



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Grotesque Physicality

Female Excess in Angela Carter's "Nights at the Circus"

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs ENS402G

Helga Valborg Steinarsdóttir

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Abstract

This essay suggests that embracing the physicality of the female body and its appetites is a premise for female empowerment. By exploring the protagonists of Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* through the prism of theory on grotesque imagery and the body, it argues that an unbiased acceptance of human physiology can help reverse the social marginalisation of women. It maintains that for this purpose, an understanding of the body as continually in the act of becoming is of central importance. The essay argues for Mikhail Bakhtin's perception of a regenerative grotesque body in the medieval or Renaissance sense in preference to the prevailing Romantic grotesque which considers the body negative and terrifying.

The essay suggests that reclaiming the Bakhtinian grotesque can reduce the urge to abject the female body as expounded by Julia Kristeva. It claims that the categorizing of female anatomy as threatening is due to its cavernous yet overbrimming connotations, and that this ideology must be countered by celebrating physical excesses. To explain how the social psyche attempts to defend itself against the perceived threat of grotesque physicality, the essay refers to Michel Foucault's theories of the panoptic State and discursive practices. It is suggested that the character of Fevvers exemplifies resistance to such control by revelling in her physical desires, and consequently in the crossing of bodily margins.

Fevvers's refusal to be rendered a static image of feminine death for the normative male gaze to observe is connected to the concept of the spectacle. The essay claims that the heroine's making a spectacle of her excesses adds to the ambiguity that is central to the Bakhtinian grotesque, and that this brings about her empowerment. The essay nevertheless observes that performing for the male gaze is not without risk.

The essay then concludes with the suggestion that the character of Fevvers reveals how the Bakhtinian grotesque, performed as a spectacle, generates infinite possibilities for women because of its ambiguity. It proposes that this regenerating grotesque spectacle could facilitate resistance to the female body's remaining a locus for social control.

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Introduction

[S]he tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies' fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety ... until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched. She gave him another queer look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of her gluttony would drive him away. (Carter 22)¹

The above description is a passage from Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus*, a scene in which the heroine performs her uninhibited eating habits for the central male protagonist. The paragraph neatly encapsulates the basic constituents and connotations of the principal female figure and the text itself, which fundamentally foregrounds the forms and processes of the body.

The scope of theory on the topic of the human body is vast and comprises a diversity of fields. Literature is a particularly abundant realm for theorization on the subject which features, although to a varying degree, in most texts that somehow deal with human beings. This prevailing presence of the body in literature would indicate a certain, if not principal importance of it to the private as well as public lives of people. In an illuminating book-length study of the female body and the grotesque, Mary Russo observes how "The reintroduction of the body and categories of the body ... into the realm of what is called the 'political' has been a central concern of feminism" (Russo 54). The politicization of the body, and particularly the female body, is possible for the exact reasons that render it subject to both oppression and, however dubious, reverence.

¹ Quotations from *Nights at the Circus* will for the remainder of this essay only be referred to by the relevant page numbers.

Sarah Sceats notes in her discussion of the representations of consumption and food in fiction by contemporary female authors, how the body and its natural processes have historically been considered incomprehensibly potent, and that this is still the case in western societies (Sceats 62). This potency can bring about negative as well as positive results, and due to its inherent ambivalence the body has been subjected to various negotiations through different cultural practices. A question often posed by twentieth and twenty-first century feminists is why the female body, and consequently women, have suffered limitations and social control to a greater extent than the male body. This can partially be explained by suggesting that the female body is even more ambiguous, and thus threatening, than the male one.

In order to resist this marginalization, and perhaps create the premise for other kinds of gender-related cultural resistance or dialectics, it is necessary to eliminate the ubiquitous notion of the female body as essentially a locus of something disagreeable. If we consider probable reasons for the prevalence of this negative perception, it will prove impossible to ignore the physiological shape of the human female, its anatomical differences from the male body, and the traditional connotations associated with the female one.

Here, it becomes useful to revisit Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal account of grotesque imagery in the works of the medieval author François Rabelais, and Bakhtin's criticism of the grotesque's later development in literature and visual art. In the light of Bakhtin's arguments it may be possible to counter the tendency to treat the female body like some defilement to be contained, as so influentially expounded in Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection, which will be discussed in section 1.3. Should Kristeva's notion of the abject be considered an extension of Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism, a renewed awareness of the positive qualities of the Bakhtinian

grotesque body may serve to reverse this development. That is to say, not to eliminate the notion of the female as grotesque but to reconsider the meaning implicit in it.

This essay will explain how *Nights at the Circus*, which is Carter's penultimate novel, dominated by its tremendously freakish heroine, exemplifies how celebrating the grotesque female body is one way to overcome the distorted notion of women's physiology that permeates the western cultural consciousness and facilitates the marginalisation of women.

Carter's story is a raucous rollercoaster centred on the Cockney protagonist Fevvers (her original name is Sophie), a statuesque beauty with birdlike wings, who has successfully established herself as a world-famous aerialiste. The story begins when the American journalist Jack Walser, a specialist in the debunking business, sets out to expose Fevvers as a fraud in an exclusive interview, but instead becomes spellbound by the girl's intoxicating presence and the vivid yet incredible recounting of her bawdy past. Wishing to familiarize himself better with Fevvers, Walser then joins the travelling circus with which she has signed up for a grand tour, and journeying through Russia and Siberia, the budding romance between the two is developed. Equally important, though, are the various embedded narratives exploring the histories of the novel's many secondary characters, and that by so doing add weight to the thematic importance of the grotesque and the female body.

Through her portrayal of Fevvers as a spectacle of femaleness whose physical appetites are a priority, Carter propounds the positive implications of sustaining the female body and embracing its needs and desires. In her novel, abnegating them ultimately results in social devaluation, helplessness and defeat because Carter maintains that an unbiased celebration of women's physique in its many guises prefigures any actual achieving and sustaining of female empowerment.

Chapter 1: The Grotesque Body

1.1 Origin and Nature of the Term Grotesque

Any attempt to grasp the concept of the grotesque would gain from considering the origin of the word itself. An understanding of its journey through time can be useful in comprehending the complexities of the term's current use and its various connotations. The concept itself is prehistoric but its name relatively recent, which is to say dating back no further than to the Renaissance period.

Around the year 1500 some ancient decorations since the time of Emperor Nero were unearthed in Rome, Italy, and these ornaments were characterized by various “intermingling of human, animal and vegetable themes and forms”. Discovered in caves, for which the Italian word is *grotto*, the adjective for decorations such as those became *grottesco*, and the noun *la grottesca*. In French this translated into *crotesque* as early as 1532, and that became the form to be adopted into English, where it was used until superseded by *grotesque* around 1640. Although originating in visual art, the grotesque has by no means been limited by that field, and has become equally notable in other art forms (“Grotesque”).

The term grotesque was applied to literature as early as the sixteenth century, but not until the neoclassical eighteenth century did its use in literary context become customary. It was then mainly used to describe freakish “aberrations from the desirable norms of harmony, balance and proportion” (“Grotesque”). During the following centuries, denotations of the term evolved from this original signification so what once was the source of aesthetic bias against the grotesque came to spark enthusiastic critical evaluation and re-evaluation.

Today, the grotesque is commonly considered not merely crude aberrations but rather, as phrased by Philip Thomson in his historical summary of the

phenomenon, “as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence” (Thomson 11). The enigmatic concept of the grotesque is further confounded by the blurring of the lines separating it from an abundance of related terms such as the absurd, the macabre and the bizarre. It can moreover be perplexing to familiarize oneself with the two most important theorists of the grotesque: the previously mentioned account of Bakhtin (orig. pub. 1965) and Wolfgang Kayser’s acclaimed book on grotesque imagery (orig. pub. 1957) offer quite divergent conclusions on the nature of the concept.

Kayser argues that the grotesque is “a play with the absurd” (Kayser 187), interpreting it as an attempt to conjure up the demonic for the purpose of defeating it (Kayser 88). For him, grotesque art renders the world an alienated and estranged place. This disturbing idea makes any laughter evoked in the process effectively mocking and denigrating (Kayser 184–87). Bakhtin’s theorizing, on the contrary, concludes that the source of the grotesque is a “cosmic terror, the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful” (Bakhtin 335), and so can not be forcibly defeated, but may be subdued through laughing (Bakhtin 335–36). For Bakhtin, laughter is a regenerative force, and so is the true grotesque itself, in its indissoluble relation to the body and the earth.

