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Anne Carson's Queer Monster in Autobiography of Red

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Rachel Mindell

Conference Abstract

In *Autobiography of Red*, poet Anne Carson explores a monster figure from antiquity, Geryon. In ancient renditions of the myth, Geryon possesses a herd of red cattle that spark jealousy in Herakles. As one of his labors, Herakles kills Geryon and steals the cattle. Carson takes up the myth from Stesichoros, preserved in the fragments bearing the name *Geryoneis*. *Autobiography of Red*, a novel in verse, recasts the figure of Geryon in the modern day, tracing his life as a red, winged person from childhood forward. In Carson's book, Geryon and Herakles are lovers, and Herakles violates Geryon's heart. *Autobiography of Red's* original poetic form, invocations of sublimity, phenomenology, and melancholia, lend the text to a reading by way of queer theory.

As part of the Graduate Research Conference, I propose to discuss the portions of my MA thesis on Anne Carson that pertain to *Autobiography of Red* and the above mentioned thematic concerns. Carson is a poet about whom much has been written and this text has received particular attention; however, a focus on the queer theoretical approaches that seek to dispel binaries related to gender and experience seems to be lacking in critical scholarship on Carson's work. Interestingly, though her texts perpetually cross boundaries, Carson holds herself to rather staunch restrictions regarding gender identification. In an interview with close friend Will Aitken, Carson discusses her early obsession with Oscar Wilde, responding to Aitken's questions about her life "as a gay man."

Carson says, "I guess I've never felt entirely female, but then probably lots of people don't." In reference to her trip on the Camino in Spain, she recalls:

"when I did that pilgrimage, I didn't have any connection to the female gender. I wouldn't say I exactly felt like a man, but when you're talking about yourself you only have these two options. There's no word for the "floating" gender in which we

would all like to rest. The neuter comes up in the “unbearable” poem, the neuter gender, but that doesn’t really capture it because you don’t feel neuter, you feel just wrong. Wrong vis-à-vis the gender you’re supposed to be in, wrong vis-à-vis the other one, and so what are you?”

According to Rosemary Hennessy’s ideas on the topic, certainly Carson’s sense of gender is relevant, even if she isn’t homosexual. According to Hennessy, “queer theory distances itself from lesbian and gay identity politics because it sees any identity as internally divided and therefore not an apt or effective rallying point for change. “Queer” is a mark of the instability of identity” (Hall and Jagose 35). In reference to *Autobiography of Red*, Carson reflects, “I was drawn to the Geryon story because of his monstrosity, although it’s something of a cliché to say that we all think we’re monsters. But it does have to do with gender” (Aitken). I would be honored to explore these issues relating to queerness and its exploration in Carson’s text by way of sublimity, phenomenology and melancholy, with attendees of the Graduate Student Research Conference. Thank you for your time.

Sources

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