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A Mirror-Like Pool of Ink: The New Woman in Carter's *Night at the Circus*

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<1>In an interview in 1984,⁽¹⁾ the year when *Nights at the Circus* was first published, Angela Carter said that “Fevvers is directly related to the description of the New Woman by Apollinaire”. In his introduction to the Marquis de Sade’s *Juliette*, Apollinaire describes the New Woman as a being who has wings and will fly. Carter finds the metaphor a “nice” one, and starts to speculate on it. She asks: “What would a real person with wings be like?” Then she creates her character, Fevvers, whose anomaly is the very wings that make her fly, though not as swiftly as we expect from a real bird-woman. Her origins are obscure: “Hatched; by whom,” she says “I do not know”⁽²⁾ As Fevvers reveals her story to the American journalist Walser, she reminisces:

I fell to contemplating the mystery of these soft, feathery growths that were already pulling my shoulders backwards with the weight and urgency of an invisible lover. Outside my window, in the cool sunlight, I saw the skirling seagulls who follow the winding course of the mighty Thames riding upon the currents of the air like spirits of the wind and so it came to me: If I have wings, then I must fly! (27)

In this way Carter stretches her imagination and expands on the idea of woman as a being with wings. Carter mixes *fin de siècle* social decorum⁽³⁾ and her ideas about sex and gender to add a sense of verisimilitude to the picaresque story of the fantastic bird-woman living among the freaks, clowns, prostitutes and circus animals. One of the outstanding motifs in the novel is the concept of the New Woman who is represented in many ways through many different female characters.

<2>Carter's elaboration of Apollinaire's image of the 1890s New Woman through Fevvers also recalls the Platonic concept of love described in *Phaedrus*; this concept resonates all through the novel in the overarching form of love as the ultimate redeemer of humanity. To Plato, a perfect soul “soars upward” thanks to the wings whereas an imperfect one loses her wings, and “drooping in her flight, at last settles on the solid ground”, finds a mortal body and lives in it (53). And the soul loses its wings because of exposure to evils and ugliness, in short “the opposite of good” (54).

<3>Echoing Plato's description, Carter first presents Fevvers as an adolescent girl growing wings while surrounded by the loving surrogate mothers in the brothel. Fevvers describes the growth of her wings felt as an “infernal itching” in her back (24):

At first, but a small, indeed, an almost pleasurable irritation, a kind of physical buzzing, sir, so that I'd rub my back against the legs of the chairs as cats do, ... And the itch increased. If it started in small ways, soon it was as if my back was all on fire and they covered me with soothing lotions and cooling powders and I would lie down to sleep with an ice-bag on my back but still nothing could calm the fearful storm in my erupting skin (24).

This reads exactly like the description in Plato's *Phaedrus* of Cupid growing wings upon beauty entering through his eyes. As beauty enters, the soul is furnished with wings:

Meanwhile [the soul] throbs with ferment in every part, and even as a teething child feels an aching and pain in its gums when a tooth has just come through, so does the soul of him who is beginning to grow his wings feel a ferment and painful irritation (497).

Later, Fevvers breaks one of her wings; which resembles the drying up and closing of Cupid's wings as a result of parting from the lover. Unlike Cupid, Fevvers loses her wing upon encountering evil and ugliness, and witnessing the suffering of other human beings. She stops soaring upward, forgets who she is and has to be reminded by Lizzie.

<4>The broken wing image functions to remind us that without the good of all its parts, an individual cannot “soar” as a being in love with a single person. This is another reference to Plato's concept of love as elaborated in *Symposium*, which describes love as a more comprehensive notion to include “beauty of institutions and laws and sciences, the science of beauty everywhere”(70). Love acts as a framework under which there is complete harmony, not only for two people of different sexes but of all.

<5>Plato asserts that the creative instinct aroused by contact with beauty will expand, and love of human beauty will ultimately rise to other loves like love of the beauty of character, action, law, great institutions and finally of beauty itself. Carter's socialist ideal, in which just laws and fair institutions will enable all the members of a society to enjoy the “beauties,” has an echo of this Platonic concept of love. *Nights at the Circus* suggests that it is by no means the love of a single object that brings happiness. The communist Lizzie's remarks about the “happy endings” (281) in the old comedies are a reference to Carter's concern about the happiness of all in a society. Just as Lizzie does not believe that romantic love brings happiness as in the fairy tales, Carter seems to whisper “I am a socialist, damn it! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?!” (Day 1). (4)

“Don't you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes? True lovers' reunions always end in a marriage. [...] The Prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon's lair is always forced to marry her, whether they have 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” (280-281).

