Fall 2008

Dystopian Matriarchies: Deconstructing the Womb in Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve*

Hope Jennings
*Wright State University - Main Campus, hope.jennings@wright.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/english

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

**Repository Citation**
https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/english/193

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Language and Literatures at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literatures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact corescholar@www.libraries.wright.edu, library-corescholar@wright.edu.
Dystopian Matriarchies: Deconstructing the Womb in Angela Carter’s Heroes and Villains and The Passion of New Eve

Abstract

This paper examines two of Angela Carter’s novels that use dystopian tactics in order to disrupt feminist fantasies of matriarchal power. As I argue in my readings of Heroes and Villains and The Passion of New Eve, both texts share striking similarities in their negative projections of a matriarchal order coming into power. Carter exposes where this feminist fantasy might in the end further oppress women, particularly within the realm of reproductive freedoms. Regardless if the female subjects in these texts attempt to assert autonomous identities, their appropriation of phallocentric representations and/or myths surrounding the maternal body is problematic. By playing according to patriarchal rules of mastery and violence, Marianne and Mother end up reinforcing the social order they were attempting to overturn. The deconstruction of maternal archetypes in both texts leads to a necessary deconstruction of the womb as an imaginative locale in women’s and men’s fantasies. However, Carter also begins to seek out an alternative locus, or, a “femi-

---

1 This paper is revised material taken from the author’s dissertation, and has been expanded from a paper presented at Queen’s University Belfast for a postgraduate conference, Perspectives on Power, March 2007, which was hosted by Quest. The original paper was published online as part of the conference proceedings in Quest, ‘Issue 4: Proceedings of the Quest Conference’ (Summer 2007), http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/QUEST/JournalIssues.
nine" imaginary; one that does not limit women to the maternal, but allows for non-repressive, multiple speaking positions with which the female subject might identify and articulate her desires.

And the curious resemblance between the womb and the grave lies at the roots of all human ambivalence toward the womb and its bearer; we mediate our experience through imagination and dream but sometimes the dream gets in the way of the experience, and obscures it completely—the womb is the First and Last Place, earth, the greatest mother of them all, from whom we come, to whom we go . . . [T]his entrancing rhetoric [has been] compounded out of several millennia of guesses and fantasies about the nature of the world.
—Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*²

Much of contemporary women's writing attempts to offer significant tactics for the reclamation of women's bodies with the aim of mapping out new territories of female autonomy. The British author Angela Carter (1940–1992) demonstrates in the majority of her writings an intensive concern with how embodied sites of power are often created or reinforced through various mythological narratives or frameworks. More specifically, Carter interrogates the extent to which the privileging or reappropriation of the maternal body as a source of feminine power poses itself as a problematic terrain in various feminist discourses. In contrast to the majority of Carter's earlier texts, which tend to remain focused on contesting patriarchal myths of femininity, in *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), the author explicitly parodies matriarchal myths in order to examine how these do not necessarily guarantee a different symbolic order but often end up reiterating phallocentric representations of women's bodies. Although these texts clearly rely on deconstructive tactics, unravelling the "blind spots" that are inherently located in any ideological framework, Carter also begins to suggest possibilities for constructing a spe-

specifically feminine discourse of subjectivity, one that is located “elsewhere” or outside of phallocentric parameters. ³

Angela Carter’s critique of matriarchal myths is primarily explored through the narrative tactics of feminist dystopia. Generally, the speculative nature of dystopia works by pushing areas of representation to their extreme limit, portraying a “bad place” (as opposed to utopia’s “good” place) through the negative projection of existing social relations as they might play out in the near future (Mahoney: 74). According to Elisabeth Mahoney, feminist dystopia is an extremely discomfitting realm, as its depiction of sexual violence and desire tends to implicate women as well as men in perpetuating those binary oppositions that keep gender relations confined to positions of “subject and object . . . master and victim” (73, 75). Feminist dystopia thus often challenges various feminisms to confront their own fantasies of power as a possibly “bad place” (Mahoney: 75).

As we see in Heroes and Villains and The Passion of New Eve, both novels share striking similarities in their negative projections of a matriarchal order coming into power, exposing where this feminist fantasy, even if it originates in a desire to overturn the patriarchal order, might in the end further oppress women. Carter offers us potent maternal figures, or myths surrounding the disruptive power of the mother, only to deflate them, exposing how female identity is not in fact contingent upon the iconic status of motherhood. According to Luce Irigaray, because women’s reproductive status has been historically privileged as the only guarantee of female identity, then motherhood often “gets wrapped up in some weird kind of holiness” (1993: 84). Carter herself calls for “the secularisation of women,” a project that is ultimately aimed at a “demystification” of the womb, which she refers to as the “most potent matrix of all mysteries” (SW: 108–09). In The Sadeian Woman (1979), Carter argues:

