

Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers

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By the time she died at the age of 52 in 1992 from lung cancer, Angela Carter had published nine novels, a volume of radio play scripts, and collections of short stories, journalism and essays on literature. She translated Charles Perrault's fairy tales, edited folk-tale compilations, and collaborated with Neil Jordan on his 1984 film *The Company of Wolves*, based on her short story of the same name. Terry Eagleton acclaimed her 'one of the finest of all postwar English fiction writers' (335), while others professed her focus on the darkly fetishistic in female desire opposed a feminist political agenda.

Rebecca Munford's 2013 book, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers: Angela Carter and European Gothic* confirms her pivotal role in Carter studies and her fluency with assorted and varied texts. Wide-ranging and remarkably detailed, *Decadent Daughters* complicates established readings of Carter by examining her 'textual engagements with a male-authored European Gothic' (x), rather than the Anglo-American female Gothic Ellen Moers articulated in the mid-1970s. Munford traces a 'dirty lineage' Carter inherited 'from the Marquis de Sade's obsessions with desecration and defilement to surrealism's violent dreams of abjection' (x), and considers the 'thickly dusted surfaces' in Carter's *oeuvre* (196), a figurative motif she adopts, albeit sometimes overly fancifully. Her study eschews a strictly chronological approach even if its quick afterword ends with Carter's last novel *Wise Children* (1991) that expresses a visionary feminist and familial unity. Munford insists we '[rethink] the conflict between Carter's aesthetic extravagancies' and her feminism (6), and uses French feminist psychoanalytic theory to clarify the ambiguities central in Carter's understanding of the Gothic. Previously unavailable working manuscripts, letters, and reading notes, in addition to Carter's literary criticism and interviews, enrich each chapter's primary text examples. The synthesis

creates an involvingly animated text, a dazzling contribution to a specialised field, a pleasure to read even for those unfamiliar (or less comfortable) with Carter's fiction.

The Marquis de Sade is the 'most troubling and absorbing of Carter's literary forebears' (27). Chapter 1, 'Sleeping Beauty and the Sadeian Gothic', discusses Carter's *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, commissioned and published in 1979 by the newly established Virago Press. As Munford crisply notes, many feminists were no fans of the book's argument. Carter labeled Sade a 'theorist of sexuality and power' (66), a 'moral philosopher' and found in his writing a 'model of sexual freedom that demystified the cult of victimisation' she deplored in feminist literary studies (28), which elevated aesthetics over the harsh realities in women's exploitation. Carter knew well the seductive appeal of a woman 'subject to the bloody "prick" of male punishment and violation' (31), but Sade was not alone with that metaphor for 'violating the supine female body' (32). Charles Perrault, whose 1679 'Sleeping Beauty and the Wood' Carter had translated, was another. Carter was reading Perrault and Sade's *Justine* when she was writing *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and the stories eventually collected as *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Munford's exhilarating close-reading of the former's 'kaleidoscopic textuality' confirms the novel's mockery of Gothic structures and the sepulchre-like female body endemic to the Sadeian world (41), and the short stories' exposé of the 'fantasies of suffering femininity' within the 'Sadeian pornograph' (66). In a forceful analysis of 'The Snow Child', Munford says Carter's startling little tale redoes the 'chilling mechanisms of power' in the cruelty of the mother-daughter relationship found in Sade (59). 'The Lady of the House of Love', originating in Carter's 1976 radio play *Vampirella*, lambasts the opulently seductive (and deadly) in Gothic conventions. The creepy fortified castle is a creaking artifice; its sensuous furnishings mere props. The 'intrepid young officer' hero (62), who pedals away on his bicycle after his night spent in thrall to the Lady, learns that the 'mysterious female body at the centre of the castle' is also just a rotten thing (62). Munford closes with the abstract, although indisputable, statement that 'Confronting the thorny hedges of the father's house, Carter unmask[s] the operations of the "prick" that repeatedly put women to sleep in the Sadeian Gothic' (66), relishing the connotative *frisson* in the noun.

