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**Reading a Metaphor Otherwise: The movement between metaphor and materiality in *Nights at the Circus***

*Emma Mould*

Angela Carter had a clear fascination with the body, especially the female body. From the beginning of her career, grotesque and fantastical female bodies populate her fiction; gendered norms based on biological essentialism concerns her non-fiction. She has repeatedly been described as a post-modern writer but still, she is certainly no relativist, being far too politically motivated. She had always been interested in the material realities of women; mythic incarnations of femininity were so toxic to her that she famously described herself as ‘being in the demythologising business.’<sup>1</sup> Yet, her female characters often find themselves immersed in such mythologising, their bodies involved in a subversion of myths which is also an acknowledgement of their discursive power.

This paper concerns itself with the notion of materiality in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, particularly in relation to hybrid female bodies and other abject bodies. My intention is to move away from critical work which tends towards a binary analysis of Carter’s use of performativity: on the one hand, characterising it as espousing a problematic free-wheeling subjectivity<sup>2</sup>, on the other, celebrating these elements as subverting absolutely any notions of bodily essentialism<sup>3</sup>. In fact, Carter’s representation of the body is far more complex than that, positing a lived negotiation between biological essentialism and discursive construction, re-envisioning materiality as materialisation, as a process which is open-ended but not absolutely limitless.

With particular reference to the theories of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, I will argue that, ultimately, the transgressive potential of these hybrid bodies lie within their continually changing lived experiences – in other words, their movements from metaphor to materiality and back again. Subsequently, gender subversion can

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’ in *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, ed. by Lindsay Tucker, (New York, G.K. Hall & Co, 1998), pp. 25.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Paulina Palmer, Clare Hanson, Aiden Day.

<sup>3</sup> See Catrin Gersdorf, Heather L. Johnson, Alison Lee.

only be accomplished through a lived experience which exposes the way in which hetero-normativity deems certain types of bodies abject. Furthermore, Carter's subversive female bodies insist on demonstrating that bodies that have been deemed unliveable are not only liveable but can also inspire methods of resistances.

In her infamous essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', Donna Haraway describes her cyborgs as 'monstrous and illegitimate' with the capacity to subvert the dualism of hetero-normative identity constitution in all its guises.<sup>4</sup> She suggests that to be deemed monstrous is to be "inappropriate/d": 'to be an "inappropriate/d other" means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality-as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination.'<sup>5</sup> It seems that the effect of monstrosity is to throw into relief previously stable boundaries between those bodies that matter and those that don't. This is certainly true for the character Fevvers', from *Nights at the Circus*, and her hybridised body. For the crowd that watches her at the beginning of the text, seeing her directly precedes the implicit questioning of empirical positivism: 'And then 'Do you think she's *real*'.'<sup>6</sup> They can no longer be sure that what they see before them is truly reality. She is both woman and swan and yet, as the American journalist Walser notes, not enough of either: 'he was astonished to discover that it was the limitations of her act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable – that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief' (16). Her liminal position between two states that are, according to the hetero-normative matrix, which is bounded and discrete, is enough of a spectacle in and of itself to trouble the rationality that Walser is so invested in. Right from the beginning of the text, Angela Carter invests a lot of subversive power in Fevvers' body; crucially, it is not an innate inscription but one that Fevvers actively asserts. She is not so much being seen as making herself an object to be seen: her slogan, 'Is she fact or fiction?' And she didn't let you forget it for a minute' (3). She is not so much an object as she is a subject self-consciously performing the part of an Object: 'With a grand ironic grace, *she exhibited herself* before the eyes of the audience' (13, emphasis added). Her self-conscious enactment

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<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, 'The Promise of Monsters', <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/monsters.html> [Accessed: 21.07.2011]

complicates and challenges the master-slave dialectic inherent within a hetero-normative identity formation which can establish subjectivity only through objectification. During her interview, she looks at Walser with ‘one lash off, one lash on’ (4), her face the personification of both artifice and the revealing of artifice. What is being emphasised here is that Fevvers’ body occupies a space which is inbetween the natural and the constructed.