<6>This raising of marriage as an issue is a reference to the original New Woman discussions; it is also a rhetorical gesture, in which Carter pretends to be a real *fin de siècle* New Woman writer. As Pykett suggests, the New Woman writers “consistently problematised, deconstructed, demystified, or rethought 'womanliness'”(57). It is apparent that Carter is not only referring to the real marriage question as a woman writer of the 1980s with hindsight, but she is also, in a roundabout way, creating a persona who writes like the New Woman writers reflecting upon marriage:

The New Woman writers also disrupted conventional plotting. They rethought the plots of domestic realism, particularly the marriage plot. Marriage, the destination of the plot of the mainstream Victorian novel, and the resolution of all of its (and supposedly the heroine's) problems, became, in the New Woman novel, both the origin of narrative and the source of the heroine's problems (57).

Thus through Fevvers, Carter plays both on the Platonic idea of love and on the image of the New Woman; in doing this, she becomes a New Woman writer herself.

<7>Being the emblem of the New Woman, Fevvers is presented as a real character that lived in the 1880s. There is much positive feeling about the coming century; the new century is believed to be about to liberate women from their bonds, and Fevvers as the emblem can fly. Carter links New Age valves and Fevvers right at the beginning:

For we are at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of the nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history. It is the final, waning, season of the year of Our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety nine. And Fevvers has all the éclat of a new era about to take off (11).

Throughout the novel, the famous *fin de siècle* song “A Bird in A Gilded Gage” is a leitmotif, suggesting the idea of the new woman as a woman with wings: if a woman has wings and can fly, Fevvers should not be kept in a cage. Beneath Fevvers' entertaining and curious show, the circus audience and the reader sense powerful undercurrents suggested by the song.

<8>Carter does not provide the lyrics but the song(5) tells about a tragic love story in which an unhappily married woman is likened to a bird in a gilded cage. She married for wealth, was in fact sold “for an old man’s gold”. Although this “rich man’s bride” has everything ‘a woman could ever want’ like “gems”, “a mansion grand”, “a divine gown”, she is in despair since she often sees the face of the man she turned aside, who is now dead. The song ends with the woman and the dead man uniting in the churchyard, in death. The refrain underlines the state of the Victorian woman as a mere object; it describes her as a “beautiful sight to see” and summarises the plot of the wasted lives of most well-to-do women of her time: “You may think she is happy and free from care/ She is not tho’ she seems to be”. Stressing how restrained and helpless she is, the song likens her to a bird in a gilded cage, and notes that marriage without love brings only unhappiness:

But happiness cannot be bought with gold,
Altho’ she’s a rich man’s bride.
She’s only a bird in a gilded cage.

Lorna Sage’s description of Fevvers as a “symbol for the undomesticated female imagination” sheds light on the function she plays in the novel as the epitome of the New Woman(176). She is unlike the ordinary woman because she acts outside the confines of constructed Victorian femininity: she flies publicly, she laughs loudly, she eats ravenously, and she speaks her mind energetically. And being hatched, she has no ordinary family lineage; this liberates her even more from the patriarchal domestic ties constraining the women of the late nineteenth century. The New Woman sought this sort of freedom from the rigid boundaries of home and Carter designs a very appropriate setting for her New Women characters; “... this is a book with hardly any houses at all” (176).

<9>This fact that there are no houses becomes the perfect tool for Carter to delineate the *fin de siècle* demand for the New Woman to live beyond the boundaries of the domestic landscape. “An up-to-date version of a very out-of-date song” that appears in *Punch*(6) represents this demand and the discomfort caused by it (123). The song describes women who are now busy as they bike, skate, play tennis, flirt and dance and asks: “who cares for home!” in a world which, “like our women, now goes upon wheels”. This parodic inversion is in fact a serious criticism of the manners of the New Woman and the decline of domestic comfort for men. Much to men’s discontent, women who are supposed to be the guardians of “Home! Sweet Home!” now “flout” “the sweet domesticities”:

Our women now crave, and they’re scarce found at home.
Home! Home! Dull, dull home!
Till a woman turns sixty a slow place is home! (123)

Thus, the choice of brothel, museum,(7) circus and Siberian wilderness as settings is significant; they all stand in powerful opposition to what the word “home” signifies in *fin de siècle* England. Two thirds of the novel takes place in the backstage of the Alhambra; this was one of the most famous music-halls of *fin de siècle* London and it went through many reconstructions to meet the rapidly changing demands of the audience.(8) As Fevvers declares quoting Dan Leno, London is a “little village on the Thames of which the principal industries are the music hall and the confidence trick” (8). The year in Carter’s novel was in fact the year in which the Alhambra hired Dan Leno’s long-time friend Vesta Tilley for a variety show. Vesta Tilley (later Lady de Frece), was one of the most famous male-impersonators of the 1890s and her memoirs make one think that Carter’s Alhambra reflects the atmosphere of the real Alhambra around the date:

It was in 1898 or 1899, whilst I was appearing at the Alhambra, London, that I introduced the waltz tempo songs, such as “Angel without Wings”, etc.; during this engagement *Punch* dubbed me “The London Idol”, and as it was the custom then to add a descriptive line to one’s name on the bills, the management so christened me (48).

