

## **Fluids, cages, and boisterous femininity: The grotesque transgression of patriarchal norms in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus***

**Md Abu Shahid Abdullah**

Otto-Friedrich University Bamberg, Germany  
jwl\_abdullah@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

The article will show that in *Nights at the Circus*, Carter's use of the themes of food consumption and excrement operate as both a grotesque means of emancipation from a feminine point-of-view, and a carnivalesque challenge to subversive patriarchal norms and deconstruction of arbitrary patriarchal hierarchies. By turning the simple act of eating into boisterous spectacle, and by handling a bottle of champagne and water hose in a disturbingly masculine manner, Fevvers transgresses the boundary between masculinity and femininity, sheds the patriarchal constraints imposed upon femininity, and thus achieves agency and emancipation. Since she is not able to acquire biological signifier of masculinity, she achieves the transgression of the binary entirely through the performative carnivalesque. The article will also discuss that the overflowing nature of grotesque femininity (both physical and behavioral) enables the female characters to speak and act at their own will, and thus performs as a means of critiquing Victorian patriarchal cultural norms.

**Key words:** carnivalesque, masculinity, grotesque femininity, patriarchal constraint

### **1. Introduction**

In the wake of social progress, backlash hearkening to an earlier, simpler time often ensues, demanding that the ways of old be re-applied to the contemporary socio-political landscape. When those ways of old were oppressive to one group in society and served to bolster a hegemonic group, how does one challenge and problematize these notions? In *Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter employs grotesque realism and carnivalesque elements to challenge subversive patriarchal norms and to achieve a sense of emancipation and agency in the female subject. Therefore, this article will examine the Carnavalesque as well as the Grotesque as they relate to bodily fluids and the consumption of food; then it proceed to discuss the refusal by the feminine subject to be 'Only a bird in a gilded cage' – or the refusal to be contained; and the essay will conclude with a discussion of

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overflowing femininity – the female grotesque and how this theme is one of emancipation and transgression of patriarchal containment.

## 2. Definitions and Context

First, what is the grotesque and what is carnivalesque? Mary Russo, in *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity* (1994), defines both beautifully; in defining the carnivalesque, she states:

“The categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society.” (p. 62)

Therefore, the carnivalesque adopts elements from various aspects of a society to blur the distinctions between, for example, class, gender, or race, in an attempt to question, and perhaps even topple societal hierarchies. These societal hierarchies demand that there be arbitrary disparities between varying groups, ultimately positing certain groups as elite and others as subordinate to these arbitrary elite. Russo (1994) then continues with a definition of the grotesque, where she asserts:

“The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world.” (p. 62-63)

The grotesque body resists containment, rather strives for and welcomes change; indeed, it cannot but change. It opens itself up to new possibilities in the face of classical conservatism that demands an impossible unchanging body; it spills out which is considered unseemly or controversial. In the carnivalesque as well as in the grotesque, one finds an avenue to challenge the norm, to establish meaningful social change, whether that be women’s rights, gay rights, or the rights of other marginalized groups. It is confronting the hegemonic with the existence of the marginalized, often through somewhat fantastical means – it is for this reason that the grotesque fits snugly within the multivalent category of magical realism<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Although initially coined to describe a tendency in German Paintings demonstrating altered reality, magical realism is now used as a literary device and/or an artistic genre where magical or supernatural events are placed in a realistic setting or narrative in order to have a deeper understanding of reality. Magical realism has also become a common narrative style for novels written from the point-of-view of the politically, socially or culturally marginalized such as the native people living under colonial system, women writing from a feminist viewpoint, or those who live with different cultural and religious beliefs and customs in another country where they are the minority, e.g., Muslims in England.

