

# Historical Fiction and the Male-Imposed Identity:

The Deconstruction of Metatextuality and “Leda and the Swan” in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*

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Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* is a feminist postmodern fairytale that narrates the life of the winged circus performer Sophie Fevvers. Drawing extensively on the story of the mythological assault of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan and replete with allusions to fairytale, myth, and myriad literary texts, Carter’s novel negotiates the politics of speech and silence and of the told and the untold. Sidney Wood’s “Historical Fiction and the Male-Imposed Identity: The Deconstruction of Metatextuality and ‘Leda and the Swan’ in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*” deconstructs the relationship between Carter’s novel, the Greek myth of the “Leda and the Swan” and William Butler Yeats’ poem “Leda and the Swan,” one of the most popular retellings of the myth. Rather than simply tracing allusion across narratives, Wood interrogates Carter’s inclusion of metatextual elements to posit that it challenges patriarchal hegemony and situates Carter’s protagonist as performing the subversive roles of both Helen of Troy and the mythological swan. This positioning invites the reader to deconstruct the notions of truth and knowability that are central to the novel, while at the same time highlights the feminist potential of a text such as Carter’s. All told, Wood’s work demonstrates excellent knowledge of the narratives that feed this novel, of the corpus of work that analyzes it, and of the potential impact that it has on readers’ relationship with truth, gender, and literature.

– Prof. H. Morgan

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Metafiction, as seen in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, is indisputably necessary for any text that aspires to challenge patriarchal normativity. A form of fiction that commonly seeks to parody traditional literary conventions as a means to explore their relationship with reality, it is with this inclusion of meta-text that authors, such as Carter, are able to tactfully challenge the legitimacy of male dominance that has existed within literature for centuries. Through writing a work of historical fiction that criticizes the lack of representation within other historical fictions, Carter is parodying traditional, and particularly male, conventions as a means to reproduce them through a Postmodern feminist lens. One of the most prevalent criticisms is directed towards the rape of the mythological figure Leda, and the offspring of this assault: Helen of Troy. Notably one of the oldest myths of female violation and oppression, this storyline is introduced into the novel when Fevvers declares that she "just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*" (Carter 3). Thus taking on the name of a female figure that has been possessed by men since her conception, Carter—through Fevvers—intends to reclaim, or rather "re-hatch," female identity from a history that has continuously oppressed it.

Setting the tone for female liberation through the subversion of classic literature, this addition of a female-directed discourse aids in the transmission of the desire for social change— one which remains present throughout the entirety of the novel. Not only is this significant for how

Postmodernist literature achieves a reimagining of the past, but also for the reconstruction and subsequent disassembling of patriarchal portrayals of women. What this re-representation does for readers is arguably more significant, as it alters the relationship they have between Carter's characters and the male-imposed identity. It is this reshaping of traditional discourse that provides readers with the opportunity to rewrite and reinterpret a literary history of female identity in their own terms.

Continuously denied the agency to tell her own story, it was not until the early modern period that Leda's presence as a historical literary figure became more ambiguous. A movement that, much like Carter's novel, began on the verge of the twentieth century, Modernism sought to separate itself from past traditions in favor of the rapidly changing times. That being said, the male voice continued to dominate and the representation of female authors remained minimal. What connects Carter's Postmodern text to this era is one story of Leda in particular: William Butler Yeats's "Leda and the Swan." An author that would be a present figure for her fictional characters, Yeats's retelling of the antiquated story is one of the most (if not the most) famous. As such, it is fair to say that Carter is alluding to Yeats's poem as "one of the novel's central preoccupations is its challenge to traditional Western opposition between reality and fiction" (Michael 495). It is the reader's responsibility to recognize the significance of how Carter incorporates this myth into her novel, as its objective is to demythologize female subjects from an

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oppressive literary history which has been purported by authors such as Yeats (Sinowitz 102). Thus, by creating a conflict between two eras of fictional representation, the comparison between Yeats and Carter becomes increasingly necessary as these conventional binaries within both texts continue to be opposed.

Opening with "A sudden blow" (1), Yeats's poem initially evokes violence; however, the following lines, "her thighs caressed...The feathered glory" (2-6), call into question just how "violent" Leda's assault truly is. Is it rape, or are Leda's "loosening thighs" (5) a sign of consent? This ambiguity is further problematized when considering the poem's ending. Leda's "drop" (14) from the Swan's beak during the final line could offer "a moment when readers can re-articulate the terms of the poem according to their own desires for social change" (Neigh 158). This argument can and should be countered by the assertion that "Yeats's vision of history [...] [articulates that] the birth of a new era will arise from a sexual act that portends violence" (Mckenna 432), and thus reinforces the continuance of a literary violence against women. Interpretations such as Neigh's are perhaps too liberal, and in large part ignore the fact that Yeats poises (albeit ambiguously) Leda's rape as complicit and glorifies her as the catalyst that induces (through Helen) the Trojan War and subsequent fall of Troy. If perhaps this "drop" is a reclamation of freedom, then it can only be obtained if Leda can successfully "put on his [the Swan's] knowledge with his power" (Yeats 14). In this regard, rather than

liberating Leda, Yeats prevents her claim to a “knowledge” by making it contingent on the authority of a man (both the Swan and himself).