Similarly famous women in the shows were given easily remembered names. Jenny Hill, for instance, was “The Vital Spark” and Mary Pickford “The World’s Sweetheart”. So Carter christens her orphan bird-woman Fevvers too; she becomes “The Cockney Venus” of her “sweet London”.

<10>In making a minor change, Carter places a circus in the Alhambra of 1898; this allows her

not only to introduce many different characters, “a motley crew”, “a gaggle of strangers drawn from many diverse countries”, but also to add further action via the Grand Tour of the troupe (279). Her circus becomes a showcase for the mindset and problems not only of the era but also of the 1980s. At the end of her narrative, Fevvers meditates on the circus and says:

Why, you might have said we constituted a microcosm of humanity, that we were an emblematic company, each signifying a different proposition in the great syllogism of life. The hazards of the journey reduced us to a little band of pilgrims abandoned in the wilderness upon whom the wilderness acted like a magnifying glass, exaggerating the blemishes of some and bringing out the finer points in those whom we thought had none (279).

Thus the circus and the tour perform their original function as the medium of transformation. Disher in his book on the history of fairs, circuses and music halls in England suggests “all the old-established sideshows of circus or fair reflect some aspect of human nature. Here is the mirror

of our inner selves. Here are things ugly, curious, admirable and beautiful, each warranted to stir some primal emotion” (16). Walser, the sceptical journalist from the US, the only seemingly ordinary person at the beginning of the novel, also goes through a process of drastic change via the circus, which functions as a mirror held up to his self.⁽⁹⁾ The narrator gives some clue as to how the circus will facilitate Walser's search for himself: “I say he had a propensity for ‘finding himself in the right place in the right time;’ yet it was almost as if he himself were an objet trouvé, for, subjectively, himself he never found, since it was not his self which he sought” (10). In other words, he starts as a man who does not know himself, but ends as the New Man through exploring his limits as a clown and chicken-man in the circus.

<11>Fevvers symbolizes a New Woman with her wings – breaking and restoring one of them in the process. Walser on the other hand becomes the New Man by running away with the circus for the sake of a “bottle blonde:” “Walser took himself apart and put himself together” (294). Fevvers speaks in a confident tone befitting the New Woman and says: “I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man out of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the new Century” (281).⁽¹⁰⁾ This image of Walser as a matching mate for the New Woman echoes the authentic *fin de siècle* discussions. As Showalter puts it in her study on the gender and culture of the era:

While men were focusing on the Woman Question, women raised the man question. Was the age producing a New Man, the companion who would share their lives and who would evolve by their side? Schreiner was optimistic about the idea that a New Man was emerging to join the New Woman and that together they would create an ideal society (49).

<12>In 1894, Sarah Grand was energetically thinking about new ways of creating a good relationship between man and woman. In “The New Aspect of Woman Question,” she asserts that man is unaware of the fact that from the woman's point of view, he is “imperfect”, and that it will not be easy for him to understand this and to improve himself on his own.

But we know his weakness, and will be patient with him, and help him with his lesson. It's the woman's pride and pleasure to teach the child, and man morally is in his infancy. There have been times when there was a doubt as to whether he was to be raised or woman was to be lowered, but we have turned that corner at last; and now woman holds out a strong hand to the child-man, and insists, but with infinite tenderness and pity, upon helping him up (in Pykett 163).⁽¹¹⁾

Through making Fevvers end the novel by hatching her man out, Carter seems to mock the typical Victorian notion that what makes a man a perfect mate is being a good woman, and performing the “sweet domesticities” of the established order. A happy ending in the patriarchal order is almost always marriage, and Carter may well be ridiculing the limited choice offered by the social system.

<13>Marina Warner's perception of Angela Carter as “a fantasist with a salty turn of mind, a dissident with a utopian vision of possibilities in the midst of disaster” sheds light on Carter's preference for a happy end (197). In a sense, it is this use of humour that explains Carter's dissidence and unconventionality:

The growing presence of humour in Carter's fiction signals her defiant hold on 'heroic optimism', the mood she singled out as characteristic of fairy tales, the principle which sustained the idea of a happy ending, whatever the odds. But heroic optimism shades into gallows humour. Although laughter breaks the silence and jesting can be provocative, disruptive, anarchic and unsettling, some laughter never unburdens itself from knowledge of its pessimism; it remains intrinsically ironic (197).

Carter ironically suggests that the New Woman and the New Man who are reverting to the age-old habit of marriage still have more to see and solve. She takes the metaphor of the New Woman as someone who has wings and can fly and turns it into a flesh and blood character in her novel.