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Carter wrote *Nights at the Circus* during the Margaret Thatcher era in Britain, sometimes termed Britain's return to the Victorian era, and it has been said by some theorists that this situating of the novel within the Victorian era was a means of criticizing the contemporary political and cultural landscape of 1980s Britain. Indeed, one such theorist, Matthew Oliver (2010) notes that Carter "directs her gaze back at the British Empire, not nostalgically, but to transform traditionally idealized 'British' identity traits through the messy, decentred, physical discourse of the grotesque" (p. 239). The Victorian era, a time of corsets and intense censorship, was a period when women's bodies and cultural norms were intensely governed, and according to Leila May (1998), "The Victorian body, social and individual, felt itself under perpetual assault from all quarters within and without, and responded to the perceived threat by adopting manifold defensive and retaliatory measures through various reform laws, regulations, and forms of moral policing" (p. 16). It is for this reason that, by critiquing the identity traits of the Victorian era, Carter is able to challenge those which are being re-imagined in contemporary Britain under Thatcher's rule. Therefore, the grotesque and the carnivalesque are particularly fruitful concepts to work with when examining Carter's text for they draw attention to the way in which the return to Empiricist British thinking is also a return to patriarchal containment of femininity and the re-establishment of rigid, arbitrary hierarchies in the face of the various human rights movements – here, most notably, the women's rights movement.

### **3. Food and Excrement – Carnavalesque Transgression**

Food and excrement are ever side by side; one becomes the other, and somewhat vicariously, through the act of fertilization, the latter once again becomes the former. Here, it is really interesting to deal with the eating habits of Fevvers as Abigail Dennis (2004) asserts, "Women's eating has been the focus of social and cultural attention to a far greater degree than masculine eating habits, and the female appetite — or, more accurately, the demonstrable lack of it — has long functioned as a crucial signifier of adherence to a traditional ideology of femininity that contributes to women's voluntary self-attenuation" (p. 120). Fevvers, however, does not adhere to the traditional ideology of femininity and eats not simply for practical purposes, but, at times, for purely hedonistic pursuits: food for pleasure. Indeed, the narrator asserts of Fevvers that "She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife" (Carter, 1993, p. 22). She essentially turns the very act of eating into boisterous spectacle, defying any expectation of so called 'lady-like' behaviour and not only resisting but breaking out of any sense of patriarchal containment concerning her eating habits.

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Again, there is Fevvers' appetite for high and low culture food; we first witness her satiating her appetite with meat pies, eel gravy, mashed potatoes, and peas (Carter, 1993, p. 22), hearkening to her cockney origins. Later, during her two meetings with wealthy men, she expresses her desire for salad, cheese, claret (p. 76-77), caviar, and champagne (p. 186), but restrains herself in these moments because she is "well bred" (p. 186). Her appetite and way of eating works to blur the line between high and low class, and is supplemented by her desire for jewelry and her otherwise working class mannerisms. As May asserts, "Victorian anxieties, nearly all [...] revolve around the bourgeois subject's obsession with the maintaining of clear and distinct boundaries: boundaries which, despite all efforts to preserve them, are incessantly in danger of collapsing entirely, and worse, in danger of being corroded from some internal disease" (May, 1998, p. 16). Therefore, by blurring the distinctions between high and low culture through the character traits and activities of Fevvers, who emerges from a culture with a particularly rigid class system, Carter achieves a poignant sense of the carnivalesque.

Indeed, Fevvers is the human embodiment of the carnivalesque, and Carter beautifully describes the carnival as that place of blurred distinctions when the narrator states: "the aroma of horse dung and lion piss permeated every inch of the building's fabric, so that the titillating contradiction between the soft, white shoulders of the lovely ladies whom young army officers escorted there and the hairy pelts of the beasts in the ring resolved in the night-time intermingling of French perfume and the essence of steppe and jungle in which musk and civet revealed themselves as common elements" (Carter, 1993, p. 105).

