Postmodern hero in Angela Carter's fiction

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The Postmodern Hero in Angela Carter's Fiction

by

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After a brief overview of the criticism written on Angela Carter’s fiction, this study explores the construction of the hero in three of Carter’s novels, *Heroes and Villains*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, and *Nights at the Circus*. This thesis is both an investigation into the ways in which Carter’s fiction deals self-consciously with gender encoding and an analysis of Carter’s experiment in decoding gender. The first chapter, “Through the Eyes of a Female Hero: Re-valuing the ‘Feminine,’” explores both of these tendencies by following the female child-protagonist of *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne, as she witnesses the damaging effects Western metaphysical assumptions have had on gender relations, and as she then proceeds to deconstruct and transcend polemic and patriarchal assumptions about world order. *Heroes and Villains* sets up Carter’s understanding of gender encoding as it emerges out of a Western philosophical tradition. Continuing the analysis of male-female relations that *Heroes and Villains* initiates, Dr. Hoffman goes on to investigate how those relations remain retarded by what Carter supposes to be a universal psychological schemata.

The second chapter, entitled “The Hegemony of Absence: A Study of the Neo-Freudian Subject in Dr. Hoffman” uncovers the psychological underpinnings of Dr. Hoffman by tracing the male protagonist’s desire throughout the narrative. Relying on Lacanian psychoanalysis, this chapter examines Carter’s postmodern applications of neo-Freudianism and exposes the limitations to which her characters and her fiction are bound by her adherence to neo-Freudian theory.

*Nights at the Circus* designates Carter’s arrival at a more liberated and optimistic conclusion about the future of gender relations. Thus the final chapter, “Reconstructing the Male Hero: Nights at the Circus as a Feminist Subversion of Symbolic Order,” relies on Lacanian thought as articulated by French feminists to examine the heroine of *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers, who through her symbolic difference lures the hero Walser through a radical psychological development that demands his temporary loss of language and subsequent psychic reconstruction. The text fuses form and content in that Walser’s re-education, which is a whirlwind of unsettling experiences traditionally called “feminine” and cyclical in content, parallels the text’s reeling eclecticism of episodes and its abandonment of the traditional linear plot structure for one more circular in form. The final chapter thus follows Carter as she abandons the fatality of her early work for the promises of an *écriture feminine*. 
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Introduction

Critiques of Angela Carter’s work reflect the multifaceted nature of her texts. Some critics, such as Carol Siegel in “Postmodern Women Novelists Review Victorian Male Masochism” and Kari Lokke in “Bluebeard and The Bloody Chamber,” note the demythologizing function of her texts, extolling her ideas as innovative, radical contributions to gender scholarship. Other scholars, most notably Robert Clark in his essay “Angela Carter’s Desire Machine,” cite her controversial theory for a moral pornography to argue that Carter’s feminism is mere patriarchy in drag. While still other criticism, including Paulina Palmer’s “From ‘Coded Mannequin’ to Bird Woman” and Elaine Jordan’s “Enthrallment: Angela Carter’s Speculative Fictions,” forges a middle ground by distinguishing among stages in her career that support both views.

Conflict among various perspectives is inevitable and dialogue desirable, but perhaps in this case the discussion is further exacerbated by the present struggle to come to terms with the nature of avant-garde, postmodern fiction, for true to the contemporary impulse, Carter’s texts speak a world of perspectives (some rational, others insane, some romantic, others cynical, some hopeful, and still others terrifying) that are not easily reconciled. Whatever else it may do, Carter’s fiction always posits plurality as a necessary social condition, and as a testimony to diversity
her texts resist the academic compulsion to taxonomize. Pick up any one of her works and you will find myriad characters, settings, and discourses enmeshed in uninterrupted conflict, and the tension generated by such heteroglossia enlivens her novelistic worlds with the complexities of everyday life.

Dr. Hoffman of The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman wages a war of fantasy on the Minister of Determination's corrupt world of reason. Marianne, the heroine of Heroes and Villains, runs away from order, stability, and security to pursue life in a chaotic, unpredictable forest. Nights at the Circus pits the ego of the male hero Walser against the female resources of the bird-woman Fewvers. In so many ways, Carter's texts acknowledge the conflict that accompanies sexual, ethnic, political, and cultural difference, and these areas of tension operate in Carter's work, in fact, as "sites of negotiation" (Fowl 76), places where difference may be discussed and understood. Tension, then, shapes the theme common to her repertoire of texts: her work explores how society constructs, influences, and determines individual thinking and feeling subjects. But in the best of her fiction Carter's is not narrative tension in the dialectic sense of the word, that is, conflict which prefigures textual resolution. It is instead tension unresolved; Pandora's box left open. In this respect, Carter's work reveals a real integrity, a willingness to accept the world on its terms and reshape it from the inside-out. She offers few, if any,
artificial hopes.

Previous criticism responds quite pointedly to the issues raised by Carter's texts and thus provides a spring board to both her work and the broader implications of postmodern fiction. Paulina Palmer's analysis spans the repertoire of Carter's work and demonstrates that Carter's language is linked closely to the disruptive elements of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque. She contends, for example, that *Nights at the Circus* alludes to so many other texts that its intertextual medley "subverts any single, unified utterance, in typical carnivalesque manner" (197). This extreme proliferation of discourses precludes any single one from establishing authority, creating a sort of temporary discursive anarchy, as liberating as the medieval carnival. Moreover Palmer argues that the human psyche is a product of its culture and can undergo change (181), and she therefore criticizes Carter's early fiction for resigning itself to mere analyses of women as "coded mannequins" and goes on to praise Carter's later fiction for charting new personal and political possibilities for women, represented by Fewvers as a "bird-woman."

By examining how fiction can bring about the type of change that concerns Palmer, Carol Siegel provides an astute analysis of the political nature of Carter's fiction in her essay entitled "Postmodern Women Novelists Review Victorian Male Masochism." She observes that Carter directs our
attention to “prior texts” instead of “current events” (9) so that her texts intentionally engage the historical tradition of discourse which determines current events. So when Carter appropriates a specific discourse, style, or archetype and revises it, she reshapes past authority without re-enthroning it, a process, which Siegel says, lends a “deconstructive power” to her texts and releases its characters and their desires “from containment within any one discourse” (13).

Brooks Landon, in her article “Eve at the End of the World,” defines this same technique as “an attempt to construct a feminist mythology” (70). Landon locates the discursive battle within the specific socio-political milieux by suggesting that she wages a “war between the sexes... on the battleground of myth” (70). Within this schema, Landon then interprets Heroes and Villains as a remythologizing of the Edenic myth and a reemblemizing of the image of Eve in defiance of patriarchal mythology. Moreover, for Landon, Carter’s fiction relies heavily on elements of the fantastic, as opposed to the mimetic, in order to liberate itself from the oppressive culture and modern literary tradition from which it emerges. Landon explains that her fiction works according to Rosemary Jackson’s definition of the fantastic and thus “arises in great part from the attempt ‘to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural restraints’” (62). In other words, Carter’s fiction operates within the realm of the fantastic to address female-oriented concerns
suppressed by other literary styles, like romanticism, realism, neoclassicism, etc.

In a similar fashion, Kari Lokke argues that Carter’s anthology of tales “The Bloody Chamber creates, from an ancient fairy tale and ancient mythic motifs, a vital original expression of a forceful feminist vision” (11). But in contrast to Landon’s fantastic, Lokke defines the tales’ emancipatory qualities as grotesque and thus as having, in Bakhtinian terms, the ability to “br[eak] down false societal and ideological barriers to expose the truth of life’s unpredictability and spontaneity” (7).

Investigating the explosive power of sexual and gender difference, Melinda Fowl also praises the indeterminacy of Carter’s work. She writes, “Gender difference and sexual identity are important... precisely because difference and identity are sites of ambivalences and insecurities, not static unities, and hence are sites of negotiation” (76). Fowl’s analysis of both “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Lady of the House of Love” stresses that individual identity is “unstable, at question and, to a degree, open to change” (72). Thus tossing stability to the wind, Fowl describes a world fluctuating with constant possibility.

While it could certainly be said that all criticism of Carter’s work deals with this topic of identity, Rory Turner’s “Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus,” Ricarda Schmidt’s “The Journey of
the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction," and David Punter's "Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine" take up the topic directly. Of the three, Turner's analysis is perhaps the simplest, contending that Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is based on a traditional folk ritual form, with a tripartite structure that replicates a tradition of sacrifice and rites of passage (59). Turner goes on to demonstrate that Fewvers progresses through stages of psychological development in which her symbolic self, determined by cultural archetypes, and her human self interact. To his discredit however, Turner reshapes the novel to fit prescribed folk categories that answer only partially to the complexity of Carter's project and in doing so reinstates the very traditions Carter subverts. Schmidt's essay, while similar to Turner's in its focus on the symbolic woman, responds more closely to the text, pointing out that "the novel has deconstructed the conception of the self as an essence and has explored the constitution of the subject in patriarchal society as mediated by the symbols of femininity men have created" (67). Concerned with historical implications, Schmidt's analysis delineates the way Carter's fiction parallels advances made in the feminist movement, culminating in the 1980s with a movement toward free-womanhood, which is characterized by the bird-woman Fewvers in *Nights at the Circus* (1988). Schmidt contends that in this later stage of Carter's work we witness the creation of new signifiers without corresponding real-
world signifieds (73), generating unprecedented female images and stepping away from allegorical representation.

David Punter, in an earlier essay, articulates a similar if more sophisticated reading of Carter by conflating life and text into a type of metatext of which we are all a part. He argues that "each and every action, and especially each manifestation of sexuality, becomes instantaneously inserted into a code, becomes a fragment of text to be read" (221). According to Punter, Carter's codes influence actions and sexual desires that simultaneously shape that code. From these premises, Punter renders a psychoanalytical reading of *Nights at the Circus* and *Dr. Hoffman*, with particular attention paid to "the mirror operating between reader and text" (217), that is, the trace of the reader's own desire within the text. While Punter's reading is informative at every step, he draws conclusions that are bounded by abstract psychoanalytic postulates. For example, his concluding remarks claim that "the sexual act can figure only... to confirm the boundary between the genders and the incompatibility of desires," and that "our interpretations of the social codes may be enhanced [through fiction], but only in the direction of isolation, rejection" (221). Such assertions, while worthwhile criticisms, suggest a social inflexibility which would have us forfeit the hope of personal, political, or social change.

Robert Clark resigns Carter's fiction to a similar
political powerlessness in his article entitled "Angela Carter’s Desire Machine." His essay sketches the parameters of reader responses to Dr. Hoffman by questioning the socio-political effects of Carter’s fiction: "The question... is to what extent the fictions of Angela Carter offer their readers a knowledge of patriarchy—and therefore offer some possibilities of liberating consciousness—and to what extent they fall back into reinscribing patriarchal attitudes" (147). Clark’s analysis touches briefly on "The Company of Wolves," "The Magic Toyshop," Heroes and Villains, Dr. Hoffman, and The Passion of New Eve (a prodigious undertaking for a reader response essay), and reaches the conclusion that these texts perpetuate, or reinscribe, patriarchal desires in different ways. He reasons that one reads texts like these not "to know (about consumer capitalism or anything else) but in order to desire, chasing objects that reveal themselves as mere images of the desirable" (156). He concludes with a scathing condemnation of her work, arguing that Carter’s "fascination with violent eroticism and her failure to find any alternative basis on which to construct a feminine identity prevent her work from being other than an elaborate trace of women’s self-alienation" (158).