<14>Carter may well be ironic about the way the New Woman perceived the marriage question; one branch of the New Woman movement, including Sarah Grand and Ouida, saw marriage as the one and only option, while the other group suggested total freedom from the marital bond.⁽¹²⁾ In an indirect way, Carter responds to these discussions by adding a scene of a newly-born she-baby, the potential New Woman, upon whose fate Fevvers speculates. She is born out of wedlock to a mother who is alone and starving. But Fevvers still enjoys the hope that the baby will not lead a "bird in a gilded-cage" life like Nora, and she will be free:

This young woman in my arms, whom we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it; she will tear off her mind forg'd manacles, ⁽¹³⁾ will rise up and fly away. 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).

Lizzie the communist wisely warns her: "It's going to be more complicated than that" (286). She could be speaking for Carter who was almost ostracised from the mainstream feminist line for her interest in de Sade and pornography,

<15>The book reflects the hope the New Woman placed on the coming of the new century via Fevvers "the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground" (25). The novel ends on New Year's Eve, with even Lizzie, who has reservations about the success of the New Woman project, exclaiming: "we're on the cusp, my dear, tomorrow is another time-scheme" (284). The novel echoes the New Woman's design for a better society in which women will not have to sell themselves for wealth.

<16>To emphasize this theme, Carter puts another child, little Ivan, into her narrative. When Fevvers was almost sold to the Grand Duke who presents her with lots of diamonds, she escapes from the mansion, metaphorically the 'bird in a gilded-cage existence,' and gives the diamonds to little Ivan, a Russian boy, on her way to the Siberian wilderness; she notes: "Little Ivan rolled in the snow, pelted with diamonds. Through our children we might be saved, perhaps" (193). This is the same hope and trust in the coming generation which is also voiced in the final scene where Fevvers addresses the she-baby as the generic the New Woman.

<17>Those *fin de siècle* people who wanted the Victorian angel-in-the-house to remain unchanged treated the New Woman as an unpleasant thing, an anomaly, or at best, as an object of gaze. A poem "What is a (New) Woman Like?" appeared in *Punch*; it parodies the old song "What is a Woman Like?" and portrays the New Woman as a cause of disturbance like "a fly to the ear, to the eye":

Buzz, buzz, always buzzing about one!
Untender, unkind (110).

The anonymous poet asserts that with her "male manners", evident in the way she spends her time by writing, biking and chatting, she is like a "queer dish/ Neither flesh, fowl, nor fish", After listing all the incomplete and unpleasant beings to compare to the New Woman, the poet decides that "She's like most things on earth-but a woman!" (110). As the perfect example of this new type of woman, Fevvers has the mentioned effect on men:

But she'll shock you and vex you,
Disgust and perplex you.

Immodestly ranging,
Continually changing (110).

This is the same effect the New Woman had on the public of the 1880s as evidenced by the jokes and articles appearing in the press. Thus, Carter's Fevvers, "the pure child of the coming New Age" with her curious wings teases the imagination of her audience to such an extent that her curious existence leads to the phenomenon called "Fevvermania":

Everywhere you saw her picture; the shops were crammed with 'Fevvers garters, stockings, fans, cigars, shaving soap... She even lent it to a brand of baking powder; if you added a spoonful of the stuff, up in the air went your sponge cake, just as she did. [...] Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger. Have you seen Fevvers?' And then: 'How does she do it?' And then: 'Do you think she's real?'
(9)

<18>The mass hysteria built around Fevvers not only resembles the New Woman discussions but it also recalls the similar interest that the statue of Nike aroused in public. In *Monuments and Maidens* Marina Warner discusses the Nike statues. At the turn of the century, the sculptor Ettore Ximenes placed a quadriga driven by a winged Victory in the Palazzo di Giustizia in Rome. A similar statue, Thomas Brock's gilded Victory on the Victoria Monument in the Mall in London was unveiled in 1911 (Warner 1985, 141-144). Carter apparently alludes to the real "Nikemia" that pervaded not only England but Italy.

<19>The figure of Nike as the goddess of success and victory paralleled the spirit of novelty that was created mostly by the New Woman asking for a more substantial public role. As Warner suggests people must have thought that they really could succeed by using an image of success and victory. That explains the occasional use of the image of Nike in public. For instance, Nike appears in the emblem Sylvia Pankhurst designed in 1908 for the weekly journal *Votes for Women*. The Nike of the Suffragettes is an angel in green and purple and white, blowing a trumpet with a banner saying 'Freedom'. From the 1880s onwards, the goddess of Victory supported many claims, both commercial and political. As Carter's Fevvers does in *Nights at the Circus*, Nike/Victoria appears on trademarks, cigar labels, as a stamp of quality, a guarantee of authenticity (Warner 1985, 141-144). Apparently, Fevvers plays Nike, the Winged Victory or the Nike of Samothrace, making herself an emblem of 'Freedom'. She symbolises the Nike of the late Victorian era and similarly, occupies a key position in the public imagination. Fevvers' audiences asks, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" echoing the *fin de siècle* question "What is the New Woman?" But she also presents an answer: "She is the symbol of victory".