Walser (who as a journalist is perhaps representative of the linear hierarchal logic of patriarchy) is interested in seeking out Fevvers’ ontology. However, it becomes clear that it will not be Fevvers who will be co-opted into his logic but Walser who will be seduced by the plurality and partiality that she embodies: ‘an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he too, stood on an unknown threshold’ (31). As she continues to speak, even her voice becomes a literal representation of the power of her narrative over him: ‘It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice’ (47). Crucially, even her voice does not have a clear origin: ‘Yet such a voice could almost have had its source, not within her throat but in some ingenious mechanism or other behind the canvas screen, voice of a fake medium at a séance’ (47). It could be argued that this renders Fevvers’ voice illegitimate but actually, the fact that her voice is of indeterminate origin is exactly what makes it so powerful. Fevvers embodies disguise and masquerade: the possibility that bodily inscription does not necessarily reveal inner identification. She knows that it is precisely this concealing ability which patriarchy would need to neutralise in order to fit her into its logic: ‘I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever’ (43).

Her monstrous hybrid body provides an opportunity for resistance precisely because her appearance cannot be sealed up or co-opted into dualistic hetero-normativity. As an ‘inappropriate/d other’, she cannot be contained by hetero-normativity and looms, both figuratively and literally- ‘six feet two in her stockings’ – above and beyond its boundaries, thereby revealing its phantasmatic operation (9). Her hybrid body exposes the gaps or what Judith Butler terms ‘the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm’.<sup>7</sup> For

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<sup>6</sup> Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 5. Subsequent references will appear in the body of the text.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Fevvers as for Butler, Fevvers' stage performance as object of the male gaze is not a repetition that reinforces its dominances but instead *repeats differently* as an undermining of its exclusionary/inclusionary trope: 'what is exteriorized or performed can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier and from the domain of corporeal legibility'.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, during her development, rather than being shamed by the monstrosity of her body, Fevvers experiences her body as 'the abode of limitless freedom' (45). Her specific corporeality allows her to subvert hetero-normative discourse rather than merely submitting to its immanence.

Such 'play' certainly does seem resolutely optimistic and utopian, aligned perhaps with an overly simplistic endorsement of performativity. However, to assume this would not only be to misread gender performativity as voluntarism, but would also fail to acknowledge the ways in which Carter explores the limits of performativity.<sup>9</sup> In the same moment that Fevvers speaks of the freedom of her body, she also circumvents that freedom: 'for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes' (45). Her use of the past tense emphasises that any freedom she experienced was only partial and temporary. The difficulty Fevvers experiences throughout the rest of the text with resisting being co-opted into hetero-normative metaphors is, as Butler puts it, 'a difficult labour of forging a future from resources inevitably impure'.<sup>10</sup> This difficulty does not only relate to Fevvers' materiality but also, to the female bodies around her as the process of materialisation is always worked out through the relation of bodies to each other. Therefore, before I continue to discuss Fevvers' materiality, I am going to look at those female bodies who informs the emergence of Fevvers' own material presence. I will be focusing particularly on Madame Schreck's museum of woman monsters and Mignon.

### **'The Freakish and Unnatural': Other abject female bodies**

As I have suggested, monstrous bodies are threatening to hetero-normativity precisely because they challenge the boundaries that are constitutive of hetero-normative identity formation. Butler explains that the coherence of the hetero-normative subject

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 200

<sup>9</sup> Butler is very clear that gender performativity does not mean causally choosing what gender to wear; indeed, this humanistic choosing subject would be completely contrary to emphasising gender as a social construction.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p.241