³My use of the term “elsewhere” refers to Luce Irigaray’s application of the word, which she employs to demonstrate how women are already located outside or beyond a masculine imaginary due to its repressive logic. Irigaray privileges this marginal positioning in order to explore the potential available to women for articulating a feminine imaginary or economy of desire that does not respect the phallocentric mirror of representation. See especially This Sex Which Is Not One, pp. 76–7.
To deny the bankrupt enchantments of the womb is to pare a good deal of the fraudulent magic from the idea of women, to reveal us as we are, simple creatures of flesh and blood whose expectations deviate from biological necessity sufficiently to force us to abandon, perhaps regretfully, perhaps with relief, the deluded priestesshood of a holy reproductive function. This demystification extends to the biological iconography of women (109–10).

The “reproductive function” derives much of its power from the cultural myths or religious texts that elevate motherhood, or the womb, to a sacred status, which illogically is used to justify the subjugation of women: They are viewed as sacred because they possess the womb, yet that “is why they are treated so badly for nothing can defile the sacred” (SW: 109). In other words, women’s assigned place in the symbolic order is this maternal role. To deviate from the “norm,” for a woman to play with or reject the reproductive positioning in which she has been situated, is to transgress the paternal law, requiring punishment and repression of her desires. If women are not “natural-born mothers,” and if the womb is merely “an organ like any other organ,” relatively useful but not much use at all if one does “not wish to utilize its sole function, that of bearing children” (SW: 109), then the rationale behind a patriarchal order begins to crumble. Thus, when a feminist discourse continues to rely on the “imaginary construct” of a mother goddess as the first and last refuge of female identity, this further mystifies women’s bodies as the receptacle and repository for phallocentric desires (SW: 110). For Carter, matriarchal myths are more often than not equally as oppressive as their patriarchal counterparts, since those feminisms that express a desire for the maternal as a source of inherent female power do not so much grant women freedom from phallocentric parameters but, in fact, help keep them in place. Overall, Carter challenges the ways in which women’s reproductive status has been used to define and oppress them through deconstructive tactics and subversive irony. Her dystopian texts invest women with power precisely because they are in possession of a womb, yet the very thing that grants them potency also makes them slaves to a patriarchal ideology, subjects only in relation to their reproductive roles.
This is not to say, however, that when Carter insists on refuting maternal myths or archetypes she is calling for the rejection of motherhood, or denying the significance of the mother’s role in the process of subject identification. Carter forces us to question the values that have been invested in motherhood; instead of it being only one of many possible identifications, the female subject rarely has been permitted any other role in the symbolic order. Luce Irigaray claims this is due to the fact that in a patriarchal society women’s bodies function as objects of exchange, and so children become their sole form of currency “in exchange for a market status for themselves,” ultimately revealing that the “value underpinning our societies for thousands of years has been procreation” (1993: 84–6). Although Irigaray acknowledges how women have been able to undermine patriarchy through persistently challenging and subverting the maternal function, she remains wary of a tendency in feminist discourses toward nostalgia when returning to the old myths, stories, and sacred texts surrounding mother figures or goddesses (ibid). The inherent discursive danger is located in those feminist narratives that invoke maternal archetypes without retaining a critical distance from them, which is necessary to achieving a transformation of the social order or founding a new sexual ethics of identity (ibid). Or rather, as Carter argues, a feminist critique of women’s reproductive positioning in a patriarchal order is at risk of undermining itself when it continues to rely nostalgically on “the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses” (SW: 5), as if this might automatically confer upon women a means of socio-political empowerment. This form of feminist nostalgia engages in a fantasy that evades a confrontation with women’s present-day, lived realities, which have not been entirely emancipated from a patriarchal order (irrespective of those who claim we now live in a “post-feminist” age).

In now turning to a closer examination of Carter’s dystopian novels, it is important to note that Heroes and Villains is itself situated in a post-apocalyptic future, where the destruction of civilization might allow for a break from history’s master narratives, and as a result potentially open up an alternative space, or “elsewhere,” allowing for a different social order. However, the text’s protagonist, Marianne, remains trapped in the alienating terrain of a chaotic world that is hostile
towards the "feminine." Although Marianne attempts to maneuver out-
side the misogynist fantasies projected onto her by Jewel, the Barbarian
"other" who takes her as his hostage, after Marianne is raped, she in-
creasingly takes a masochistic pleasure in her subsequent sexual en-
counters with Jewel. By doing so, she begins to convince herself that
she is the one who has power over Jewel: "as if he were helplessly try-
ing to prove his autonomy to her while she knew all the time he van-
ished like a phantom at daybreak... at the moment when her body
ceased to define his outlines" (89). Marianne's objectification of Jewel
might be read as a means of self-defense, or defiance, allowing her to
retain whatever limited power or autonomy that is available to her.
However, Jewel's sexual violation of Marianne inevitably has a power
of its own, as much as Marianne attempts to deny this, and his desire is
motivated by a similar conviction to establish, as he claims: "some
status in relation to myself" (90). That status, for Jewel, is dependent on
what Marianne realizes is an even more "terrible violation of her pri-
vacy," when at one point during intercourse he commands her to:
"Conceive, you bitch, conceive" (90). Shocked and disgusted, compre-
hending that Jewel does indeed have the will and capacity to force upon
her an identity not of her choosing, any previous notions Marianne had
invested in the relationship between pleasure and power "died now
[that] she realized pleasure was ancillary to procreation" (91).