This conclusion is simplistic and extreme. Consequently, Elaine Jordan takes Clark to task in her article entitled "Enthrallment: Angela Carter’s Speculative Fictions" by proposing that Clark is confused by his own
categories, expectations, and desires (27). Her own conclusions are much more optimistic: Angela Carter's scenarios are skeptical but not pessimistic. They are ways of looking with lively intelligence and imagination at ideas of the individual and the social in terms of the interests of those who have been colonized and marginalized, driven to the edge of what is held to be reasonable and commonsensical, and turned into ideals or horrors there. The demythologizing business is not only a rational process but a making of new fictions. (35)

In this respect, Jordan agrees with Siegel's argument that Carter's fiction creates new, unseen, and unprecedented images of women. Her analysis, which touches on most of Carter's major texts, including *The Sadeian Woman, The Passion of New Eve, Heroes and Villains, Nights at the Circus,* and *Dr. Hoffman,* emphasizes that as a woman Carter "enters history [and] rewrites it with herself in it" (38). That is, Carter takes history and myth and historicizes and mythologizes it in turn, a highly political maneuver which makes possible what Roland Barthes calls "prospective history" (Enthrallment 38).

In one of her earlier articles entitled "The Dangers of Angela Carter," Jordan outlines just how Carter helps to make prospective history possible and how she in turn contributes to a constructive feminist politic. She organizes Carter's contribution into three categories: Carter exposes the precarious position of woman as virtuous victim; she offers insight into
narcissistic desire and its detrimental effect on human relations; and she awakens an often complacent readership by shocking it with unexpected images and scenarios (2). Jordan covers the first two points briefly by examining The Sadeian Woman and Heroes and Villains, respectively, but merely touches on the implications of her third observation and thus only hints at the subversive potential of Carter’s fiction.

Like Jordan, all of the above critics seem to share the belief that fiction has the potential to alter and improve human experience, but they disagree as to the role Carter’s fiction can play in bringing about such change. Turner’s analysis, for instance, resides merely in the realm of representation where signifiers do nothing more than signify a more natural, immediate existence. On the other hand, critics like Palmer and Fowl move a step beyond Turner by permitting fiction a more explosive psycholinguistic potential. Palmer illustrates this by tracking the flight Carter’s fiction takes away from restrictive late-twentieth century gender codes toward the liberated language of Carter’s futuristic bird-woman; and Fowl does so by investigating the ways in which Carter’s “process of reworking tales provides readers with new contexts that can liberate signs and patterns” from oppressive psychological and social conditions (71). Palmer and Fowl acknowledge the subversive psycholinguistic aspect of Carter’s fiction, but Siegel, Lokke, Landon, Punter, Clark, and Jordan take yet another step further by addressing the ways that Carter’s texts interact with their readers and collapse
conventional notions of the boundary between life and text.

The project of these latter critics emerges out of the postmodern impulse on the part of both critic and author to underscore the relationship between signification and self-construction. This tendency manifests itself characteristically in postmodern literature’s heightened self-consciousness toward the language of the text, its keen awareness of itself as constructed, shaped by the practices or codes of its forebears. Just as postmodern fiction delights in an awareness of its own craftedness, so the postmodern critic revels in bringing awareness to how society and the individual are crafted by linguistic constructs, e.g., Cixous’ coded mannequin. In this vein, Carter’s more astute critics not only capture the ways in which her narratives reveal the cultural encoding of gender, but also the way in which she struggles to escape the more oppressive aspects of that encoding by textually reappropriating advances in psycholinguistic theory.

My thesis fits in at this juncture. While it is certainly an exploration of the ways in which Carter’s fiction deals self-consciously with gender encoding, it is also an analysis of Carter’s experiment in decoding gender. My first chapter, entitled “Through the Eyes of a Female Hero: Re-valuing the Feminine,” explores both of these tendencies by following the female child-protagonist of Heroes and Villains, Marianne, as she bears witness to the damaging effects Western metaphysical assumptions about gender have had on gender relations, and as she
then daringly marches forth to deconstruct and transcend polemic and patriarchal assumptions about world order. **Heroes and Villains** sets up Carter’s understanding of gender encoding as it emerges out of a Western philosophical tradition. Continuing the analysis of male-female relations that **Heroes and Villains** initiates, **The Infernal Desire Machine of Dr. Hoffman**, a later work, goes on to investigate how those relations remain retarded by what Carter supposes to be a universal psychological schemata.

By second chapter, entitled “The Hegemony of Absence: A Study of the Neo-Freudian Subject in **The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman**” uncovers the psychological underpinnings of Dr. Hoffman by tracing the male protagonist’s desire throughout the narrative. Relying on Lacanian psychoanalysis, this chapter examines Carter’s postmodern applications of neo-Freudianism and exposes the limitations to which her characters and her fiction are bound by her adherence to neo-Freudian theory.

**Nights at the Circus** escapes the fatal determinacy that concludes Dr. Hoffman and marks as Palmer says a departure from the decidedly grim promises of a text like **Heroes and Villains**. In doing so it also designates Carter’s arrival at a more liberated and optimistic conclusion about the future of gender relations. Thus in my final chapter, “Reconstructing the Male Hero: **Nights at the Circus** as a Feminist Subversion of Symbolic Order,” I rely on Lacanian thought as articulated by French feminists, a move warranted by the novel itself, to examine the extraordinary heroine of **Nights at the Circus**, Fevvers, who
through her symbolic difference (she has the wings of a bird) lures the hero Walser through a radical psychological development that demands his temporary loss of language and a subsequent psychic reconstruction. The text fuses form and content in that Walser's re-education, which is a whirlwind of unsettling experiences traditionally called "feminine" and cyclical in content, parallels the text's reeling eclecticism of episodes and its abandonment of the traditional linear plot structure for one more circular in form. My final chapter thus follows Carter as she abandons the fatality of her early work for the promises of a *criture feminine*. 
Through the Eyes of a Female Hero: Re-valuing the "Feminine"

In *The Man of Reason*, Genevieve Lloyd rehistoricizes Western metaphysics in terms of gender by tracing patterns of female oppression throughout classical philosophical thought. She argues that by confusing human nature with socialization, philosophy repeatedly affirms existing patterns of oppression and assigns men and women the gender-determined roles already in place in Western culture. Critiquing the classical Greek postulate that the male was the "real causal force of [sexual] generation" and the female a provider of the "matter which received the form," Lloyd demonstrates that such an assumption leads to the simplistic conclusion that maleness implies "active, determinate form" and femaleness "passive, indeterminate matter" (3). Therefore, the premise also contains the conclusion, in this case, that the male is suited for active roles and the female for passive ones, a justification for women's confinement to the private sphere and men's involvement in the public one. Even today the male's metaphysical connection with form (reason is virtually interchangeable with form in this schema!) keeps him politically, religiously, and socially empowered and allows him to dismiss women's voices as other than reasonable.

Lloyd theorizes that because women have had restricted access to public discourse, most professional discourses are still confined to the terms of their earliest predecessors, with the roots of today's debate traceable all the way back to
Plato's aforementioned discussion of form and matter in the early third century.² By mirroring its patriarchal context, man's philosophical discourse creates a narcissistic, masculine polemic that delegates Man, Society, Mind, and Form to govern over Woman, Nature, Body, and Matter in a master-slave relationship that continues in contemporary discourses (3-9).

Shoshana Felman develops this argument and demonstrates that sexual discrimination occurs because Western philosophy clings fiercely to gendered, binary oppositions. In her essay "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," she expands Derrida's notion of the "absent center"³ to show that such oppositions depend on a tension between a male presence, the ordinate term, and a female absence, the subordinate term, so that all that is associated with maleness coalesces into a referential center from which to understand, perceive, and order all that is not masculine. In her fight against these androcentric terms, present in artistic, philosophical, and historical discourses, the female writer is trapped in a particularly peculiar dilemma, something like Gilbert and Gubar's "infection in the sentence" (Infection 289).⁴ So in the midst of an unaccommodating if not hostile tradition, perhaps the most empowering and subversive thing women can do is assert the absences neglected by those discourses, that is, empower the terms that have been neglected.

Carter's texts do just that by giving voice to female
characters and validating female discourses. Her texts speak for those who have been denied voice; and the presence of these long-neglected discourses stands as evidence of the inadequacy of conventional thought. Carter's text *Heroes and Villains*, for instance, complicates traditional perceptions by melding the artificially constructed extremes and contrasts (i.e. protagonists and antagonists, feminine and masculine, art and nature) that are so integral to the Western male literary tradition: a hero belies himself as a villain, a boy devolves into a speaking dog, a landscape subsumes a character, a cottage melds into a forest, human reason unravels to unreason, and so on. She chooses a female child-heroine, Marianne, as our lens into this novelistic world which is so familiar to—yet fantastically different than--the one we are used to seeing and to the one Marianne is told she should see (by authorities, such as her father, her uncle, her nurse, her peers, etc.). Ever alert to the inconsistencies in Western thought, Marianne refuses to accept inadequate conventions to explain them away, and unlike other characters, perceives a diverse even contradictory world. In doing so, Marianne infuses a fresh, untainted perspective into text, daring to refer to her own textuality and transgressing the formerly sacred boundary between fact and fiction by questioning whether other characters in the text are "real or not" (103). With a self-consciousness that transcends the interiority of the text
itself, Marianne is thus able to cue readers to blurred 
oppositions, character doubles, and other artistic devices 
used by Carter to debunk masculine assumptions about world 
order. She emerges then as a strong, female presence in a 
hostile, patriarchal world.

To Marianne, Carter's post-apocalyptic world looms 
ominous with a fantastic, well-guarded city posed as its 
center, an initial point of reference that is both highly-
ordered and male-oriented with its citizens divided into 
three patrilinear professions, Professors, Workers, and 
Soldiers. With relatively no social mobility, the city 
manages to assure a fairly reliable stability within its 
walls based on a formalized "hereditary caste" system in 
which "[e]very Professor's eldest son became a cadet among 
the Soldiers [and] Professor's younger sons, nascent 
Professors," while the progeny of Workers and common Soldiers 
follow their fathers' professions, and working women fulfill 
domestic or working class roles. As the daughter of a 
Professor, Marianne finds herself in a privileged but 
strictly determined role in which she has the choice of 
marrying any of the young city men but few, if any, 
professional options. In other words, the system discourages 
er her from forging a public female identity by relegating her 
to private or lower class roles and disarming her in 
political and economical terms.

As an intransigent and emotional female, Marianne poses
only a minor threat to the stoic regiment of the city. The "feminine" forest outside the city, however, poses a major threat to its relative stability by introducing a dialogic tension into the text. Indeed, the forest appears to be opposite the city in most every way: the Professors live in "tranquil order" (14), while the Barbarians live in "chaos" (11); the "colours of the Professors [a]re browns and sepias, black, white and various shades of grey" (39), whereas the Barbarians "'like bright colours... beads, things that shine" (39); the Soldiers seem to be "mechanical, ingenious objects" (21), while the Barbarians are lively and garish, with flesh of "many colours and great manes of hair" and horses "caparisoned with rags, small knives, bells and chains dangling from manes and tails" (5); and the Professors think in terms of words and linear time, whereas the Barbarians organize their thoughts in images without regard to time.

Nature has been subdued and symbolic order prevails inside the city's walls, while outside the parameters of this "safe" haven untamed and primitive Barbarians run rampant in a chaotic and amorphous landscape of unrecognizable plants, mutated humans and unknown beasts, generating tension between a fixed, masculine order and a veritable feminine void.

Feminists have documented just such a tension in the history of philosophy, science, and religion by demonstrating, as Carolyn Merchant does in *The Death of Nature*, that the archetypes and images that emerge in these fields repeatedly
align women with nature, chaos, and body while associating men with society, order, and mind. Presuming this historical background, Carter's scenario foregrounds nothing less than a battle between the binaries of man/masculine and woman/feminine. After her text establishes these respective oppositions, it immediately sets out to deconstruct them by exposing them as masculine perceptions and stereotypes formalized by and conveyed through government, the academy, and mythology.