The carnival is the place where the bourgeoisie meets the proletariat, where wealth meets poverty, where the scents and sights of the rich meet those of the street and of excrement and urine, and where beast meets beauty. It is therefore very apt of Carter to situate her heroine in this setting of carnivalesque spectacle, where she can fully realize a sense of class distinctions being overtly blurred and even challenged to their core.

Apart from this, another important issue, however, is the blurring of distinctions of the gender hierarchy that Carter likewise achieves through the character of Fevvers. One instance is when Fevvers "shook the bottle [of champagne] until it ejaculated afresh" (Carter, 1993, p. 12), while the second instance, referring Fevvers' handling of a water hose, is when she "shook out a last few drops in a disturbingly masculine fashion and laid it aside" (p. 166). These two moments display Fevvers possessing a metaphorical phallus: the first in a sexual and masturbatory fashion, while the second is the image of casual, upright (standing) urination. Carellin Brooks (2006) notes "the textual woman who appropriates [...] a penile substitution addresses [...] her own phallic investiture.

Her transgressive encroachment on what the phallus symbolizes and ultimately grants – masculinity, the freedom to desire, the ability to move within the world – also reflects upon and refers back to the potentially physical” (p. 115). So, by transgressing the boundary that separates masculinity and femininity, Fevvers is able to get rid of the limits imposed by Victorian idealist regulations upon femininity. Here, however, it is not possible to adopt the immediate signifiers of the Other to transgress these boundaries (such was the case when straddling the boundary of socio-economic binarism), as Fevvers cannot acquire the biological signifiers of masculinity, i.e., a literal phallus. She therefore achieves this transgression of the binary entirely through the performative carnivalesque.

Theory of the grotesque is highly interested in bodily fluids particularly fluids produced by the female subject. In the novel, a very interesting event occurs within the panopticon (that prison where a large number of women are kept under gaze and essentially stripped of any level of agency). Between prisoner and guard “Contact was effected [...] on rags of clothing if paper was not available, in blood, both menstrual and venous, even in excrement, for none of the juices of the bodies that had been so long denied were alien to them, in their extremity” (Carter, 1993, p. 217). Bodily fluids, so often contained – first physically but also by our sanitizing discourse – here become emancipatory for these likewise contained women. As Dennis (2008) notes: “Engaged in a process of continual renewal, in which the functions of ingestion, excretion and reproduction are foregrounded and the orifices assume a central role, the grotesque is particularly associated with the earthed, physical feminine. Its counterpart, [...] the classical body is flawless, finished, in stasis, inaccessible; ‘the inner processes of absorbing and ejecting [are] not revealed’” (p. 124).

The female grotesque gives these contained women the liberty of fluidity and a voice. The power of communication is essential for any successful uprising or social movement; furthermore, it is through this grotesque communication that the prisoners and the guards (prisoners alike) are able to achieve agency, assemble and subsequently overthrow their oppressor, and establish themselves as free and fluid beings.

#### **4. ‘Only a bird in a gilded cage’ – The Refusal to be Contained**

I would like to begin this section by looking at several Judeo-Christian religious references made in the text. The references themselves may not seem overtly important but what they allude to is thematically substantial. First, upon encountering Colonel Kearney, we witness, “cradled affectionately in the crook of his arm a lean, agile, inquisitive-looking young sow whose head sat, with as decapitated a look as that of John the Baptist’s on a platter” (Carter, 1993, p. 98-99) – this is a reference to the story of John the Baptist but specifically, due to the