It is this maternal role that threatens to engulf Marianne entirely.
On her "sham" wedding night (77), she is forced onto "a primitive
bride-bed" (76), and advised "to reconcile herself to everything from
rape to mortality" (59). This advice is offered to her by Mrs. Green,
who represents "some kind of domestic matriarch" (43), and serves as
an insidious maternal example for Marianne. The only comfort she can
provide the girl is "the repetition of certain old saws about human
behaviour which might or might not any longer have application" (77).
Marianne claims those "old saws" are anachronistic, "a pun in time"
(56), which we might extend to Carter's view of the old myths that
function to keep women in their "proper" place. The maternal role pro-
jected onto women by a patriarchal order, which historically has been
used to restrict women's identities solely to their reproductive status,
must be rejected as a social construct "that once had a place and func-
tion but now has neither any more” (HV: 57). This encapsulates Marianne’s problematic positioning in relation to maternal archetypes: She acknowledges them as anachronisms that have no place or function in her self-perception and/or self-definition, but having recognized the power they continue to hold over the masculine imaginary, she nevertheless attempts to manipulate those myths of maternal potency to retain a position of dominance over Jewel and the Barbarians. As Sarah Gamble notes: “Having so singularly failed to find the glamorous objective Other [in Jewel], Marianne instead transforms her own self into an icon of otherness” (79). Even if she seems to reject stereotyped roles, in her use of mythic spectacle mixed with political purpose, we are left questioning whether this is an effectively subversive or further repressive move (Gamble: 79).

Indeed, Marianne serves as Carter’s warning to a feminism that too readily accepts its own myths, particularly that of “the healing, reconciling mother,” since regardless of whether the “revival of the myths of [matriarchal] cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life” (SW: 5). For example, at one point Marianne is confronted by the following aphorism: “I THINK, THEREFORE I EXIST; BUT IF I TAKE TIME OFF FROM THINKING, WHAT THEN?” (98). Though Marianne is more than capable of “utilizing her perceptions till the very end” (81), once she becomes pregnant with Jewel’s child, burdened with a maternal role not of her choosing, she can no longer “think of anything” and is “unrecognizable to herself” (149). She is seduced by the allure of a mythic version of herself, accepting somewhat apathetically and then wholeheartedly the reproductive function into which Jewel has trapped her. She comes to believe a child might provide her with some form of dynastic power, ensuring her place among the Barbarians, just as Jewel had desired a son to ensure his own status (90).

I am not at all suggesting, however, that Marianne is ever entirely duped by the mythic status she applies to herself; she remains to the very end the same rigorous deconstructionist she started out as (Carter explicitly describes her as such in the opening paragraph of the novel). Similar to many of Carter’s female protagonists, she is above all a survivor. Although we might be drawn to this aspect of Marianne’s char-
Character, it is necessary to keep in mind that Carter also urges us to question the ways in which she chooses to survive. Marianne’s refusal to play the role of victim is problematic for several reasons. Rather than subvert patriarchal weapons of dominance, she remains preoccupied with the imposition of pain on one person by another, having learned from her relationship with Jewel the use of violence as a form of self-preservation. In her presentation of Marianne’s particular brand of female power, Carter reveals where this is not in fact an antidote to male violence but often indicative of women’s complicity in their oppression through the perpetuation of further violence.