<20>In the case of the other female characters, the picture is not so pleasant. All the other female characters in *Nights at the Circus* represent the "untender" and "unkind" aspects of the New Woman by their demands for liberty from domestic violence, for sexual freedom and for the right to run their own business. As described in "The Man and the Maid", by becoming a "manly miss" or failing to act as a "womanly woman", a woman making demands was seen as improper (291).

What Pykett says about the *fin de siècle* reception of the New Woman in her *The Improper Feminine* is congruent with the role models of femininity that Carter creates:

The New Woman challenged traditional gender boundaries in paradoxical ways. The mannish New Woman threatened such boundaries from one direction by quitting the sphere of the proper feminine, aping masculinity and becoming a new intermediate sex (23).

<21>As Carter speculates about the nature of femininity by presenting different female characters, she reiterates the question she formulated in her famous article "Notes from the Frontline"; Carter wants to understand, "How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing" (in Wandor 1983, 70). Since all the female characters transgress the boundaries of Victorian femininity in some way, they can be seen as versions of the model New Women giving clues as to how the social fiction of femininity is created. The differences between these characters show that the New Woman was not an empty intellectual construct of the middle-class: "She was everywhere and changed the image of women throughout all classes of late Victorian society." (Maitland 127).

<22>Carter notes an affinity between the New Woman discussion and the homosexual climate of decadence, and touches upon the sexual aspect of the New Woman through characters like

Mignon, the Abyssinian Princess, Olga and Vera as well as Fevvers. The New Woman, who lacked “womanly” manners, was seen as a subversive figure much like the homosexuals. The discussions over the roots of subversion and homosexuality culminated at the *fin de siècle*, and the most solid form of these discussions was Oscar Wilde’s trial in 1895 in which he publicly rejected his “natural masculinity”.

<23>Pykett states that although some commentators saw decadent homosexuality as a response to the New Woman, in fact the decadent, the homosexual, and the New Woman all emerged out of the same mentality regarding masculinity and femininity (1995, 19-20). Showalter similarly notes that in the conservative mind, homosexuality and the New Woman were firmly linked as a couple sharing many attributes since both challenged the institution of marriage and blurred the borders between the sexes (169). Thus, Fevvers with her masculine attributes like a voice “extraordinarily raucous and metallic [...] clanging of contralto or even baritone dustbins,” an enormous appetite and a manly interest in her bank account is a perfect mannish New Woman standing on the borderline of femininity and masculinity (13).

<24>Carter problematizes sexual expression and homosexuality more explicitly through Mignon. Beaten by her husband, the Ape-Man, and seen as an easy sex-mate by all the men around, Mignon is a typical exploited woman. Luckily Walsler rescues her when she is attacked by a tiger in the circus; this becomes a new beginning for her. Then Fevvers takes her under her wings and looks after her, providing shelter and the warmth. Mignon does not return to her husband but starts to accompany the Abyssinian Princess, the tiger tamer. As the Princess plays the piano, Mignon sings to attract the wild tigers.

<25>Parallel to this model of a same-sex couple living in bliss, Carter puts Olga and Vera who develop a relationship in the House of Correction, a panoptical prison for women. Olga’s crime was to kill her drunkard husband when he beat her; like Mignon she finds love and peace in her own sex. Like the solidarity and love between Olga and Vera, Mignon’s relationship with the Princess is a model of a happily united couple whose peace and harmony radiates even to the wild tigers and soothes them. Ironically, with the Princess mute and Mignon not knowing the language of the songs she sings, it is not speech but music that becomes a tool for communication. What

Mignon could not do with language when she was with her husband, the Ape-Man, she can now do with music to tame the tigers.(14)

<26>As the novel draws to a close, we see Olga and Vera running out of prison for a new life together; and Mignon and the Princess making a decision to stay in Siberia and live in the Conservatoire to study music. Thus, they end up becoming typical New Women; not only do they liberate themselves from the sexual stereotypes of the Victorian age but they also study and find their own means of survival. Complying with Ruth Robbins’s definition of the term New Woman, they become representatives of “emancipated women who sought professional careers, university education and the vote at a time when ‘proper’ ladies were supposed to be satisfied with marriage, motherhood and no franchise”(76).

<27>Throughout the novel, the same-sex relationship is represented as a form of solidarity among women at a time when they most needed to unite for their rights. In this sense, the Mignon-Princess and Olga-Vera relationships seem more like a type of solidarity, similar to the air of sisterhood in a brothel. There is a loving bond among the girls working in a brothel; they follow the Suffragists in believing that help will come only from themselves.(15) Thus Carter portrays an all-female atmosphere which stands as an alternative to the ‘proper’ patriarchal institutions like marriage and family:

Even the dog who guarded it was a bitch and all the cats were females, one or the other of ‘em always in kitten, or newly given birth, so that a sub-text of fertility underwrote the glittering sterility of the pleasure of the flesh available within the academy. Life within those walls was governed by a sweet and loving reason. I never saw a single blow exchanged between any of the sisterhood who reared me, nor heard a cross word or a voice raised in anger (38-39).