'is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject...When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement'.<sup>11</sup> So there is a lot at stake for hetero-normativity when such bodies appear; it is unsurprising, then, that it seeks to contain them within a manageable framework which reinforces their abjection. This is precisely the function of Madame Schreck's museum of woman monsters: to turn the potential of monstrosity into mere spectacle. Behind glass, with any movements they may make carefully rehearsed and authorised by paying customers, the monstrosity of these women becomes neutralised through fetishisation and commerce: 'She'd say "Shall I open the curtain? Who knows what spectacle of the freakish and unnatural lies behind it!" And they'd say "yes", or "no", depending on whether they'd been there before, for if they'd been there before, they'd got their fancies picked out' (69). Madame Schreck herself is a kind of disembodied presence - 'a black spotted veil hanging down in the front, so thick you could not see her face' (60)- who in turn denies Fevvers and the other women any agency by turning them into '*tableau vivants*' (66). These 'living pictures' function as human sacrifices - her "profane altars", as she used to call them' - when required (68). The rest of the time, they are successfully hidden from view, their abjection literalised by a living space which is removed from the world: 'this place was known as "Down Below", or else, "The Abyss" (68). Their material circumstances mean that, for these women, their bodies are not the source of limitless freedom but are, in fact, the reason that they are imprisoned. Here, Carter begins to demonstrate the limits of Fevvers' free-floating corporeality through highlighting the ways in which the female body is contained and restricted by hetero-normativity and the effects of such restriction. For Fanny, the monstrosity of her body means that she is unable to have the children that she wants. For her, there is no freedom in the fact that 'she saw too much of the world altogether' (78). The Wiltshire Wonder sees her height as that which separates her from her adoptive family: 'for, dearly as I loved my family, there was always that unalterable difference between us' (76). Deemed abject by hetero-normative discourse, the Wonder experiences a division within her identity formation which Frantz Fanon has described as 'an amputation.'<sup>12</sup> However, unlike Fanon, the Wonder's gender means that she is unable to seek solace (temporary or otherwise) in

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 85.

the ‘unhappy romanticism’ of being amongst her ‘natural kin’ (76).<sup>13</sup> As both female and dwarf, The Wonder’s alterity is marked differently from the male dwarves who then seek to conquer that particular difference as they too have taken on the exclusionary/inclusionary logic of hetero-normativity: ‘I fear they did not treat me kindly, for, although they were little, they were also men’ (77). Her telling of her personal history to Fevvers (who then passes it on to Walser) is an example of an oral history which relates the way in which material circumstances can lead to devastating psychological consequences: ‘So you see how this lovely creature truly believed herself to have tumbled so far from grace that she could never climb out of the Abyss, and she regarded her pretty, spotless self with the upmost detestation’ (77).

All of this points to Carter’s refusal to lose sight of the material oppression of women that hetero-normativity engenders. She seemed to have taken its impact very seriously and recognised that it cannot be easily evaded. However, this does not mean that its authority cannot be challenged. In *The Sadeian Women*, she presents a post-structuralist reading of pornography where:

A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Madame Schreck’s museum of women monsters brings into relief the absurd and impotent nature of the men who visit them; men who can only experience sexuality if it is presented to them as artificial and static. Their choosing of outfits- ‘a cassock or a ballet-dancers frock, or whatever they fancied’ – emphasises this need to ‘dress up’ their sexual desire rather than embody it as a spontaneous expression (68). Toussaint recognises that ‘it was those fine gentlemen who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones, not we’ (68). Crucially, Fevvers then asks: ‘For what is “natural” and “unnatural”, Sir?’ (68). The use of quotation marks here further highlights the constructed nature of the boundaries the hetero-normativity produces and then claims to merely describe. Therefore, despite their oppression, the women in Madame Schreck’s museum of women monsters

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Women: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 19.



function within the text as that which cannot quite be reduced and erased but instead, reveals the discursively constrained nature of hetero-normativity's foundational premise.

Of course, it is important that liberation occurs in practical and monetary terms as well, which is why it is vital that the women are able to escape their material circumstances and that they finally receive the earnings that they are due. What is also important is that there emerges an alternative to their merely repeating hetero-normative discourse. Therefore, Fanny is finally able to become a mother figure *without* the need to be legitimised by patriarchy. The Wonder is able to return to her family with the understanding that her monstrosity does not have to mean abjection. However, The Sleeping Beauty remains trapped within her corporeality and functions as the first sobering rebuttal to Fevvers' utopian optimism: 'we do believe...her dream will be the coming century. And, oh God...how frequently she weeps!' (100). The Sleeping Beauty functions as a limit case for performativity and a reminder that not all women will be set free through a counter-discourse of gender performativity.