Ultimately, Marianne’s tactics of survival are dependent on a denial of the other’s irreducible difference; she reacts to the repression of her desires and identity by in turn inflicting similar acts of repression on others. For instance, this is made painfully clear when Marianne, having been the victim of rape, virtually rapes one of the Barbarians, a young man who has the mental equivalency of a child. When he makes an unwanted sexual advance toward her, and though she knows she could defend herself against his ineffectual attempt, Marianne “roughly seized hold of him and crushed him inside her with her hand” (115). She literally seizes the chance to dominate another, which is essentially prompted by her desire to assert her own vengeance against Jewel for having “put a kid up [her]” (116). Though her “rape” of the boy is in reaction to her pregnancy and the helpless position in which she feels it has placed her, during the act she entertains a sentimental maternal fantasy of herself: “She was caught in a storm of warmth of heart; she wanted to fold him into her, where it was warm and nobody could harm him, poor, lucid, mindless child of chaos now sucking her as if he expected to find milk” (116). First, as an abject fantasy, this violently disrupts the boundaries between mother as nurturer and devourer, and in the end Marianne has nothing to offer the other (no milk): the fantasy itself is barren. Second, this scene works to disrupt Julia Kristeva’s own notion that maternity might provide access to the Other, since Marianne can never fully accept the reality of the Other, even if at one point she attempts “to feel the shape of the child down there which knitted its flesh and blood out of her own in the artificial night of the womb” (135). Marianne thus views her own positioning or identity as a
maternal body (womb) to be an artificiality, the child itself perceived by her to be an alien presence that further threatens her sense of self-sufficient autonomy, which she has been so desperately attempting to retain throughout the novel. Pregnancy turns out to be yet another alienating experience for Marianne, hindering her from articulating her desires. This is not only because motherhood has been imposed on her against her will, but also because she herself reduces her identity to the maternal, believing this is now her only means to power. Put differently, Carter's text suggests that "the female imaginary would appear to self-destruct" when a feminist discourse makes the theoretical move of collapsing female sexuality into reproduction, in effect neutralizing the mother herself as a desiring and speaking subject (which, though contrary to Julia Kristeva's aims, is something that potentially occurs in her own work) (Meaney: 97).

Moreover, one of Marianne's major failings is that she fails to articulate her identity outside the boundaries of those patriarchal myths that operate according to a fear of the disruptive power of the maternal-feminine. As Kristeva points out: "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power" (1982: 77). In psychoanalytic terms, the feared potency of the mother's generative role is imprinted on the deepest archaeological layers of the (male) child's psyche; she who has sole power to give life (birth) also has power to take it away (castration). Thus, the archaic, or primal, mother is paradoxically situated in the masculine imaginary as both a life-giving and destructive force; or, as Carter claims: "the curious resemblance between the womb and the grave lies at the roots of all human ambivalence towards the womb and its bearer" (SW: 108). Marianne sets herself up as this archaic mother preying upon the primitive fears and superstitions of the Barbarians, becoming a matriarchal tyrant in order to defend her vulnerable positioning amongst them. She chooses to become "Eve at the end of the world" (124) when she might have rejected that role as anachronistic in itself. Since the apocalypse has already come and gone, the eschatological myths of the biblical text are now

---

4See especially Freud's "The Uncanny," particularly its closing paragraphs where he speculates on the male subject's "primal" fears or phobias in specific relation to the mother's genitals.
glaringly redundant, thus offering her the freedom to create for herself a different myth. Instead she relies on the violent gender oppositions embedded in the Genesis narrative, establishing herself in a position of power bought at the expense of conforming to patriarchal configurations of the maternal-feminine.

Marianne’s “feminine” power is utilized solely as a destructive force, as Jewel himself fears when Marianne informs him, just prior to his death: “you’re nothing but the furious invention of my virgin nights” (137), stripping away from him any sense of his own subjectivity. Later she smashes the mirror where Jewel had put on his war-paint, where she had seen him for the last time, and feels “a warm sense of self-satisfaction” and “pleasure” in the thought that she is the one who has destroyed him (147). By recognizing her illusions—that in many ways Jewel is no more than the creation of her own projected fantasies, desires, and fears—she discovers the power to decreate him while simultaneously (re)creating her own image. The image she chooses, however, is that of a witch stirring her cauldron, giving birth to monstrous children “with faces of horses and lions” (149). After Jewel’s death she fully embraces her role as a Monstrous Mother, a “little Lilith” (124) determined to subdue or destroy her male rivals for power. She slips on the iconic mask of a terrible, devouring mother, implementing this myth of maternal potency in defense of her precarious positioning among the Barbarians now that Jewel is no longer there to protect her from them. When she is informed the Barbarians are threatening to abandon her, she claims: “They won’t get rid of me as easily as that. I shall stay here and frighten them so much they’ll do every single thing I say... I’ll be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron” (150). The novel ends with one form of tyranny replacing another, as Marianne adopts a masculine positioning in relation to the law by transforming herself from victim to predator (Meaney: 96).