Like any "good girl," Marianne is expected to fulfill her role in this system by marrying a young man and settling into pre-established patterns, and without female role models or a surviving mother, alternatives seem slim. So like everyone else in the city, she should slip easily into the established order. She does not do so, however, and instead rebels against traditional expectations. On the simplest level, she flatly rejects the idea of marriage; but more important, she challenges the figures of authority who hold the most influence over her life. Marianne's nurse, for instance, tries to discourage her interest in the unknown forest by telling her things such as, "If you're not a good little girl, the Barbarians will eat you. . . . They wrap little girls in clay just like they do with hedgehogs, wrap them in clay, bake them in the fire and gobble them up with salt" (2), and Barbarians "slit the bellies of women after they've raped them and sew cats inside" (10). When Marianne
questions the basis of such claims, the nurse silences her by saying, without further explanation, "that is the nature of the Barbarians" (2). Even though Marianne doubts what the nurse says, such teachings pervade her thoughts throughout the entire text. Whereas the nurse represents mythological and superstitious discourse, Marianne’s father, the most authoritative city figure we meet, represents academic knowledge and “truth,” bearing the title Professor of History and carrying with him the authority of a long-standing academic tradition. Predictably, the perceptions he passes on to Marianne are founded on past authority and classical thought. But like the nurse, he also tries to help Marianne situate herself within her world. He explains to her that "Rousseau spoke of a noble savage but this is a time of ignoble savages" (10), and whereas humans were once interlinked, now "there is Homo faber [man the maker], to which genus we belong ourselves; but also Homo praedatrix [man the predator], Homo silvestris [man of the forest] and various others" (9). Invoking a beautiful past and espousing a current human taxonomy, her father falls back on history to distinguish among different tribal orders in the text, and thus defines an implicit hierarchy of being in which his noble men of artifice and technology are pitted against the ignoble savages from outdoors. Together he and the nurse portray the outside as chaotic, primitive, and dangerous, and the inside as ordered, civilized, and secure; and they
expect, of course, that Marianne will be partial to the latter. Marianne instead resists their insight, sensing a bias that she cannot quite identify, and in a seemingly naive way, veiled in childhood innocence, launches an uncompromised critique of her society's prejudices. Through her eyes we see past the nurse's scare tactics, the Professor's arbitrary taxonomy, and perhaps our own methods of ordering the world. With youthful curiosity and innocence, she thus guides us through the text, yawning at her elders, preferring nontraditional insight, and freeing herself and the reader from simple-minded polemics.

Sensing something too easy about her nurse's mythology and her father's sociology, Marianne cues the reader to a reading of the text that takes plurality and difference into account. Too many events remain unexplained. Why do some of the Worker women secretly help the Barbarians? Why do other women defect to the forest? Why is the rate of suicide so high in the city? Why does her nurse have six fingers when the norm seems to be five? Neither her nurse or father can explain away such facts. And despite its efforts to regulate everything from foreign attacks to human deviance, the military cannot prevent these things from happening. Disorder seems quite natural in fact and order seems somehow artificial. Through her actions, Marianne displays a similar unwillingness to fit into formal categories. Her first and clearest statement of resistance comes when a boy asks her to
play a variation of the childhood game Cowboys and Indians; The children played Soldiers and Barbarians; they made guns with their fingers and shot one another dead but the Soldiers always won. That was the rule of the game.

'The Soldiers are heroes but the Barbarians are villains,' said the son of the Professor of Mathematics aggressively, 'I'm a hero. I'll shoot you.'

'Oh, no, you won't,' said Marianne and grimaced frightfully. 'I'm not playing.' (2)

Imitating his elders, the boy develops a simple-minded game of good guys and bad guys; and when he claims that the soldiers are heroes, he mouths the authoritative discourse of his father and his father's academy, thus earning the selfless title, "son of the Professor of Mathematics." But Marianne unmask him. Seeing through his simple-minded manipulation, she refuses to play, spurning a game that casts her as a victim, a role too common to both outsiders and women. By relying on her own instincts and assuming a space outside the boy's game, she rejects society's restricting manacles and makes the best of her situation. Such innate responses lay bare her world for the reader by demonstrating that things are not quite as simple and options never quite as limited as society's rules would have them.

Faced again and again with inconsistencies between the world she observes and her education, Marianne rebels by refusing to play the children's games, questioning her
father's teachings, scrutinizing her nurse's cliches, and generally resisting pre-determined values. David Punter characterizes this resistance as a female resistance in which "Marianne grows, precisely through her female experiences, through her first-hand knowledge of repression, into a force far more effective than [the other characters], more pragmatic and less bound by ritual and superstition" (Terror 397-8). Maturing then through experience and a sensitivity to oppression, Marianne crosses another border to enter deeper into the unknown, providing the reader with a more accurate individual perspective into her world. In defiance of her nurse's warnings, She penetrated to the fossilized heart of the city, a wholly mineralized terrain where nothing existed but chunks of blackish, rusty stone. Here even the briars refused to grow and pools of water from the encroaching swampland contained nothing but viscid darkness. All was silence; the rabbits did not burrow here nor the birds nest. She found a bundle of rags with putrified flesh inside and looked no further but hurried on. . . [into] the forest. (12) Exploring parts of the world her father and nurse dismiss as dangerous (or merely neglect to mention), Marianne continues to discover a world that contradicts their teachings, finding the "heart of the city" to be a colorless wasteland, void of plants and animals, a dormant and petrified heart that no longer pumps life through the city's arteries but instead
reeks of death and sterility. Here, at the center, Marianne sees a part of the city that is hauntingly empty and barren, the culmination of perhaps too much order and too much reason.

So alone and frightened by the city, she rushes into the forbidden forest, where she finds a gentler, tranquil environment:

The trees surrounded her with vertical perspectives which obscured the flow of the hills. Here were wolves, bears, lions, phantoms and beggars but she saw nothing though she walked as softly as she could. . . . Moon-daisies, buttercups and all manner of wild flowers hid in the foaming grass. She saw a variegated snake twined round the bough of a tree but it did not harm her. . . . Bird song and the wind in the leaves seemed not to diminish but to intensify the silence; she could hear her own blood moving through her body. (12) Here she finds peace as she enters a sort of Eden with wild flowers peeping through the foaming grass, deer dashing through the trees, birds twittering, and a snake twisting around a branch.11 And though we hear the voice of her nurse anticipating wolves, bears, and lions, Marianne discovers only fertility and beauty in a silence so glorious that she hears the blood pulse through her veins. Having crossed over to the other side, she uncovers the beauty of the forest and the horror of the city, a reversal of expectations incomprehensible to the static, less curious city folk and a
clear inversion of what Merchant describes as the overwhelming tendency in American Literature to assume "the superiority of culture to nature" (144). On the simplest level, Heroes and Villains serves then to invert Western cultural prejudices by re-valuuing nature and de-glorifying culture, a first step toward reinterpreting what society has marked "feminine."

But Marianne takes the text's feminist statement a step further when she runs away from her society and its predictable, rational discourse to enter the forbidden forest with a Barbarian warrior named Jewel. Anticipating a more dynamic, imaginative world, she thus follows this warrior who seems at times to be no more than a projection of her own desire. With him, she crosses the divide between city and forest forever and discovers a remarkably alive and vibrant environment, quite contrary to what she was told to expect: Plants she could not name thrust luscious spires towards her hands; great chestnuts fantastically turreted with greenish bloom arched above her head; the curded white blossom of hawthorn closed every surrounding perspective. . . . it seemed the real breath of a wholly new and vegetable world. (22)

Contrary to the myths of the city folk, the forest reveals itself as gentle and protective, with its spires, turrets, roof, and walls sheltering Marianne during her first bivouac. Unlike her home of steel and concrete, the forest is alive
and blooms with a wholly natural architecture, healthier and purer for its luscious colors and smells. Her senses awakened, Marianne gains strength, becoming as aware of her body as her mind, a personal "becoming" that is ever so important to both French and American feminist projects.

Once Marianne casts her lot in with the Barbarians, the text makes a significant shift, for Marianne's attitude changes from excited anticipation to a more sobering acceptance of the impossibility of so easy an escape from patriarchy. In this transition, Carter makes no overtures to utopianism or escapism, using her text to convey instead the very real and far-reaching effects of the phallic tradition. Marianne finds herself, for instance, in a paternal and brutish situation much like the one she just escaped, a situation in which she is immediately surrounded by a Barbarian nurse just as superstitious as her former nurse, a Barbarian father who used to be a professor, and a surrogate Barbarian brother. To complete the parallel, she notices a social hierarchy, "a Barbarian snobbery" (40), all too similar to the caste system she just left. And if she gains freedom in the forest it is partially mitigated by the psychological presence of an oppressive Christian tradition, a tradition which Jewel wears on his back as a tattoo of the Fall of Man, a sign that, as Paulina Palmer remarks, "has the effect of placing [Marianne's] struggle in the context of [yet another] misogynistic culture" (Coded Mannequin 189).
While Marianne does not escape Western patriarchy as easily as she hoped, her character nonetheless continues to develop. She, in fact, learns from this repeated oppression, becoming more sensitive to her predicament and more perceptive as a result of this sensitivity. The forest is still quite different from the city, particularly because it offers a glimmer of hope, a possibility of change that is markedly more positive than the slow death that seems to be the city’s fate. Jewel’s character seems to prophesy one such hope for change. In contrast to his city counterparts, who are predictably static textual automatons, Jewel is a radically split subject, a profoundly enigmatic composite of contradictions: he is both surrogate brother to Marianne and the murderer of her brother, the hero who rescues her from the city and the villain who kidnaps her from that city, the lover who helps her know her own body and the rapist who violates that body, the prince who rules his town and the servant who bows to his foster-father, and the Prince of Darkness and the angel of mercy. He has so many disparate characteristics and embodies so many contradictions that he forces Marianne to confront the main issue of the novel: who is a hero and who a villain, or more precisely how do we ever know who is who. Of course, there can be no answer, and Marianne recognizes this: “I don’t know which is which anymore, nor who is who.” (125). A junkpile of emotional odds and ends, Jewel thus confuses linear logic, forcing us
against the rules of such logic to hold in place sameness and difference simultaneously, and to regard him as both protagonist and antagonist, self and other. Interpreting a similarly complex character from Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*, Palmer observes that this type of ambiguity “challenges the notion of unified character, pointing to the existence of multiple identities and the possibility of change they contain” (185). Struggling to understand Jewel’s explosive nature and its disruptive potential, Marianne accepts him as all three (other, brother, and self), another important step she takes away from conventional reason.

The more Marianne learns about the forest the more inadequate her civilian education proves to be; for traditional models fail to accommodate her narrative environment, leaving too many anomalies unexplained. Stuck in uncharted terrain with no handy cognitive map, she falters in an unsettling existential limbo, the repercussions of which are felt by the reader. Despite her ambiguous position, Marianne maintains a stoic heroism by adapting to her circumstances and accommodating new information, an instinct for survival that permits her to accept more ambiguity than perhaps the reader is accustomed to.

Her sexual liaison with the dog-boy, an episode that questions the nature of humanity, is markedly ambiguous and compels us to consider the fragility of our own existence. The text describes him best during Marianne’s first sojourn
into the forest:
The child had a collar around his neck fastened to a chain.
He was naked but for a very ragged pair of trousers. He was eating something and slobbering. He was twelve or thirteen.
He was covered with a snaky, interlaced pattern of tattooing all over his chest, arms and face. Suddenly this child began to cry out and thresh around, foaming at the mouth. (12)
The child, chained to a tree and deprived of his freedom, attests to the tenuous nature of our being, for although he speaks and looks to be human, he has regressed to a condition closer to a canine. Tearing at scraps of food like a bull dog, slobbering like a Newfoundland, and foaming as if rabid, he resists categorization, roaming somewhere between "dog" and "boy" and thus rendering traditional distinctions between human and animal inadequate. Consequently, his presence deprives Marianne of the conventional cognitive framework, the man-animal dichotomy, necessary to clarify the scene. Unable to see him as either a dog or a boy, she does not settle on either conventional term but instead makes due with "half-wit" and "dog-boy." The reader would be hard-pressed to achieve any further clarity.