Mignon's body functions both as a powerful metaphor and an example of a materiality which cannot be easily evaded. Written on Mignon's skin is a physical representation of the historical domination of women: 'And more than the marks of fresh bruises on faded bruises on faded bruises, it was as if she had been beaten flat, had all the pile, the shine banged off her adolescent skin...' (150). Mignon's child-like body becomes 'flat' under the weight of an oppression that seems to go above and beyond her small body. However, rather than turn Mignon's body into primarily a metaphor, Carter focuses our attention on the specificity of her oppression which begins before she meets the Ape-Man. Mignon's body hasn't been truly hers since before her parents died and the Ape-Man recognises this when he first meets her: 'he took her on solely in order to abuse her' (162). Forced into prostitution for survival, Mignon's disembodiment is represented by her ghost-like presence, as Herr M. notes: 'It was her great resemblance to a spectre that struck most' (155). For the Ape-Man, her body is reduced even further to that of an inanimate object: 'the Ape-Man beat his woman as though she was a carpet' (133). As spectre or object, Mignon's body becomes a signifier of passivity: 'Word about Mignon passed around quickly' (164). This is perhaps why Fevvers, Lizzie and Walser are so stunned by Mignon's singing voice; the poignancy of it does not lie so much in its beauty as in the fact that it is

coming from someone who has for so long been deprived of any agency at all: 'it was as though the scarcely-to-be-imagined tragedy of her life, the sea of misery and disaster in which she swam in her precarious state of innocent defilement, all found expression' (153). Her voice is 'uncanny', precisely because it comes from a bodily source which has been posited as the site of absence (153).

Various critics have emphasised Mignon's lesbianism as key to her emancipation.<sup>15</sup> It is certainly true that a loving and equal relationship contributes to Mignon's newly discovered agency. However, I would argue that it is Mignon's singing voice that is just as important when it comes to her liberation. It is, of course, what brings two speechless women together: 'They would cherish in loving privacy the music that was their language, in which they'd found the way to one another' (196). As Fevvers says, 'If they hate speech because it divides us from them, to sing is to rob speech of its function and render it divine' (179). If, as French feminists such as Cixous and Irigaray argue, there is an implicit phallogocentrism within language itself, anything that disinvests it of its power and then re-signifies such power could be seen as an effective disruption of phallogocentrism. For Mignon, the use of her singing voice is certainly the source of her emancipation and importantly, the way in which she reclaims bodily agency. As Fevvers notes:

When we first heard her sing, in my room in the Hotel de l'Europe, it sounded as if the song sang itself, as if the song had nothing to do with Mignon and she was only a fleshy photograph, made to transmit music of which she had no consciousness. That was before she became a woman (292).

There is no longer 'uncanny' aspects to Mignon's singing because she now seems to fully own the sound that her body is producing. Her body, which has for so long been utilised and then erased by oppressive patriarchal forces, has now materialised into what Haraway described as the body as agent, rather than resource.<sup>16</sup> In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous characterises liberated female speech as an expression of the body: 'Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materialises

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael Magali Cornier, 'Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies' in *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsay Tucker, (New York: G.K Hall & Co, 1998) and Aiden Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 200.

what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body.'<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Mignon's singing becomes much more than just modified speech - 'To speak is one thing. To sing is quite another' (180). It is an expression and an affirmation of a materiality that has for so long been denied.

Such expression does not confine itself to Mignon alone. Cixous insists that this alternative feminine discourse will 'always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophic domination.'<sup>18</sup> It is unsurprising then, that the relationship between Mignon and The Princess develops alongside the emergence of Mignon's singing voice, as both intersect to create a space which wrenches itself free from hetero-normativity and even challenges its regulatory processes. The Strong Man, who had previously seen Mignon and all women as nothing more than 'the cause of discord between men', relinquishes his macho physicality which has been inscribed with hetero-normative dominance: 'so, by degrees, he grew less physical' (175; 238). Witnessing the egalitarian love between Mignon and The Princess also encourages him to appreciate the value of unity and connection rather than hierarchal dualisms: 'He knew he could not love the one without the other as he *could not love the singer without her song*' (238, emphasis added). Therefore, Mignon's materialisation goes beyond her to force a disruption of the foundational terms in which hetero-normativity is situated.

