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Appropriation and Intertextuality: Two Postmodern Strategies in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

Marcela Iochem Valente
Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. e-mail: marcellaiv@ig.com.br

Lídia da Cruz Cordeiro Moreira
Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. e-mail: lidccm@gmail.com

Orientação: Prof[a]. Dr[a]. Peonia Viana Guedes, UERJ

Resumo: Apropriação e Intertextualidade são duas estratégias usadas e abusadas por escritores pós-modernos de modo a subverter formas canônicas de representação. *Nights at the Circus*, romance de Angela Carter, é um excelente exemplo do uso dessas estratégias, no qual a autora entrelaça uma série de referências a textos anteriores com o objetivo de fazer uma releitura paródica de tais textos. Dentre eles estão obras tão diversas quanto a Bíblia, contos de fadas tradicionais e as peças de Shakespeare. Neste trabalho, temos como objetivo discutir o papel da apropriação e da intertextualidade na literatura pós-moderna a partir de alguns dos inúmeros exemplos presentes no romance de Angela Carter.
Palavras-chave: 1. apropriação. 2. pós-modernidade. 3. Angela Carter

Postmodern fiction is marked by fragmentation either concerning its form or its plot, and many times both. Two strategies among the several ones used by postmodern authors which contribute to this fragmented aspect are the use of appropriation and intertextuality. In *Nights at the Circus,* Angela Carter makes brilliant use of both, building an intricate mosaic of intertexts to tell the story of the winged *aerialiste* Sophie Fevvers.

In order to discuss the roles of appropriation and intertextuality in *Nights at the Circus,* it is firstly necessary to understand what these two intrinsically intertwined terms mean in postmodern literature. The term appropriation designates the act of taking parts or the whole of a work – either another literary work or any kind of work – in the making of a new work. In fact, this kind of appropriation has been used in art for centuries, but postmodernism has given it a political meaning. Feminist postmodern writers like Angela

Carter have used it as a way of taking canonic texts written by the dominant patriarchal culture and subvert them, thus showing how some stable and coherent "truths" are actually historically constructed by those in power. Therefore, this appropriation is not just a play on words, but aims changing the reality which the canon has helped to build throughout many centuries of male-dominated literature. Furthermore, it contributes to challenging the concepts of *originality* and *authorship*, which belong to this same dominant ideology.

As for the concept of intertextuality, Julia Kristeva referred to texts in terms of two axis: a *horizontal axis*, which connects the author of a text to its reader, and a *vertical axis*, connecting the text to other works. Therefore, no text is a closed unit and, as Michel Foucault stated in *The Archeology of Knowledge:*

> [T]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network...The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hand... Its unity is variable and relative (FOUCAULT, 1972, p. 23).

As a consequence, any reading depends on *shared codes* between the writer and the reader, on the *cultural baggage* of the reader: if s/he does not know the works which the writer alludes to in her/his text, s/he will not be able to grasp the full meaning and implications of that work and sometimes might even not be able to understand certain passages. On the other hand, since a text is not a closed unity, the postmodern reader is much more independent to search for meanings which the writer her/himself may not have thought of and can participate in a much more active and creative way in the construction of a literary work.

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is a masterpiece in the use of appropriation and intertextuality. The reader cannot go through one page of the novel without finding at least one example of these two strategies, some more obvious and direct, others more subtle. Carter managed to carefully interweave elements taken from such different sources as Greek, Roman or Eastern mythology, the Bible, traditional fairy tales, the poetry of Byron, Blake, Yeats, Goethe and Baudelaire, the works of Shakespeare, *Moby Dick, Arabian Nights,* and even to her own short stories "The Company of Wolves" and "Black Venus". The list could stretch for pages and it would be impossible to cover all of them here. Therefore, we have chosen to deal with some of these elements due to their importance for the plot of the novel in itself or for the importance they have in the subversion of canonic literature, namely the legend of Helen of Troy, Leda and the Swan and Icarus, from Greek mythology, and Cupid from Roman mythology; traditional fairy tales; the works of Shakespeare; and her own short stories mentioned above.

