

## Gender Matters in The Sadeian Woman

Nanette Altevors

A NUMBER OF CRITICS HAVE "called into question" the feminist ideology informing Angela Carter's works, but probably no single concept has been contested more frequently than that of the "moral pornographer."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Carter herself acknowledged in a 1988 interview that "moral pornographer was a phrase that got me into a lot of trouble with the sisters, some of the sisters."<sup>2</sup> It also got her into a lot of trouble with some of the "fathers." Robert Clark, for example, claims that "Carter's belief that a 'moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes'" is "mistaken, the ideological power of the form being infinitely greater than the power of the individual to overcome it."<sup>3</sup> The first eleven pages of "Angela Carter's Desire Machine," an essay in which Clark questions the extent to which Carter's works "offer their readers a knowledge of patriarchy . . . and to what extent they fall back into reinscribing patriarchal attitudes" (147), comprise a negative critique of her feminist revisions of traditional fairy and folk tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, her portrayal of rape in *Heroes and Villains*, and, finally, her notion of the "moral pornographer" in *The Sadeian Woman*.

The charge Clark brings against Carter's argument in *The Sadeian Woman* is the familiar one (and to be sure it is not without some validity) brought against most feminist writing contemporaneous with it: Carter's feminism runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism by uncritically accepting the hierarchical thinking characteristic of the patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> Her belief that pornography can be used "in the service of women" simply "reinscribes the essential practice of foregrounding sexuality as the acme of pleasure and origin of authentic significance," thus resulting in "a depersonalization that culminates in the [traditional] pornographic substitution of the fetishized part (penis, vagina, buttocks, breast etc.) for the organic human being, a point that Carter herself has made" (153, 152). On the penultimate page of his essay Clark finally acknowledges the "positive side of Carter's representation of gender," her "representation of femininity as a male construct" (158). It comes as no surprise at this point, however, that her "positive side" is not without its negative side:

Carter's insight into the patriarchal construction of femininity has a way of being her blindness; her writing is often a feminism in male chauvinist drag, a transvestite style, and this may be because her primary allegiance is to a postmodern aesthetics that emphasizes the non-referential emptiness of definitions. Such a commitment precludes an

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affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being. (158)

Clark's confusion here, it seems to me, underscores his confusion all along.

There is no evidence in Carter's work that "her primary allegiance is to a postmodern aesthetics," whatever that may mean; a "postmodern aesthetics" is, of course, a contradiction in terms. Postmodernism and poststructuralism do indeed emphasize the "non-referential emptiness of definitions"—including that of the aesthetic. The poststructuralist notion of intertextuality allows no distinction between "literary" (or "artistic") and "ordinary" discourses, thus deconstructing the category of the aesthetic altogether. Moreover, poststructuralism does not countenance any notion of an "intending subject" or undeconstructed self, as Carter clearly does and as Clark himself has pointed out a few pages earlier (152-53). Although Carter agrees with many of Foucault's ideas—she believes, for example, that sexuality is constructed not from gender but from relations of power and politics—she does *not* accept his deconstruction of the subject.<sup>5</sup> She believes in the "self, as autonomous being," in the "unique 'I'"; and, most important for a feminist, she believes in "women" who are not "the slaves of history" but "its makers" (*Sadeian Woman*, 107, 6, 3). It is, in fact, Carter's "primary allegiance" to "an affirmative feminism" that precludes her allegiance to poststructuralism, not vice versa. And it is Clark's own "allegiance" to poststructuralism<sup>6</sup> that blinds him to this insight.

Unlike feminism, a historically diverse and culturally heterogeneous social movement, poststructuralism originated in and remains the dominant discourse of the academy—one of the last bastions of male hegemony. It is, after all, the order of women's exclusion from the traditional literary canon, as well as from the university itself, that is the *raison d'être* of academic feminism; it is precisely this exclusion that feminist scholars in *all* the disciplines of the human sciences have set out to rectify. And although women's studies and feminist theory *have* effected changes in the ways literature and literary theory are taught, as well as in the way literary history is written, such progress has typically been magnified far out of proportion by the opposition.<sup>7</sup> Poststructuralist critiques of the "subject" and "identity" as ideological fictions necessary for the smooth workings of humanist systems of thought and social regulation (the whole masculinist Western tradition which views Western Man as universal subject and Woman as the negative term that guarantees his identity and against which feminism has always worked) have culminated ultimately in the poststructuralist injunction to deconstruct *all* categories, including that of "woman." Of course, if "woman" is a fiction, a locus of pure difference and resistance to logocentric power, and if there are no women as such, then the very issue of women's oppression would appear to be obsolete and feminism itself would have no reason to exist. Put simply, poststructuralism is a patriarchal discourse which is, by definition, inimical to feminist politics. It leaves intact the regions where the logic of exclusion disguises its operations most completely by replacing a masculine-dominated ideology disguised as univer-

sal humanism with a masculine-dominated ideology disguised as a *critique* of that ideology.

