Young for his sagacity and enthusiasm.

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Angela Carter and the Politics of Intertextuality

Rebecca Munford

[M]y fiction is very often a kind of literary criticism, which is something I've started to worry about quite a lot. I had spent a long time acquiescing very happily with the Borges idea that books were about books, and then I began to think: if all books are about books, what are the other books about? Where does it all stop? [...] Books about books is fun but frivolous.

(Angela Carter in interview with John Haffenden)

Angela Carter's œuvre is characterized by its extraordinary range of literary and cultural references. Christina Britzolakis, for example, refers to 'the voracious and often dizzying intertextuality' of Carter's writing (50), while Linden Peach argues that intertextuality is a 'boldly thematised part of her work' (4). From fairy tale to French decadence, from medieval literature to Victoriana, and from cookery books to high theory, Carter's narratives are littered with allusions and references drawn from a wide range of cultural spheres.¹ As Carter herself puts it in an interview with John Haffenden:

I have always used a very wide number of references because of tending to regard all of western Europe as a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles...*bricolage*. Basically, all the elements which are available are to do with the margin of the imaginative life, which is in fact what gives reality to our own experience, and in which we measure our own reality. (92)

It is owing to the suggestive image of the scrap-yard from which Carter irreverently loots and hoards that her 'distinctively magpie-like relation to literary history' (Britzolakis 50) and iconoclastic approach to canonicity have most often been framed in relation to a postmodern aesthetic. Undoubtedly, Carter's promiscuous use of citation, appropriation and literary resonance dismantles the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' cultural forms and unsettles the workings of power, legitimacy and the sacred. In this respect, it shares postmodernism's challenge to mimetic assumptions about representation by promoting narrative uncertainty, heterogeneity and dispersal. Nevertheless, this straightforward understanding of Carter's eclectic intertextual citation in terms of the formal textual qualities associated with postmodernism is held in tension with her self-declared 'absolute and committed materialism' – her frank and steadfast 'investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives' ("Notes from the Front Line" 70). In short, her oft-cited claim that she is in the 'demythologising business' (ibid. 71).

One of the most recurrent and mordant charges levelled at Carter is that her fiction thematizes – even fetishizes – the surface so that words and images are divorced from their context. In his interview with Carter, Haffenden, for example, questions whether 'the highly stylized and decorative apparatus' of her novels 'might appear to be disengaged from the social and historical realities' she wishes to illuminate in them (85). Similarly, in her reading of Carter's 'unabashed fetishism,' Britzolakis proposes that

[f]or a certain purist tradition of Marxism, as much as for liberal humanist criticism, Carter is a deeply embarrassing figure, adopting as she does a postmodern aesthetic which, it has been argued, privileges style over substance, eroticizes the fragment and parasitically colludes with consumer capitalism. (44)²

In its articulation of the 'rift between politics and pleasure, between allegory and fantasy', that has come 'to inhabit Carter criticism, as indeed [...] it inhabits Carter's writing' (44), Britzolakis's analysis thus brings into focus the supposed tension between the aesthetic and the political which frequently haunts Carter criticism. The literary scavenging to which Carter herself alludes is recapitulated as parasitic and predatory; the figure of the vampire, one of her most favoured motifs, becomes a metaphor for her textual practice.

What seems to be at stake in such understandings of Carter's use of intertextuality as both vampiric and sybaritic is the issue of pleasure. This is an issue which, especially in early readings of her work, is tied to notions of the 'proper' position of the feminist author and the politics of authorship – the notion that Carter's writing 'could do with a dose of social realism' (Haffenden 91).³ Such assumptions about the appropriate position of the 'feminist' author are epitomized by Robert Clark's well-known critique of Carter's fiction which appeared in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* in 1987. Here Clark proposes that Carter's 'writing is often feminism in a male chauvinist drag' (158). He moves on to attribute this designation to Carter's 'primary allegiance' to a postmodern aesthetics – an allegiance which, he argues, 'precludes an affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being' (158). He continues:

The brilliant and choice lexicon, the thematization of surfaces and odours, of beauty, youth, and power, the incantatory rhythms and tantalizing literariness, are strategies that bind the reader poetically, give the illusion of general significance without its substance, and put the reason to sleep, thereby inhibiting satire's necessary distancing of the reader from both the text and the satirized illusions. (158–59)

For Clark, the response to Haffenden's questioning of the potential dissonance between the heavily stylized décor of Carter's novels and socio-historical contexts is unambiguous: Carter's 'incantatory' and 'tantalizing' literariness necessarily prohibits political commitment – and, in particular, any commitment to a rational *feminist* politics. Most troublingly, Clark's analysis rests on an essentialist assumption about women's 'organic' being, so that Carter's stylistic heresy is cast as an affront to the 'reality', or 'authenticity', of women's experience.

Elaine Jordan proposes, with an air of Carteresque mischief, that Clark's criticism of Carter 'reads like a sinister piece of female impersonation' in its blatant disregard for Carter's unequivocal and repeated statements about her 'allegiance' to political and cultural analysis – albeit an analysis derived from 'specific experiments rather than from a single assured base towards a single Utopian goal' ("Enthralment" 26). Not only a sardonic riposte to Clark's condemnation of Carter's

'male chauvinist drag', Jordan's remark here also, of course, echoes Carter's own comments about the element of the 'male impersonator' which characterized some of her early writing.⁴ The tension in Carter's work, then, issues from the uncomfortable position she occupies in relation to a dominant model of second wave Anglo-American feminist literary criticism and its notion of the role – and responsibility – of the 'woman author'. Of especial concern for Carter detractors has been her fervent critique of the mystification of female virtue and victimhood within certain strands of second wave feminist discourse and, in particular, her apparently tolerant dialogue with the Marquis de Sade and the possibilities of 'moral pornography' as a mode of social critique in *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979).⁵ As Lorna Sage puts it, Carter's writing 'unravels the romance of exclusion. And this means it's in an oblique and sometimes mocking relation to the kind of model of female fantasy deployed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* – where fantasy is a matter of writing against the patriarchal grain' (*Women in the House* 168). Concerned as she is with entering the male-dominated territories of decadence, surrealism and pornography, the trouble with Carter is that she often writes against the *feminist* grain and, as Sage suggests elsewhere, becomes 'an offence to the modest, inward, realist version of the woman writer' ("Death of the Author" 248).

Nevertheless, as is explored in this collection, in spite of 'the fantastic and exotic surface' of Carter's fictions (Haffenden 91), and in spite of her refusal to 'repose securely in the bosom of the sisterhood' (Sage, "Death of the Author" 248), Western patriarchy remains an ongoing object of interrogation – and denunciation – in her writing. Carter's concerted and candid investigation of social fictions, including the 'social fiction' of femininity, comprises a painstaking (if, at times, painful) challenge to the stability and authority of male-authored canonical representations. She repeatedly described her fiction as 'very often a kind of literary criticism' (Haffenden 71) and was unequivocal in her alignment of the political and the aesthetic, and her belief in the social responsibility of the artist:

Fine art, that exists for itself alone, is art in a final state of impotence. If nobody, including the artist, acknowledges art as a means of knowing the world, then art is relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind and the irresponsibility of the artist and the irrelevance of art to actual living becomes part and parcel of the practice of art. (*The Sadeian Woman* 6)