

Postmodern Portfolio –
Discussing Angela Carter’s
Short Stories

By Stephanie Darke



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Angela Carter’s ‘Polemical Preface’ in
*The Sadeian Woman*¹ definitively
presents itself as just that, polemical.
As a key figure of second-wave
feminism, Carter’s preface would
suggest a seeming contradiction of
moral and ethical values. However,
the first sentence in the preface defies
any accusation that Carter has
abandoned all inherent feminist
values; “Pornographers are the
enemies of women” (4)¹, a sentence
which reaffirms the generally-accepted
feminist stance that pornography, in

¹ Carter, A (1979). ‘Polemical Preface’. In
*The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in
Cultural History*. London (1993): Virago

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its brutal compulsion, only serves to reinforce patriarchal standards which advance the commodification and objectification of women, not just in pornography but also in our phallogentric society. Carter's denunciation of society's unjust acceptance of the submissive female role is written with in both a sanguine and purposeful way which paves the way for revolution. As such, Carters work was followed by Dworkin's 'Pornography: Men Possessing Women'² and a host of other writings

² Dworkin, A. (1981). 'Pornography: Men Possessing Women'. In: Humm, M. (1992) *Feminisms: A Reader*. Oxen: Routledge.

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condemning, not sex, but the
assuming and misogynist view of sex
that is most explicitly illustrated in
pornography. The articles on this
website will further explore Carter’s
argument in the preface by reading a
selection of her short-stories in which
she often subverts the expectations of
gender and sexuality.

‘The Lady of the House of Love’

The structural framework of Carter’s
‘The Lady of the House of Love’³ is the
subversion of traditional sexuality.

³ Carter, A. (2006). ‘The Lady of the House of Love’. In *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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The tale’s protagonist, The Countess, embodies the paradigm usually associated with the traditionally predatory male as she seeks and violates young males by sucking their blood; “When she takes them by the hand and leads them to her bedroom, they can scarcely believe their luck.” (111)³. The Countess isn’t ruled by the constraints of gender roles or sexual desire and subsequently, the young British officer in the story is described in tones frequently used to describe the traditional Gothic ‘damsel in distress’ character; “He has the special quality of virginity...

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ignorance...unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance.” (112)³ and thus, in keeping with traditional Gothic tropes, the Countess is the predatory figure. In her preface, Carter calls for women to reject these restrictive ideological structures; ““If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men).” (5)¹. In particular, descriptions of and allusions to bodies

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are a source of criticism by Carter to
the way in which women are viewed
by men;

“A great, intoxicated surge of
the heavy scent of red roses
blew into his face as soon as
they left the village, inducing a
sensuous vertigo; a blast of rich,
faintly corrupt sweetness
strong enough almost, to fell
him. Too many roses. Too many
roses bloomed on enormous
thickets that lined the path,
thickets bristling with thorns,
and the flowers themselves
were almost too luxuriant, their
huge congregations of plush
petals somehow obscene in
their excess, their whorled,
tightly budded cores
outrageous in their

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implications. The mansion emerged grudgingly out of this jungle." (113-114)³.

This description intimates the overwhelming sense of distrust that men have in the female genitals and this concept is one which Carter address in her preface; "Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning." (4)¹. So, if the male is so afraid, or dismissive, of the female genitalia, then why does pornography exist with its overt focus of the female orifices?

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This I believe can be answered in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’. The Countess, though she subverts the gender role, only manages to illustrate that pornography is merely about power. Once the Countess encounters the officer, she mentally and physically crumbles, she cannot overpower him despite the implied influence available to her from her ancestors. The countess is merely a figure to be looked upon, her rose (symbolic of the vagina) is the only part of her which stays with the officer and he embraces his archetypal patriarchal role in the army.

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The Werewolf:

Angela Carter explicitly draws inspiration from ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ in ‘The Werewolf’ though, predictably, she subverts the original and adorns the story with her own themes. Carter had been, only two years before writing *The Bloody Chamber*, was commissioned to translate the fairy stories of Charles Perrault from French into English and according to Jack Zipes, *The Bloody Chamber* was written in sync with the

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translations (ix)⁴. No doubt Carter, as a feminist, would have harked at the morals Perrault wrote to accompany his fairy tales and that which follows his ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ exemplifies the thought of marginalised gender;

“Young children, as this tale
will show,
And mainly pretty girls with
charm,
Do wrong and often come to
harm
In letting those they do not
know
Stay talking to them when they
meet.

⁴ Zipes, J. (1994). *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*. Kentucky. The University Press of Kentucky.