Marianne’s assertion of her identity is thus dependent on becoming a slave to the myth of the archaic mother; as an omnipotent force that rules through terror, her power is derived from the masculine fears that a history of patriarchal narratives have projected onto women’s bodies. As Julia Kristeva warns in “Women’s Time,” we must refuse to accept this notion of “woman” as “possessor of some mythical unity—a su-
preme power, on which is based the terror of power and terrorism as the desire for power” (205). Although Kristeva views this desire for maternal power as a force of subversion, in that it might offer a specifically feminine discourse where historically it has been silenced, she also acknowledges that the myth of the archaic mother, when appropriated by a feminine imaginary, is paradoxically a failed utopia, one that fails “to bring out the singularity of each woman, and beyond this, her multiplicities, her plural languages” (205, 208). In other words, by relying on some archetypal maternal power as the source (origin) of female identity, this not only further represses women’s differences (from each other), but might also further alienate them from articulating their desires. In effect, they remain ensnared in a history of phallocentricism that operates according to a denial of sexual differences, which ultimately keeps relationships between the sexes locked at an impasse. Likewise, although Marianne has elevated herself to a position of authority, she is only “Queen of the Midden” (61), tyrannically ruling over the refuse heap of western civilization while enclosed in a system of violence. Overall, Heroes and Villains exposes how the manipulation of myth is if anything an effective tool in deploying power over others, and how regardless if that myth system is patriarchal or matriarchal, it will continue to propagate violent oppositions between self and other as long as it functions according to a hierarchical power schema. This is a problem that reoccurs in The Passion of New Eve, to which I will now be turning, yet Carter also begins imagining a possible movement away from the oppressive myths or fantasies surrounding the “mother.”

Similar to Heroes and Villains, the assertion of a destructive matriarchal power in The Passion of New Eve (henceforth referred to as New Eve) demonstrates how this “feminism as terrorism” is ineffectual in subverting patriarchy because of its complicity with the underlying violence of that order. New Eve takes as its conceptual basis the experiment of turning a man into a woman, which is enacted in the text in the form of a “feminist” revenge fantasy directed toward the male sex for its “crimes” against women. Evelyn, an arch-misogynist who takes a sadomasochistic pleasure in beating and raping his female victim, Leilah, is kidnapped, held hostage, raped, and forced to undergo a sex-
change operation by the monstrous Mother (who later turns out to be Leilah’s own mother). Mother embodies as well as reinforces a patriarchal order’s worst fears in her self-appointed role as the “Grand Emasculator” (49). She is an artificial goddess who literally operates underground in a network of caverns, a renegade “feminist” haven she has named Beulah (a direct allusion to Blake), which has been technologically transformed into a simulation of the womb. It is a “place where contrarieties exist together,” presided over by a profane goddess who is the incarnation of “a complicated mix of mythology and technology” (48). Mother has surgically “transformed her flesh” (49) into an exaggerated version of a maternal deity, stitching onto herself tiers of breasts donated by her acolytes and becoming “her own mythological artefact” (60). Both Beulah and Mother indicate a “slippage of the differentiation between what is natural and what is artefact”; as simulations they personify a gynocentric essentialism based on phallocentric models of femininity (Gamble: 124). Indeed, Beulah itself is represented by the insignia of a truncated phallus, and in “the synthetic apparatus of mystery that dominated this place” (57), we are continuously forced to ask: “Why use a male symbol for a place of female power?”

Mother’s seductive myth of female potency turns out to be as sterile as the artificial womb she inhabits, merely reiterating a phallocentrism that situates the female always in relation to the male. Although she claims she is “the Castratix of the Phallocentric Universe” (67), Carter reveals how she has not in fact “castrated” anything. Mother’s project is fundamentally flawed, since her “newly born woman” is no more than a literally castrated male (precisely the old Freudian myth). Thus, even if Mother’s “mythic vengeance” (50) is to reveal how myth itself “is a made thing, not a found thing” (56); like Marianne, she fails to achieve a truly remade myth that offers an alternative to a masculine positioning that is violently repressive of women. Though she seeks out a specifically feminine discourse in reaction to a history of women’s repression, she asserts this can only be achieved through the creation of an exclusively female society. Her subversion may be extremely disruptive, but it is a destructive force; when creating her New Eve she insists on the need for killing off “Old Adam” (16). Mother’s violent repression of the male subject does not merely reiterate the phallocen-
tric urge to repress the "feminine," but perpetuates a violence of difference between the sexes according to her entirely exclusionary and hierarchical premises.

Carter further demonstrates here the dangers that Julia Kristeva warns against in "Women's Time." Kristeva critiques "the more radical feminist currents" that refuse identification (or confrontation) with the existing power schema (202). She argues that when attempting to "make of the second sex a counter-society," as an alter-ego of the official society, a feminist discourse runs the risk of regressing into the refuge of fantasy, articulating itself as an a-topia because it remains outside the law (203). Ultimately, any feminism that defines itself through exclusionary practices will end up with an inverted sexism, creating its own scapegoats; by reiterating the phallocentric logic of the "guilty one," the very logic of any matriarchal counter-power/counter-society will generate itself as a "simulacrum of the combated society" (ibid). Beulah itself is a simulation, and not only as an artificial womb but also as a place of power. Mother's "radical" feminism, founded on the symbol of a truncated phallus, can only derive its logic from the very thing she is attempting to overturn, and ironically enough, she can only wield her power from underground. In other words, according to her own terms and the place/positioning from which she operates, Mother keeps the "feminine" repressed. What she believes is a female utopia is in fact a dystopian nightmare, where women remain enslaved to "the phallocentric thrust" of violence (NE: 77), which imposes upon their bodies and gendered identities a subjectivity not of their making.