Carter's dog-boy exposes the dilemma inherent to polemic thought; binary distinctions, however useful they may be to discursive practice, disregard what lies between extremes and what melds oppositions or contrasts. As a testament to a more connected world, the dog-boy takes on added significance
when he copulates with Marianne. Their coupling, characterized by "two or three thrusts" and some clumsy fondling depleted of sensual pleasure (114), is unsettling. Has she made love to a young boy? Has she fucked a dog? History informs us that such a union is politically significant since women have often been identified with animality (Merchant 143). Moreover, the text highlights the liaison by making the dog-boy a metaphorical father to the child Marianne is to bear.¹⁴

Carter thus complicates her novelistic world with the dog-boy; but she pushes it a step further with her description of the Out People who verge on virtual formlessness and who have developed horrible perversions in order to adapt to the forests and dead cities they inhabit. Pushed into the harshest of habitats, marshes, swamps, abandoned ruins, they have mutated (evolved? devolved?) into such variant forms that they defy the very notion of biological taxonomy. The text seems barely able to contain them as they burst seemingly out of nowhere in a suicidal assault on the Barbarians:

Those killed lay in undignified heaps. Amongst the Out People, the human form acquired fantastic shapes. One man had furled ears as pale, delicate and extensive as Arum lilies. Another was scaled all over, with webbed hands and feet. Few had the conventional complement of limbs or features and most bore marks of nameless diseases. Some were
ludicrously attenuated, with arms and legs twice as long as those of natural men, but one was perfect in all things but a perfect miniature, scarcely two feet long from tip to tip. . . . [And another was] a being of indeterminate sex equipped with breasts, testicles and a light but total covering of chestnut fur. (111)

Sexually indeterminate and physiologically disparate, the Out People defy classification. With ears furled like Arum lilies, one collapses the distinction between man and plant. Another, scaled and with webbed feet, is as much fish as man. While another, covered with fur and endowed with testes and breasts, resists classification by either sex or species. Gazing into this pile of monstrosities, Marianne tries futilely to understand them by comparing them to some human "norm," using phrases such as "[f]ew had the conventional complement of limbs or features," "some were ludicrously attenuated," and "one was a perfect miniature" (110).

Without a common characteristic, a general "form," the Out People transcend polemic thought, existing exclusively in the in-between, in that formlessness where polemic differentiation makes no sense. Marianne comes to accept them as both human and not-human, in her own terms, "men/not men" (my plural), and her acceptance of their difference seems to prepare her for the last leg of her journey where she moves furthest away, physically and psychologically, from her father's city and its masculine assumptions.
Pregnant and having finally completed a long pilgrimage to the ocean, she leaves the Barbarian tribe to discover the sea with Jewel:

Before them and around them were all the wonders of the seashore, to which Marianne could scarcely put a single name, though everything had once been scrupulously named. . . .

Losing their names, these things underwent a process of uncreation and reverted to chaos, existing only to themselves in an unstructured world where they were not formally acknowledged, becoming an ever-widening margin of undifferentiated and nameless matter surrounding the outposts of man. (136)

Walking the fringes of the sea with Jewel, Marianne is no longer capable, like the narrator, of identifying or differentiating the "fans, fronds, ribbons, wreaths" of seaweed nor the separate types of sponge, "[p]urse sponge, slime sponge, breadcrumb sponge" (136). Deprived of their symbolic names, Marianne witnesses them slip back to their natural state as "undifferentiated and nameless matter."

Timeless and formless, this is yet the furthest extreme of the city, nature's purist extreme, and an extreme that frightens even Marianne with its "namelessness" and "absolute privacy" (137). Looking out at the sea, Marianne also peers into the womb, her own womb where she nourishes a child, where humanity exists in its most natural "human" state.

In its formlessness, the sea then testifies to a
connected world, a world like the womb where mother and child are united in a symbiotic harmony. But like the fetus inside her, Marianne must forfeit this temporary unity for the discord of civilization. So as she leaves the sea, she too undergoes a metaphorical birthing, a rebirth of the mother, which brings with it a fierce insistence on what has often been stereotypically termed "feminine." Without the Name of the Father, the sea yields interconnectedness, and Marianne’s prophetic child, son of a prince of fantasy and a creature of ambiguity, promises this same characteristic. Returning to the tribe, she and Jewel bring with them a fresh hope for change, Jewel certain that he must leave the tribe and Marianne confident that she will become its new matriarchal chieftain. Although the text ends before Carter defines this changed world, a fact used to decry her fiction as lacking "coherent significance" (Clark 156) and resisting "social and psychic change" (Palmer 180), Carter nonetheless promises change as Jewel dies at the hands of his father and Marianne succeeds to the throne carrying inside her this unnarratable future. And though it may be unfortunate that Carter does not venture to prophesy more, due perhaps to social, psychological, or literary hurdles, she does indeed sketch the contours of change. For in the end, Marianne’s ascendency to chieftain and her forthcoming child together seem to promise a respect for difference, body, and nature, features neglected by both Marianne’s fictional predecessors
and Carter's literary forefathers.
Notes

1. Genevieve Lloyd argues that Plato assumes the world to be suffused with a transcendental Reason comprised of ideal (Platonic) forms (Man of Reason 3-9).

2. Since Plato thought that the mind ascertained Truth by transcending or suppressing the body, the active oppression of women was a mere metaphysical remove (Lloyd 3).

3. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Jacques Derrida discusses the structurality of structure, explaining that all structure, including language, has a center, "a point of presence, a fixed origin" the function of which is "not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure... but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the free-play of the structure" (247-49). It is perhaps equally as important to note that Derrida's "absent center" refers to a wholly different concept than Felman's "feminine absence" ("Women and Madness" 6-7).

4. Gilbert and Gubar draw from Freudian critics analyses of the author's relationship to his or her literary forebears. They assume as others have before them that the author is always engaged in a literary Oedipal struggle with his or her forefathers. Bloom titles this the "anxiety of influence," fear of the father's overwhelming influence and the need to distinguish oneself within or against that influence. Gilbert and Gubar further argue that the female author occupies an even more difficult position, caught in a double bind, subject to the anxiety of influence Bloom speaks of, and bound to the archetypes, styles, and such of her forebears, which are for the most part decidedly masculine.

5. To speak of Marianne as transcending the interiority of the text is to accept the existence of several texts. First, there is the narrative itself, bound between the covers. Second, there is the narrative which Marianne, who is in close alliance with the third person narrator, perceives. She perceives two texts within that narrative, one which is tangible and exterior to herself ("Jewel's body was too warm to be imaginary") and another which is abstract, a projection of images in her own psyche (Jewel is "a metaphysical proposition"). Marianne is self-conscious of these latter two texts. At several times, she is, like the reader, cast in the role of observer, high in a tower, watching, observing, and judging what is going on.
6. In his work *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin identifies
dialogic tension as an inherent aspect of novelistic
discourse. Editor Michael Holquist writes, "Dialogism is the
characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by
heteroglossia" (426). Dialogic tension would then be the
interaction between two or more different discourses.

devotes an entire chapter to the ways women have been
associated with nature in mythology, philosophy, and
religion. She renders an equally informative analysis of the
ways nature and, in turn, women have also come to be equated
with chaos. See chapters "Nature as Female" and "Nature as
Disorder," respectively.

8. The notion of absolute truth is, of course, being
challenged in this novel.

9. I am thinking of Frederic Jameson’s discussion of
cognitive mapping. In his article "Postmodernism and
Consumer Society," he discusses the subject’s need to situate
itself psychologically within its socio-economic context.
Marianne rejects the psychological markers prescribed by her
society and thus ventures into uncharted psychic terrain.

10. The term is Bakhtin’s, by which he means, as editor
Michael Holquist writes, "privileged language that approaches
us from without; it is distanced, taboo, and permits no play
with its framing context" (424). In other words,
authoritative discourse is the discourse of power, the
discourse which is beyond questioning.

11. Alluding to the Fall of Man, this snake prefigures other
snakes in the novel. The repeated image suggests a Christian
presence in the forest.

10. Early in the text, Marianne witnesses Jewel slaughter
her brother. Over time, the two figures blur in her mind as
their faces superimpose "entirely on each other" (10).

13. Jewel is furthermore the character double of Marianne’s
brother and her own double in whom she sees "herself
reflected twice" (88).

14. I take it as fairly obvious that Jewel is the father of
Marianne’s child, but it is the dog-boy who informs Marianne
of her own pregnancy when he says to her, "Jewel’s put a kid
in you" (116), to which she responds with a surge of maternal
warmth for the prophetic dog-boy, this "mindless child of
chaos now sucking her as if he expected to find milk" (116).
Having copulated with Marianne, suckled her breasts, and prophesied her pregnancy, the dog-boy shares a metaphorical relationship with the child Marianne bears as well as with the father of that child.
In her essay “From ‘Coded Mannequin’ to Bird Woman: Angela Carter’s Magic Flight,” Paulina Palmer argues that over the course of her career Carter’s fiction matured from what Carter herself calls male impersonations into an increasingly female-oriented fiction where women protagonists break free of their cultural programming. While little of Carter’s work is as imitative or limited as Palmer suggests, with my previous chapter’s conclusions concerning Heroes and Villains (1967) a case in point, much of Carter’s early work does limit itself to depictions of what she supposes to be an impervious patriarchal order. As Palmer observes, this fatality circumscribes Carter’s literary projects so that although they may present “brilliantly accurate analys[es] of the oppressive effects of patriarchal structures, [they run] the risk of making these structures appear even more closed and impenetrable than, in actual fact, they are” (181). The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman, written fairly early in her career (1972), fits Palmer’s description more precisely than any of the other novels, for although it appears in form and content to be radically innovative and explosive, it is a conservative work emanating from and framed by the neo-Freudian psychology it seems to transcend. While highly imaginative and experimental in the ways it appropriates psychoanalytic developments to complicate
prevailing literary practices (predicated on Structuralist assumptions and Modernist narratives), Dr. Hoffman remains strictly bound by neo-Freudianism, a condition that limits the subversive potential of her narrative and restricts her characters to narcissistic pursuits and destructive gender relations.¹

Carter presents the narrative of Dr. Hoffman as a quasi-dream sequence fueled by unconscious sexual energy. The text, which was originally published under the title The War of Dreams, pits the diabolical Dr. Hoffman and his dream machine against the Minister of Determination's tyrannical determinism. To combat the incumbent forces of the Minister's positivist logic, Dr. Hoffman unleashes the sexual energies of the unconscious and effectively tears open the tough fabric of the Minister's reality. Fighting on the battlefield of the Minister's city, the two struggle to secure their disparate epistemologies, the Minister patriotically defending the institutions and cultural heritage that make up the establishment, the Doctor launching an imaginary offense on that establishment in the hopes of shattering its fragile facade. The narrator, Desiderio, writes that before the war the city was "solid, drab, yet not unfriendly" but "thickly, obtusely masculine" (15), but when the Doctor blasts it with hallucinations from his gigantic generators of desire great cracks emerge "in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation we had
informally formulated in order to realize our city" (17). Throughout the duration of the war, the narrator and begrudging hero of the text bridges these two camps, not on a mission of espionage or heroics as he claims, but in pursuit of Hoffman's sensual daughter, Albertina, who is the projection of the hero's desire. As the sexual component of his personal dreamscape, she is the only thread woven throughout the novel's plot; as the ambiguous and ethereal trace of his desire, she unifies the text.