### **From a woman into an idea (and back again): Fevvers' fluid materiality**

It is, however, Fevvers' body which must withstand many and varied attempts at codification by hetero-normativity. It is not as simple as her resisting absolutely the sexual and bodily terms of hetero-normativity, as if her hybrid body can somehow claim a radical constructivist position outside of discourse. Any transgressive performativity that her body enacts will always work within the boundaries of discourse. As Butler reminds us, 'there is an "outside" to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute "outside"...it is that which can only be thought-

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<sup>17</sup>Cixous, Helene, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', <<http://www.inscribethebreath.co.uk/laughofthemedusa.htm>> [Accessed: 18.08.2011].

<sup>18</sup> As above.

when it can- in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders.’<sup>19</sup> In this way, Fevvers’ body cannot remain untouched by the patriarchal attempts to turn her into a metaphor, or ‘from a woman into an idea’ (343). By its very function, metaphors turn the literal into the abstract, thereby removing any specificity and making it easier for oppression to occur<sup>20</sup>. This is exactly what occurs with The Grand Duke.

Fevvers is well aware that, for him, she is not a living human being but an exotic object, disinvested of anything but symbolic meaning. Indeed, he has no interest at all in the material specificity of women: ‘If all the women in the world had wings, he’d keep his jewels to himself, to play at ducks and drakes on the icy waters of the Neva. My value to him is as a *rara avis*’ (218). Of course, he only recognises her uniqueness to the extent that it makes his subsequent dominance over it more potent. This dominance is literalised in the egg he gives her which contains an empty cage<sup>21</sup>. By this time, she no longer feels ‘like a predator’ who can withstand his objectification but begins to feel ‘more and more vague, less her own mistress’ (218; 224). She attempts to maintain her distinction from ‘the authentically priceless glamour of objects intended only for pleasure, the impure allure of the absolutely functionless’ (221). She does this by appealing to her human corporeality as distinct from the mechanical nature of the Grand Duke’s toys: ‘anyone who could make a Grandfather clock could put that harpy together’ (221). Here, Carter seems to hint at the limitations of Haraway’s cyborg when it is taken to be a universal solution to the emancipation of women. Women must be aware that sometimes, the strength of feminism lies in women asserting their material reality rather than a hybrid cyborg identity which can seem too bloodless. When the cyborg metaphor is appropriated as utopian and descriptive, it is not able to account for women who must fight against being turned into objects by patriarchy. As Fevvers demonstrates in her encounter with The Duke, it is in such moments that the assertion of material specificity becomes important and necessary. This is why his discovering and destroying her sword weakens her ability to fight against him. Nelson’s sword may have clear metaphorical value but it is also a very real weapon of defense. Without it, Fevvers

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<sup>19</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> An obvious example of this would be colonist discourse which used animalistic metaphors to describe natives, thereby reinforcing their dominance.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, eggs traditionally symbolise femininity, replete as they are with fertilisation. It is no wonder, then, that the Duke seeks to contain Fevvers within such a vessel.

becomes increasingly unable to withstand his objectification: 'Fevvers did not shrink but was at once aware of the hideous possibility she might do so' (225). Despite finally being able to escape him, she does not emerge unharmed. The painful image of Fevvers 'raddled with tears, hair coming down, again, gypsy dress ripped and clotted with semen' does not only render Walser speechless but also, the reader (227). This is not the strong and fearless Fevvers we have come to know with the limitless freedom of embodiment. For the first time, her feathers are not objects of awe or fear but are unable to hide her vulnerability: 'trying as best as she could to cover her bare breasts with a filthy but incontrovertible tangle of pin feathers' (227). It is here, that once and for all, it is made apparent that Fevvers' body is not above and beyond patriarchal oppression just because she has wings. Carter's magical realism does not extend to utopianism because she was far too grounded in the material realities of oppression. As she said in an interview with *The Guardian*: 'I'm a socialist, damn it! How can you expect me to believe in fairies?'<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, Fevvers' hybridised body is not offered up as a form of escapism but is irrefutably implicated within a discourse which seeks to recast all bodies as hierarchal and fixed as part of its dynamic of power.