The novel stars with a direct reference to Helen of Troy, when Sophie Fevvers, the protagonist, compares herself to Helen, since both were hatched from an egg and not born into this world by the "normal channels":

> 'Lor' love you, sir!' Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. 'As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! not billed the "Cockney Venus", for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me "Helen of the High Wire", due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy was hatched (CARTER, 1984, p. 7)[1].

Moreover, Fevvers claims she does not have a navel to prove that she was really hatched and not born. In Greek mythology, Helen of Troy was the daughter of Leda, queen of Sparta, and Zeus, who assumed the form of a swan when raping the queen. Leda then produced two eggs, one which yielded Helen and Polydeuces, children of Zeus, and the other which carried Castor and Clytemnestra, children of her husband Tyndarecus, who had impregnated her later the same night. Here we already have other intertexts, not only with the legend itself, but also with the poem by Yeats "Leda and the Swan", which narrates the raping of Leda by Zeus, and also with the painting by Michelangelo, whose reproduction was, in fact, one of the paints in Madame Nelson's drawing-room and Fevvers's favorite while she was growing up in Nelson's brothel. As Fevvers describe Ma Nelson's drawing-room, she mentions that

> the walls, covered with wine-red, figured damask, were hung with oil paintings of mythological subjects (...) All these pictures, some of the Venetian school and no doubt very choice, were long since destroyed, along with Ma Nelson's house itself, but there was one picture I shall always remember, for it is as if engraved upon my heart. It hung above the mantelpiece and I need hardly tell you that its subject was Leda and the Swan (p. 28).

Not by a coincidence, it was by jumping off this same mantelpiece that Fevvers attempted her first flight.

As for Yeats's work, it is worth mentioning that the poet created his own mythology, which considered that every two thousand years would see the beginning of a new age in the history of man, marked by the coming together of a mortal woman with an immortal being. The first age would have been the Classic age, marked by the coming together of Leda and Zeus; the second age would have been the Christian, marked by the union of Mary and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the world would be now awaiting for the beginning of the third age. As Ma Nelson says to Fevvers that she thinks the girl "must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground" (p. 25), one might speculate whether Carter appropriated Yeats's mythology in order to shoe Fevvers as the symbol of the coming of this third age, perhaps a feminist one.

Indeed, although Fevvers compares herself to Helen, the latter was not more than a pawn of the gods in Greek mythology, a character without much to say in a man's world,

[1] From now on, all the quotations from *Nights at the Circus* are going to be referred just by the number of the page.

whereas Fevvers is an independent woman, who takes hold of her fate. This parody subverts the legend and gives the world a new paradigm of femininity, since Fevvers is – much like Helen was the most desired woman at her time – "heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise (...). Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger" (p. 8). However, although she is the *femme-fatale* of the moment, Fevvers is far from being stunningly beautiful like Helen: she is much taller than most women, she does not have the best manners and her facial traits and make-up are such that Jack Walser, the journalist interviewing her and later her lover, even wonders if she is not in fact a man (p. 35).

From Greek mythology, Carter also appropriates the myth of Icarus in at least one direct reference, on p. 32, but also when she describes Fevvers' first fight. Icarus was a boy who had been imprisoned with his father in a tower in Crete, from where the only way to escape was by flying. Therefore, his father Daedalus built both of them a pair of wings and taught his son how to fly, not knowing that this salvation would also be his death, as he flew too close to the sun. In a 1799 painting by French painter Charles Paul Landon, we can see Daedalus pushing Icarus towards his first flight. In *Nights at the Circus* this scene is appropriated when Fevvers, petrified of taking her first flight, is pushed off the roof by Lizzie, the woman who had found and raised her, although Lizzie herself does not have wings. Fortunately, Fevvers' fate is happier than that of Icarus.

From Roman mythology, Carter borrowed the myth of Cupid, the winged child who aims his arrows at mortals, making them fall in love with each other. In a parody of the legend, Carter places seven-year-old Fevvers as a *tableau vivant* dressed as Cupid in Ma Nelson's brothel while "the ladies introduced themselves to the gentlemen" (p. 23), ironically bringing the symbol of love to the totally unexpected setting of the whore house. Later on, as Fevvers grows up and her wings grow out, she stops representing Cupid and starts posing as "the Winged Victory of Samothrace". By an unknown artist, the marble statue was found in the Greek island from which it borrowed its name (Samothrace) and is one of the great surviving masterpieces from the Hellenistic period, although it is significantly damaged, missing its head and arms. In reality, the fact that it is missing the arms was appropriated and re-written by Angela Carter, who not only gave the sculpture its arms back but also a sword:

> Ma Nelson, contemplating the existence of my two arms, all complete, now puts her mind to the question: what might the Winged Victory have been holding in 'em when the forgotten master first released her from the marble that had contained her inexhaustible spirit? And Ma Nelson soon came up with the answer: a sword (p. 37).