<28>After this ironic depiction of the brothel as an alternative place, Carter does the most appropriate thing and has her characters set the house on fire after the death of Ma Nelson. All the girls are liberated and plunge into the outside world as couples, not necessarily lesbian ones. Carter in an interview with Anna Katsavos notes that “All the women who have been in the first brothel with her end up doing those ‘new woman’ jobs, like becoming hotel managers and running

typing agencies” (13). Louisa and Emily decide to set up a little boarding-house in Brighton; Annie and Grace start up a small agency for typing and office work; Esmeralda takes a job in the entertainment industry and plays the flute to accompany a snake charmer, the Human Eel. It is only Jennie who marries, but she does it as the last resort since “she had no special talent to put to work for her and never saved a penny but give it all to beggars” (45).

<29>Carter's most interesting characters are in the *fin de siècle* entertainment industry; this was populated by young girls singing, dancing and impersonating men, and by freaks being displayed in public for money. Tracy Davis notes that in the Victorian context, “women’s choice to go on the stage” had something to do with “the growing ‘surplus’ of women needing employment;” “a low working-class wage, social ostracism, and the constant threat of unemployment” was the young girls’ lot despite the glamour they may have created among the audience (xiii). The actress was a worker whose workshop was music-halls, variety shows and circuses; that she displayed herself in return for money made her “the very antithesis of the Victorian lady” (Maitland 65). In this sense, female characters in Carter's circus like Fevvers, Mignon and the Princess of Abyssinia represent the typical Victorian working class women, both through their efforts to survive and through their challenge to the Victorian stereotypes. The women in Madame Schreck's(16) Museum, Fanny Four Eyes, the Wiltshire Wonder, the Sleeping Beauty Cobweb and Albert/Albertina bring to mind the side-shows and museums(17) of the late Victorian era.

<30>While theatres, music halls and vaudevilles were mostly for the well-to-do, museums appealed to those who did not have a lot of money to spend on entertainment. And in time, the discrepancy in the audiences became a further deterrent and the rich found museums “unacceptable to middle-class sensibilities” (Stoddart 24). Museums included freak shows and people with anomalies like smallness, tallness, fatness, gender anomalies, birth defects to name but a few. There was even a certain format to these shows:

The customers first visited the ‘curio hall’ where, presented in scientific terms, they would be able to view oddities of nature ranging from pickled embryos to Siamese twins. More elaborate Museums also included waxworks of famous personalities. After the curios, the customers would proceed to the show, which lasted thirty or forty minutes... they were almost exclusively confined to solo acts... Museum work was punishingly hard (so much so, that there were never animal acts since the animals could not have taken the pace) (Maitland 35-36).

Carter's “Museum of Monstrous Women” is a replica of a typical *fin de siècle* “Museum” which showcased “freaks”.

<31>Leslie Fiedler in *Freaks, Myths and Images of the Secret Self* notes that freaks came to include many things like “oddities, malformations, abnormalities, anomalies, mutants, mistakes of nature, monsters, monstrosities, sports”, “strange people”, “very special people”, and “phenomènes”. He made a “pilgrimage” to the “Circus World Museum” in Baraboo, Wisconsin to see P.T. Barnum’s Side Show of the nineteenth century (16). The Barnum shows which toured Europe exhibited “A Fat Lady, a Bearded lady, a Giantess with a Dwarf, a Living Skeleton, Siamese Twins” and a hermaphrodite, Josephine/Joseph, (which was not employed in family shows) (34). These shows became so popular and so familiar to the *fin de siècle* British that *Punch* announced the coming show in Olympia with the title “Still Barnumming!” The Great Barnum, who is mentioned in the news as “the greatest showman of this or any other age,” was said to be as active in 1889 as he was in 1844 (234).

<32>Carter's freaks, while embodying the cultural atmosphere of the *fin de siècle* were also allegorical figures highlighting the demands of the New Woman of the era. Fanny Four Eyes,(18) with two eyes where her nipples are supposed to be, returns the male gaze that was designed to keep her in an object status. Her bodily anomaly becomes a form of passive resistance in the cultural setting which sees liberated women as anomalies. It is a perfect parody of the side-shows which became a hot topic for casual talk. *Punch*, for instance, published a joke, a mock-poster of a side-show at Olympia stating that it “simply must not be omitted” since it features “Fanny: The Learned Lady of Dublin!” This made-up Fanny with her “talents in literature and politics” is presented as a freak, which speaks about the attitude of men towards women's demands for education and the vote (286). Carter designs her Fanny not to entertain, but to challenge like the New Woman.