In Chapter 2, 'Poe, Baudelaire, and the decomposing muse' (74), fascinating details establish that the male poet-female muse relationship has been always 'Gothic' and 'phantasmatic'; the muse always a 'kind of Gothic mother' and her invocation always an 'act of

Gothic possession' (73). Munford uses two often overlooked stories, 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' and 'Black Venus', both from the 1985 collection *Black Venus*, to scrutinize Carter's 'transfiguration of the monstrous muse' that turns Western culture's male writers into dust and discards them in the conventionally female Gothic mirror (74).

Carter had evaluated the theatrical aesthetic Poe outlined in 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846). For Carter, Poe's fantastic castles and houses resembled the Sadeian structures in which elaborate acts of sexual violence were acted out. Munford leads her readers through Carter's 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe's' to unveil the Gothic clichés' complexities in the genre's 'familial tropes' (81). The tale's intertextual intricacies, she argues, make it 'a literary lumber room – a perversely domesticated version of the Sadeian torture chamber' (81). Elizabeth Poe, the author's actress mother, is the text's Gothic mother, the maternal muse, and the source for the male author's performative subjectivity. Carter shapes the maternal body as pastiche, constructed from biographical notes, allusions, and quotations. The tale's gruesome rewriting of the death of Poe's child bride Virginia confirms the male Gothic fantasy and separate subjectivity that requires the Sadeian mortification of the female reproductive body. Rather than a bloody tubercular death, the "poetical" dying muse suffers the bloody surgery Poe performs with an enormous pair of pliers (qtd. 76).

In comparison, Baudelaire discovers artistic creativity in his obsession with his Creole mistress, Jeanne Duval, inspiration for the 'Black Venus' cycle in *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). Munford reviews the customary critical frames, such as French Orientalism, but her deft attention to Venus's many portrayals in art and literature through the centuries and to Carter's shrewd appropriation of Baudelaire's signature images, like tobacco and the albatross, invigorate the analysis. Munford declares Carter's 'Black Venus' crucial in understanding her 'equivocation towards her French, male literary influences and intertexts' (87). Carter lets Duval tell her own side of the story, demanding we rethink all those inscrutable dark ladies in our literary heritage significant only in reflecting back to the male poet his own genius. Munford's application of quotations from Irigaray can become a bit heady, but does not supplant how Carter 'demystifies and humanises Duval' (93), nor deaden the irony Munford notes amid all Carter's theorizing. In Carter's retelling, Baudelaire's legacy is not his poetry, but the syphilis he passes on to his black muse who, liberated from the burden of shoring up a diseased male subjectivity, returns to her

Caribbean home, independent and financially secure. Munford's mastery with her source materials produces a closely textured and vivid analysis, making this chapter one of the book's most rewarding.

Chapter 3, 'Dolls, dreams and mad queens', investigates Carter's response to the automated femininity in the psychoanalytic and surrealist imaginations. As Munford admits, Carter scholars have long noted that the 'living doll is a prominent denizen of Carter's fiction' (118). Some lively historicizing moves the discussion easily into the claim that Carter's fiction portrays the 'uncanny' and 'precarious' power dynamic between her male toy-makers and their 'highly eroticised . . . doll-like female protagonists' in the sadistic games they play (113). Yet, the lengthy description of Freud's 'The Uncanny' (1919) that iterates his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' stalls the study's momentum. Although background for Carter's query into psychoanalytic conventions, the point that Freud's reading marginalises Hoffmann's female doll, Olympia, has received considerable play for some time. In *The Magic Toyshop* (1976), Melanie typifies the Gothic heroine so evocative for Carter; the thorny hedges around her family home and the rose-printed wallpaper in her bedroom, holdovers from Sade and Perrault, delineate the physical and psychical. The book's disturbing concentration on female sexuality and autonomous identity blurs the boundaries between the real and the mechanical. Melanie's troubled sense of self and her victimisation at the hands of her sadistic, toy-maker uncle, shape Carter's critique of Freud's gender politics. In 'The Loves of the Lady Purple' (1974), the puppet-master's obsession with a life-size marionette is a 'Gothic fantasy of [male] artistic authority and omnipotence'; the beautiful animated puppet, a Sadeian prostitute who loved 'perversity, pain and murder' changed 'into nothing but wood and hair' (121). One night, reanimated by the electric charge of the puppet-master's kiss, the Lady Purple drains him of his blood but Carter leaves her revenge and the division between the 'automaton and autonomous agency . . . unresolved' since the newly ambulatory Lady Purple returns to her brothel world (123).