In Lacanian terminology, Albertina serves a dual role as both the other, the objet petit a of Desiderio's temporal desire, and the Lacanian Other, the representation of a universal unconscious Desire that is the well-spring of language production. So although she brings coherency to the text, that coherency stems not from character continuity and development but from her presence as the continuing testimony to Desiderio's D/desire. The narrative of Dr. Hoffman is thus exclusively the story of Desiderio as a split-subject; and the war of dreams nothing more nor less than the ontological struggle between his two selves, what Lacan would term his split-subjectivity.

Unlike Freud who leaves us with the model of a fairly integrated ego, Lacan cleaves the ego in two, into the enunciating subject, the conscious subject which articulates, and the subject of enunciation, Lacan's moi, the unconscious subject which is always in the process of being articulated
In doing so, he complicates our understanding of language, making it a multilayered activity that perpetually recalls the origins of our subjectivity (Ragland-Sullivan 131). In keeping with Freud, Lacan theorizes that the subject comes into being during the early stages of childhood through a series of universal experiences (most notably the mirror stage and the Oedipal crisis) that culminate in separation and alienation. He contends that the child initially experiences itself as a composite of disconnected parts (eyes, ears, etc.) and disconnected sensations until sometime between six and eighteen months. This stage passes quickly and the child enters a mirror stage during which it adopts for itself an "ideal ego" -- a coherent image of itself (before and during the mirror stage, the child does not distinguish between itself, its mother, and its environs). But the Imaginary gestalt of the mirror stage terminates with the appearance of the father's law, through which the child is symbolically castrated, adopts an Oedipal Complex, and is tossed headlong into a Symbolic world of language and subjectivity (Ragland-Sullivan 29).

Lacan proposes three key concepts to explain the intrasubjective self which emerges from these developments: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary, an antecedent to the Symbolic developmentally, corresponds with the early mirror stage and is thus characterized by an ontological totality that precedes the child's realization of
itself as distinct from its surroundings. On a developmental level, the Imaginary denotes a temporary phase apriori subject-object relations, a phase which ends violently when a representation of the phallic father intervenes to sever the child from its symbiotic cohesion with the mother and its surroundings. This dramatic event, the Oedipal Crisis, simultaneously hurls the child into a nascent awareness of its own subjectivity and into a world of subjects and objects where Symbolic communication becomes possible, necessary, and urgent.

Symbolized by the Phallus and characterized by separation and castration, the Symbolic realm thus signals the child's initiation into language and culture, where communication and acculturation are equated with survival, selfhood, and most importantly Desire. The Real on the other hand, unlike the Imaginary and the Symbolic which dominate specific stages in the Oedipal drama (but persist as ontological phenomena afterwards), can only be defined in elusive relation to these two, as that before which the Imaginary falters and as that which underpins the Symbolic and emerges only in the gaps of language (ie. parapraxis). Lacanian psychoanalysis disperses the speaking and thinking subject into what Ellie Ragland-Sullivan calls a slippery "interplay of Real events, Imaginary representations, and Symbolic meanings" (136) in which Real intrasubjective events are recorded in Imaginary forms that have the latent
potential for Symbolic significance. Lacan's subject is thus driven not by Freud's "mechanistic concept" of the libido but by a "dynamic process of wanting" that recalls the elemental drama of separation and castration (Ragland-Sullivan 131).

At its center lies then the root of existential angst, the equation of desire with loss. Language and knowledge are thus wound up within a lack brought on by the Oedipal crisis and the desire to fulfill that lack through language and love. With castration, alienation, and separation so inextricably bound to language, knowledge, and love, the very systems of meaning and being, the essence of reality, are inherently fragmented and unstable (Ragland-Sullivan 131).

According to Marilyn Brownstein in her essay "Postmodern Language and the Perpetuation of Desire," the most crucial implication of Lacan's psycholinguistic theory for contemporary literature is that it provides "a system of linked and coinciding pairs which are the first principles and discrete elements of postmodern writing" (81). She argues that coinciding pairs, such as "me/not me, inner/outer, desire/with its amalgem of loss and gain, background/foreground, image/significance, and the equation of primary loss with its secondary manifestation," have become the theoretical foundations and vocabulary for a spreading postmodern discourse that includes the corpus of Carter's fiction (81). Dr. Hoffman, a stridently postmodern work in several respects, coincides with Brownstein's
discussion in two explicit ways: first, by exposing the uncertainties and discontinuities in the intrasubjective neo-Freudian self, thus expounding on connections between me/not me, desire/with its amalgem of loss and gain, and primary loss/secondary manifestation; and second, by including Imaginary interruptions in a Symbolic text, questioning critical distinctions between image/significance.

In all of her fiction, and in Dr. Hoffman especially, Carter reappropriates Lacanian theories on split-subjectivity to escape oversimplified narrative characterizations based on Western notions of subjective continuity. By drawing on more current psychoanalytic dialectics such as me/not me, desire/loss and gain, and primary loss/secondary manifestation, she is able to blur the traditional categories of protagonist and antagonist and in doing so develop Desiderio along more ambiguous lines of character resolve. As David Punter points out in his essay, "Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine," Dr. Hoffman is in effect a dramatization "of the constructed subject" through which Carter throws into question "the ontological location of desire" and "the arbitrariness of change" (210). Although he offers a commendable critique, Punter still slightly misses mark, for Carter’s Dr. Hoffman does not raise the question of an ontology of desire as he states, which would mean proposing alternatives and raising ambiguities, so much as it actually locates that desire within the "lack" of Lacanian
intrasubjectivity, effectively underscoring the relationship between the self and others, between desire and absence, and between primary loss and secondary manifestations.

Desiderio is a split-subject, simultaneously submissive and aggressive, sadistic and masochistic, moralistic and pederastic, and nonetheless a psychologically normal Everyman inadvertently turned hero. As the composite of the textual renderings of his Desire, he testifies to the complexity of human Desire and the human condition and thus exposes the fiction of a unified subject. The symbol of his Desire is Albertina, the objet petite a as it bursts on the scene in a variety of guises, for from the moment he conjures her as a black swan wearing a golden collar in his dream, the name Albertina engraved on that collar comes to signify his Desire. Her actual form, as the object of his desire, however remains secondary to his greater, mutable, unconscious Desire for the Other "Albertina." In his own words, "she was inextricably mingled with my idea of her and her substance was so flexible she could have worn a left glove on her right hand" (142). Albertina thus represents both the primary loss brought on by the Oedipal separation and its repetition in secondary forms. Their relationship recalls the origins of subjectivity and the ensuing psychological patterns that result.

By playing out the drama of Desiderio’s intra-subjective self, Carter liberates Desiderio from oppressive notions of
character continuity and portrays him as a complicated, confused, or ambiguous hero, despite such positivistic exhortations to the contrary as "I remember everything." The glimpse we get of his unconscious, through the many manifestations of Albertina, reveals the complexity of Desiderio's desublimated self. After his dream of the black swan, he next calls her up as Dr. Hoffman's male ambassador who in his words is "the most beautiful human being I have ever seen" (32), then as the sexually enslaved and mute servant of a libertine Count, later as the Madame of a brothel reknowned for its half-women, half-beast playthings, and finally, as what he considers the "real" Albertina, "a golden woman whose flesh seemed composed of the sunlight" (164). Having undergone a series of at times perverse mutations, Desiderio's desire then settles on "traditional" mainstream heterosexuality, symbolized through this gorgeous woman too mythic to be human, a woman so radiant as to be "composed of the sunlight." The multifaceted nature of Desiderio's unloosed desire permits Carter to raise the spectres of homosexuality, bisexuality, and bestiality, all the while maintaining a pretense of "palatable" heterosexuality. To understand Desiderio, the reader must accept the diverse nature of this desire, thus dispersing mainstream sexuality into a series of sadistic, masochist, homosexual, and bisexual tributaries.

While Carter's application of the split-subject marks a
significant attempt to remake the fictional hero, her understanding of neo-Freudian cognitive theories permits her to challenge modernist narrative by experimenting with the gap between Imaginary representations and Symbolic meanings, or in Brownstein's terms, by complicating distinctions between image/significance. Dr. Hoffman purports his projections to be "the unleashed unconscious" (211), Imaginary interruptions in the Minister's otherwise Symbolic text. Barraging Desiderio and by extension the reader with a flood of "constantly fluctuating" and completely "instantaneous" images that at times seem without rhyme or reason (18), Hoffman seeks to depose the Symbolic and let flow a river of colorful representations without any discernible Symbolic import, creating a world of seemingly ignorant (unconscious) bliss, a liberation of the unconscious which, in the Doctor's words, "shall, of course, liberate man" (208).

The deluge of Hoffman's images first strikes Desiderio when he walks onto a city street to find the familiar cityscape transformed into "cloud palaces" surrounded by what used to be lampposts but have come to be a "group of chanting pillars" and then a row of huge "silent flowers." Inside, a theater audience momentarily transforms into an auditorium "full of peacocks in full spread" and outside, the boulevard has begun to susurrate with mendicants in "long, loose, patchwork coats, strings of beads and ragged turbans"
claiming to be "refugees from the mountains" (18). From the earliest pages, Hoffman's unconscious struggles for dominance over the Minister's Symbolic text. As Desiderio observes, "Hardly anything remained the same for more than one second and the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream" (18). Striving toward a representation of the Imaginary, Hoffman hopes to dislodge the text from the institutions of Symbolic logic. In this sense, the war of dreams is a war between two competing epistemological and ontological impulses, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Lacan's je and moi. Desiderio, seemingly aware that Hoffman's Imaginary interruptions are reaching for something beyond the Symbolic, explains that life itself has become so complex, "so rich it can hardly be expressed in language" (11).

According to Robert Clark in his essay "Angela Carter's Desire Machine," this characteristic of Carter's work has the effect of limiting the text to "play or parody. . . . but a parody that has no discernible point of departure or arrival and seems always on the verge of pastiche" (155). By celebrating the proliferation of images at the expense of discernible textual significance, a characteristic that Clark uses to argue for the text as "finally blank or overdetermined" (155), Dr. Hoffman's unconscious, like Brownstein's postmodernism, "is in clear contrast to the habits and words in modernist texts whose associative
energies and idiosyncratic references create the seamless systems, the memory temples which rise in grandeur for the duration of the text" (82). Hoffman's unconscious resembles instead what Lacan speaks of as a 'sliding of the signified beneath the signifier,' which Terry Eagleton reads as "a constant fading and evaporation of meaning... which will certainly never yield up its final secrets to interpretation" (169). Unlike the modernist text with its tendency to erect temples of meaning, Dr. Hoffman's unconscious disseminates seemingly empty signifiers, stylistic imitations, and surface allusions, creating a limitless world of substitutions, or as the character Dr. Hoffman puts it, "'an and + and world" in which he alone has "discovered the key to the inexhaustible plus'" (206). In contrast to a metaphorically meaningful modernist text, this "and + and" text permits contradictions, fluctuates with indeterminacy, and in many respects defies exegesis as it seems to expand outward. Desiderio, prisoner of a structuralist consciousness, finds that his "limitations positively for[bid] such a thing" as this text from happening, and finds himself at a loss to explain away the unconscious phenomena and the unhinged signifiers he encounters. Equipped to deal exclusively in rational Symbolic terms which sublimate the subconscious drama they represent, Desiderio, and by extension the reader, discovers himself embroiled in a postmodern narrative that insists on performing that drama.
But Clark misses the point. Dr. Hoffman’s unconscious is not Carter’s text. Although Carter does experiment with an Imaginary writing in this text through Hoffman’s unleashed unconscious, the text itself never really disperses into pastiche as both Hoffman and Clark would have it. Episodes, like Desiderio’s encounter with the centaurs, though perhaps not integral to the text in the way that words and scenes accumulate meaning in modernist texts, occur within a strict narrative framework, the metanarrative of Lacanian subjectivity. Dr. Hoffman in the end flaunts a paradoxically conservative message, for the text is held together by Desiderio’s unalterable and presumably universal Desire for Albertina, a composite of desires so crippling that she remains a mere projection of Lacan’s eternally unattainable Desire, a symbol of the lack which can never really be fulfilled. In regard to the conclusion, Punter points out that we are “supposed already to know the outcome of the story” (211), that Desiderio has already told this story, and that it has already been recorded in history books. But we already know the end of this story in still another sense. It will end as every neo-Freudian search must end, in an inescapable drive toward self-annihilation and the pursuit of narcissistic pleasure. In this sense, Dr. Hoffman’s story is a lie. Though he may succeed in desublimating individual desires, he cannot “liberate man in the process.” Humankind remains bound in Carter’s text to the realities of the Real,
a prisoner forever to absence and isolation. Dr. Hoffman does not lack the "metanarrative" or "coherent significance" that Clark seeks afterall (156). Instead, Carter's text reiterates the already written story of the neo-Freudian subject, the foreclosed metanarrative of Lacanian subjectivity. In that sense, all of its episodes are Imaginary snapshots in the composite of the neo-Freudian self.