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And if they don’t do as they
ought,
It’s no surprise that some are
caught
By wolves who take them off to
eat.” (103)⁵

Though the message is obviously
allegorical, Zipes notes in his text,
Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion; “In
other words, they must exercise
control over their sexual and natural
drives or else their own sexuality will
devour them, in the form of a
dangerous wolf.” (40)⁶. As Carter

⁵ Perrault, C. (2009). *Charles Perrault: The Complete Fairy Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Zipes, J. (2006). *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. Oxen: Routledge.

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writes it, the child not only immediately defends herself against the wolf but she maims him by cutting off his paw which the wolf responds to by “[letting] out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem.” (128)⁷. If one takes the werewolf to be a metaphor for the predatory male, then once the child removes his phallic paw, he no longer feels he holds any power over her even though, technically, he could continue his attack. Upon returning to her

⁷ Carter, A. (2006). ‘The Werewolf’. In *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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Grandmother’s house, the child quickly realises that it was not, like tradition would suggest, the wolf whom imitates the Grandmother but the Grandmother was her attacker, the werewolf. Thus, in ‘The Werewolf’ Carter imagines a scenario in which the child not only fights off her attacker, but exposes the witch and becomes economically independent by taking the house as her Grandmother, the witch, is chased off to be killed. By subverting the moral of the original tale, Carter proposes that by dismissing inherent preconceived

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notions of male power, one is able to prosper (129).

The Company of Wolves:

The fairy stories of old (Grimm, Perrault, etc.) were used as pedagogical tools used to reinforce the ideological narrative that girls are inherently different to boys and more susceptible to danger simply because of their genitalia. This is never more overt than in the original ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ stories which fundamentally illustrate the message that if young girls put their trust in predatory male strangers then they

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will be ‘eaten up’. Angela Carter seeks
to challenge this unjust narrative that
girls will be punished despite the
actual crime being performed by the
“wolf”. In fact, before Carter
composed *The Bloody Chamber*, in
Andrea Dworkin wrote a scathing
criticism of gender identity in her text,
Woman Hating. Dworkin rightly
identifies that virgin/whore paradigm
is founded in childhood through fairy
tales, stating; “There are two
definitions of woman. There is the
good woman. She is a victim. There is
the bad woman. She must be
destroyed. The good woman must be

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possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified.” (61)⁸ and that; “We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity.” (37)⁸. Christina Bacchilega more recently, in 1997, supported this statement, even claiming that the traditional versions of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ were written for the aristocracy and that; “The girl (and women in general) is seen as a victim and seducer, the red colour being an evidence of her

⁸ Dworkin, A. (1991). *Woman Hating*. Middlesex: Penguin.

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complicity with the devil.” (57)⁹. In

‘The Company of Wolves’ Carter

abandons the idea of any binary

gender power and ultimately the

sexual power is awarded to neither.

The girl encounters the charming and

disguised wolf (the traditional mode

of manipulation of the wolf) on her

way to her Grandmother’s house and

they wager that if he reaches her

Grandmother’s home before her, she

will have to kiss him. Rather than

being manipulated by him, it is she

⁹ Bacchilega, C. (1997). *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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who takes the power: “for she wanted to dawdle on her way to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager.” (135)¹⁰. Upon arriving at her the house, she soon realises that the wolf has eaten Grandmother and is forcefully trapped by the wolf and, then starts the litany by which the original story is renowned; Carter turns it into a seductive exchange between the naked girl and the slavering wolf:

“What big arms you
have.

¹⁰ Carter, A. (2006). ‘The Company of Wolves’. In *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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All the better to hug
you with.
Every wolf in the world
now howled a
prothalamion outside
the window
as she freely gave the
kiss she owed him.
What big teeth you
have!
She saw how his jaw
began to slaver and the
room was full of the
clamour
of the forest's Liebestod
but the wise child never
flinched" (138)¹⁰.

When he tells her that his teeth are
"All the better to eat you with." (138)¹⁰,
she laughs; "The girl burst out
laughing; she knew she was nobody's
meat." (138)¹⁰. In this way the power is
evenly distributed between the

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genders, whilst the wolf tries to unbalance and scare Little Red Riding Hood into submission, she neither tries to escape nor fight back. The girl is far from helpless and in fact embraces her sexuality, giving herself freely the predator.

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Podcast Transcribe:

A Discussion of Andrea Dworkins

1981 Essay, ‘Pornography: Men

Possessing women’ and Angela

Carter’s ‘Wolf Alice’. *Please note that

this video, in its entirety can be found at

www.postmodernportfolio.weebly.com

Angela Carter’s short tale ‘Wolf
Alice’¹¹ is the final story and the most
overt amalgamation of wolf and girl.
This strange formation gives Alice
license to initially act in any way she
wishes without gender boundaries

¹¹ Carter, A. (2006). ‘Wolf Alice’. In *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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being imposed upon her. When she is imprisoned by the sexless nuns, she becomes less wolf and more Alice. By becoming more female throughout the story she then becomes a commodity by which sexuality is now an available currency. The use of the mirror to discover herself becomes an important part of her gender formation. She is able to create a self by which others will perceive her. This discussion will focus on gender perception and propose that pornography is the ultimate product of such.