Nancy K. Miller makes this point persuasively in her remarks concerning Foucault's dismissal of the author/subject:

This sovereign indifference, I would argue, is one of the "masks . . . behind which phallogentrism hides its fictions" ["What Is an Author?" 138]; the authorizing function of its own discourse authorized the "end of woman" without consulting her. What matter who's speaking? I would answer it matters, for example, to women who have lost and still routinely lose their proper name in marriage, and whose signature—not merely their voice—has not been worth the paper it was written on; women for whom the signature—by virtue of its power in the world of circulation—is *not* immaterial. Only those who have it can play with not having it.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to Clark's assertion, Carter's "primary allegiance" is to no *theoretical* position; it is to a feminist politics that would rectify the *material* oppression that women experience daily and that Miller here poignantly describes. Moreover, to focus, as Clark does, on Carter's notion of the "moral pornographer" (which she in fact mentions but once) is to miss completely the significance of *The Sadeian Woman*.

Carter's critique of the ideology of pornography is intricately and inevitably bound up with her critique of myth "Since all pornography derives directly from myth" (6). And it is the very fact that myth derives from theory rather than from experience that most irritates her: "mythology" presents us "with ideas about ourselves which don't come out of practice; they come out of theory. They come out of pure theory." Indeed, by the time she wrote *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter was "getting really ratty with the whole idea of myth." She was "getting quite ratty with the sort of appeals by some of the women's movements to have these sort of 'Ur-religions' because it didn't seem to me at all to the point. The point seemed to be the here and now, what we should do now."<sup>9</sup> Her attack on myth—according to Carter, *all* myths are "consolatory nonsenses" (5)—is peculiarly timely, given the overwhelming success of the recent best-seller, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, which celebrates precisely what Carter in 1978 referred to as the "most insulting mythic redefinition of myself, that of occult priestess" (5). As such, a woman is

indeed allowed to speak but only of things that male society does not take seriously. I can hint at dreams, I can even personify the imagination; but that is only because I am not rational enough to cope with reality.

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). . . . If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place.

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. (5-6)

Such false universalizing of sexuality tends to enforce the archetype of male aggression and female passivity, thus merely confusing "the main issue, that relationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men" (6-7).

Although Carter hastens to add that such economic dependence is "now very largely a fact of the past," since in 1978 "most women work before, during and after marriage," she nevertheless maintains that "the economic dependence of women remains a believed fiction and is assumed to imply an emotional dependence that is taken for granted as a condition inherent in the natural order of things and so used to console working women for their low wages" (7). The same could surely be said in 1994 when we still inhabit "a world with a cash-sale ideology" (58) where women earn only 60 to 70 percent of what men earn and where no amount of howling in the woods (a method advocated in the numerous "workshops" spawned by the success of *Women Who Run with the Wolves* to express spiritual power) is likely to rectify the situation.

Women's lack of economic freedom results, moreover, in their lack of reproductive freedom. Money is power, and women's lack of political power has allowed reproductive freedom to remain an issue as important in 1994 as it was in 1978. It is, of course, the central issue of *The Sadeian Woman*. In her "Introductory Note" Carter suggests that "Sade's work"—as demonstrated in her analyses of the dialectically related *The Misfortunes of Virtue* and *The Prosperities of Vice* and of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*—is particularly significant to "women because of his refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function, a refusal as unusual in the late eighteenth century as it is now, even if today the function of women as primarily reproductive beings is under question" (1). Unfortunately, it is still "under question." It is no exaggeration to say that abortion has become the most talked about and controversial issue in America.