Bakhtin devotes some energy to criticising Kayser’s perspective but both accounts are relatively one-sided, as Bakhtin quite willingly admits (Bakhtin 44). However, the nature of Bakhtin’s criticism succeeds in increasing the weight of his view, which relies heavily on historical understanding of the development of the grotesque. In his writing, the end justifies the means, and whilst one may choose not to agree, Bakhtin’s theories offer an indispensable prism through which to view the

grotesque and the body in literature. Although he does to a large extent ignore the topic of gender, which has naturally sparked a deal of reaction from feminist critics, his account is immensely valuable to any discussion of female existence and corporeality.

1.2 Bakhtin's Grotesque Body and Grotesque Realism

Bakhtin focuses on the body as a fundamental category of the grotesque, as represented and developed in the originally medieval literary genre of grotesque realism. In grotesque realism the “material bodily principle” acquires almost utopian qualities (Bakhtin 18), and the bodily element will not and can not renounce its earthiness and connection to the soil from which it continually springs. This directing of everything towards a material realm of body and earth, or “degradation” in Bakhtinian terms (Bakhtin 19), centres on an unbiased interest in the “lower stratum of the body,” with the relevant processes of digestion and defecation, copulation and conception (Bakhtin 21). The result is an “unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (Bakhtin 24), and this is a determining trait of the grotesque and an infinite source of celebration. This spirit of celebration with which Bakhtin regards the grotesque body is a key point to be made in this discussion and can not be overemphasised.

The characterizing instability and ambivalence of the grotesque image renders it the opposite of the “classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development” (Bakhtin 25). During the Renaissance, medieval aesthetics are eventually superseded by what come to be considered classical ones. Emphases shifts towards the body as a complete, static and clean entity, separated from its exterior world and other forms of bodies. In

representation, any reminder of the body's unfinished nature and its corporeal messes is shielded from view (Bakhtin 29). To the framework of classical aesthetics, the grotesque body is ugly and monstrous. Bakhtin considers this change a regressive disintegration of "the positive pole of grotesque realism" (Bakhtin 53), and calls for a reinstating of the lost dynamics of folk culture, which "brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life" (Bakhtin 36–39). However, the development of the grotesque in the years since Bakhtin's publication has simply continued the process with which he so disagrees.

For Bakhtin, the idea of the grotesque as essentially monstrous, as Kayser argues, is a vestige of the transformation that the grotesque undergoes in the Pre-romantic and Romantic era. The Romantic grotesque, marked by its "vivid sense of isolation" (Bakhtin 37), reduces the fundamental element of laughter to irony and sarcasm, thus depriving laughter of its regenerative qualities. Unable to defeat terror through laughter, the Romantic grotesque exists in a terrifying, alien world, resulting from the moralistic "abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism" (Bakhtin 36–39), and this has since become a characteristic of the modern grotesque. Not only is the grotesque image deprived of the body as a source of power and regeneration, but furthermore, it has been bereft of laughter as its main weapon against the terror of existence.

If Bakhtin is calling for a return to medieval and early-Renaissance values regarding the grotesque, based on the idea that a regenerating grotesque is valuable in man's eternal struggle with the world and its forces, this would necessitate a fundamental re-evaluation of the body. It would require returning beyond the Romantic and Pre-romantic period and back to the Renaissance, when the perception of the body begins shifting and the "lower stratum of the body" becomes a source of

vulgarity instead of celebration (Bakhtin 21–24). This serves to weaken the regenerative power of laughter because an important source has been removed from the realm of the comic and ludicrous. The loss of the medieval view of the body is essentially debilitating, resulting in a “broken grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed” (Bakhtin 53); a crippled grotesque which has lost its memories.

1.3 The Kristevan Abjection

A broken grotesque is a dysfunctional one and so cannot serve its purpose. Western cultural and aesthetic climate since medieval times has not permitted bodily functions to be restored to their former status as unquestionably positive phenomena, and the grotesque is generally not considered a cause for celebration. What remains, and this Bakhtin finds objectionable, is the monstrous grotesque and the vulgar body which must forever be concealed and disguised as a complete product.

The situation of the contemporary grotesque body is precarious and problematic. In the introduction to her book on Bakhtin’s writing, Sue Vice suggests that Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection could be considered “a psychoanalytically inflected development of Bakhtin’s grotesque,” that is to say influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Vice claims the Kristevan model “offers a different and more modern way of viewing the same phenomena Bakhtin discusses” so instead of being considered a contradiction to Bakhtin’s theories, hers could serve as an extended version. While Bakhtin advocates the reclaiming of a positive sense of the grotesque, Kristeva explains how its constituents are bound to affect one as revolting and crude (Vice 163–64). Kristeva’s psychoanalytical extension is thus somewhat removed from

the polemical spirit of Bakhtin's account of the grotesque, as she rather appears to be analysing and exploring a condition than arguing for or against it.

Drawing on Jacques Lacan, Kristeva's theories claim that the human child's developmental process largely revolves around the leaving of an original maternal semiotic realm. This exiting must take place in order for the child to enter the paternal symbolic realm, which it then inhibits for the rest of its life, and where the socializing processes take place. The maternal semiotic must be rejected to enable the necessary socializing, but it remains an insidious existence, into which the human subject fears to be plunged.

Every reminder of the original maternal existence is abhorred by the human subject, not because of the nature of the recollection per se, but rather as a result of the reminder's positioning outside of its appropriate place; it has crossed certain borders. "The potency of pollution," Kristeva importantly notes, "is therefore not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it" (Kristeva 69). As Vice duly points out, bodily fluids like pus, urine and mucous are "signs of health when they are within the body, but signs of a dangerous transgression of boundaries when they are outside" (Vice 164). The threat is obviously metaphorical. When a subject is confronted by the abyss of the rejected maternal, abjection occurs.

The body is a prime field for abjection because it constitutes the original conception of boundaries for the human subject; the borders between self and others, and also between life and death. It is infinitely ambivalent as it produces the very substances it rejects in order to remain an alive unified unit, as Kristeva so vividly portrays:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit — *cadere*, cadaver. (3)

The cadaver, or corpse, is for Kristeva “the most sickening of wastes” as it has become “a border that has encroached upon everything” (Kristeva 3) and is consequentially the most abjected of all abjects.

Kristeva’s representation of humans’ disgust at their own bodily functions is uncompromising and bleak. For her, the abjected is grotesque and the grotesque must be abjected. The grotesque abject is repugnant in its monstrosity — one would not abject something comic and regenerative. Her theory must be considered a continuation as well as an analysis of the development Bakhtin seeks to reverse, so if the abject represents the contemporary grotesque, this designates a situation that Bakhtin finds objectionable. Nevertheless, it is descriptive of the status quo faced by the grotesque today.

If Bakhtin means to facilitate a shift, he has certainly failed because the medieval grotesque appears to have been even further obscured since the publication of his book on Rabelais. However, his polemic discussion of the positive powers of the regenerative grotesque does provide an alternative to the abjected and monstrous grotesque that is all-prevailing to the modern mind. What Angela Carter has so artfully done is to remove this alternative from the realm of theory and put it into practice within the framework of contemporary literature, employing the medium of a novel that is simultaneously postmodern, picaresque, tragicomic and fiercely political.

Chapter 2: The Female Grotesque

2.1 The Cavernous yet Overbrimming Body

To the contemporary mind, the grotesque is dreary, uncertain and scary. Because it always retains an element of the comic, however obscure, it is furthermore impossible to perceive the extent to which it induces fright. As noted by Russo, the grotesque befittingly “evokes the cave — the grotto-esque”; visceral but alluring precisely because of how frightening it is (Russo 1). Resorting to a bodily metaphor is quite tempting, but as such “the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body” (Russo 1). The abdominal cave from which all humans crawl also stores the physical detritus that, in Kristevan terms, is subject to abjection (Russo 1–2). This misogynist equation between the female body and the filthy repugnant bodily abject is notably prevailing in western cultural history.

Despite any abysmal connotations that female anatomy might suggest, the revolting interiors of the body can not be prevented from brimming over their boundaries, and consequently being abjected. Interestingly, Kristeva’s terminology regarding pollutants directly references exclusively female attributes since she divides such substances into “excremental and menstrual” ones (Kristeva 71). Both terms imply that the body in question — which could be of either sex — is failing to contain defilement from some sort of anal and menstrual bowels. As observed by Russo, the arena for transgression privileged by Kristeva and others is the “archaic, maternal version of the female grotesque” (Russo 10) — the grotesque female who is unable to contain herself.

Nights at the Circus provides plenty of instances of how society deals with overflowing, and consequently unacceptable, female bodies by forcibly incarcerating

them. It is possible to perceive the principal function of these characters as providing a foil for the main protagonist, the utterly uncontained and abnormal Fevvers, who literally runs amok throughout the entire narrative. There are three groups of women in the novel that are somehow imprisoned because they do not adhere to normative standards, the most obvious and important one being the women at old Madame Schreck's museum of monsters.