As Fevvers "worked [her] passage on Ma Nelson's ship as living statue" (p. 39), she waited and waited and, although she did nor know exactly what it was that she waited, she believed she was destined to some special fate and she says "I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir!" (p. 39). Here and in other passages of the novel, Carter clearly alludes to

fairy tales to subvert the role prescribed to women in them. Regardless of the tale or its origin, women were always portrayed as passive beings, waiting for Prince Charming or another male character to rescue them to a better fate. But Fevvers is no Cinderella and her fate – although at the time she did not know exactly what it was – is in her own hands.

As Ma Nelson died and her house was destroyed, Fevvers went to work at Madame Schreck's Museum of Woman Monsters. There she posed as the Angle of Death, guarding one Madame Schreck's attractions, the Sleeping Beauty, in another appropriation of a fairy tale. Carter's Sleeping Beauty was a country girl who had had a joyful childhood until the day that her menses started. From this day on, she was able to only stay awake for a few moments every day, only enough to eat and go back to sleep. In this appropriation of the traditional story, the girl may still represent the enchanted chaste princess, waiting for the Prince to kiss her and save her from a horrid fate. However, this Sleeping Beauty may also have retired from reality deliberately, on the same day she became a woman, exactly to escape the fate of most women at the time. Therefore, in this version of the fairy tale, Sleeping Beauty may be seen as a character with immense power rather than fragile vulnerability, subverting the submissive role imposed to women by the traditional fairy tale.

Furthermore, another character common in these fairy tales is that of the evil stepmother who is inevitably a rival to the heroine. In *Nights at the Circus,* this character is appropriated and re-written through the character of Lizzie. Although she is not exactly Fevvers's stepmother, she found the girl and raised her, being like a mother to her. However, there was never rivalry between them, but only loving complicity. Thus, in this feminist appropriation there is room for women's sisterhood, replacing the rivalry imposed on women by patriarchal canonic narratives.

Another example of intertextuality connecting *Nights at the Circus* to fairy tales appears on page 10, when the narrator says that "like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver, Walser did not know how to be afraid". In fact, this refers **to** a fairy tale written by the Brothers Grimm about a boy who did not know how to shiver, but it also refers to Carter's own short story "The Company of Wolves". In the short story, Carter appropriates and re-writes the tale of Little Red Riding Hood (which is itself directly referred to on page 18 of the novel), giving it a surprisingly subversive ending, as she unites the girl and the wolf. Before this encounter, as the girl is still an innocent virgin, Carter describes her as "an unbroken egg; (...) a sealed vessel; (...) a closed system; [who] does not know how to shiver" (p. 114), whereas at the end she shivered as her fate approached, as her journey towards self-knowledge was closer to an end. Similarly, this reference to Walser as the boy who does not know how to shiver may be read as a foreshadowing of the fact that he too is going to undergo a process of self-discovery throughout the novel.

Another source from which Carter draws a great deal is the work of Shakespeare, creating many examples of intertextuality. Fevvers's first flight took place on a Midsummer Night (p. 33), in a very appropriate connection with the play in which the most unlikely