mention of his decapitation and his head on a platter, it is an allusion to the story of Salomé. In this story, Salomé, by dancing – making a spectacle of herself – for king Herod, is promised to be granted whatever she desires. When she demands the head of John the Baptist on a platter, the king implores her to choose something else but since he is bound by his word he, eventually, concedes and gives her what she desires and then has her murdered (BibleGateway.com). This scene symbolically displays a female subjectivity which refuses to be contained by patriarchal authority by enacting its own agency, and a patriarchal authority which must uphold the status quo by returning that subjectivity back to passivity – by destruction if necessary. The second instantiation of this is the allusion to the story of Lot, when Walser “vaulted the barrier and was half-way up the amphitheatre towards the main exit when, Lot’s wife-like, he could not resist a backward glance” (Carter, 1993, p. 111) and was “struck like a pillar of salt” (p. 112). In the story of Lot, he, his wife, and their daughters flee the city of Sodom as it is to be destroyed by God. The angels who aid them in their flight from the city demand that they not look back on it, but as they run Lot’s wife defies this order and gazes one last time upon the city that was her home; as a result, she turns into a pillar of salt (BibleGateway.com). Once again we witness female subjectivity defying patriarchal rule, only to be relegated to absolute and infinite passivity by patriarchal authority.

Having laid a thematic framework upon which to base the argument of this section, I will now examine the character of Mignon. Mignon’s fate is tied at various moments throughout her story to the care of one man or another – relegated often to submission and passivity at the hands of her male counterpart. At one point the narrator states, “Mignon’s skin was mauvish, greenish, yellowish from beatings [...] the beatings had beaten her back, almost, into the appearance of childhood [...] she had no breasts and was almost hairless” (Carter, 1993, p.129-130). The bruises we witness are that of the grotesque contained, blood which does not escape the body and, like a blacksmith pounding the iron into sleek, smooth, functional objecthood, so does the Ape-Man beat Mignon into smooth, passive, eternally youthful femininity – the patriarchal ideal. This is highlighted by Oliver (2010) when he asserts: “The representation of what breaks the surface or extends from the body specifically combats the version of identity propagated by those in power to maintain social order, which is represented by the ‘closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface’ of the body” (p. 239). This returns us to the symbol of Lot’s wife (pillars are eternally composed, smooth, and impenetrable) where the Ape-Man would take the place of that utmost patriarchal entity– God himself – forcibly fitting Mignon into the Victorian patriarchal ideal of femininity.

Speaking of the patriarchal ideal, I would like to briefly examine the corset – that article of clothing which shapes and contains the female body. In fact, we

witness Fevvers “Freed from the confines of her corset, her once-startling shape sagged, as if the sand were seeping out of the hour-glass” (Carter, 1993, p. 276), thus marking a body which is not static, closed, and sleek, but one which is malleable and seeps. This follows the breaking of her contract with Colonel Kearney, achieving liberation from immediate capitalist responsibility, but, in an act symbolic of God’s punishment of Lot’s wife or King Herod’s punishment of Salomé, Kearney deprives Fevvers of the tool which allows for agency in a capitalist economy – her pay. However, “the grotesque body, by not being enclosed, is a more accurate representation of reality in contrast to the artifice of hegemonic discourse” (Oliver, 2010, p. 240) and, in defying patriarchal punishment and the hegemonic discourse of money, Fevvers establishes for herself a new-found agency by breaking free from the corset-like dictates of her employer (and even Lizzie, who had played a particularly controlling role in her life). By doing this, Fevvers takes the grotesque beyond her body to couch it in the symbolic, breaks free from her metaphorical gilded cage, and deconstructs the patriarchal expectation of submission in the face of punishment.

### **5. Overflowing Femininity – The Female Grotesque**

There is a lot of grotesque imagery throughout the text, even the writing style (Carter’s choice of words) alone seems grotesque. Much of this writing, which suggests an overflowing nature, surrounds Fevvers with phrases such as “My, how her bodice strains! You’d think her tits were going to pop right out” (Carter, 1993, p. 17) or “nothing could calm the fearful storm in my erupting skin” (p. 24). She is often portrayed as bursting out of her own clothing and, indeed, out of her own skin, almost as though she is transgressing herself or her own femininity. As Oliver (2010) suggests: “the grotesque does not parody specific or literal concepts within a culture but instead “uncrowns” . . . one structure of thinking to replace it with the grotesque one. This “uncrowning” typically entails the displacement of the privileged, abstract, rational category of language by the fecund and fertile category of bodily reproduction. The grotesque functions as critique by degrading broad idealized categories of the hegemonic power structure by associating them with ‘low’, unsanctioned discourses” (p. 240).