La Schreck's employees are physiologically aberrant in various ways and all gathered for incarceration and exhibition on the grounds of their freakishness. For a short while they are joined by Fevvers, who sets the lot free in a typically ungraceful manner on discovering that the old scarecrow was cheating her out of her proper salary. Each of those unfortunate "denizens of 'Down Below'" (69) receives her own personal history, narrated in the empathetic voice of Fevvers. Verging on sentimentality, she emphasises the unfairness of judging people based on their looks alone, demanding it be considered that "The mould in which the human form is cast is exceedingly fragile" (61). Nevertheless, apart from the moralistic implications of portraying the freakish women as mere victims of monstrous circumstances or abuse, the fact remains that they do deviate from generally accepted norms. The nature of this deviation then links all of them to areas of prime concern for both Bakhtin and Kristeva's theorizing on the grotesque and the abject, respectively.

Albert/Albertina is a "bipartite" or "half and half and neither of either" (59), which causes doubt about what belongs to his/her body and what its anatomy is lacking. S/he is furthermore "a droll one and always full of fun" (69), and fuels the speculations over her gender with pleasure. The longsuffering Wiltshire Wonder is less than three feet tall (59), but although dwarfish, she is "perfectly formed" and marvellously agile (64), yet regards "her pretty, spotless self with the utmost

detestation” (68). Despite the fact that Wonder is fully grown, she appears less than that, and because her freakishness relies entirely on her appearance, the actual limits of her body are questionable. The withdrawn “melancholy creature” who sits “by herself a good deal, playing patience” is called Cobwebs because she is covered in them between her eyebrows and cheekbones (69). Although, as a result, she possesses a “unique quality of vision” (86), it is unclear whether she does indeed have eyes or not.

The abnormal physiology of all three abovementioned women problematizes their bodily margins because they overbrim the proper form of the human body. Furthermore the inappropriate limits of their bodies are extremely ambiguous, and it is somewhat uncertain whether Albert/Albertina, Wonder and Cobwebs are really lacking some body parts or if those are simply incompletely formed. This deforming then serves to dehumanize them in the eyes of properly normal people.

Then there is Fanny Four-Eyes, “a big, raw-boned, plain-spoken hearty lass from Yorkshire” (69), who is the caring nurturer of the group, and especially interesting for a theorist of the grotesque because she is endowed with perfectly functioning “mamillary eyes” where her nipples ought to be (69). This can quite obviously be linked to the category of the maternal, an important constituent of the Bakhtinian grotesque’s regenerative power. For Kristeva, however, it is more problematic because “the prohibition placed on the maternal body” represents the “symbolic function in its most significant aspect” (Kristeva 14), that is to say the oppressive socializing forces of the symbolic realm. The maternal implications of Fanny’s character are then reinforced by explaining how she longs for a baby but believes she should not have one because it would be cruel to “nourish a babby [sic]

on salt tears” (69). When she is eventually free from Madame Schreck, however, Fanny establishes an orphanage in her native shire.

Lastly, there is the case of the Sleeping Beauty, a lovely girl who has since adolescence remained perennially asleep, but retains enough sense to wake up once-daily to take some soup and urinate a little (64). Although not actually deceased, Beauty can no longer be considered living, and consequently aligns herself with the category of death, which is a critical one for both Bakhtin and Kristeva. One might consider her alive in death because Fevvers relates how underneath Beauty’s lids “her eyeballs moved continually this way and that ... And sometimes her toes and fingers would convulse and twitch ... Or she might softly moan or cry out, and sometimes, very softly, laugh, which was most strange” (64). Her being such an active dreamer, though, does not change the fact that Beauty grows ever more reluctant to regain consciousness and tend to her body’s needs, which represents a certain disregard for the physiological limitations of human anatomy.

The second group of women of concern consists of the inmates of Countess P’s panopticon. Convicted criminals, they have been categorized by society as lacking in moral boundaries and are consequently imprisoned. Each of them is supposedly a murderess who has been found guilty of killing her husband, and none of the women can allegedly be excused on the grounds of insanity because, in phrenological terms, their “bumps indicated the possibility of salvation” (210). Not only have the panopticon’s inmates been judged wrongdoers but furthermore unjustifiably in the wrong. The fairness of their trials and sentence is subject to debate as Olga Alexandrovna’s case suggests. She is convicted for taking “a hatchet to the drunken carpenter who hit her around once too often,” having naively believed that “the life being beaten out of her was surely worth as much, in the general scheme of things, as

the life of the man with the fists — perhaps, since she was a loving mother, more” (211). Much to her shock, Olga realizes that the court considers her “a wicked woman” (211) and that therefore she must be detained.

Thirdly, there are the prostitutes in Ma Nelson’s brothel where the orphaned Fevvers is lovingly raised and cared for (25). Ma Nelson’s prostitutes are presented by the reminiscing Fevvers as mostly intelligent and talented women, although to varying degrees, but they are each and every one idealistic suffragists, including the cross-dressing Nelson, whose alias is Admiral Nelson (38). Despite being “governed by sweet and loving reason,” this sisterhood is formed out of necessity for they are “only poor girls earning a living” (39), and in this novel working girls stick together because nobody else guards their backs. While it may be unjust to claim that they lack moral boundaries, that is how those women appear to the world outside of Nelson’s Academy, and according to Fevvers it is to the mercy of those eyes that they subject themselves (39). Furthermore, according to the cultural conventions that perceive Nelson’s girls as immoral, they may also be considered lacking in physical boundaries because their repeated consummation with various men renders their sexuality inappropriately overflowing.

Those mini-narratives all tell of women who do not comply with the prevailing perception of acceptable female bodies or behaviour; they do not fit the obligatory mould and consequently overflow appropriate boundaries. *Nights at the Circus* presents these characters as unfortunates who are being punished by oppressive social structures for involuntary deviations such as their physiology or responses to economic or emotional needs. In many of the cases, though, the characters become empowered once they learn to utilize their individual peculiarities and eccentricities, realizing that there is more to them as human beings than mere

freakishness, and understanding that this very freakishness can even be an advantage. Fevvers is a perfect role model for the empowered freak because she is never victimized to the extent where she can not regain her strength, and furthermore she exemplifies how remaining certain about one's own self-worth is a necessary premise for self-preservation and personal gain.

2.2 Female Excess and the Excessively Female Monster

"Fear of the archaic mother," Kristeva claims in her discussion of the sources of the abject, "turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power" (Kristeva 77). This is a bold but plausible statement, considering the cavernous qualities of the female body. It also provides some explanation for why the female genitals and those ubiquitous symbols of maternity, the female breasts, remain a constant point of reference for the female grotesque in art. Although useful, Kristeva's account, though, is so far removed from the spirit of Bakhtin's discussion that for our purposes it must be carefully approached.

Hers is a view of the grotesque as principally terrifying, as a realm belonging to "the nurturing horror" that civilisations attempt to push aside through purification and the construction of systems (Kristeva 210). In Kristeva's development of Bakhtin's grotesque, there is no repairing the bond between the body and the soil, and she describes how "Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body ... abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother" (Kristeva 78–79). This respect is only reserved for the body of a male brother. The cohesive physical substance of female human beings is always a field that tends towards abjection, and therefore parading the body translates directly into a way of engaging in culturally political dialogue.

Fevvers, in the words of her biographer and eventual lover, Jack Walser, is “a *big girl*” (7). Everything about her is big, grandiose and extravagant, culminating in “those tremendous red and purple pinions, pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she” (7). She is a loud, rude, sweating (*perspiring* would be an insufficient adjective in Fevvers’s case) and farting glutton who is yet capable of seducing and arousing any man. The description provided of her dressing-room as “a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor” (9) epitomizes its inhabitant.

Parading her female sexuality, Fevvers is almost intimidating in her overt use of various instruments of artificial femininity, such as her long bottle blonde hair (19), six inch false eyelashes (7), slabs of rouge and powder (18), and frilly intimates and corsetry (9). Nevertheless, she strikes a likeable figure and is consequently not grotesque at all in the Romantic sense of the term. Rather, she is a Bakhtinian body, earthy and very corporeal at “six feet two in her stockings” (12), with a very large yet flawless face (20), an extraordinarily “Rubenesque form,” and then the fabled wings (17) which are her main attraction. Walser describes the girl as an “over-literal winged barmaid” (16), and Fevvers is indeed an uncouth one. She explicitly enjoys every fart that escapes her butt-hole as well as every greasy morsel she stuffs in the ever-hungry hole in her face with “gargantuan enthusiasm” (22). Carter is quite successful in creating a female monster in the sense of the word implying physical aberration or largesse, and equally importantly, in the sense of a person that is “highly successful” in what she or he does (“Monster,” def. 5).