facts – like Fevvers' flight – happen. In fact, a direct allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is made on page 123. Ma Nelson used to use her toy sword as a staff to conduct the revels, as Prospero, the protagonist in *The Tempest,* used his wand (p. 37). As Fevvers and Lizzie were living with the latter's sister in Battersea, they took the chance to go frequently to the theater, where they "wept at Romeo and Juliet", booed Richard III and laughed at Malvolio, the character in *Twelfth Night* (p. 53). Lizzie even remarks on the same page: "We love the Bard, sir. What spiritual sustenance he offers!" In the second part of the novel, the Professor, who leads the chimpanzees at the circus, teaches them a lesson in human anatomy (in a parody of a University seminar), as he gets Walser to strip and declaim Hamlet's famous soliloquy "what a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!" (p. 111). The tragic is ironically subverted into comic, as a man, that piece of work (in this case, Walser), makes a fool of himself before the apes, and the eloquence borrowed from Shakespeare only places him beneath the self-educated apes. Another famous monologue by a character of Shakespeare, now Othello, is alluded to in at least two passages, on pages 228 and 264. It is the well-known speech often simply named "Othello's farewell to his occupation". Finally, on page 233, Carter alludes to *Macbeth,* as the Abyssinian Princess, the tiger tamer, walks up and down with "her useless hands outstretched, looking ghastly as Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene" after the train where the circus was traveling is exploded.

Carter took intertextuality to such an extent in the novel that she even connects it to her own short story "Black Venus". On page 38, Fevvers explains to Walser the influence of Baudelaire, the French poet, on the way men saw the work of prostitutes at the time:

> The French poet, sir, a poor fellow who loved whores not for the pleasure of it but, as he perceived it, the horror of it, as if we was, not working women doing it for money but damned souls who did it solely to lure men to their dooms, as if we'd got nothing better to do...

The poet is a character in Carter's short story "Black Venus", in which the protagonist is his mistress, Jeanne Duval. In both works, Carter appropriates the ideas of Baudelaire to show the poet as a "poor fellow" and to expose his ideas through a feminist point-of-view, as opposed to his eighteen-century romantic male point-of-view. Furthermore, as Fevvers describes the life at the whore house, she says "life within those walls was governed by a sweet and loving reason" (p. 39) and that "in [their] well-ordered habitation, all was *"luxe, calme at volupté"* though not quite as the poet imagined" (p. 40). This is actually a verse by Baudelaire, from his poem "L'invitation au Voyage" which evokes an image of ideal harmony between man and nature, subverted by Carter as she uses it to describe the life in a brothel. In addition, there are at least two other subtle references which remind us of "Black Venus", both on page 41: when Fevvers compares herself to Venus ("Were I to be the true copy of Venus, one built on my scale ought to have legs like three-trunks, sir") and when she mentions the albatross:

> I vowed I'd learn to swoop and soar, to emulate at last the albatross and glide with delighted glee on a Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties, those winds like the breath of hell that guard the white, southern pole. (...) I should never be content with short hops to Hackney Marshes. Cockney sparrow I might be by birth, but not inclination.

It is impossible to read this passage without being reminded of the passage in the short story:

> Wind is the element of the albatross just as domesticity is that of the penguin. In the "Roaring Forties" and "Furious Fifties", where the high winds blow ceaselessly from west to east between the remotest tips of the inhabited continents and the bleu nightmare of the uninhabitable ice, these great birds glide in delighted glee, south, far south, so far south it inverts the notional south of the poet's parrot-forest and glittering beach; down here, down south, only the phlegmatic monochrome, flightless birds from the audience for the wonderful *aerialists* who live in the heart of the storm – like the bourgeoisie, Daddy, sitting good and quiet with their eggs on their feet watching artists such as we dare death upon the high trapeze.

Note how some of the expressions used in both works are actually the same (the Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties, glide with/in delighted glee). Besides, not only does "Black Venus" echo in *Nights at the Circus* but also the novel echoes in the short story, when Carter mentions *aerialists* and the high trapeze, as she compares trapeze artists to the albatross.

In conclusion, in *Nights at the Circus,* Angela Carter took the strategies of appropriation and intertextuality to an extent that the reader's participation in reconstructing this web of connections is fundamental for a richer reading. Nevertheless, we have not attempted handling all of them here, and, in fact, some of them remain a mystery to us and probably to most readers. What is important to consider is the political meaning of these connections. Drawing from varied sources, Carter was able to parody and subvert so many canonic representations of women, such as that of Helen of Troy, the Sleeping Beauty, and the stepmother from fairy tales, giving them a new feminist meaning and showing their status of constructed "truths". As Linda Hutcheon states, "they are all ironic femininizations of traditional or canonic male representations of the so-called generic human – 'Man'" (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 94).

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