For this reason Fevvers is a perfect vehicle for social critique, for “Fevvers is clearly grotesque, combining human and animal discourses, representing the body in its extremity and physicality rather than in its elevated or ideal state” (p. 239). Thus, by presenting Fevvers as ambiguously human and animal, feminine and masculine, high and low class, Carter troubles the seemingly stable binaries that separate the hegemonic class from that of the marginalized in an attempt to debase the naturalized privilege granted to the former.

Building off of this idea, the narrator states that Fevvers “must be the pure child of the century [...] the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground” (Carter, 1993, p. 25). Therefore, Carter uses Fevvers’ grotesqueness as something emancipatory for femininity in general (symbolized by wings through her skin), breaking through the common social order that would see a woman bound in place. As Oliver (2010) again asserts, “The novel uses [Fevvers’] wings as exaggerated, grotesquely hyperfeminine traits, and her status as a performer allows her to reflect on gender identity as performance” (p. 239). Performance is not static and can be manipulated and asserted in the face of cultural and moral regulations: regulations which seek to contain fluidity and plurality of expression. This idea is exemplified when Fevvers says, “I saw my future criss-crossing the globe for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes; I only knew my body was the abode of limitless freedom” (Carter, 1993, p. 41). There is, therefore, a disconnect between what Fevvers desires and is capable of, and what society demands of her.

However, one of the overarching messages of the text is that one’s body is the abode of limitless freedom and one must identify it in oneself to achieve some sense of emancipation and agency. There is an allusion to William Blake’s famous poem “London” when Carter uses the line “mind forg’d manacles” (p. 285). In the case of oppression, the oppressor has power over the oppressed so long the oppressed is convinced that this is the case. Indeed, in *The myth of Sisyphus* (1955/2012), Albert Camus writes “I cannot understand what kind of freedom would be given me by a higher being. I have lost the sense of hierarchy. The only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the State. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action” (p. 56). This is to say that freedom is never given from a hierarchy but exists only in the corporeal and the imaginary of the individual, and to experience this freedom one must assert it in spite of external forces which seek to oppress. Hence, for the women’s rights movement to have even begun, there had to be women who had already shed themselves of their mind forg’d manacles and had begun “to twist the shiny strings of [their] frail cage in a perfunctory way” (Carter, 1993, p. 14). So, what Carter does is that she uses the grotesque to say that one already possesses the freedom within oneself, and that one should use it and let it come out.

## 6. Conclusion

Having examined Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* and the way she employs the carnivalesque and the grotesque, it is quite clear that she has used these literary techniques as a way to challenge Victorian patriarchal cultural norms that were being re-imagined and re-inscribed in 1980s Britain. The article has demonstrated that Carter’s use of the themes of food consumption and excrement

operate as both a grotesque means of emancipation and a carnivalesque challenge to and deconstruction of arbitrary patriarchal hierarchies. It has then examined some culturally embedded biblical references which work to subjugate women, and looked at how Carter's text perpetuates these themes while also interrogating and deconstructing them towards the end of feminine emancipation and agency. Last but not least, it has discussed the overflowing nature of grotesque femininity as a means of critiquing Victorian patriarchal cultural norms, and as a way to assert one's own freedom in the face of oppressive hierarchies. Ultimately, Carter's text is one which interrogates the naturalized hierarchy, that is patriarchy, in an attempt to render femininity not simply "a bird in a gilded cage" rather an agent for change.

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## Contact

Md Abu Shahid Abdullah  
Department of English  
Otto-Friedrich University Bamberg  
96047 Bamberg  
Germany  
jwl\_abdullah@yahoo.com