<33>Another freak in Madame Schreck's museum is the Wiltshire Wonder, a child/woman who functions as a female figure that rejects the process of becoming a woman. Her mother sells the

Wonder to a French pastry cook for “fifty golden guineas cash in hand”. Through her story, Carter subverts the myth of motherhood, which is one aspect of traditional feminine identity. After she is sold by her mother, the Wiltshire Wonder is mothered by a small girl who takes her home:

[This little girl] carried me off to the nursery and her nanny put soothing ointment on my burns and dressed me up in a silk frock that the young lady’s own doll sacrificed for me, although I was perfectly able to dress myself... I soon formed a profound attachment to the girl who’d been my saviour and she for me, so that we became inseparable and when my legs could not keep up with hers, she would carry me in the crook of her arm (67).

Apparently, Carter implies that it is not biology that makes a woman motherly. The Wonder feels herself so happy in the care of the little girl that she remembers her days with her as the best time of her life. So, she rues the day when she left the family to join a theatre company; now she envies the Sleeping Beauty since she does nothing “except for one thing: she dreams” (68).

<34>The Sleeping Beauty is literally the sleeping beauty of the museum. This image of the adolescent girl metamorphosed into a sleeping beauty is an ironic response to the Victorian stereotyping of femininity. She opens her heavy eyes, “her little windows”, only to eat but then sinks down again “under the soft weight of dreams” (64). Just as Fevvers grew wings at puberty, the bright and merry daughter of a country curate is transformed into a Sleeping Beauty in her fourteenth year, “the day her menses started” (63). She is twenty-one now, but her female flow grows less and less as she sleeps. The loss of fertility and the extremely passive state the Sleeping Beauty experiences can be seen as a record of female silencing. The adolescent girl rejects the process of becoming a “womanly woman”, instead choosing the state of complete passivity.

<35>Cobwebs, whose face is covered with cobwebs from eyebrows to cheekbones, never says a word or smiles; she epitomizes the fact that women live silenced and victimised. Her condition is the spur to the New Woman who demands that men listen to women's words and understand her right to speak for herself.

<36>Interestingly, the most joyful creature of the museum is Albert/Albertine, a hermaphrodite; her joy is unusual under the circumstances, Carter seems to suggest that androgyny could be a way to transcend the subordination of women and subvert repressive gender definitions. The juxtaposition of the feminine and the masculine in Fevvers’s manners is solidified in Albert/Albertine’s bipartite body.(19) Perhaps Carter puts all these oppressed women awaiting the new age under the wing of Fevvers, who herself waits to fly. Fevvers who performs against the background song “A Bird in a Gilded Cage” says to the audience that with her real wings, she will soar and never be a bird in a gilded cage.

<37>In conclusion, Fevvers becomes a free woman who loses and then finds her lover on foreign ground, the Siberian wilderness. This is a place far away from the civilised culture that forces domesticity on women. This motif of life in foreign parts(20) emphasises the otherness that is associated with the New Woman. In the wilderness, Fevvers feels liberated on seeing the village at the end of fields with its “low, wooden houses, and smoke rising from chimneys, and a rich, strange smell of unfamiliar suppers cooking on unfamiliar hearths” (285).

<38>To persuade both Lizzie and the reader that uniting with Walser does not mean she is tricked into the cult of love and marriage, she notes that Walser functions as a writer. With this ending the narrative makes a full circle to the beginning where Walser had appeared as a journalist interviewing Fevvers, the bird-woman. He ends as the lover of this woman, whom both he and the reader see as the symbol of New Woman. Walser is a fit man for this New Woman who describes him as follows:

'Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis,' she said to Lizzie. 'And not of my trajectory, alone, but of yours, too, Lizzie; ... Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those woman who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow (285).

<39>With this concluding statement about Walser, Carter both reminds the reader that the novel

carries the stories of many New Women and wittily refers to a probing *fin de siècle* argument that the New Woman did not really exist but was a mere construct of journalism. As Schaffer's study asserts, "The 'ink' which constituted the New Woman was not just the stuff of journalism, but also resembled the magically hypnotic ink of another fin-de-siècle text: a mirror-like pool in which the gazer could see beyond her own face, into her past, and the future" (50).⁽²¹⁾ Carter's text has all the magic and hypnotic effects to make the reader go in search of the history of the New Woman.