In an article on the power of monstrous women in literature, Sara Martin claims that Carter’s attempt at a “recovery of the grotesque from the clutches of the bourgeoisie myth of the angelic woman” (Martin 208) is a failure, due to the author’s trying to “simultaneously expose woman’s monstrous side and to make it endearing”

(Martin 208). To prove her statement, Martin argues that, in approaching the subject of monstrous women, Carter prefers the comic Bakhtinian grotesque to the horrifyingly monstrous because comedy is a more comfortable subject than horror (Martin 209). Martin claims the novel's message to be "that a woman must pretend to be a monster in order to protect her uniqueness from the hands of patriarchy" (Martin 195). Thus, she implies that the physiological aberrations of Fevvers alone are insufficient to render her a real grotesque monster, and that her appearance and behaviour are actually a façade because her true nature is not monstrous enough. Martin then maintains that the author creates this fake monster because she can not be hard on her own sex (Martin 208), referring to Carter's comment that "women writers are kind to women" and generally unable to feel true "moral horror at their own actions" (qtd. in Martin 208–09).

Arguing that the morally horrific is some level of monstrosity that Carter avoids, rather settling for the physical grotesque reflects a certain miscomprehension regarding the medieval grotesque. Bakhtin explains how grotesque bodily imagery into the Renaissance period is "infused with one single logic" (149), and not separated from other realms of meaning or morals. Rather, each image is "subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming," and is therefore "deeply ambivalent, being intimately related to life-death-birth" (Bakhtin 149). The grotesque image of the body ideally represents this ambivalence because it is continually in the act of becoming. Regarding it as a corporeal case either filled with or devoid of moral horrors, reveals a mindset that fails to pass the abyss which has opened up between the grotesque body with its bodily lower stratum, and higher more respectable matters like philosophy and morals (Vice 180–81). The most important characteristics of the grotesque body, its

regenerative, comic and ambivalent qualities, are rather positive ones, and by no means some stepping stone into truly moral horror.

As the fundamental nature of the Bakhtinian grotesque prevents it from possibly replacing the morally horrific, it is far fetched that Carter would have considered the two for the same purpose. Actually, almost every aspect of Fevvers's character appears modelled precisely on Bakhtin's discussion of the grotesque, and there is nothing to indicate that Carter's heroine is intended to be monstrous in any way other than the physically aberrant. Her employment of the endearing monster — or the monster that is not horrible — is quite suitable for the politicization of the female body. It seems inappropriate to criticize Carter for creating a Bakhtinian monster simply because she could have used a different approach for a different topic.

The morally horrific does not feature, and has no place, in Carter's story of Fevvers. There is nothing remotely evil, or nasty even, about Fevvers except for the "highly personal aroma" composed of perfume, stale feet, greasepaint and sweat, with a pinch of raw gas and the stench of old fish from her dressing-room (8–9). Rather, Fevvers gradually reveals herself to be a shrewd and saucy yet emotional and idealistic young woman who uses her unique looks to advance herself economically and socially by creating a public sensation and market herself under a brand in her own name. When she first appears to the reader, Fevvers has the world at her feet and cash to spare (11). And although she is greedy enough to sometimes bite off more than she can chew, hence her almost fatal private meetings with both Christian Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke, she is generous and kind as well. Throughout the novel, Fevvers always sides with the underdog, most notably when she takes in and mothers the roughed-up Mignon whilst believing her to be Walser's new girlfriend, ignoring the aching of her own enormous heart (127–44).

2.3 Correction of Abnormalities and Foucault's Panopticism

In her study of the relationship between consumption, gender and power, Sceats discusses the complexities of western attitudes regarding the body, noting how “a guiding principle seems to have been the subjugation of the body as a means of disciplining the spirit” (Sceats 61). She observes how the parallels drawn by Michel Foucault “between the micro-politics of body regulation and the macro-politics of population surveillance are especially pertinent to the question of body *image*,” which she argues that serves as “a means of social control” (Sceats 62). Foucault's renowned theories of social power relations regard the body as a center of concentration for discipline. According to Foucault, all discipline has the purpose of molding the body and controlling its unruly processes, and this key point is developed even further in his theorizing on sexuality (Baldvinsson 27). Effective disciplining of the body is the premise for successful socialization.

In his book on systems of punishment and discipline, Foucault discusses how the panopticon designed by the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham in the early nineteenth century is an architectural representation of the operating of power relations in modern Western society. Bentham's model is exquisitely detailed and Countess P's panoptical prison for murderesses in *Nights at the Circus* is quite similar to Bentham's original plans:

a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows. In that room she'd sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her. (210)

It is impossible for the inmates to discern whether or not they are being watched at a particular moment because although Countess P never leaves the swivelling chair in the observatory, she varies the turning speed, and when she draws the blinds for her windows there is no way of telling if she is faking her nap or actually asleep (211–14).

Ironically, Countess P has killed her own husband and gotten away with it, and she is appeasing her nagging conscience by devoting herself to helping other women murderers to repent (210). Her Siberian “private prison with its unorthodox selectivity was not primarily intended as the domain of punishment but, in the purest sense, a penitentiary — it was a machine designed to promote penitence” (212). Foucault describes the panopticon as a means for correcting behavior and Countess P’s prison is referred to as “the House of Correction” (214). It becomes even more clear how precisely Carter draws on Bentham or Foucault when she describes the Countess’s situation, that is how “the price she paid for her hypothetical proxy repentance was her own incarceration, trapped as securely in her watchtower by the exercise of her power as its objects were in their cells” (214). The few stolen moments behind the observatory curtains are the only instances when “she was able to exercise freedom although she was the inventor and the perpetrator of this wholesale incarceration” (214). Along the same lines Foucault suggests that the fate of the supervisor in Bentham’s watchtower must depend on the success of his surveillance (Foucault 142).

A House of Correction is occupied by those society thinks are in need of correcting, that is those who defy the social order. Foucault considers the panoptical institution as designed by Bentham to be parallel to the way discipline pervades society and maintains the prevailing power relations. The general public is surveyed

and divided into individuals who are categorized and labeled as normal or abnormal. There exists a diverse selection of institutions and methods aimed at defining the abnormal, controlling and correcting them, and by so doing greasing the mechanism of discipline (Foucault 136).

Peter Barry explains, in his guide to literary and cultural theory, how the panoptic or all-seeing State “maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its ‘discursive practices’ ... which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic” (Barry 176). Through the use of discursive practices, society thus offers the individual a legitimate perspective which, although never entirely monolithic, is always quite limited. Discourse is the “whole ‘mental set’ and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society” (Barry 176), and it is meant to be indisputable and thus impossible to think beyond it. In any case, that would result in the individual being branded as abnormal; insane, immoral or criminal.

As a result, “power is internalized by those it disempowers, so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally” (Barry 176–77). The panoptic State renders its power relations automatic and independent of the individual who reinforces it, and thus asymmetry and inequality are ensured (Foucault 139). Similarly the key to the efficiency of Bentham’s panopticon, or Carter’s for that matter, is precisely that its subject knows that he is always visible. Aware that although he is not being surveyed all the time he could be watched at any given time, and consequently constant surveillance and reinforcement of authority are unnecessary. A disciplinary system based on the principles of the panopticon guarantees effective correction of inconvenient abnormality, and preserves the power dynamics within any social, economic or psychological relations.

2.4 The Image of Woman

If people's perception of their bodies has become practical as a discursive practice to reinforce certain dynamics, then the most important locus of such social control is the female body. It is logical for the female body to appear more threatening than the male one to a mind ruled by the ubiquitous classical aesthetic because of its all-consuming — hence the idea of a *vagina dentata*² — yet overflowing potential. To the classically minded canons, the body as represented in grotesque realism is a formless and hideous blob (Bakhtin 29), and even more importantly, it is a dangerous blob that threatens “the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and complete phenomenon” (Bakhtin 318). Described by Bakhtin as “the fruitful earth and the womb” that is “always conceiving” (Bakhtin 21), this grotesque body is bound to be considered female, in spite of Bakhtin's claim that medieval representations of grotesque realism acknowledge neither class nor gender.

The grotesque female body is so much alive that even in death it generates life (Bakhtin 25–56). Therefore, the best way to deprive it of its threatening qualities would be to render it static and bereft of all self-determination. Laura Mulvey lends psychoanalytic weight to this argument in her essay on how sexual inequality is inscribed in traditional methods of visually representing women. The reason, she claims, is that the characteristic way of looking at the female body is shaped by the male unconscious. Mulvey suggests that “the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father” (Mulvey 2188).

² Latin for *toothed vagina*. A symbolic expression of the fear of female genitals, occurring widely in folklore and also in Freud's discussion of the castration anxiety (Gilmore 41).