To get to the heart of Dr. Hoffman's logic, we need to follow Desiderio through his descent into the basement of the castle where Hoffman keeps his headquarters. Hoffman's headquarters is a supermodern complex of computer technology run by a staff of android-like technicians, an immense control room of centralized power and mechanization. Beyond this room, behind locked doors, lie the generators that power Hoffman's project. Invited inside, Desiderio describes the engine room as a maze of cylindrical steel drums, humming transmitters, white-tiled walls, plastic conduits, flashing lights, the entire chamber buzzing with the "electricity of desire" (213). Visible at its center in seamless glass housing hundreds of yards long are Hoffman's love pens, where "a hundred of the best-matched lovers in the world [are] twined in a hundred of the most fervent embraces passion could devise" (214). This Desiderio discerns is the driving force of Hoffman's laboratory, a perpetual orgy of piston-like bodies emitting almost enough eroto-energy to fuel
Hoffman's war machines. The addition of Desiderio's desire will complete the equation. With Albertina at his side under the guise of a general in Hoffman's militia, Desiderio comprehends his role in Dr. Hoffman's designs for the first time. Suddenly aware that Hoffman intends for him to become part of the love machine, he screams, "No, Generalissimo! No!" (215), in fear.

Faced with the chance to consummate his desire and join the others with Albertina in their perpetual orgasm, Desiderio recoils at the prospect and cries out, setting off the castle alarms. A pell-mell struggle ensues among Desiderio, Albertina, and Dr. Hoffman in which Desiderio breaks Hoffman's neck and plunges a knife into Albertina's heart. Having arrived at the core of Hoffman's universe, he has a sudden change of heart and impulsively demolishes the laboratory. Desiderio's sudden outburst, which brings the text to a near close, can be understood as a response to his newly-acquired knowledge about Albertina, her father, their machines, and himself. Having looked into the heart of Hoffman's darkness, he has seen something to fear -- namely, his own death (212).

The end of Dr. Hoffman concerns Lacan's death instinct. What Desiderio sees in the mechanics of Hoffman's desire machines that frightens him so deeply is his own drive toward self-annihilation. Presentiments of this self-knowledge come upon him early in the chapter when he first peers into the
love chamber. There he sees "petrified pilgrims, locked parallels, icons of perpetual motion, [who know] nothing but the progress of their static journey towards willed, mutual annihilation" (215). The horror Desiderio observes is two-fold. On the one hand, he comes to realize that each of us, pilgrims that we are, is forever locked into his or her own trajectory, like parallel lines, never to intersect fully with our other, the Other. Second, Desiderio sees that we are eternally seeking to leap over the gap between ourselves and the other, in a perpetual chase to outrun the distance between ourselves and our Desire. This is what Desiderio means when he speaks of a "dictatorship of desire." He means the totality and fatality of Dr. Hoffman's universe, or in other words the frightening universality of Freud's formulas, the metanarrative of life.

For Desiderio to outrun his own Desire and join Albertina in an orgy of perpetual fulfillment would imply a repudiation of the self and a retreat into pre-consciousness, apriori Lacan's mirror stage. In other words, were Desiderio to leap the void between himself and the O/other, he would have fulfilled his Desire, the well-spring of his subjectivity. He would thus regress back into the Imaginary, a prospect which is neither appealing to him nor possible for us. Thus by collapsing the distance between himself and what he calls his "Platonic other," Desiderio would excommunicate himself from the Symbolic world he knows. Consequently, he
would facilitate his own annihilation, bringing on what he calls his "necessary extinction" (215). Alarmed by his own drive toward self-annihilation, Desiderio instinctively adopts the only means of self-preservation available to him, namely the murder of his own desire. He explains, "Why should I tell you how I killed Albertina? I think I killed her to stop her killing me" (217). Desiderio impulsively murders Albertina to destroy his desire, manifested as the objet petite a, with the hope of doing the impossible, destroying the very lack which confines him to a cycle of perpetually unattainable Desire. Albertina’s death would in this sense suggest the impossible, liberation from Lacan’s formula. Desiderio, thinking he has beat the system and killed his own Desire, writes of Albertina’s apparent death: “I felt the uneasy sense of perfect freedom.... I thought I was free of her, you see” (217).

What Desiderio confronts in this particular scene and what we are dealing with in neo-Freudianism as a field of study in general are the limitations of a bounded psychic system. Lacan asserts his theories as fixed and universal. To accept them is to accept a number of premises, among them, the existence of a mirror stage and an Oedipal crisis through which everyone passes, of a Desire so prevalent as to underlie all cultural formations of a masculine Symbolic and of a feminine Imaginary. Carter’s text is quite consciously bounded by this system, just as it is liberated by the self-
same psychoanalytic advances discussed earlier. Character actions, scenes, and symbols concern neo-Freudian theory and occur within a neo-Freudian construct and thus narratologically bind Dr. Hoffman within a neo-Freudian framework, expressed metaphorically in Dr. Hoffman's peep shows, the models for his "unleashed unconscious."

Earlier in the text, Desiderio chances on a carnival, the main attraction being a peep show operated by the former physics teacher of Dr. Hoffman. Having paid his quarter and stepped under the flap of a tent marked "Seven Wonders of the World in Three Life-like Dimensions," Desiderio peers into a series of peep shows displaying synthetic sexual images, each begging a neo-Freudian exegesis. In the first, Desiderio looks into the vagina of a woman to see a replica of Dr. Hoffman's castle. In the second, he peers into a window and sees himself reflected back in a "model of eternal regression" (45). The third, entitled "The Meeting Place of Love and Hunger," houses two spheres of ice-cream topped with cherries and made to resemble breasts. The fourth displays a butchered woman made to appear like meat. The fifth shows that woman's head severed. The sixth showcases a large penis pointing accusingly at the viewer and titled "The Key to the City." And the seventh, titled "Perpetual Motion," is a representation of Hoffman's love pens with Albertina embracing a man who Desiderio does not see, but who we know later to be Desiderio himself.
The peep show functions as a microcosm of the text. In the first case, it replicates the act of reading, with Desiderio peering into the metal machines just as we are peering into Carter's text. It thus suggests a sense of boundedness, the show framed within a metal capsule, the book within its cover, Desiderio stuck peering into the machine, and the reader into the novel. But far more significantly, the peep show, like the text, is also bounded by a predetermined set of images and tropes. Both Carter and the peep show proprietor are compelled to draw from a ready made set of images. Though they both deal in imaginative transformations, both also remain forever dependent on the images and forms that presuppose their work. In the proprietor's case, that means merely his sack of optic lens. In Carter's case, that means the philosophical and literary tropes and traditions that precede her work. Cognitive of her complicity in a phallic tradition from which she cannot escape, Carter thus seeks in the end to offer in lieu of an impossible Symbolic rendering of the Imaginary (an écriture féminine that is) what she can offer, instructive lessons. Like the proprietor who offers "didactic demonstrations" that lay bare the devices of Dr. Hoffman's logic, Carter lays bare the neo-Freudian tradition that defines and delimits her artistic endeavours (49). In the end, Dr. Hoffman is not a revolutionary novel; no novel can be in this sense. It is an exposé on the Lacanian logic from which it cannot transcend.
The compelling influence of neo-Freudian logic leads to the final line of the text. By this point, we know Desiderio has attempted to murder his Desire and liberate himself by killing Albertina, and that the world stripped of Hoffman’s eroto-energy has returned to its “familiar ruins.” So we are left with Desiderio sitting in the last scene reflecting on his long-lived life and considering the autobiography he has just finished. Tired, he closes his eyes, and the text ends with “Unbidden, she comes” (221). Albertina returns, and with her return Desiderio discovers that he has not demolished Hoffman’s system after all. It survives yet, for Desire is undying and Hoffman has the last word. In the end, Carter cannot emancipate Desiderio from his own Desire, for it is the condition of his being and it generates this text. Nor can she liberate her text from Lacan’s phallic logic. Dr. Hoffman thus ends fatally, symbolically returning to the very system it sought to subvert. Having failed to depose Lacan’s Symbolic, Carter cannot with integrity permit her hero to dethrone Hoffman. She capitulates.
Notes

1. I should note that Neo-freudian thought can be highly subversive to the extent to which it celebrates difference and plurality and complicates prevailing notions of where the subject lies. That aside, Neo-Freudian thought does suppose a basis to culture which is rooted in separation and alienation. The Lacanian precept that the essence of being is rooted in "lack" implies a certain level of pessimism concerning human relations.

2. This marks the realization by the child that it is not its mother, that she is distinct from the child itself. The child realizes simultaneously that it is not the sole object of its mother's desire and recognizes its mother's desire as trajecting towards the father. Language is the process by which the child attempts to signify the mother's absence—or really absence in general. This absence, this loss of the mother is ultimately a result of the threat of castration—the Name of the Father denies the child the mother--claims her desire. It is at this point, at the moment of castration, that the child assumes its gender—aligns itself according to the phallus. Either she displaces her desire for the mother onto the father and becomes "feminine" or he undergoes the phallic function and tries to be the phallus—the "masculine" object of the mother's desire (Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis 1-67).


4. A friend of mine offers the following analogy: The Real is the Invisible Man, the Symbolic a bucket of paint dropped over it, and the Imaginary the point of perception, the specific locus and filter of that image.

5. The existence of the subject is embroiled within the quest to fulfill its Desire, so to end that quest would only serve to annihilate the source of the subject's being—a veritable suicide. Therefore, Lacan writes that life "mimics death in the very kernal of being" (Ragland-Sullivan 72).
Reconstructing the Male Hero: *Nights at the Circus* as a Feminist Subversion of Symbolic Order

In an attempt to liberate their discourse from tradition, many postmodern essayists, poets, and novelists forge a more pluralistic understanding of the past by breaking monolithic History into a series of often contradictory histories. This New Historicist project, as it has come to be known, attempts to validate alternative viewpoints and divergent experiences in order to re-establish roots for a multi-cultural and multi-sexual society. Postmodern literatures assist this project to the extent that they explode accepted paradigms and subvert conventional forms without instituting another paradigm, freeing texts and readers from fixed, ordered hierarchies. Angela Carter's fiction participates in the postmodern revolution by rejecting and reworking traditional practices and forms through an exploration of sexuality, desire, and subjectivity.