Just as Mother is "too much" (as a grotesque caricature of the maternal), she turns Evelyn into an excessively male version of the "feminine," modeling her New Eve after a Playboy centerfold (75). This is exactly the kind of woman that men (including Evelyn when he was one) are encouraged to desire through a specular phallic economy that projects onto women's bodies a passive masochism. Significantly, though, even if the newly transsexual Eve/lyn is now technologically altered into an "unnatural" woman with all the necessary organs for female reproduction, s/he is hardly a "feminized" subject. Initially, when Eve/lyn first discovers the new body s/he has been given, s/he does not experience any psychological or behavioral change, merely
viewing his/her external appearance from an internal masculine positioned: “the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (75). On one level this indicates a paradoxical split in self-perception, in which the “desiring viewer and the desired object, usually distinct figures, are here confined within the one body” (Johnson: 172). In many of her texts, Carter explores that split in self-perception as indicative of the challenges women face when attempting to assert a specifically feminine subjectivity and/or sexuality while remaining trapped within the confines of a phallocentric mirror of representation. Or rather, women are often forced to see themselves and their bodies through a male specular economy of desire. However, Eve/lyn does not think of him/herself as any less male than before Mother wielded her surgical knife, in spite of all her efforts to teach Eve/lyn how to be a woman. She attempts to do this through repeatedly showing Eve/lyn “non-phallic imagery such as sea-anemones opening and closing; caves, with streams issuing from them; roses opening to admit a bee; the sea, the moon” (72). Ironically, as Carter intends, these might just as easily reassert phallic images of the female body, explicitly figuring it as passive, receptive, cyclical, a dark cave trickling out streams of menstrual and ovular excretions.

Mother’s project of “feminizing” Eve/lyn essentially relies on various symbols a patriarchal order uses to shroud or veil women’s bodies in mystery. She may believe she is re-appropriating those symbols but she does so uncritically, seduced by their representative power that reduces women to their reproductive biology. Indeed, Mother’s ultimate goal is to impregnate Eve/lyn with his/her own preserved semen. Mother falls for the very same patriarchal propaganda she claims to be contesting, reinforcing its repressive discourse in her belief that motherhood will provide the supreme proof of Eve/lyn’s femininity. Though Eve/lyn is forced to view reproductions of “every Virgin and Child that had ever been painted,” this absurd attempt “to subliminally

Both Marianne in Heroes and Villains and Melanie in The Magic Toyshop (1967) provide similar examples of this; both are adolescent girls who struggle to assert their identities while struggling against the violent repression of their desires, either through rape or demands that they conform to patriarchal norms of the maternal-feminine; both are ultimately alienated from articulating their own sense of autonomy and/or sexuality.
instill the maternal instinct itself’ (72) is answered by Eve/lyn when s/he retorts: “it takes more than identifying with Raphael’s Madonna to make a real woman!” (80). Of course, this is again another instance of irony, since Eve/lyn at this point in the text, and by his/her own admission, does not have any notion of what it means to identify as a woman. Carter’s intended humor also carries serious implications and points toward the central questions driving the text: Who exactly is considered a “real” woman (or “real” man, for that matter)? Who or what is in control of defining the terms of gender? More importantly, if women continue defining themselves according to patriarchal terms of femininity, then to what extent are they truly in control of their own reproductive positioning and/or identities?

As we see with the example of Mother, the assertion of her own identity is founded on phallocentric representations of femininity. She claims she has achieved a radical rebirth of herself through surgical alterations to her body when in fact she is no more than a primitive, archaic mother; her attempt at technological progression leads to a regression, and by the end of the novel: “She has retired to a cave by the sea” (174). When Eve is brought to this cave by Mother’s daughter, Leilah, she is forced “to slide into the living rock all alone” (179), experiencing a backwards birth.⁶ The cave is representative of the womb, which is “beyond consciousness” (NE: 184), since each of our own experiences of being in the womb can only be imagined through the “hypothetical dream-time of the foetus” (SW: 109). Through Eve’s experience, Carter forces us to confront the womb as this “imaginative locale” (ibid), and with the aim of demystifying the womb as a symbol of eternity: as “the First and Last Place, earth, the greatest mother of them all, from whom we come, to whom we go” (ibid). This in itself, as Carter points out, is a dream or myth that “gets in the way of the experience, and obscures it completely” (ibid).