Only think: in 1990, 1991, and 1992 Supreme Court justices were apparently chosen on the basis of their perceived positions on the issue; several American cities were thrown into tumult because of demonstrations about it; it became a defining issue in a presidential campaign; and the Supreme Court handed down one of its most important and eloquent opinions on the subject. A pregnant social worker was stopped at Kennedy Airport when she flew in from Europe carrying a duly prescribed dose of RU-486, a pill that causes early abortion and that is being used with success and safety in several European countries. The drug is on a special import alert list, although even some Food and Drug Administration officials say that this has nothing to do with safety. It did not go on the list at the behest of serious scientists but at the request of conservative members of an overwhelmingly male Congress. The abortion battle has become a referendum, a conflict between those who think raising children is one part of a woman's life, freely chosen, and those who think it is the center of a woman's life, her essential destiny. Clearly, we have not progressed very far beyond Freud's notoriously phallogentric and notoriously in-

fluent pronouncement that "anatomy is destiny"—about which Carter has this to say:

My anatomy is only part of an infinitely complex organization, my self. The anatomical reductionism of graffiti, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the bodily differences between men and women, extracts all the evidence of me from myself and leaves behind only a single aspect of my life as a mammal. It enlarges this aspect, simplifies it and then presents it as the most significant aspect of my entire humanity. (4)

It all comes down in the end to the question of women's autonomy.

According to Carter, "*The Sadeian Woman* is neither a critical study nor a historical analysis of Sade; it is, rather, a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems he raises about the culturally determined nature of women . . ." (1). Although "Sade remains a monstrous and daunting cultural edifice," Carter turned to him because he was "unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and in installing women as beings of power in his imaginary worlds" (37, 36). And because Carter believes that women are not "the slaves of history" but "its makers," she believes that they have the power to reformulate gender relations and reshape the *real* world. Each of us has the power to deconstruct the culturally imposed opposition between masculine and feminine, perceive its pernicious influence and try as far as possible in a still rigidly patriarchal order to live as our own woman, without regard for the crippling definition of gender identity to which society would have us conform. Woman-centered realities would be shaped from fundamentally different presumptions if they did not have to be formulated from a denunciation of otherness—the situation that sexual inequality (patriarchal rule) has produced. The opening lines of Carter's postscript to *The Sadeian Woman* are as timely today as they were in 1978: "History tells us that every oppressed class gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that woman learn that lesson. . ." (151).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 19; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>See Anna Katsavos's interview with Angela Carter published in this issue (16).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine," *Women's Studies* 14 (1987): 152-53; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup>The charge of an "inverted sexism" was of course most famously leveled against Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979).

<sup>5</sup>See Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Sherry Simon and ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), for his most famous and sustained argument relegating the "speaking subject" to a function of language.

<sup>6</sup>Clark 147. The "question" Clark poses concerning the reinscription of "patriarchal attitudes" in Carter's work "derives from Pierre Macherey's theory" as presented in his

essay in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (1981).

<sup>7</sup>In "Life after a Tenured Position," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 19 July 1992, 14, Kay Mills quotes Carolyn Heilburn, who, after teaching for more than thirty years at Columbia University, retired abruptly when Columbia decided not to grant tenure to a deserving female scholar: "Conservative scholars keep saying 'that the feminists, blacks, Marxists—whatever—have taken over, I wish they would point out to me one department where that has happened.'" Indeed, Heilburn had "long joked that she would stay on until she was 75, her revenge against what she called the sexism at the university and its English department." However, she decided ultimately that "it was unfair to students to mislead them, by her continued presence, into thinking that the university was hospitable to her field of scholarship in particular and to women in general."

<sup>8</sup>Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 118.

<sup>9</sup>Katsavos 16, 13-14.



*All You Need Is Love:  
Angela Carter's Novel of Sixties Sex  
and Sensibility*

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IN HER AFTERWORD to the revised 1987 edition of *Love*, Angela Carter reveals the obscure source of inspiration for her narrative of sixties sexual misadventure: "I first got the idea for *Love*, from Benjamin Constant's . . . novel of sensibility, *Adolphe*; I was seized with the desire to write a kind of modern-day, demotic version . . . although I doubt anybody could spot the resemblance."<sup>1</sup> If this connection had eluded Carter's audience, surely it is understandable. A phenomenon of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the novel of sensibility had long fallen from vogue and reappeared, revenantlike, only in its latter-day guise of popular romance. Yet, as Lorna Sage has so adroitly observed, one of the hallmarks of Angela Carter's craft is the "grotesque, and yet . . . recognisable (borrowed, parodied) range of her symbolism [with which] she seems bent on a general stocktaking, from the earliest innocent cons to their latest camp revivals."<sup>2</sup> In this particular borrowing Carter effectively scrutinizes the moral ambivalences of sensibility, particularly the sinister motivations lurking behind the external display of emotionality constructed as a sign of heightened sensitivity and refined benevolence. Simultaneously, she mercilessly illustrates the similarities between the excesses of the period that gave rise to Romanticism and those of the period that gave us the sexual revolution. Through the medium of the *ménage à trois* comprised of Lee, Annabel, and Buzz, she takes stock of our cherished and reviled conventional gender roles and to what extent they have, while changing drastically, nonetheless stubbornly remained the same.