Thus, when represented, women signify the threat of castration and consequently “activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanism to circumvent this threat” (Mulvey 2191). In both cases, the defense mechanisms rely on a “determining male gaze” to thrust a fantasy onto the female (Mulvey 2186). Through discursive practices, the female figure is then molded by the dominating gaze and styled according to the preference of the male viewer, and consequentially reduced to an image that is not threatening. The panoptic State has corrected the abnormal so that the previously menacing grotesque female has become an acceptable configuration of a woman.

For the male to defend himself against the threat of castration with fetishism may not prove as practical as it appears. In her psychoanalytical study of the relationship between aesthetics, death and femininity, Elisabeth Bronfen discusses the problem of fetishizing the body of a woman. The female body in itself “always recalls the initial fetish of the maternal body” (Bronfen 123), which is paradoxically both phallic and castrated in its “double coding of plentitude and lack” (Bronfen 122). This original fetish is a defense against the threefold threat posed by the maternal body which exists as:

the cut produced by birth and marked with the navel; as the cut on social terms that requires her renunciation; and as the cut on sexual terms that brings the concept of castration into play. Paradoxically, even as the maternal body articulates loss and split, it mitigates this anxiety and is used to cover and contradict lack. (Bronfen 122)

The gaze appears to be the prevalent method of minimizing, however imperfectly, the threat posed by female bodies, and this involves negotiating the masculinity that is endangered. Bronfen refers to the comments of the art critic John Berger regarding

how “the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of woman is designed to flatter him” (qtd. in Bronfen 121). Woman as an image is convenient because she is dead, but her death is not grotesque, generating life and energy. Rather, it is a static condition, a closed image, completely dependant on the gaze to bring it meaning.

Feminist critics have concerned themselves with representations of the lifeless woman, deprived of her self-determination by the male gaze. Bringing those back to life requires reclaiming the physical realities of the female body without abnegating any of its inherently grotesque qualities. Carter participates in this process through her choice to portray Fevvers, her heroine, as an extraordinarily robust woman who oozes gross physicality. It is useful to consider Fevvers’s own remark “that a *large woman* with a *sword* is not the best advertisement for a brothel” (38) in connection with Mulvey’s comments that the icon of woman is displayed for the pleasures and convenience of the male viewer controlling the gaze, yet “always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (Mulvey 2188). Holding a metaphorical penis, the lack of which Fevvers’s femaleness signifies, she threatens castration and thus disturbs the phallogentric order that relies on the image of women as the ones castrated for its world to acquire meaning (Mulvey 2182). Perhaps a sword is the most fitting accessory for a subversive heroine such as herself.

The literally Sleeping Beauty of Madame Schreck’s museum provides the perfect foil to Fevvers’s almost inappropriate vivaciousness and the exaggerated womanliness achieved through celebration of her enormous stinking, belching, farting, eating, pissing, bum-wiggling, corset-busting body. Interestingly, Beauty’s mysterious sleep disorder manifests itself when she menstruates for the first time: until then she used to be “bright and merry as a grig” (63). Since entering

womanhood, the lovely Beauty has been the ideal image of a harmless female. She is silent and immobile, hardly eating, never defecating and barely urinating, her menses all dried up but still her lovely hair keeps growing, having long reached her toes (63). In every instance, she is the exact opposite of a grotesque body.

Poor Beauty is even pitied by her wretched colleges in the freak-museum because she is the most vulnerable and degraded of them all, probably unaware of her own tragic fate but not beyond feeling pain (64). She is victimized in the extreme and her condition turns out to be beyond all repair; she never regains consciousness (86). Beauty suffers a decade presented naked on a stone slab in the role of a dead maiden, groped by shivering voyeurs in “Madame Schreck’s chamber of imaginary horrors” (70) — a term that could refer both to horrifying creatures of the imagination and horrible images of the more visible kind. Bronfen explains how being “gazed at in a state when she can no longer determine how she is seen nor reciprocate the gaze is in itself a form of rape” for the woman in question, for whom hermeneutic incursions are equated with bodily ones (Bronfen 98). Forever unable to participate in life, yet not really dead, Beauty has become an image, a mere representation of something that never existed, so far removed from the sprightly girl she used to be that the reader is never even told her real name.

It must be remembered that a discussion regarding the discursive practices within a society, or the workings of social forces like the oppressive gaze, does not reveal some overarching plots or conspiracies against women or other social groups for that matter. Foucault explains how “although a perfectly clear logic, with perfectly decipherable aims and objectives, may characterize historical power relations, it is nonetheless ‘often the case that no one was there to have invented’ these aims and strategies” (qtd. in Bordo 166). One could recall the Countess P in her observatory,

who like any dominator of any power relations is equally imprisoned by the situation as her subjects, and that the dominated themselves often tend to facilitate the extension of their condition (Bordo 166).

Chapter 3: Consumption and Power

3.1 The Living Body as Grotesque

Eating involves placing an exterior substance inside of one's own interiors, that is to say crossing of one's bodily boundaries. This substance that once was outside will now become a part of one's body and enlarge it, stretching the body's margins to new limits, or pass through the body to be ejected through its boundaries once more. It is impossible for a body to eat unless it excretes as well, and Kristeva observes how human beings must "permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 3). She then elaborates on this ambivalent process in a seminal paragraph:

‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it ... I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself* ... ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. (Kristeva 3)

The loathing of faeces is internalized by the human subject during socialization in the symbolic realm because, just like any vestige of the original semiotic order, such marginal stuff as shit or urine must be forcefully rejected. The abject and the process of abjection act as gatekeepers protecting the subject from falling back into, and become consumed by, the annihilating maternal semiotic (Kristeva 2). By the cavernous archaic maternal that is the grotesque.

However, no real body can survive unless it sustains itself with proper nourishment by eating. This is a vicious circle for the proponents of the complete classical body: in order to live, the body must eat and consequently defecate, and through these processes render itself grotesque. Alas, the living body can only exist as grotesque (eating and shitting). So, in order not to be a grotesque, the body must effectively be dead or non-living. This is the point where the “aesthetic coupling of Woman and death” occurs, and indeed assuming some reciprocity between the two has become a prevailing theme in western literature and visual art (Bronfen 60). Woman is aligned with static death to erase the threat posed by the grotesque female body that simultaneously threatens death by devouring and uncontrollable regeneration in death. Bronfen illuminates this paradoxical relationship between aesthetics, Woman and death:

the production of beautiful images (aesthetics) and the construction of femininity are culturally equated because they are analogously positioned in relation to death. The beauty of Woman and the beauty of the image both give the illusion of intactness and unity, cover the insupportable signs of lack, deficiency, transiency and promise their spectators the impossible — an obliteration of death’s ubiquitous ‘castrative’ threat to the subject. (Bronfen 64)

A non-living body would be closed for all penetration and ejection, and consequently not allow for any growth. Static, “clean and proper” (Kristeva 72), this would make a body acceptable to the classical aesthetics that Bakhtin perceives as antithetical to the regenerative grotesque.

As opposed to the celebration it enjoys in grotesque imagery of the medieval period, the eating and living body has, since that time, acquired mostly denigrating

connotations which are epitomized in the Romantic and modern grotesque. The Greco-Christian ideology of dualism has come to influence immensely western people's perception of their bodies. Discussing cultural impact on the psychopathology of anorexia nervosa, Susan Bordo describes how the works of Descartes (1596-1650) foreground more explicitly than previous philosophical writings the importance of the mind dictating the body, and the ultimate achievement of "intellectual independence from the lure of the body's illusions" (Bordo 167). Descartes's life roughly coincides with the peaking of Renaissance cultural values, and the following historical period is precisely when the loss of medieval and Renaissance grotesque ideology manifests itself.

Among the more disturbing characteristics of Romantic and modern grotesque imagery is the inherent view of the body as constantly erupting from its allotted sphere and posing a threat to orderly existence, as if its chaotic mode of being were an infectious disease. In Foucauldian terms, this grotesquely diseased body is then subjected to correction through the discursive practices of the panoptic State. The body, its biological needs and its psychic connotations, are perceived as inferior to the logical mind; through the coveting of reason and control, the body has become marginalized and oppressed.

What renders the Bakhtinian grotesque so useful for the politicizing of the body is that such a body is an all-inclusive one, rejecting only the notion of hierarchy of any sort. All-inclusive would also be ever-including and thus ever-consuming and ever-growing, and growth is precisely a prerequisite of empowerment. The tragicomic leader of the pack of clowns in the travelling circus joined by Fevvers and Walser, Buffo the Master Clown, ironically cites Shakespeare and states that "Nothing will come of nothing" (123) when discussing the nature of clowning. This could easily be

applied to the condition and nature of the human body as well; a static body closed for all penetration can neither increase its size nor gain in power. Just as energy can not be created out of nothing but must be transmuted from one form to another, a body that refuses to ingest energy can not exert power; it becomes a dead object, deprived of its subjectivity.