Abundant examples from major surrealist artists that illustrate their preoccupation with a fetishised mechanical, and often dismembered, femininity frame Munford's analysis of Carter's first novel *Shadow Dance* (1976), the book that 'plays the most ghastly and deadly games with the female body' in its revisionist homage to surrealist artistry (126-127). The male protagonists,

Honeybuzzard and Morris, regularly clothe the ‘masochistic, doll-like Ghislaine’ in strange costumes (129), surround her with bizarre props, and put her on display in their junk shop window. Ghislaine confounds the ‘boundaries between the fleshly and the automatic’ to become ‘an image of mechanical femininity threatening to run out of control’ (130). This section’s expansive discussion of chess, a vital theme and image for Carter, pays generous tribute to a richly varied scholarship. Munford’s pleasure in her research is infectious and I found myself jotting down titles from her impressive bibliography for some fun future reading. Carter was intrigued by the ‘troubling allure of the chess queen’ (131), and knew the queen had evolved from an originally weak piece into the game’s most powerful, even if it is the weak king who dominates. In *Shadow Dance*, Honeybuzzard and Morris play a frenzied game of chess, and Honeybuzzard later punishes Ghislaine ‘in a [horrifying] spectacle of violence and defilement’ when he murders her on a table covered with a checkered cloth (139). In *Love* (1971), Annabel, a young art student, struggles between agency and objectification. She becomes involved with two half-brothers who had a ‘violently, desirous relationship’ with their insane mother (141). Like Honeybuzzard, Annabel plays a mean game of chess even while the game’s ‘Gothic vocabulary’ shows she (146-147), like Ghislaine, resurrects the Sadeian woman who is a ‘pawn because she is a woman’ (qtd. 149). Munford concludes this engrossing section saying Carter understood the potential for ‘a feminist surrealist aesthetic that insists upon recreation (play) as a mode of re-creation and re-making’ (150), even if her efforts with Annabel failed to achieve ‘new imaginative vistas through an aesthetic of disorder’ (149).

With Chapter 4: ‘Daddy’s girls and the Gothic fiction of maternity’, Munford returns to the vexed regard Carter had for Sade, especially his 1788 ‘Eugénie de Fanval’ and 1795 *Philosophy of the Bedroom*, which both illustrate a daughter’s gruesome initiation into a punishing matricidal sexual desire that eradicates the female body as a reproductive and sexual site. Munford challenges critical opinion that lumps Carter with other women Gothic writers who pay short shrift to a maternal figure’s autonomous self in favour of the daughter’s, asserting Carter rewrites what ‘Sade’s sexual economy’ occludes (165): the mother’s agency and her own sexual pleasure. ‘The Bloody Chamber’, Carter’s extravagant retelling of Perrault’s 1697 ‘Bluebeard’, populates the Gothic text of female subjugation with a maternal figure that emblemizes feminine courage and strength. The young narrator marries a much older Marquis who takes her to his castle on an island off the French coast. Carter’s heroine is ‘innocent but not

naïve' since her mother had explained to her what lovers do; she is plucky and curious having inherited her "'mother's spirit'" (qtd. 169). But it is the narrator's mother who 'ruptures the [male] pornographic fantasy' within the decadently dangerous castle (108), galloping wildly across the causeway and into the daughter's story to save her from the male libertine. A nifty historical link aligns Carter's character with the French Revolutionary Théroigne de Méricourt who exemplifies 'the political possibilities of the Sadeian woman who seizes the father's power' (171). Munford shows with scrupulous detail that patriarchal authority in Carter is 'as fragile as it is atrocious' (171), even though she ignores the humour in the tale's quotidian domestic closure.