Carter viewed the creation and perpetuation of myth as a key part of this patriarchal domination which elides material reality: 'Myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. In no area is this more true than in that of relations between the sexes.'<sup>23</sup> In this way, myth making could be seen as an extension of the abstraction produced by metaphors which is certainly evident in *Nights at the Circus*. Like The Grand Duke, Mr. Rosencreutz's conception of Fevvers seeks to fix her body into a metaphoric mythic narrative in order to ensure his continued dominance. Therefore, Fevvers becomes 'Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species' in order for Rosencreutz to re-imagine her as an offering to be sacrificed: "'Lie down upon the altar!'" (92; 95). His fetishisation of her body endeavors to tame the transgressive potential of her hybrid body. It not only denies her individual agency but also, permits him to see her as a commodity to be used in much the same way as The Grand Duke. Of course, what is revealed in his attempt to co-opt her body for his own uses is that his mythic

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<sup>22</sup> Angela Carter, Quoted in Mary Harron, *The Guardian*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1984, p. 10 [Accessed: 4.9.11]

<sup>23</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 5-6.

inscription is not necessarily stable. As Fevvers reveals her own weapon, she subverts his mythologizing in a way he could not have foreseen: 'he'd not thought the angel would come armed' (95). Her escape from him is then, both literal and figurative. She is free from him physically, but she also manages to emancipate herself from his mythic creation of her through a disruption which exposes its unstable and phantasmic nature.

In fact, this ability is truly where the transgressive nature of Fevvers' body lies. The fact that her body is implicated in metaphoric language does not mean that she is forever trapped within such metaphors. After all, Derrida's work on the irreducibility of metaphors reminds us of this.<sup>24</sup> This is exactly what Fevvers' body manages to do. To read a metaphor otherwise or against itself does not come from being somehow immune from discursive inscription but instead, comes from having the potential to disrupt and reformulate its foundational, naturalised premise. It is what Butler calls 'power as resignification'.<sup>25</sup> It is not an easy resignification as we see from Carter's problematising of Fevvers' initial bodily utopianism but nonetheless, it is one that allows a movement between metaphor and materiality which suggests that neither are pure states.

Whilst watching Fevvers perform, Walser makes a distinction between her monstrosity and her materiality: 'She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none' (188). Lizzie takes the opposite but similarly binary view: 'a woman tied head and foot to that Nature which your physiology denies, Sophie has been set here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman' (336). For them, Fevvers status as a woman cannot be compatible with her transgressive monstrosity. However, it is precisely these boundaries that Fevvers is able to render unstable. As I discussed in the beginning of this essay, Fevvers' body utilises the metaphoric appropriations of her monstrosity to her own advantage. She also brings into parodic relief the myth-making which Carter believed fixes women in a schema of oppression. However, throughout the text, she also laid claim to a materiality which ensures that Fevvers' body never becomes a purely theoretical concept. In this way, Fevvers' demonstrates, with her abject body, a process of

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<sup>24</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 240.

*materialisation* which is constantly in flux and therefore, resists reproducing the constitutional terms of hetero-normativity. It is not an easy resistance and Fevvers struggles throughout the text to maintain such resistance but her important final realisation is that her sense of singularity does not need to depend on a fixed bodily appearance: ‘She would be the blonde of blondes, again, just as soon as she found peroxide; it was as easy as that and meanwhile, who cared! And of course her wing would mend’ (345). She finally realises the true performativity of her body; its subversive potential lies in its ability to move between hetero-normative boundaries, displaying its foundational instability. Residing in both fact and fiction, in materiality and discourse, she demonstrates that these are not, in fact, mutually exclusive terms.

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