⁶Henceforth I will refer to the character of Eve/lyn as Eve, since by this point in the text the character has adopted what might be interpreted as a primarily feminine positioning, indicating a significant gendered shift in the text’s first-person voice. For a more thorough discussion of this, see Heather L. Johnson’s insightful analysis of the text’s exploration of transsexual subjectivity and narrative voice.
At first, Eve’s journey through the womblike interior of the cave seems to enact a regression in both time and space, as the initial cave recedes into a smaller cave, and yet another cave within that, swallowing Eve in its obscure depths (181). Carter intends for this image of a receding network of caves to indicate both the complex mythology that has been elaborated around the womb, as well as the complexity of women’s bodies and desires, which that mythology attempts to suppress. She refigures the dream-time of the foetus, of being inside the womb, as a distinctly bodily space: “the extensible realm sited in the penetrable flesh” (SW: 107). By giving flesh to the womb, the text attempts to bring us back to a discourse of women’s bodies, but without mystifying the womb as a sacred, inviolable space; we are required to confront the biology, rather than the mythology, of reproductive bodies. As Luce Irigaray observes, the womb is often fantasized as a “devouring mouth,” precisely because it “is never thought of as the primal place in which we become body” (1993: 16). Or rather, this fantasy of a threatening, devouring womb, which completely obscures the realities of the flesh, is particularly located in a masculine imaginary’s endeavor to repress a female specificity in women’s attempts at articulating their experiences of gestation and childbirth.

Carter insists on the need for articulating that experience according to its biological processes, while refusing to mystify the womb through a romanticized, or sanitized, depiction of the mother’s body. Even if the womb is “the domain of futurity in which the embryo forms itself from the flesh and blood of its mother” (SW: 107), it is not merely a passive receptacle for neonatal growth and nurturance. In Eve’s case, during her passage through the womb it is shown to be extremely active and aggressive in its formation of the child. For instance, once Eve has traveled as far as she can within the caves, she reaches a final cave, and squeezing herself into its cramped space she is forced to fold her body into a foetal position. The position does not offer her any physical comfort but rather pushes in on her from all sides, the living rock attempting to expel her forcefully from its interior. At this stage the cave is explicitly figured as a womb going into labor: the cave’s walls “shuddered and sighed,” and as its “pulsations exert greater and greater pressure,” the contractions develop into a “visceral yet perfectly rhythmic
agitation," rippling its walls of “meat and slimy velvet,” which at first seem to ingest Eve in one last inward pull before shoving her out “into the amniotic sea” (186). Ultimately, the womb is depicted here in all its messy reality, the flesh and blood of the maternal body. That body does indeed become a suffocating space, at least at the point of its expulsion of the child. Thus, according to the biological accuracy of this scene, Carter refutes the masculine imaginary that insists on figuring the womb as a devouring mouth. Just as Eve is expelled from the cave, so too is the infant once the womb no longer provides the room in which it needs to develop and grow. To take this one step further, Carter indicates how each of us needs to be expelled from the womb as a fantasized, mythological space.

If anything, Carter’s deconstruction of the biological iconography of the womb self-consciously avoids the impulse to romanticize its secret, unknowable interior: “This inner space must have been there before any of the outer places; in the beginning was the womb and its periodic and haphazard bleedings are so many signs that it has a life of its own, unknowable to us” (SW: 109). In other words, according to Carter’s doubled meaning, we have to acknowledge the ways in which the womb takes on a life of its own through either myth or fantasy, taking on an imagined existence; and when distinctly removed from our fantasies, its own reproductive biology or reality has very little to do with the myths constructed around women’s bodies. For example, the womb, and by extension female sexuality, is often inscribed in the myth of “mother earth.” Although Carter claims she does not mind the idea of “mother earth,” she also points out that this becomes problematic in our tendency to equate “mother” with nurturance since “mother earth,” or nature, is not benign. When nature shows its absolute indifference to us, that it does indeed have a life of its own, we are inevitably shocked. Thus, Carter suggests, and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that if we insist on relying on the notion of a mother goddess then perhaps Kali, the goddess of death, would be the most appropriate repre-

---

7For this and the following three sentences, I am referring to statements made by Carter in her interview with Lisa Appignanesi; also see The Sadeian Woman, p. 115, where Carter discusses Kali as representative of the Terrible Mother: “who stands for both birth and death, and not only destruction but Nature’s cruel indifference to suffering.”
sentation of the mother. Kali, however, like Mother in New Eve, and Marianne at the end of Heroes and Villains, is a grotesque, monstrous matriarch, and not at all dissimilar to patriarchal fantasies of the archaic mother. This is precisely Carter’s point, reminding us that the womb, as well as mother goddesses, are always a difficult thing to think through since we persistently have to guard against the danger of romanticizing the mother. Eve herself realizes that “Mother is a figure of speech,” since when she calls out for Mother to appear, as absolute proof of her existence, she only receives an empty reply of silence (184, 186). Carter indicates here the ways in which the mother’s body fails to provide the female subject with a secure, autonomous identity.