3.2 Consumption, Excretion and Ambiguous Bodily Margins

In the same way as (or perhaps because) ingestion, digestion and ejaculation are of central concern to Bakhtin's grotesque, so they abound in Carter's novel. These processes are, however, not represented in a uniformly positive light. The culture of medieval and Renaissance folk humour, from which springs the concept of the grotesque as a regenerative force, is like the grotesque itself essentially ambivalent, that is to say "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding" (Bakhtin 11–12). It must not be forgotten that the grotesque equally "asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (Bakhtin 12). Eating is certainly an important constituent of Fevvers as a powerful individual but for Buffo the Clown it is a humiliating activity, albeit a source of mirth for his putative audience. The "whores of mirth" are constantly accompanied by despair (119).

Buffo the Great — the most hilarious yet most terrifying of the clowns — is a walking, talking representation of ambiguity and crossing of boundaries. His clown-wig is not a simulation of hair, but actually a bladder, so that the Master Clown "wears his insides on his outside," and rather obscenely "stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss" (116). Appropriately for a Master Clown, Buffo is Carter's most explicitly carnivalesque character, and it is easy to note how he parallels

Garagantua, one of the central characters in the works of Rabelais, and whom Bakhtin discusses especially with respect to grotesque realism and the bodily lower stratum.

The birth of Gargantua is regarded by Bakhtin as “one of the most remarkable episodes of the novel and the most characteristic of Rabelais’ manner of presentation” (Bakhtin 220–21). The birth-scene occurs during an exquisite banquet, and the leading theme “is the material bodily affluence, a generating and growing superabundance. All the images are subjected to this theme” (Bakhtin 221).

Gargantua’s mother, Gargamelle, consumes vast amounts of tripe, which are the intestines of oxen that have been fattened. “Bowles, intestines, with their wealth of meaning and connotation are the leading images of the entire episode” (Bakhtin 221), and it occurs that Gargamelle eats so much that her own right intestine falls out and she goes into labour. The midwives mistake her stuffed intestine for a foul-smelling baby, and give poor Gargamelle some concoction that blocks her vagina and anus. Unable to enter the world through the normal channels, baby Gargantua climbs upwards through his mother’s body and exits throughout her left ear. Gargamelle dies and instead of crying, baby Gargantua loudly demands a drink (Rabelais 29–31).

The famous birth-episode in Rabelais’s novel links the devoured animal tripe with the devouring human intestine so that “The bodies are interwoven and begin to be fused in one grotesque image of a devoured and devouring world. One dense bodily atmosphere is created, the atmosphere of the great belly. The essential events of our episode take place within its walls: eating, the falling-out of intestines, childbirth” (Bakhtin 221–22). This is quite applicable to Buffo, whose sole pleasure seems to be consumption, and who is appropriately large and bulky. Most importantly, though, his desire to consume seems relentless, and he is “dominated by his tremendous and perpetual thirst” so that he appears to be trying to “bottle the

whole world, tip it down his throat, then piss it against the wall” (118). Buffo’s appetite can never be satisfied because if he ceased crossing his own boundaries, he would be complete, and the spirit of grotesque realism does not allow for completeness. Rather it combines into a single knot elements like “the slaughter, the dismemberment and disembowelling, bodily life, abundance, fat, the banquet, merry improprieties and finally childbirth” (Bakhtin 222).

3.3 Containing the Threatening

Bakhtin explains how grotesque aesthetics “ignores the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body,” retaining only those “excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices” leading “beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (Bakhtin 317–18). These preferences appear alien to the modern mind, trained to accept only a very limited notion of a body where all that “protrudes, bulges, sprouts or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden or moderated” (Bakhtin 320). This means that only the moderated or controlled body is perceived as normal, and gender is an issue here because, as I have touched upon, the female body has historically been subjected to control to a further degree than the male one.

The static image, into which the female grotesque is cast in order to contain her threatening qualities, has throughout the centuries developed in tune with the prevalent aesthetical emphasis of each historical period. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century — our contemporary period — prefer an image that is “lean, taut, smooth and hairless, something like a mobile, androgynous statue” (Sceats 66). This may partially be ascribed to the limitless “commodification of the body” in contemporary culture and economy (Sceats 66), which relies on the purchasing of

various products for the body to reach this desirable state. Other dimensions of the development, however, are of concern too.

Elaborating on the idea that apprehension of chaos and disorder is easily focused onto the contingent and undisciplined female body, Sceats observes how archaic “Fears of engulfment by femaleness translate into the cultivation of hard outlines” (66–67). Few things can be scarier for the male than being castrated by the “the bearer of the bleeding wound” (Mulvey 2182), the all-consuming *vagina dentata* that exists only to carry the meaning of castration.

The vagina and womb of the amenorrheic Sleeping Beauty are dried up and have by implication been rendered non-threatening; the danger indicated by Beauty’s first menses has been eliminated. When undernourished, women cease to menstruate because their bodies feel they are in no condition to carry a child and nourish it — common among anorexics and professional athletes. Beauty is a frail little thing, “pretty as a picture, although a mite emaciated” (63), but one would suspect she is too skinny for the word *mite* to do her justice, considering her only nourishment is her daily soup. Hardly even substantial as a physical entity, Beauty’s face has become so slight that the “soft, veined webs” of her far too prominent eyes are “dark as the underskins of mushrooms” (63–64). Yet, she is the Beauty in Madame Schreck’s collection of freaks, perhaps not despite but rather because of her feeble condition. Rarely, if ever, is the sturdy and vigorous Fevvers, erotic in all her robust freakishness (or freakish robustness), referred to as a beauty. Such descriptions are reserved for those who are acceptable to classical aesthetics.

There is another beauty in Carter’s novel, one who is described in equally emotive terms as the “tragic case” of Beauty (63), as if designed to invoke in the reader feelings of pity as well as adoring endearment. Just like the Sleeping Beauty,

little Mignon of the circus has been bereft of every instance of threatening femaleness. The first proper description of her is extremely pathetic, but quite characteristic of Mignon, who has by then been thrown out by her husband, the Ape Man, and turns to Walser, clinging to him in the Russian winter night:

her bare arms were dappled mauve with cold. The little white rabbit bones of her ankles stuck out above the torn, felt carpet slippers on her bare feet. Her limp, light hair dangled from her small head in dragged rats'-tails ... he pulled her upright and she came easily, she was light as an empty basket. She leant against him whilst she finished off crying, knuckling her eyesockets like a child. The dark marks on her face could have been either tearstains or bruises. (126)

This might not sound like the portrayal of a beautiful woman but Carter continues: “She was adenoidal and breathed through her mouth but she had a pale, undernourished, unhealthy prettiness. When she stopped crying she had breath enough to cough” (126). Mignon is one of the novel’s loveliest characters because of her childish innocence in the face of utter misery. Always on the receiving end, she is not adorable for her actions but for her reactions.

Mignon is used, abused and victimized, existing only in relation to some oppressive authority until she meets Fevvers, who gives the starveling girl a make-over and jumpstarts her career in music, which then leads to the first real love of Mignon’s life. What to begin with appears an authentic affair of Mignon’s with Samson the Strong Man (109) is later explained as one of the many instances when she, tragically unwittingly, serves as the whore of the circus (141). Like the Sleeping Beauty, she is helpless in her senseless passivity, which, however, is also what keeps

her from losing her mind, but Mignon is a girl of “an exceedingly short memory, which alone saved her from desolation” (141).

Although in a different manner than the *Sleeping Beauty*, Mignon also poses for the dead for the period of time she stays with the fraud Herr M. It is, however, neither a threatening death, nor a Bakhtinian one tied to birth and regeneration. The girl, adolescent at the time, is “so thin she did not cast a shadow” (132–33) and appears hardly able to sustain her own life, let alone generate another. When Walser and Fevvers come to her rescue, Mignon possesses an “immature body” (132), which has, through the repeated thrashings of her husband, been beaten back “into the appearance of childhood, for her little shoulderblades stuck up at acute angles, she had no breasts and was almost hairless but for a little flaxen tuft on her mound” (129–30). Yet, in that pathetically “precarious state of innocent defilement” (132), Mignon is not ugly but retains what is traditionally associated with acceptable, non-threatening femininity; a lovely sea of “Gretchen yellow hair” (144) to decorate her image as “Death-warmed-up” (156). Her case supports Bronfen’s claim that “Beautification and aesthetisation mitigate a direct threat by severing image from its context or reference” (Bronfen 121–22).