Carter's *Nights at the Circus* tests the limitations of our imagination while it seems intensely familiar, near the order of dreams or the unconscious. Its heroine, Fevvers, a female celebrity with wings like a bird, part human and part animal, moves in a text peopled with sleeping beauties, pixies, prophetic pigs, four-eyed women, mouthless men, and non-corporeal misers, a world of mutations and contradictions, a world that is and is not our own. The
novel follows Fewvers from London to St. Petersburg to Siberia as she is pursued by the male hero, Walser, an American journalist. Motivated by desire for her, Walser finds himself whirling helplessly in a foreign, feminine world. The series of fantastic experiences Walser undergoes propel him through a radical psychological development quite different from the traditional Bildungsroman. As a representative of the Western male tradition confronted with an alien world, he comes to question and deconstruct his psyche and his writing, removing himself from the strangling constraints of an inadequate patriarchal consciousness.

Akin to much poststructural and postmodern literary theory, Carter's text assumes a symbiotic tension between subjectivity and communal history in which individual consciousness is both the conscious and unconscious carrier of history, making it possible to read a collective and personal history in the individual's psyche. A review, or reworking, of history (read also tradition) then proceeds hand in hand with a reevaluation of individual subjectivity (and vice versa). Walser's psychological reconstruction then parallels his reevaluation or remaking of history, a complex process that begins when he first meets Fewvers.

As both woman and bird, a personification of difference, Fewvers eludes Walser's understanding, resisting his every attempt to define her. She represents a disruptive otherness that Helene Cixous attributes to all women. Cixous writes
that all women jumble, transcend, disorder, dislocate, disorient, empty, and, indeed, like Fewvers, fly outside and through structure. With her wings, Fewvers prophesies a "'New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground,'" an age in which women will throw the patriarchy off balance, exposing its inadequacies and refusing to be defined through its terms.¹ Fewvers is visible proof of the deficiencies in patriarchal thought. An archetypal representation for all women, she defies male-oriented conceptions of women -- she is "warts and all the female paradigm" (286).

Fewvers presents a challenge to patriarchy, so it is not incidental that the story begins with an interview between her and a male representative of the media come to write her history, to expose her story, to reduce her to his terms. But in a manipulative turn of events, Fewvers reverses the power of authority, taking control of the discourse and rendering the journalist, Jack Walser, virtually silent and helpless. Depriving him of authority, she complicates the distinction between interviewer and interviewee, a complication of subject and object that persists throughout the novel. Nights at the Circus then concerns the story of Jack Walser as much as it does the story of Fewvers (though Fewvers, the consummate performer, never completely relinquishes the spotlight). In other words, as Walser tries to write Fewvers' history, his-story becomes entangled in the
process with her presence, which provokes and motivates his
dramatic psychological plot. Fewers coaxes and nurtures
Walser through a psychological development that by the end of
the novel liberates his writing from the unhealthy confines of his empirical, monolithic, masculine consciousness.

Jacques Lacan offers us a way to understand the link between Walser's consciousness and language, or more specifically his psyche and his writing, i.e., his symbolic activity. In *The Meaning of the Phallus*, Lacan resurrects Freud's castration complex to explain that symbolic activity is necessarily a masculine activity, an assertion which is at best problematic but one from which he derives an important connection between desire and the act of writing. Lacan suggests that the male subject, or the male writer, designates his own being through everything he signifies (82). In other words, the act of writing (he extends this to all symbolic activity, including speech) always reflects and names something within the writer's own unconscious, namely his Desire. When the writer writes he articulates this unconscious Desire, which drives the symbolic and attempts to fill the empty signifier of the phallus. In Carter's text, Fewers is a construct of the male's conscious desire and of unconscious Desire itself -- existing in both Lacan's real and imaginary. As both "real" woman and bird, Fewers has the ability to maneuver anywhere within his model. Unlike the male or even human female, she is not confined to a
desire founded on absence or lack but instead on a completeness, a unique 0/otherness, which allows her to exploit Lacan's symbolic order. On the other hand, the text sets up Walser as a representative of symbolic order at the same time that it deprives him of symbolic communication, for although integral to the text, Walser remains conspicuously silent, and though a journalist, he rarely writes. Ironically, he exists as a passive character -- an empty phallus, an arbitrary signifier.

Whereas the text alerts us to Walser's professional acumen and psychological strength (claims presumably founded on the same symbolic order that the text undercuts time and time again), it portrays him quite differently by throwing him headlong into a world in which he is unloosed from the symbolic order and in which he loses authority. He comes into the interview suspicious, sharp, and reasonable, scrutinizing Fewer's body and questioning her story with thoughts such as "'How does she do that?'" (8) and "'Do you think she's real?'" (9). He quickly loses that acuity, for Fewver's presence stultifies his empirical cynicism and seduces him out of his element. The novel pits her unique femininity against his masculine sensibility. The diction, with its defenses, protections, and challenges, suggests a battle between the two; if the interview is indeed a duel, then Walser's empirical reason seems an inadequate defense against Fewver's feminine assault: "Perhaps, perhaps... my
brain is turning to bubbles already, thought Walser, but I could almost swear I saw a fish, a little one, a herring, a sprat, a minnow, but wriggling, alive—oh, go into the bath when she tipped the jug" (20).

His senses falter, and just as he considers the strangeness of the event, Fewers takes up the interview, allowing him "no time to think" (20). Like Cixous' women, birds, and robbers, she disorients him and robs him of his reason; her context overwhelms him. Stockings lay bestrewn about the room, a fishy smell intermingles with the stench of stale feet, underwear drapes across some object, and, though he tries to "keep his wits about him" (9), the wine and the smells of the room disturb his reason. He becomes unwillingly intoxicated by the setting, for the "room, in all, was a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor, sufficient, in its homely way, to intimidate a young man who had led a less sheltered life than this one" (9). Walser intends to write her history, but her situation -- in all its "feminine squalor" -- disrupts his writing, emasculates his phallic activity and confuses his masculine order. As if Fewer's presence calls into question his authority to write her story, the narrator shifts abruptly to Walser's own history in the form of a new story: "His name was Jack Walser" (9). In doing so, the text weaves Walser's history into the writing of Fewers' history, or as Lacan suggests, his story about her involves his own story as well; his story
is, in fact, the only one he can write, the only one that can be determined, the only one with a tradition on which to build.

Fevvers, however, seizes control and writes her own text. The act of writing literally changes hands, and nowhere is this change as evident as in the descriptions of Walser's writing hand. Although he begins the interview with pencil in hand and "at the ready," that sharp attentive hand fades during the interview to a mechanical hand that aches, then a weary hand that needs a break, and finally an obedient hand that can no longer even write: "The hand that followed their dictations across the page obediently as a little dog no longer felt as if it belonged to him. It flapped at the hinge of the wrist" (78). Psychologically, as Walser surrenders control of his writing, his hand becomes a winged appendage of Fevvers. As if this were not enough, Fevvers grabs the notebook from him and writes in it herself, literally taking over authorship. We never see the story that Walser wrote about Fevvers. The text records her telling of the tale, but wholly ignores his writing of it. When his boss asks him the next day how the interview went, his only response is that "[i]t's the ambition... of every red-blooded American kid to run away with the circus" (90). Like the text, Walser disregards his own writing and instead asks permission to follow Fevvers and the circus to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he begins a new story in which he
too is a character. Fevvers piques his interest and beriddles his sense of order, filling him with "a sense of wonder." Aroused by her mysterious magnetism, a projection of his own desire, Walser begins to be pulled through the text. A prisoner to her difference, he pursues her mystery, a mystery that defines her allure as a performer, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (7). Like the audiences that come to watch her aerial performances, Walser is drawn to the enigma of her physical difference, her otherness; and, much like the response a New Critic might have to a text, he hones in on her riddle and seeks its answer.

If the interview confuses symbolic order, then Walser's involvement with the circus destroys this order; it serves as a sanctioned madness, as a carnival of chaos simultaneously dethroning authority and elevating the masses, replacing the serious with the ridiculous, and celebrating irrationality while denigrating sanity and reason. Ironically, the rational, serious Walser is assigned to Clown Alley where his "very self, as he had known it, departed from him, [as] he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being" (103). With a new context and new identity, Walser loses his history. Behind the clown's mask and within the clown's carnival, he liberates his language from formal and psychological constraints, a significant passage for both him and his
writing, for it frees him from his rigid empiricism and alerts him to the amorphous nature of language and being: "Walser-the-clown, it seemed, could juggle with the dictionary with a zest that would have abashed Walser-the-foreign-correspondent" (98). Hiding behind a painted face, Walser-the-clown becomes playful, his writing revels in the mystery and difference of his new location, detaching itself from a more fixed relation between signifier and signified. Attracted to Russia's difference and his inability to know it, Walser describes Russia as "a sphinx," as a half animal/half human creature like Fewers. Although Walser is obsessed with Fewver's mystery, a mystery that calls into question his understanding of women, he does not pursue the riddle of this sphinx, a riddle which begs the definition of man. Instead, Walser does away with definitions, and the text supports this change by publishing his writing for the first and only time.

Distinct from the written Logos, the circus emphasizes a connection between the performer and the performance, the performer being also the work of art, a merging of body and art. As a clown, Walser becomes the object of art, a spectacle, and like Fewvers, he experiences the terror of the body as text, a terror all too familiar to women subjugated by the Law of the Father. He discovers what it is like to have his body persecuted, mutilated, stared at, and defined by frightening forces. In one instance, the Professor, an
intelligent chimpanzee curious about Walser's physiognomy, places a dunce cap on his head, strips him down to "nothing but the dunce's cap," and subjects his body to a scientific scrutiny, prodding his thorax and prying his mouth open with a cue while a group of eager student-chimps scribble down the lesson. On the other hand, Walser also becomes more intimate, more connected, with this body while with the circus—a reunion which precludes him from symbolic action and necessitates physical action. When a circus tiger gets loose in the amphitheatre and stalks a terrified woman, Walser rushes into the scene. Without thought, "Walser let rip a tremendous, wordless war-cry: here comes the Clown to kill the Tiger!" (112). His performance is meta-symbolic as he dashes to her aid, without words, without thought, without weapons, without clothes, with only his body. Truly out of his element, even his war-cry is "wordless." Walser, the man-of-words, thinks, "Kill it, how? Strangle it with his bare hands, perhaps?" (112). The narrator calls attention to the physical and primal nature of this act, an act in which Walser uses his writing hands in a way that we had not seen them used earlier, no longer as extensions of symbolic thought but as defenses and weapons in a brutal and dangerous world. During the fight the tigress claws his arm and debilitates his writing hand so that he cannot write for the duration of the novel, a loss of the written symbolic, and for the most part the spoken symbolic. If language, the
unconscious, and the symbolic order are as intimately allied as Lacan assumes, then this loss of language makes it possible for Walser to undergo a radical reconstruction of self.

At the point when Walser stops writing, Fewers begins to nurture him and minister to his wounds as a mother would a child. After regaining consciousness from the tigress' blow, he looks up to see Fewers "[u]pholstered in the snowy linen, her bosom looked as vast as its mother's does to a child as she bends over its bed in sickness." (113). Vulnerable and passive, he lies listening to her and her attendant, Lizzie, explain the incident and misappropriate his story in the same stereotypical ways in which male writers have for ages misappropriated women's narratives. Unable to garner enough strength to repudiate them, Walser merely sinks into despair replying, "I'm here to write a story. . . . Story about the circus. About you and the circus" (114), a last gasping concern about his assignment.