In response to Yeats’s restrictive narrative, Carter’s protagonist Fevvers, who is intentionally brass and larger than life, suggests to readers that she will not be a passive victim of circumstance. The epitome of a Postmodern heroine, Fevvers does not allow herself to be the by-product of a woman who was “mastered by the brute blood of the air” (Yeats 13). Referred to instead as a product utterly “unknown to nature” (Carter 20), Fevvers, by existing within the unknown, possesses the capacity to create an alternative narrative for Helen. It is this unknowability surrounding Fevvers’s body that transforms the reader’s traditional understanding of oppressive male constructions of female identity. To simply evoke Leda’s story does little to actually reconceptualise it. As such, Carter goes further by making her protagonist a symbol of Helen *and* the Swan. What this contemporary transformation does is allow “Fevvers’s body and narrative [to] challenge categorical recognitions and hierarchies separating women from men, science from literature, and culture from nature” (Yang 506). Now representing both the oppressor (the Swan) and the product of the oppressed (Helen), a subversion occurs between Carter’s novel and Yeats’s poem, transforming Fevvers into a symbolic figure that cannot be placed into masculine or feminine frameworks.

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Carter does not allow her subversion of Leda's story to end here. Going further by devising her own re-imagining of the "drop," Fevvers's first attempt at flight occurs in the presence of a painting that becomes "engraved upon [...] [her] heart" (Carter 28): Leda and the Swan. A gift to Ma Nelson from one of her clients at the brothel, it is described to Fevvers as "a demonstration of the blinding access of the grace of flesh" (Carter 29). An "access" that has been exploited by authors such as Yeats, this moment challenges the aforementioned idea that "knowledge" is *gifted* to women by men. However, by having the painting exist within a brothel, Carter posits that the themes in her novel are more than "purely escapist or entertaining, instead being more often than not conjoined with feminist politics to focus on redefining what counts as history worth telling in the first place" (Kohlke 154). Paralleling the traditional imagery of Leda and the Swan with Fevvers's first "drop" is significant, as it demonstrates a transcendence of Leda's identity into a contemporary re-imagining of her kin and thus, invites the possibility of progressive change.

Fevvers's failure to take flight during her first "drop" does not imply a definite failure in overcoming the oppressive nature of Yeats's poem. Significant change is difficult to achieve, and it would lose its value if Carter provided it to readers prematurely. What does occur is Fevvers's realization of "the great burden of[...] [her] unnaturalness" (Carter 31). A "burden" that afflicts any who do not conform to traditional patriarchal conventions, Fevvers, like most women, must further strive to overcome

this obstacle. Nonetheless, this moment provides a valuable opportunity for readers (particularly female readers) to relate their struggles to Fevvers's own, as she is "part of an allegory about women's aspirations to soar over nets and restraints of a strongly patriarchal world, a world illustrated by Yeats" (Sinowitz 112). Although one may not at first succeed in their attempt, the act of trying sets a precedent for the growing resistance against the oppressive male authority that exists within literature.

Fevvers's first "drop" may have aided in the gradual transformation of her narrative, but it has not yet given her possession of it entirely. It is her second "drop" that provides her with this agency. Occurring on the rooftop of the brothel, Fevvers is no longer shadowed by Leda, but instead by her own subversive "mother," Liz. Reflective of this shifting away from tradition that is present in the novel, this second attempt at flight parallels Yeats's interpretation, as Fevvers is briefly held mid-air by her "invisible love" (Carter 37), only to swiftly be released (as Leda is by the Swan). Forced to take flight or fall to her death, Fevvers's ability to survive this "drop" signifies her deviancy, as it brands her with "irreparable *difference*" (Carter 36). A "*difference*" that exists in defiance to patriarchal conventions, this moment must be seen as a "means of reclamation, a narrative empowerment to write women back into the historical record" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 144). Offering a tangible and (semi)liberating ending to the "drop" that Yeats does not provide, Carter realigns readers with a narrative that permits the necessary

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progression for the female identity, unshackled from the male author's pen.