In a retrospective assessment of the cultural and social significance of the sixties, Carter speculated that "manners had not been so liberal and expressive since the Regency—or maybe even since the Restoration, with the absence of syphilis compensated for in the mortality stakes by the arrival of hard drugs."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the sex and drugs that seem synonymous with sixties culture were simply elements of a greater phenomenon, the youth culture's valorization of total freedom (or, more precisely, license), of boundless physical and mental sensation, and of a Rousseauistic "natural" goodness unrelated to traditional social mores (or, as a number of popular songs of the era put it, being "really real"). Likewise, if less demotically, the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility prized

emotional susceptibility, heightened sensitivity, and a tremendous capacity for suffering, all regarded as the outward signs of a highly refined moral character. The novel of sensibility, as Janet Todd explains, was originally a didactic mode that "showed people how to behave, how to express themselves in friendship and how to respond decently to life's experiences," but it soon devolved into a popular form that "prided itself more on making its readers weep and in teaching them when and how much to weep."<sup>4</sup> Yet Carter, incorporating this mode into a postmodern pastiche, inverts this paradigm. *Love* is more likely to invoke fear and revulsion than tears and sympathy—and is, in its fatal consequences, a study in how *not* to deport oneself.

In the traditional novel of sensibility the characteristic signs of the privileged trait were most often embodied in female protagonists who were prone to weeping, fainting, and madness while being perpetually subject to threats of seduction and bodily harm. This historical model finds its postmodern reincarnation in the "mad girl" Annabel, a young woman so lost in a dream world that "even the women's movement would have been no help to her and alternative psychiatry would have only made things, if possible, worse" (113). The setting in which Annabel, in the throes of hysteria, first appears is directly analogous to the origins of the novel of sensibility and its literary first cousin, the Gothic novel: the collision between the orderly, cool rationality of Augustan neoclassicism and the pleasurable terrors of the imagination lurking at the heart of Romanticism. The park, which, "In the system of correspondences by which she interpreted the world around her . . . had a special significance" (1), constitutes the remains of a ruined eighteenth-century manor. All that remains of the once stately home is, on the south side, "a stable built on the lines of a miniature Parthenon, housing for Houyhnhnms rather than natural horses" replete with "pillared portico," and, on the north, "an ivy-covered tower with leaded ogive windows skulk[ing] among the trees," fronted by "a massive pair of wrought-iron gates decorated with cherubs, masks of beasts, stylized reptiles and spearheads" (1,2). Annabel, a creature of sensibility "suffer[ing] from nightmares too terrible to reveal," quite naturally prefers the latter Gothic setting, "for serenity bored her" (3,2).

The opening sentences of the novel reveal the depth of Annabel's sensibility, one apparently so refined that the sources of her torments would seem to be far from mundane ones: "One day, Annabel saw the sun and moon in the sky at the same time. The sight filled her with a terror which entirely consumed her and did not leave her until the night closed in catastrophe for she had no instinct for self-preservation if she was confronted by ambiguities" (1). Ambiguities, however, inform the very essence of Carter's fictions. While Annabel externally exemplifies the "feminine" traits of physical and mental frailty and passive victimage peculiar to the Gothic heroine, her interactions with her husband and brother-in-law betray her passive-aggressive sadism. The most extreme manifestation of her assumption of a quasi-masculine role is her "branding" of Lee, her wayward husband. To punish him, she forces him to submit to a tattoo of her own design, "her name indelibly in Gothic script . . . circle[d] . . . with a

heart" (69) that becomes a living emblem of his subjugation. Moreover, in attempting to reduce both Lee and his brother Buzz to denizens of a realm that exists in her own fevered imagination, a realm that would exceed the combined nightmares of Emily Brontë and Edgar Allan Poe, Annabel indulges in a virtuosic display of will to power and engages the two men in a duel to the death—ironically, her own. Before reaching this end, however, she enjoys a brief tenure as the phallic mother to this sibling pair, who have been, all along, her rivals for the distinction of having the acutely tortured sensibility.<sup>5</sup>