3.4 Consumption of Food and Consummation of Power

Food and power are thoroughly enmeshed in our culture and this connection is intricately elaborated on in *Nights at the Circus* as well as in most of Carter’s other key works. Emma Parker notes in her essay on consumption in Carter’s writing that the author displays an unusually keen awareness of how “eating embodies coded expressions of power” (Parker 141). The relationship between power, eating, feeding and starving is the reason why feminist research regarding the female body and social

control has dedicated much energy to revealing how “ideology is ingested as we eat” and how eating and consumption in general “superimpose the body politic on the physical body” (Parker 142). The example of Fevvers, grounded in the portraits of the novel’s other characters, demonstrates how consumption or the lack of it “can be used both to exercise and to excise patriarchal power relations” (Parker 142).

First and foremost, Fevvers’s behaviour is characterized by her incredible appetite for food and drink. In the novel’s first scene, during the introductory interview with Walser, the aerialiste downs loads of champagne (8), “hot meat pies with a glutinous ladleful of eel gravy on each; a Fujiyama of mashed potatoes; a swamp of dried peas ... swimming in greenish liquor” (22), several mugs of tea with sugar straight from the bag (43), and a bacon sandwich described as “strips of rusty meat slapped between the doorsteps of white bread” (53). Her table-manners are politely described by Walser as “of the Elizabethan variety” (22), and she gobbles down her grub with a hearty, almost beastly relish, digging in with a “vigorous mastication of large teeth” (53), and happily smearing grease all over her face and messy satin dressing-gown.

Such conduct does not to render Fevvers the least bit repulsive, but rather do her appetite and violent manner of consumption increase her sexual charm, just like the stubbly armpits, loaded with deodorant that she flashes at Walser induce in him a “seismic erotic disturbance” (52). Joan Jacobs Brumberg, in her essay on cultural preoccupations regarding food and eating in the Victorian era, has pointed out that appetite for food was considered a barometer of female sexuality, especially among the growing bourgeoisie population. Physicians even asserted that certain foods could cause premature sexuality and nymphomania in adolescent girls, and overall “food

and femininity were linked in such a way as to promote restrictive eating” (Brumberg 148–50).

Eating was perceived as self-expression, an analogue of the self, and consequently consumption and food “presented obvious difficulties because they implied digestion and defecation, as well as sexuality” (Brumberg 150). The culturally prevailing mindset of dualism demanded that to fit the mould of the Angel in the House, the Victorian ideal of femininity, women needed to show that they prioritized their spiritual growth over physical comfort. As a result, among “the most convincing demonstrations of spiritual orientations was a thin body — that is, a physique that symbolized rejection of all carnal appetites” (Brumberg 153). Fevvers is overtly subversive in her excessive performance of consumption, and of course is the response from Walser and others equally likely to stem from this transgression in itself as from the fact that it is manifest in the act of eating. Everything from her “bullish nape” (57) to her “good three inches” of eyelashes” (40) and her “cavernous, sombre voice ... her voice of a celestial fishwife” (43), demands positive attention and admiration precisely because of its inappropriate exuberance and utter disregard for conventional feminine graces.

Discussing female appetite and the grotesque in *Nights at the Circus*, Abigail Dennis suggests that the novel provides an example of how to “reject self-attenuating social fictions of femininity that disable feminine desire” (Dennis 128). This is very true of the character of Fevvers who embodies more than merely the physical appetite that translates directly into her robust and expanding grotesque body. She is furthermore an incurable materialist, fiercely acquisitive of “all the luxurious, bright, transparent things, that make her blue eyes cross with greed” (104), and unashamedly

coveting of the powerful social status that accompanies riches in the Victorian bourgeoisie culture.

Fevvers's appetite for wealth is presented parallel to her gluttony for food and drink, and habitually discussed in the same terms so that on one occasion "She wanted to *eat* diamonds" (182). Kept in check (and understandably annoyed) by her wizened substitute mother, the raving Marxist-feminist ex-whore Lizzie, Fevvers is usually prevented from succumbing senselessly to her consumerist urges — "'Sheer *greed*, that's what it is'" (181) — but she still gets into some fairly frightening scrapes when too far gone to care about Lizzie's warnings. It is possible to read those instances, for example when Fevvers is foolhardy enough to go for private meetings with suspicious but rich men, as Carter's reservations concerning relentless greed and acquisition. In the novel those attributes cause a lot of trouble, but as Fevvers's most prominent character-flaws they balance her persona, preventing her from becoming too positive in her subversiveness.

Chapter 4: The Spectacle of Grotesque Performance

4.1 Performance, Exhibition and Exaggeration

Fevvers's enormous proportions and gargantuan consumption would not be considered such an essential characteristic of hers except for the reason that she makes it into one. She parades her earthiness, her physical aberrations and her gluttony, effectively making a show of everything which Foucauldian discursive practices of late Victorian society aim to make a woman hide, and in this sense she is reactionary. It is thus not her physicality per se which is important, such as when she "shifted from one buttock to the other and — 'better out than in, sir' — let a ripping fart ring round the room" (11), but rather how she employs it for her own purposes,

peering over her shoulder “to see how he took *that*” (11). Everything about Fevvers is a spectacle because she runs her show to render it so, and aided by her indispensable companion, Lizzie, she has created a successful brand in her own name. She has turned both her body and persona into public commodities, and is herself in control of the distribution of as well as the profit from the consumption of those commodities.

This is a precarious situation, however, because Fevver’s performance of herself “entails her becoming, both as freak and as woman, an object of the gaze of her culturally more powerful counterpart, normative Man” (Dennis 126). She must then constantly appropriate this consuming gaze for her own use, driven by her craving for wealth and power. Although it can prove a double-edged sword, this craving is precisely what provides Fevvers, Lizzie and some of their loved ones with a comfortable life, and Fevvers is generally quite skilled at negotiating the threat of the gaze. She is well aware of its inherent dangers, having spent her formative years existing “only as an object in men’s eyes,” when posing as a living statue in Ma Nelson’s brothel (39). Fevvers is clever enough to perceive the usefulness of this experience, acutely aware that it is to “the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world” (39).

A defining characteristic of the spectacle is its ambiguity, for to retain the gaze of the observer, the enigma must never be explained. If so, then the show is over because without suspicion there is no controversy, as duly noted by Walser (11). For Russo, Fevvers is the “figure of ultimate spectacularity” because she embodies a “compendium of accumulated cultural clichés, worn and soiled from circulation” (Russo 166). She represents endless possibilities and, equally important, the potency to make use of them. There appears to be no truth about Fevvers that can be pinned down, except for that fact that she is a figure of doubt and speculation. Even her

physical limitations revealed in Fevvers's vamping aerialiste act paradoxically strengthen the argument that she is a real bird-woman — "the absolute suspension of disbelief" — rather than supporting the claim she is a fake (17). Lizze's repeated commentary which constantly interrupts the narration, only adds to the overall confusion.

Walser, who at the beginning of the novel sets out intent upon unmasking the purported hoax of Fevvers's wings, and reveal her as one of the "'Great Humbugs of the World'" (11), becomes, along with the reader, ever more disorientated as Fevver's story progresses (including the parts she does not herself narrate), and increasingly more susceptible to the various possibilities she compounds. His analytical journalist mind is of no use when dealing with a freakish spectacle. At moments Walser even resorts to "throwing all questions of identity, authenticity, and origins onto the axis of gender" (Russo 170), wondering if the Cockney Venus might even be male (35), as if that would explain anything.

If so, Fevvers would be the world's most industrial cross-dresser because the image she parades for the objectifying male gaze is like a real life caricature of femaleness. During her stage performances, she exaggerates her huge bust and bum, reducing her waist to almost nothing with the aid of a scary corset "so she looked as if she might snap in two" (15). Fevvers's enormous mouth is painted artificially red, she wears six-inch long false lashes on top of her already three-inch ones, and she scatters around her quarters, as if intended for Walser to see, "elaborately intimate garments, wormy with ribbons, carious with lace, redolent of use," "a large pair of frilly drawers" and pairs of pinkish fleshings (9). And to make her good looks visible to the entire world, she thickly coats her face in so much make-up that it must be referred to as "greasepaint," caking the rancid neckline of her silk dressing gown (19).

Employing to the extreme every method society makes available to assert one's femininity, Fevvers succeeds in fuelling her spectator's doubt about the realness of her female nature, and this makes her all the more interesting.

The observation made by Russo regarding the ambivalent quality of the freak (Russo 166) is echoed in Dennis's claim that Fevvers's allure is tied to her resistance to be assessed and categorized (Dennis 128). In an important footnote, Dennis then connects this suggestion to the traditional warnings directed at women regarding how when men get to know them too well, that is to say carnally, they will lose interest. She claims that although "engaged in a similar negotiation of appetite," Carter's heroine "plays the game with a narcissistic savvy that precludes her exploitation" (Dennis 129). This is a precarious statement and rather descriptive of the mindset of Fevvers herself than suitable as foundation for critical evaluation. Fevver's story reveals more than once that playing to the gaze is risky business and that the hubris of considering oneself too clever to care can be very dangerous.