Endnotes

(1)From the interview with Angela Carter, Adam Mars-Jones.^(△)

(2)Throughout the rest of the article, page references to Carter's novel will be given as parenthetical, in-text citations rather than as numbered endnotes. Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical page numbers cited in-text remain from Carter, Angela. *Nights at the Circus*. Ontario: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984.^(△)

(3)I agree with Jeannette King who in her *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* sees Carter's *Nights at the Circus* as a text celebrating female sexuality by rewriting the lives of the New Woman. She studies the novel under the light of *fin de siècle* theories of evolution and degeneration and considers the New Woman discussions as a form of border-crossing.^(△)

(4)Carter expresses her anger at those who fail to understand the socialist implications of her work in an interview with Mary Harron of the *Guardian* in 1984 in Aidan Day's *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*.^(△)

(5)Harry von Tilzer's music over Arthur J. Lamb's words.^(△)

(6)The original song which is inverted is "Home! Sweet Home!"^(△)

(7)The word "museum" used here, as it is used in the novel, refers to performances similar to side-shows; the following parts of the article will elaborate on this.^(△)

(8)It was first built as "The Panopticon" (the name appropriately echoes Foucault's panopticon as a place designed to gaze at the other) in 1854 as an education institute; but when that failed it was turned into a circus, then was rebuilt with a proscenium and stage and became a music-hall in 1860. Later it was called the Royal Alhambra Palace, theatre of Varieties and became a regular theatre presenting opéra-bouffes until it was burnt down. It was rebuilt in 1883 and opened as the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties. Mander and Mitchenson. P.25.^(△)

(9)It can be suggested that the Siberian wilderness where Walser finds himself is a utopian mirror that makes the readers question their civilised lives in urban landscape.^(△)

(10)It is interesting to see the intricate references to the cultural icons Carter had previously commented on in her non-fictional writing. Walser's becoming a chicken man for the sake of his love for a woman who belongs to a different order echoes Professor Rath of *The Blue Angel* (1930) starring Marlene Dietrich as Lola; he loses his status and job for his love only to end up in a variety show and appear in a clown costume as the sorcerer's apprentice. Upon seeing his Lola being kissed backstage by a rich man, he starts crowing; this recalls the joke they made as a fresh couple at their wedding as the hen and cock. Carter cites Lola as a femme fatale in her 1978 article "Femmes Fatales". In *Nothing Sacred*. London: Virago, 1992. pp. 131-6.^(△)

(11)Grand's article appeared in *North American Review*, 158, pp. 272-3, and is available in appendices to Pykett's *Engendering Fictions* (1995).^(△)

(12)The moralist vein of the New Woman movement did not like the idea of woman becoming like a man; to Ouida, for instance, being like a man is being like a farmer cultivating a field that does not belong to him. *Women's Writing of the Victorian Period: 1837-1901*, pp 299-302.^(△)

(13)With an allusion to William Blake's famous poem, "London" in Songs of Experience, "mind forg'd manacles", Carter reinforces the idea that the New Woman of London will leave behind the innocence preached to her in the form of mores and modes and become a liberated individual.^(△)

(14)Mignon recalls Goethe's Mignon in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Goethe's Mignon is

simultaneously beaten by her husband and is rescued by Wilhelm when he buys her. She starts singing and dancing for him, she has no homeland and yearns for the land where there is music. So the choice Mignon and the Princess make to stay in Siberia seems to be a tribute to Goethe's Mignon's who dies tragically from unreturned love; in a way, Mignon's wish is fulfilled by Mignon and the Princess in Carter's text.(△)

(15)In her introduction to the eyewitness novel of Gertrude Colmore, *Suffragettes: A Story of Three Women*, Dale Spender mentions the disappointment that the suffragettes had as a result of broken political promises made by men, and quotes Christabel Pankhurst "Men have given us nothing but soothing words." Thus, they started their campaign with the motto "Deeds Not Words!" London: Pandora, 1984. p. 1.(△)

(16)Schreck anticipates Max Schreck the actor who played Dracula in Fritz Murnau's expressionist movie *Nosferatu*.(△)

(17)See note 7.(△)

(18)It is really hard not to recognise Carter's implicit reference to Fanny, the femme fatale of Walter de la Mare's *Memoirs of A Midget*, an autobiography of a nineteenth century midget. In the introduction she wrote to the novel in 1982, Carter draws attention to de la Mare's description of Fanny as "a beautiful body with that sometimes awful Something looking out of its windows." And like the writer himself she finds it very striking. In the meantime, Lady M., the midget is later in the novel employed by a circus as an anomaly to be looked at. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982. p. xxii.(△)

(19)With Albert/Albertina, there seems to be an indirect reference to a real case of undermined masculinity, Albert, Queen Victoria's husband.(△)

(20)Goethe's Mignon sings English songs to German Wilhelm, Carter's heroine sings English songs again but does not understand a word of English and speaks a broken German. This loss of the chance to speak one's mother tongue in both cases heightens the effect of their sexual difference as well. The language and customs of this land do not help these women.(△)

(21)Talia Schaffer. "Nothing but Foolscap and Ink': Inventing the New Woman ". *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminism*. Eds. Angélique Richardson and Chris Willis. NY: Palgrave, 2001.(△)

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