Steph – Introduction

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Welcome to this postmodern podcast.

This podcast was recorded on the 8th

May 2015 and is a discussion

undertaken by myself, Stephanie

Darke and Nicola Wood. Nicola will

now introduce the discussion topics.

Steph –

Though I enjoyed the essay and it

works as a fantastic counterpart to for

Carter’s short-stories in *The Bloody*

Chamber, in 2015 it is a little dated

purely because of the advances in

feminist thought. I know you enjoy

Carter’s fiction Nicola but how did you

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find Dworkins essay, ‘Pornography:
Men Possessing Women’¹²?

Steph – On Male Power

I think one of the first and most
important point in Dworkin’s essay is
the concept of male power, especially
in regards to the short stories we are
focussing on from Angela Carters
collection, *The Bloody Chamber*.

Dworkin states that pornography is
the explicit and pure output of male
power. I think we can say that it is
absolutely still relevant and to some

¹² Dworkin, A. (1981). 'Pornography: Men Possessing Women'. In: Humm, M. (1992) *Feminisms: A Reader*. Oxen: Routledge.

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extent with the advances in photo
shopped images and such, the image
of the female is more than ever
idealised to pander to the male fantasy
of the submissive, perfect object to be
used for his own gratification. The
pornographic female is often
manipulated to replicate the image of
the sex doll or the fantasy video games
characters for example. In 2015 we
have reached a point where life is
imitating art that previously imitated
life. Thus, the female in the real world
is left only with unrealistic ideals
about what it is to be attractive, and
perpetuated by the patriarchal media,

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the male gains significant power by imposing fake ideals and unrealistic ideologies. In this way, male power is still very much at the helm of society. I think that the way Angela Carter subverts this male power in some of the short stories directly challenges the male power in place. The story of Wolf Alice is loosely based on a number of fairy tales but none more overt than Little Red Riding Hood. The feral child in the story has no need to fear the gaze or power of the Duke as she herself has the power of the wolf, she is athletic, fearless and revengeful.

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Steph - On ‘Male Gaze’

I think this discussion would be missing something if we failed to touch upon Laura Mulveys 1975 theory of the Male Gaze. The ‘Male Gaze’ is perhaps the key element behind Dworkins piece. Women, traditionally, are expected to be beautiful in order to attract a mate and in Pornography, as well as mainstream cinema and television, the heterosexual male gets his wish! The camera focuses on the woman’s body, cinematically carving it up for the male to feast on. I think this is interesting to consider as a comparison

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to the way that Carter uses the mirror
in many of her stories.

The mirror acts as a vessel for Alice to
learn how to perform the gender
forced onto her and combined with the
beginning of her menstrual cycle, she
becomes aware of time, space and the
acts she is expected to perform as a
female, she finally accepts how she is
perceived and dresses accordingly to
perform for herself and others. Before
she was captured & without the
ideological gender boundaries of
society, Alice was able to live how she
chose without pressure to perform for
anybody.

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Steph – On Porn Today

One of the final points Dworkin makes in her essay is that the left-wing is inevitably an enemy of progress if they condone the porn industry and the commodification of women. In 1981, I don't doubt this was true, so today are things any more liberal? Is porn any more "ethical"? I argue not and in fact I think one thing we said we'd like to address the myth that today pornography isn't sexist anymore. It is. The so-called 'Fifty Shades of Grey' phenomenon actually serves to reinforce male power. Though many,

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many women bought into this idea of popular porn for women, it is a story of a man who stalks a woman, controls every aspects of her life until she submits to his sexual wishes. The kind of sex that both male and female consent to is irrelevant, the male has the power to control and manipulate the female in order to have her. As Angela Carter conveys in her stories, women enjoying sexual power is only revolutionary if we are willing to accept that first and foremost, men are the true dominant sexual power. If sexual power for women is only in reference to the power men have, is it

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truly power at all? I’d argue that it isn’t. Wolf-Alice grows up without these boundaries or pre-existing power struggles and is truly free until she is imprisoned both literally and within the female gender role.

Conclusion.

I’d like to finish just where we began really by stating that Dworkin and Carters work are inherently conveying the same message, Dworkin posing the question that Carter answers in her short stories. The one other thing that can be taken away from Carters stories is that women are sexual creatures just

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like men and require no permission to be sexual. Sexuality isn't a camera objectifying a women's body but is just as natural as the sexual desires of a man.

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