What Carter's reimagining of the "drop" provides readers with is an alternative interpretation for the uncertainty surrounding Yeats's ending portrayal of Leda's (and subsequently Helen's) fate. As Yeats's Helen "engenders" (Yeats 9) a new era as a result of her mother's "drop," Carter's "Helen" engenders a reconceptualization of the literary female. Catalysts for a deconstruction of a patriarchal institution that has maintained control over women's bodies within literature for centuries, it must be understood that both interpretations result in differing consequences. Yeats's Helen may bring about the fall of Troy, but this ruin is swiftly replaced by an equally male-dominated authority (the Achaeans). This is unlike Carter's "Helen" who rejects any authority that may surpass her own. Yeats merely alludes to the idea of agency, whereas Carter reclaims it through Fevvers's unyielding perseverance. This subversion of Yeats's portrayal provides readers the opportunity to witness a figure who has succeeded in putting on a man's "knowledge with his power" (Yeats 14). Dissuading readers from making ignorant assumptions that subscribed to the subsumed legitimacy of the male voice, Carter uses Fevvers's second "drop" to argue that such "knowledge" is inherent to a women's existence, and should not be a "power" they must suffer for.

As Fevvers becomes "re-hatched" as the contemporary Helen of Troy, Walser is "hatched out of the shell of



unknowing" (Carter 348), and becomes the contemporary Leda. A transformation that begins when he is symbolically "raped" by Fevvers, Walser is overpowered as her "winged massiveness paradoxically deconstructs ideals of feminine angelic delicacy and scientific presumptions of the female" (Yang 508). Exemplifying this subversion, when Walser takes on the identity of a bird, it is a hen (not a rooster) that he chooses to embody. An alternate identity that further diminishes the novel's only male protagonist's claim to traditional patriarchal authority, as Fevvers embodies the Swan's symbolic identity, Walser simply role-plays and becomes a feminized victim of oppression that must "put on... [Fevvers] knowledge" (Yeats 14). A final reversal of Yeats's poem, the conventional male figure becomes the one who must take "himself apart and put himself together again" (Carter 348). What this suggests is that if patriarchal conventions are to fully be disassembled, it must be a complicit act that demands change from both men and women. Enacting this change through the violation of the male body as men have enacted conformity through the violation of the female body, this sexual union between Walser and Fevvers "reproduces Walser [and the conception of masculinity itself] [...] so that he can become a new man more fit for the changing era" (Yang 509).

Recognizing that to "deconstruct a particular ideology and a particular set of conventions, it is necessary to invoke those very ideologies and conventions one hopes to subvert" (Boehm 7), this blurring of identity purposely

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challenges a reader's traditional ideologies. Fevvers is both Helen and the Swan, as Walser is both man and Leda, and together they develop an alternative narrative for female representation that is suitable for contemporary literature and society. A change that must be consummated, the spindle of patriarchal control that dominates Yeats's poem, "turn[s] on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn... [and] 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" (Carter 338-9). This seemingly utopic transformation, however, as argued by Liz, cannot be as easily achieved as Fevvers (and the readers themselves) may wish it to be.

The battle between Leda's story and the domination of the male voice has permeated throughout centuries and, as such, cannot be so easily eradicated. Although it is important for readers to participate in Carter's evolving narrative, they must nonetheless accept the challenges that still exist for the representation of women in literature. Carter may have succeeded in re-writing one myth, but patriarchal normativity is far from being defeated. *Nights* may provide radical alternatives for understanding female identity in historical fiction, but as Liz tells Fevvers to "improve [...] [her] analysis" (Carter 339), Carter advises her readers to be equally as critical.

An individual such as Fevvers may represent change, but it is not until they are accepted by a majority (in this case the readers) that they become normative. By the end of the novel, Fevvers, through her shared symbolic identity

within Helen, still struggles against a traditional discourse that seeks to persuade her into conformity. What this struggle suggests is that physical agency alone is not enough to free Fevvers or Helen from their supposed fate. What Carter does provide is the observation that certain ideologies require a dismemberment if their conventions of female oppression are to be overcome. In doing so, she “imagines the path towards emancipation for her magical heroine... [and] confronts and rewrites the myths of Yeats, which symbolize illusionary stability that ultimately seeks to restrain and imprison” (Sinowitz 112).

It is ultimately up to the reader to decide which portrayal of Leda’s myth is justified and to which they most identify their ideologies. Those who reject Carter’s rewriting of history help to reinforce the patriarchal normativity that exists within traditional literature. Those who accept Carter’s reimagining of Leda’s myth will aid in delegitimizing the oppressive male voice. Those who reject both interpretations in favour of their own must nonetheless acknowledge that Carter provides them with a “self-conscious project of problematizing the very nature of the authored and authorized character of historical narrative” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 138). No matter what choice readers may make, the presence of metatextuality reveals that nearly four decades on from Carter’s publication of *Nights*, and almost a century since Yeats’s poem, readers still find themselves accosted by patriarchal narratives that purport an oppressive literary tradition. As such, those who, like Carter, seek to confront the male-

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imposed identities of women in literature find that they are left to ask themselves time and time again, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter 3).

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