After all, sensibility has never been the exclusive property of imperiled heroines. This trait has also manifested itself in certain "problematic" male characters whose feelings, Todd informs us, "are too exquisite for the acquisitiveness, vulgarity and selfishness of the world," and who "avoided manly power and assumed the womanly qualities of tenderness and susceptibility but . . . [could not] be raped and abandoned."<sup>6</sup> These descriptions would seem to apply to Lee Collins, the blond, blue-eyed, university-educated, correctly leftist, and sadomasochistic "very nice young working-class boy" around whom *Love* revolves.<sup>7</sup> His dazzling smile and frequent tears, disarming outward signs of a "feminine side," are perceived by women as evidence of his sensitivity, compassion, and travail. Like his literary antecedents, this man of feeling presents himself as an exemplar of benevolence, a rescuer of the wretched of the earth, roles no doubt the legacy of his two most significant female influences: the socialist aunt who raised him and the mother who, "in his sixth year, . . . naked and painted all over with cabalistic signs, burst into the crowded playground and fell writhing and weeping on the asphalt before him" (10). Indeed, the death of his aunt and the memory of his mother predicate, both textually and psychologically, his "rescue" of Annabel, whom he discovers in a state of profound and nearly aphasic abjection at the typical sixties party scene of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

If Lee were seeking, unconsciously or otherwise, a surrogate for his absent mother, he could not have chosen a better replacement than Annabel. What Annabel expected in a husband, however, is as unclear as her chronic mental state. From her drawings of Lee as a lion or a unicorn, we can infer a desire for a fairy-tale figure—which the man of feeling, featured as he is in popular romance, may well be. Yet if her expectation is that he simultaneously be the protector who defends her from the world outside her fantasies and a subject forever in her thrall, she must inevitably be disappointed, for the benevolent hero of sensibility is ultimately as narcissistic and hysterical as his female counterpart. That this should be the case, Carter suggests, is hardly surprising; it is the product of our social conditioning:

Women tend to be raised with a monolithic notion of "maleness," just as men are raised with the idea of a single and undifferentiated femininity. Stereotyping. *Real* men, especially when approached by women acting in ways they're not supposed to act, can behave like fifteen-year-old girls in the photostory magazines. This can come as a shock. ("Truly" 214)

As the novelty of Annabel's "strangeness" wears thin, Lee, weary of her sexual unresponsiveness and manifold needs, seeks affirmation of his beauty and benevolence from other female sources. Not surprisingly, more than a few succumb to his smile and his tears, ready to assuage his wounded, exquisite feelings. When they discover they have merely provided sexual diversion, they too are disappointed and shocked.

To punish Lee's crass and public display of infidelity, Annabel slashes her wrists and, as a result, enjoys an extended stay in the National Health Service psychiatric hospital. Lee, in order to expiate, offers himself as her sacrificial victim, abjectly submitting to her whims, particularly the pernicious tattoo, upon her release. Thus the two paragons of emotionality, now both physically as well as mentally scarred by their travails, embark upon a domestic war of abasement and self-abasement climaxing in the ritualistic enactment of "a mutual rape" (97). Although, as Todd suggests, the eighteenth-century man of sensibility was immune from the threat of rape or abandonment, it would appear that this exception no longer applies to his postmodern descendent. Women can also act in a manner inconsistent with societal gender expectations. This too "can come as a shock."

But *Love* is not merely an allegorical narrative of the traditional battle of the sexes along male-female lines. Lest anyone attempt to imagine otherwise, Carter reminds us that the sexual explosion of the sixties "wasn't just heterosex, either; o, dear, no" ("Truly" 215). In the event that, like Annabel, readers missed the clues to Buzz's homosexuality in the first edition—including his gonorrhea acquired in North Africa (where male prostitution flourished in the days before AIDS and Islamic fundamentalism) and Lee's explanation that "He's always been funny with girls" (98)—Carter makes the matter perfectly clear in the afterword. In the context of the sixties, however, Buzz's exaggeratedly ferocious demeanor, his lack of verbal facility, and his complete lack of Lee's semblance of gentility or civility give him the outward appearance of the hypermasculine sexuality attributed to the Gothic villain. While this simulacrum convinces Annabel that she can coerce Buzz into playing Heathcliff to her Cathy, it is merely the inarticulate repression of a love that dare not speak its name—one that is not only homosexual but incestuous as well. Nevertheless, as a member of what was then deemed "the middle sex," Buzz becomes the sexual third term of mediation between Annabel and Lee. It is hardly an accident that their delayed consummation finally occurs when Lee returns home to find Annabel dressed in the absent Buzz's clothes: "and for a moment he thought his brother was back unexpectedly" (32). That Buzz (or Buzzz, as he has become) can announce some twenty years on, "if there is one thing he would like to do before he dies, it is to fuck [Lee]" (117), forces us to reassess the object of his jealous agony, night after night, listening to Lee and Annabel make love, and his obsessive photography of the naked couple in bed. In her solipsism Annabel infers that the sexual tension pervading the household is purely heterosexual—indeed she seems ignorant of any alternative. This blunder proves her undoing, for "It is always a