The Passion of New Eve (1977) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) illustrate Carter's impatience with the 'consolatory nonsenses' in second-wave feminism's 'mythic versions of women' that trap women in an ahistorical and illusory power (qtd. 172). This noteworthy thesis strikes one of Munford's most resounding chords and she does not skimp on evidence from the novels or the criticism. However, the considerable plot exposition to explain these highly fantastic novels blunts the analysis's rigor. Crisper summarising sign-posts would have added stringency, although, admittedly, finding the proper balance between story details and analysis, even for this review, is a formidable task. *The Passion of New Eve* owes its lavish intertextuality mostly to the French decadent writer Villiers de L'Isle Adam's 1902 novel *L'Éve future*. Carter's narrator, Evelyn, a Baudelarian dandy, becomes obsessed with Tristessa St. Ange, a Hollywood star who personifies a Gothic passivity even while her surname revives *Philosophy of the Bedroom*'s 'lubricious Madame de Saint-Ange' (160). Evelyn goes to New York and meets Leilah, foil to the chaste Tristessa and victim to her own reproductive sexuality. Evelyn leaves New York City for the West where a guerrilla band of women led by the grotesque 'Mother' takes him prisoner. Mother is her own 'mythological artifact' with "'two tiers of nipples, giant limbs, and a phony black beard'" (qtd. 175), who rules in Beulah, the radical feminists' underground community. She is a Gothic mad scientist run amok who carves Evelyn into Eve, and Carter's flamboyant riposte to 'feminist and decadent iconographies' that both emerge from the 'mystification that exiles women from history' (176).

With *Nights at the Circus* Munford asserts Carter attained the "'new way of writing and a new way of being'" she had outlined in 'Notes from the Front Line' (both 1984) (qtd. 174). Its

heroine, Fevvers, a winged aerialist in Paris and Vienna, ‘adapts [fetishistic myths about female sexuality] to assert her own sexual agency’ (178). Carter’s unpublished working notes for the novel show her interest in accounts of Parisian nightlife by French *fin-de-siècle* writers like Eugène Sue and Aragon, but most influential was the surrealist Apollinaire who thought Sade’s debauched Juliette heralded a new woman, winged, who would “renew the world” (qtd. 180). Carter crafts the formulaic Gothic narrative trajectory to find feminist potential within the ‘Sadeian and decadent Gothic topographies’ (182). Fevvers meets three surrogate mothers who are all necessary for her evolving autonomy. Influenced first by Ma Nelson, the cross-dressing suffragette whose primal space, the Academy, is one empty of biological motherhood but filled with sexualised female objectification (183). Fevvers next meets Madame Schreck, the ‘sterile, phallic mother’ whose Museum of Woman Monsters (184), with its displays of mutilated female bodies, is the novel’s ‘Gothic centrepiece’ (184). Finally, Fevvers meets Lizzie, a Marxist feminist and ex-whore. Lizzie’s bond with Fevvers conveys a triumphant modern understanding of the Gothic mother-daughter, a link intuitive and reciprocal. They leave the fallen urban world for the snowy and clean Siberian landscape, a space far beyond the ‘heavily codified structures of the Gothic castle’ (187), one that fosters individual female and feminist consciousness. Surprisingly Munford overlooks Carter’s feminising of the fraught male camaraderie Frankenstein and his monster found in their own chilly arctic place. Nonetheless, she brings all together with the point that the “revolutionary promise” Carter envisioned is in liberating the mother ‘from the European Gothic’s fictions of paternity’ (qtd. 188), and relocating her in ‘historical time’ (189). Lizzie gets a truly happy ending – she meets Marx in the British Museum’s reading room and joins Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s debating society.

Munford’s occasional labyrinthine prose means the reader must sometimes struggle, although willingly, through the logic. More attentive copy-editing might have caught the distracting overuse of ‘infamous’ in the early chapters and trimmed several lengthy endnotes that elide key plot details or theoretical concepts. Munford proves beyond doubt the political seriousness with which Carter approached her writing; however, she resists applauding the sardonic levity that includes us in the voluptuously disturbing good fun Carter had with her male predecessors. As Margaret Atwood said in her memorial tribute, Carter did relish a ‘hearty up-theirs vocabulary’ (61). A consequent grimness inflects Munford’s otherwise elegant voice and sophisticated intellect. Nonetheless, *Decadent Daughters* is a remarkably rich resource. Carter

may indeed work a 'risky edge' in her combined admiration for and appraisal of her 'often misogynist' (105; 146; 196) male European Gothic influences, but it is an edge Munford's comprehensive study convincingly shows deliciously worthwhile to approach.

References

Atwood, Margaret, 'Magic token through the dark forest', *Observer*, 23 (February 1992), p. 61.

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