However, once we have completed the text’s deconstructive journey through the womb, we need to acknowledge that Carter also has attempted a visionary journey. Eve’s own vision in the caves, as she inches her “way towards the beginning and end of time” (185), describes a backwards evolution, in which extinct forms of life undergo “a process of reversal” (183). This journey does not end in a regression to a matriarchal order predating patriarchal societies. Carter refuses nostalgia for an imagined “prehistorical” moment in human communities, rejecting the dream of return to a prelapsarian paradise, as if this might provide us with an original model or blueprint upon which to build new human identities. For Carter, gendered identities will inevitably remain inscribed within socio-historical discourses: “Flesh comes to us out of history” (SW: 11). Thus, in the text’s attempt to imagine through that process of reversal a point of origin located beyond human constructs of time, Carter seeks out a more fluid subjectivity that is not yet trapped within the confines of any singular unifying discourse. Eve’s visionary journey takes her back to a time before humans evolved; transported to a primeval forest, she envisions an archaeopteryx, a feathered, flightless dinosaur: “bird and lizard both at once” (185). Eve recognizes how this creature is in fact not unlike herself: “One of those miraculous, seminal, intermediate beings,” a cross-species “composed of contradictory elements” (185). Such a creature might provide a different model for conceiving a female subjectivity that is multiple, hybrid, and limitlessly free in the articulation of her desires.
Problematically, yet very much in line with Carter’s persistent self-critique of the myths she herself sets up, the text deflates its visionary promise of a new female subjectivity. Although by the end of New Eve we are left “on the beach of elsewhere” (NE: 190), this is a highly ambiguous space. We are not quite sure whether this “elsewhere” indicates a genuinely new discursive departure from phallocentric representations of the maternal-feminine, or if the text is enacting a regression to yet another mythological, maternal space that concludes in a further mystification of women’s bodies. The text closes with Eve offering a final incantation: “Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth” (191), and “the unguessable reaches of the sea” might be interpreted as one more representative symbol of the womb (SW: 107). Rather than successfully disentangle herself from the imagined site of the womb, Eve literally disappears into another version of its romanticized space, as she seems to take solace in relinquishing her own identity and destination to the whims of wherever the sea might take her. As readers, we are given no clear indication of where Eve might be journeying, or even from what location she might be narrating her story. We are left with the suspicion that the female subject, according to these terms, will become bound more tightly to the unimaginable, the unrepresentable (Gamble: 129). Sarah Gamble suggests that Carter’s typical lack of resolution poses two conflicting questions, which I would argue are central to Carter’s concerns in nearly all of her writings: Is it possible to assert a “multiple, malleable subject capable of an infinite degree of self-creation”; or, will gender roles always remain limited to ideological structures (ibid)?

In “Notes from the Front Line,” Carter argues that the only means by which a feminist discourse might assert a “new kind of being” is through a refusal to privilege the maternal:

---

8It is important to keep in mind that Eve herself is now not only the bearer of a womb, but also suspects she is carrying a child after her one night with Tristessa, a transvestite with whom Evelyn was once obsessed when he thought Tristessa was a woman. This is another significant instance in the text where notions of sex and gender are disrupted in complex ways, which unfortunately this paper does not have the room to explore more fully.
The voluntary sterile yet sexually active being, existing in more than a few numbers, is a being without precedent and, by voluntarily sterile, I don’t necessarily mean permanently childless; this category includes women who are sterile not all, just most of the time . . . (41).

Having made this statement in 1983, Carter is referring to the relatively recent reproductive freedoms that were offered women with oral contraceptives and the legalizing of abortion. However, we should keep in mind that her suggestion here is aimed at radically opening up the idea of the “mother” to indicate that this is above all a positioning rather than an identity, and one any woman might adopt or reject according to her voluntary desires. Moreover, as we have seen in Heroes and Villains and New Eve, Carter’s texts force us to think through the problems that arise when women attempt to assert a specifically feminine/sexual subject while continuing to define themselves according to male representations or symbols of femininity. She reminds us of the risks that accompany a female imaginary when it fails to remain self-conscious or critical of the position and/or premises from which it speaks; when contesting the myths of patriarchy, a feminist discourse must avoid the trap of falling for its own myths that it appropriates or sets up. This is all the more imperative since the socio-political debates surrounding motherhood remain centered on legislatively, financially, and morally determining (or censuring) women’s private and individual choices to reproduce. As Luce Irigaray points out, even with the advancements made in reproductive technologies, which in themselves offer women greater freedoms in subjectively determining their own identities, no text or society has been able to imagine a world without mothers (1993: 83). Thus, a confrontation with those myths structured around the figure of the mother presents itself as a continuing challenge.

Works Cited


Mahoney, Elisabeth. “‘But Elsewhere?’: The Future of Fantasy in
84 Dystopian Matriarchies