This also begs the question whether cultural resistance, such as any reversal in aesthetic values or at least an increased acceptance of multiplicity of meanings, can ever truly be effective as long as its proponents play to the system they defy; whether it is possible to reverse a condition in which one is explicitly implicit. Such considerations can hardly be disregarded when reading *Nights at the Circus*, and with respect to Angela Carter's "uncompromising stand on women's need to accept their complicity in their own oppression" they become all the more important (Dennis 119).

4.2 A Transformative Grotesque

As Russo noted, Fevvers is “an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque” (Russo 159). As a grotesque spectacle, she becomes a figure of infinite possibility which is “always conceiving” so that every failure, every metaphorical death is regenerative instead of finite (Bakhtin 21). This spirit of ambiguity pervades *Nights at the Circus* so that the narrative is never conclusive but dominated by a multiplicity of meanings, and consequently, the utopian implications of the story and of Fevvers as a character are limited (Russo 181). Nevertheless, the prevailing subversiveness of the heroine implies various possibilities of a change as opposed to stagnation, and may consequently aid progress within cultural dialectics regarding the position of marginalised women, freaks and freakish women.

Actually, it is insufficient to claim Fevvers merely implies or suggests change as she repeatedly verbalizes her vision of the New Woman that she believes will be born with the dawn of the new twentieth century when “all the women will have wings, the same as I” (285). For an embodiment of possibilities, it is perhaps only suitable to be rather too optimistic and idealistic in her hopes for the “New Century,” into which she intends to “march hand in hand” with the “New Man” (281) so that together they can open up “the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world” (285). Then it is Lizzie’s turn to put a damper on things, and remind her young and slightly hysterical charge “why you’re promised jam tomorrow” (239).

However, Fevvers is not alone in perceiving herself as the foreboding of a transformation to come, but her naïve visions are obviously the products of her upbringing among a bunch of early feminists. Even the gnarled surly Lizzie tells the girl that she is “Year One” and consequently free from the burdens of history, and

subject only to her own expectations for the future (198). The first thing Ma Nelson exclaims on seeing the adolescent spread her moist and sticky wings for the first time, is that she must be a child of “the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground” (24-25). Then the old cross-dresser becomes so moved by the prospect that she starts to weep (25).

Pauline Palmer, looking at the trajectory of Angela Carter’s writing, identifies an interesting shift away from what she calls the “analytic and ‘demythologising’ impulse” earlier in Carter’s career and towards a “celebratory and utopian” spirit in her last works (Palmer 180), which would include *Nights at the Circus*. Instead of implicitly discussing, as in her earlier stories, the workings and ideologies of patriarchy, Carter turns towards depictions of women’s inner lives and lived experiences, and by so doing she allows for anti-patriarchal action within her work. By developing Palmer’s comments further it is possible to consider this particular novel and the character of Fevvers within the framework of Elaine Showalter’s distinctions between phases in the history of women’s writing.

For Showalter, the years 1840-1880 are characterized by imitation of the dominant male norms in aesthetics and art, and this she terms the Feminine phase. The subsequent years 1880-1920 see a shift towards more radical and politicized positions, or a Feminist phase. Following is the so-called Female phase from 1920 onwards, when women have begun to reject the dependency of “both imitation and protest”, and this stage encompasses works on female experience as well as attempts to discover a particularly female way of writing (Showalter 35–36). The story of Fevvers occurs within the time frame of the Feminist phase, and does indeed display certain traits that fall under Showalter’s criteria. It is a very political narrative, varying

its angles of attack and arguing for a more just society where womanhood does not have to entail suffering.

Yet, “Fevvers has all the *éclat* of a new era about to take off” (11), perched on the cusp of the twentieth century and waiting for a chance to spread her wings. *Nights at the Circus* is fine literature, unlike much of the minatory social commentary written in the Feminist phase. Furthermore, the pace and mode of narration appears to almost entirely serve the interest of Fevvers and Lizzie, and thus it could be considered an essay at a specifically female voice. It is appropriate for a character embodying infinite potential to be transitional in this sense, and even slightly ahead of her time. In any case, Carter seems to suggest that development must happen on the wings, or at least in the wake of the possibilities represented by the winged body of a New Grotesque Woman.

In her reading guide to *Nights at the Circus*, Helen Stoddart observes that grotesque realism “harbours a familiar gender alignment” (Stoddart 30), and she refers to Vice’s remark that “Earth and the reproductive body are associated with the feminine; heaven and the rational body with the masculine” (Vice 156). Stoddart then elaborates on what may be the most successfully subversive constituent of Carter’s intricate novel; the fact that it reverses, or upends, Bakhtin’s gendering of the grotesque (Stoddart 30).

Fevvers does possess a grotesque body in the Bakhtinian sense, and plays upon this fact by parading herself as a physiological freak, thus making a perfect spectacle of herself and her vulgar femaleness. However, “it is not fertility and conception that are twinned with this earthy, downward-weighted body” but rather the opposite (Stoddart 30). We should not ignore the fact that Fevvers places enormous emphasis on her rather dubious status as “the only fully-feathered intacta in the entire

history of the world” (71), and how “her inaccessibility was also legendary” (19). She is so disassociated with conception, having been hatched from an egg (7), that her own biological parents are entirely unknown, but the bird-woman metaphor is only suitable in the sense of her being meant to “fly to the heavens, not to brood over a clutch of eggs” (282). As a woman Fevvers could give birth to a new era of femaleness that rejects subordination and marginalization, and is thus regenerative in the Bakhtinian sense in symbolic terms but not actual or literal (Stoddart 30).

Fevvers’s ambiguity as a grotesque is thus epitomized in her being connected to the female “Earth and regeneration” as well as “the upward, heavenward movement that Bakhtin situates with males and masculinity” (Stoddart 30). She celebrates her aberrant appearance by aligning herself with the positive medieval grotesque, yet disregards any limitations that form might impose by simultaneously partaking in what historically has been a realm closed for women, and this truly is a spectacular achievement.

Conclusion

Every woman retains a complex and conflicting relationship to her body. In addition to dealing with it as *a body*, she is faced with the reality of a *female body*; an even more problematical matter. Although Bakhtin avoids discussing gender difference in his theories of the grotesque body, his ideas are tremendously important with respect to feminist body politics. This concerns Bakhtin's proposal of a less monolithic perception of the grotesque, thus rejecting the ubiquitous notion of it as essentially terrifying and repulsive, allowing for an inclusion, if not a preference, of the grotesque body as the positive and regenerating force represented in medieval and Renaissance art.

Kristeva's illuminating concept of the abject is representative of the trend which Bakhtin opposes, but it must be remembered that her theorizing is an expounding of the cultural and psychological climate from which this notion arises, and neither the invention nor propagation of it. The physiological form of the female body and its biological functions of menstruation, pregnancy and child-birth facilitate an easier alignment of the female with feelings of abjection than that of its male counterpart. If the body is a prime field for the process of abjection, the female body is exceptionally so.

Because of this, the female body has historically suffered social control to a greater degree than the male body, and Carter's novel abounds with examples of women unable to *contain* themselves or their bodies, and who are therefore incarcerated to prevent the overbrimming of threatening qualities. This is neatly phrased by Sceats who states that the body is "thus subject to external and internalised constraints, is itself a constraint or limitation and in addition is a source of immeasurable potential" (Sceats 62).

Carter's heroine and main protagonist, the freakish Fevvers, embodies this potential and so her aberrant body becomes a compound of possibilities rather than a metaphorical prison. By parading her earthiness and physicality, Fevvers rejects the notion cultivated by the social psyche that she is something that must be contained. This is epitomized in her enormous appetite for the consumption of food, drink, material wealth and social power. By celebrating and exaggerating her femaleness through every means available, Fevvers objectifies herself and attempts to play to the normative male gaze on her own terms. However precarious this may be, Fevvers's emphasis on her own artificiality reminds the holder of the gaze that he is observing an artificial image but not reality. By so doing, Fevvers tries to protect herself from totalizing notions that would deprive her of her subjectivity and assimilate her with any static and closed image of femininity.

As observed by Russo, it has proved the case that "radical negation, silence, withdrawal and invisibility, and the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested cultural politics for women" (Russo 54). Making an ambivalent spectacle of herself through the unashamed parading of her female body and its physical constituents, and simultaneously preserving the ambiguity that this body suggests, Carter's heroine is quite deserving of her claim to be a model for the New Woman; an excessive and grotesque woman who will generate innumerable possibilities.

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