Having no way to write, Walser becomes a performer like everyone and everything else in the circus. He experiences a fusion of body, identity, and text with his face becoming an artistic medium. His condition is exemplified in two of the other clowns, Grik and Grok, who function as a pair of syllables lost without each other (123), signifiers rent from fixed signifieds or individual signifiers that mean only in relation to other signifiers. While clowning liberates, it
is also self-effacing and self-destructive, as the head clown, Buffo, commiserates:

[A]m I this Buffo whom I have created? Or did I, when I made up my face to look like Buffo's, create, ex nihilo, another self who is not me? And what am I without my Buffo's face? Why nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy. (122)

'aking on a performance face, the clown forfeits what he (for they are all male clowns in Carter's circus) perceives as a continuous self and emerges as another self. By distinguishing the clown's painted face from the clown-as-person, Buffo highlights the separation of signifier and signified and the release of the individual from a fixed, immutable idea of selfhood. He explains that his clown's face is a pure signifier, underneath it only an absence, a non-Buffo, and clowning a deconstructive act of the masculine symbolic which elevates the sign without meaning, or the empty symbolic. Carter's clowning shares aspects of Derrida's theory of text in which there is "no center... but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play." (249). Culminating in nothingness, the clown's play celebrates the absent center and the freedom of infinite signification. As Buffo avers, the glory of clowning lies in the fact that its nothingness creates nothing, that "Nothing will come of nothing!" (123). In their grand finale, every clown except Walser vanishes entirely into an unexpected whirlwind dramatically exiting the text in a complete
leconstruction. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this signifier-signified split, manifested in *Nights at the Circus* through clowning, parallels the split between the subject of enunciation and the enunciating subject, so that as it releases Walser from the structuralist tyranny it also releases him from a rigid concept of identity permitting him to accept difference and preparing him for a re-formative passage through Siberia.5

As the circus rolls across Siberia on voyage to its next site, the train dislodges from its track, hurling the passengers about and knocking Walser unconscious. Buried beneath a pile of tablecloths and napkins, he emerges, as if from a womb, with the help of two women and cries "'Mama'" (222). In the accident he loses his memory and his ability to speak, forcing him to revert primarily to gesture as a means to communicate to the two women. In a metaphorical rebirth, Walser returns to Lacan's pre-linguistic stage of the Phallic Mother, a time prior to the anxiety of the differentiated subject when the child experiences the world as complete and unified, before the Law of the Father suppresses that child's desire into the unconscious. Walser's return to a pre-symbolic stage makes it possible for him to relearn the fullness of language, metaphorically returning him to the Lacanian imaginary, akin to the feminine imaginary posited by the French feminists.6 The accident leaves Walser sentient, but not rational and without any conscious comprehension of a past that now comes to him only as incomprehensible bits of shattered memories. When Walser's past, a reiteration of the Law of the
...sense of self, for when "[a]11 his previous experiences were rendered null and void. . . . they lost all potential they might have had for re-establishing Walser's existential credibility" (252).

Alone and wandering the tundra, he encounters a shaman who takes him to a tribe of people who observe "no difference between fact and fiction" (260) and no distinction between the past, the present, and the future (258), a people who dissolve "the slender margin. . . between the real and the unreal" (260) existing as 'exiles from history" (265). Opposed to the white Western tradition, these Eastern tribal people are ahistorical and symbolic, their conscious and unconscious selves fully merged. Walser enters this society deprived of his identity, a conscious understanding of his own history, and a language through which to communicate to its people. Drained of a predetermined symbolic order, he learns to perceive through images that burst uncontrollably and unconnectedly out of his past (236). Walser's foster father, the shaman, attaches prophetic interpretations to these images, taking them as divine revelations. For instance, when Walser utters "Eel pie and mash" and "rub[s] his stomach with his hand" the Shaman pours him some broth and waits for further revelations, finally deciding that "Walser must mean the time had come to make his shamanizing drum" (256). Walser and the Shaman's relationship breaks down the signifier-signified equation entirely, demonstrating the unfixed, shifting nature of signs, a
reconstruction simultaneously beautiful and terrifying, for though Walser gains a richer perspective in the long run, he also experiences what Gilbert and Gubar delineate as "infection in the sentence." Like women in Western culture, he does not have a tradition on which to stand, and though he has the urge to communicate his thoughts and feelings as he struggles to understand them, he must defer to the shaman's authority of interpretation. If, as Lacan suggests, signifying designates and creates its subject, then Walser has lost the ability to define himself.

He then learns to speak the shaman's tongue while he continues to think in his own English tongue "setting up a conflict within him, for his memories, or his dreamings, or whatever they were dramatised in quite another language" (260). To complicate matters, the shaman disregards him when he speaks in the shaman's tongue, a parallel of the conflict that Gilbert and Gubar suggest women experience whenever they engage in symbolic activity, i.e. a feeling of alienation and inability to communicate through a masculine language. No longer able to rely on symbolic determination, Walser turns into himself to "acquire in 'inner life'; a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that [is] entirely his own" (260). Walser's introversion casts him into a process of re-individuation, quite different from the sociological one he experienced as a Western child. Only after he begins to establish himself as a different person does his history come back to him in shattered bits that reconnect him with his
former life. With only fragments of memory, Walser cannot heal
is previous consciousness but must instead accept the disjunction
of a postmodern pastiche.

As Fewers grapples to comprehend her own condition among
another Siberian tribe, she touches on an observation pertinent to
Walser's situation:

What we have to contend with... is the long shadow of the
past historic... that forged the institutions which create
the human nature of the present in the first place...
It's not the human "soul" that must be forged on the anvil of
history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to
change humanity. (240)

She explains that the anvil of history must change in order for
humanity to change. Human nature is not deficient, but the social
order is. Therefore, shifting human nature requires a
restructuring of history, a reforging of society's institutions
and language. If, as Lacan suggests, subjectivity is a confluence
of language and history, then tearing down this symbolic order and
recreating its foundations emancipates the individual from deeply
rooted, pre-determined molds and empowers the individual with
self-determination, a new power that Walser exercises at the end
of the novel when his and Fewer's stories reconverge. She begins
his process of reassimilation into Western society when she cries
out a name he has forgotten, "Jack Walser!" (269), which he
immediately recognizes as "his name, in the mouth of the winged
creature. A sign!" (269). As before, he comes to recognize
himself through the O/other, but this time Fewvers does the articulating, she gives him back his name, suggesting that the new language for a new society will have to include the female and its feminine aspects. Further asserting her future role, Fewvers rebirths Walser, dramatizing thoughts she had earlier in the text: 'Oh, but Liz -- think of his malleable look. As if a girl could would him any way she wanted. . . . I will transform him. . . . 'I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man 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). When at last they confront each other, she forces him to the ground physically, bites his hand, and plumps herself down on his chest. Unlike her feminine assault at the beginning of the novel, this time she defeats him physically, in the masculine arena. Pinning him down, her strength wavering all the while, she invokes all of her O/otherness to rebirth him. Spreading her rings in a last burst of energy, she simultaneously defeats and attaches him to find that he "was not the man he had been or would ever be again. . . [and] she was anxious as to whom this reconstructed Walser might turn out to be" (291). Walser's face seems to clear as from a haze as he scrambles to his feet and uturs out: "What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?" o which she responds, "That's the way to start the interview!. . . Get out your pencil and we'll begin!" (291). Thus, Fewvers eturns the novel to its beginning, a circularity which Walser als contemplates: "And now, hatched out of the shell of
unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again" (294).

Seconds before the turn of the century in the final scene of the novel, Walser stands "contemplating, as in a mirror, the self he was so busily reconstructing"; but in trying to articulate himself and his history ("I am Jack Walser, an American citizen. I joined the circus"), he restates his former self, emphasizing his writing career, his importance, and even going so far as to name Fevvers "Mrs Sophie Walser" (293). As midnight strikes, however, and the characters enter the twentieth century, "Walser takes] himself apart and put[s] himself together again," beginning his story over in a more playful and reflective manner: 'Jack, ever an adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her" (294). He begins the New Century a new man, the New Man who acknowledges and tries to understand his desire, a desire that has dragged him through a pastiche of experiences and a series of rebirths. At the end of Carter's text, he emerges out of his shell as a postmodern hero, a prophetic everyman, sympathized with and loved for his passivity, his discontinuity, and his ignorance as much as for his strength, his order, and his wisdom.8

The new Walser is prepared for a healthier relationship with Fevvers but remains deluded by the nature of desire. Innocently, he still does not realize that his story must be about himself, that his words can only signify his own Desire, that they will
never be about Fewvers. He still asks why she tried to convince him that she was the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world" to which she responds, "[Y]ou mustn't believe what you write in the papers!" (294). Unaware of the way that Desire feeds language, Walser does not understand that the question concerns his own sensibility. Amused by his ignorance, Fewvers responds with a contagious laugh that spreads across all Siberia, the laugh of the Medusa, a laugh that seems to say: "The new history is coming; it's not a dream, though it does extend beyond men's imagination, and for good reason. It's going to deprive them of their conceptual orthopedics, beginning with the destruction of their enticement machine" (340). And though the joke is on Walser, for the first time he too can laugh.
Notes

1. Working through Jacques Lacan's exclusion of women from the symbolic order, the two prominent French feminists Helene Cixous and Luce Irigary examine ways in which women's unique position outside of that order can disrupt masculine institutions. Both theorists contend that women must develop a new language founded on female experience, which, by embracing their anatomical and libidinal difference, will revel in plurality, difference, and formlessness. Exploring such a new language, Cixous writes, "Flying is woman's gesture -- flying in language and making it fly. . . . It's no accident that voler has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers. . . . They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" ("Laugh of Medusa" 344).

2. As a real-woman, Fevvers is the corporeal object of Walser's sexual desire, a representative other; while at the same time, her extraordinary inhuman wings make her an imaginary construct, a projection of the unconscious, a symbolic Other.

3. In Simulations, Jean Baudrillard contends that we now live in a hyperreal society in which the dissemination of simulacra is so profuse that we no longer distinguish between images and nature. In closing the gap between the two, we enter into the depthlessness of the image (for the image no longer refers to anything except itself) at the expense of a deeper nature: 'simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference" (11). In this passage, we see how Baudrillard's discussion of simulacra parallels the split made in post-structuralist thought between the signifier and signified in which the signifier is freed from the tyranny of any stable, determinable signified (5-10).

4. In "Structure, Sign, and Play," Jacques Derrida discusses the structurality of structure explaining that all structure, including language, has a center, "a point of presence, a fixed origin" the function of which is "not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure. . . . but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the free-play of the structure" (247-9). Carter's clowns operate within an arena of free play that is nonetheless limited by the rules of clowning, the decorum of their trade.
If as Lacan argues, "the subject designates his being only by crossing through everything he signifies" (Feminine Sexuality 82), then an individual's self-actualization or self-knowledge need not correlate with a continuous, non-contradictory, singular self but instead with a self which is as disjunctive and diverse as the individual's spoken history.

In "This Sex Which Is Not One," Luce Irigaray writes that "Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary [where] "She" is indefinitely other in herself" (353). Walser's return to the pre-linguistic stage of the indifferenced subject allows him a temporary insight into the plurality and connectedness of the female imaginary.

Harold Bloom contends that all writing is both an outbirth of and rebellion against the tradition of one's predecessors. In response, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that if we accept Bloom's argument as true, then women, having few female predecessors received in literary canons, are caught in a peculiar position of authorship; for when a woman picks up a pen, her battle cannot be against female predecessors but instead male predecessors that have tried to define her. Gilbert and Gubar term this "infection in the sentence" in contrast to what Bloom calls men's "anxiety of influence" (291-92).

Frederic Jameson discusses the notion of a postmodern pastiche in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," suggesting that "perhaps the immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature--its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms--foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole." He goes on to argue that the postmodern condition may betray the "very possibility of a linguistic norm" by reveling in "nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity" (167).
Works Cited


