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Plundering the feminine grotesque in Angela Carter's *Nights at the circus*

Abstract:

The dominant patriarchal literary culture names certain feminine qualities grotesque based on historical ideas of the classical masculine body. In an act of disobedience, feminist humour plunders the literary tradition that makes women disgusting and turns to the comic and regenerative power of the grotesque to claim and empower the female body. The feminist grotesque estranges the masculine bodily ideal implicit in the grotesque female form, and transports the female body from the abjected grotesque to a powerful subject. This paper will discuss the grotesque in relation to humour and the body, and particularly the female body. Revisionist feminist literature, such as Angela Carter's *Nights at the circus* (1984), seizes the abjected female body, the repository of this fear, and inverts the power structures that name it. The disobedient writer negates the power of the dominant authority. Humour such as irony and satire, and narrative strategies such as polyphony and metafiction fracture the single voice of authority and create new meaning. Humour alleviates the shock of the horror invested in the grotesque body, and polyphony and metafiction disrupt the traditional novel form because it reminds the reader that single narrative voices are not as reliable as dominant ideology would have us believe. At the heart of Angela Carter's text is the disruptive polyphonic fracturing of the single misogynistic voice of patriarchy. Carter seizes the power that patriarchal laws governing femininity deploy when it names the grotesque female body.

Biographical note:

Claire Duffy is a PhD candidate at Deakin University, Geelong. She relishes the transformative power of humour in feminist literature. She views writing as a powerful tool for voicing that which is not obvious, and that which is not easy—a catalyst for transformation. *Hecate, Swamp, Verandah, AntiTHESIS, In Stead, Intellectual Refuge*, and *Gold Dust* have published her short stories.

Keywords:

Grotesque humour – feminine grotesque – abject – polyphony

Plundering the feminine grotesque in Angela Carter's *Nights at the circus*.

Dominant patriarchal literary culture names certain feminine qualities grotesque based on historical ideas of the classical masculine body. In an act of disobedience, feminist humour plunders the literary tradition that makes women disgusting and turns to the comic and regenerative power of the grotesque to claim and empower the female body. The feminist grotesque estranges the masculine bodily ideal implicit in the grotesque female form, and transports the female body from the abjected grotesque to a powerful subject. This paper will discuss the grotesque in relation to humour and the body, and particularly the female body, and how feminist literature arrests the patriarchal discourse that names the female grotesque. I will use the example of Angela Carter's *Nights at the circus* (1984) to show how humorous feminist texts disrupt attitudes to the grotesque female body, transforming it from a site of disgust to a site of power.

What is the grotesque?

The term 'grotesque' is derived from the Italian word for cave, *grotta*, when during the late fifteenth century archaeologists uncovered Nero's Ancient Roman home Domus Aurea, which had ornamented cave-like corridors. The notion of the grotesque then expanded into artwork, such as the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel, which displayed grotesque representations of life and death. The grotesque also inspired literature that described the low world of the body and the earth such as François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (2006). The grotesque continued to appear during the Romantic and Gothic periods in nineteenth century Christian art depicted life-like representations of Christ rather than abstract or metaphoric images. Modern forms of writing broadened to explore intense human experiences of crime, insanity, and the irrational and as I discuss later the grotesque female body in Angela Carter's *Nights at the circus* (1984). In the twentieth century, surrealist painters such as Dali and Picasso challenged standard representations of everything from the human form to animals and the built environment.

The grotesque brings to mind the ugly, disfigured or deformed, and the history of the term underscores a social desire to define what is culturally correct. Maria Biscaia (2011) teases out this notion in her discussion of the postcolonial and feminist grotesque when she differentiates the ornamental arabesque that 'appears as an elaboration of leafy and floral motifs which are drawn from nature' (2011: 109) from the altogether different grotesque figures which are more dangerous because they are 'born (sic) out of the human imagination' (2011:109). In other words, the arabesque presents no danger because it remains faithful to nature, but grotesqueries represent unnatural beings and consequently challenge the natural order of things.

The unearthed images in the fifteenth century depicted human-organic forms: nocturnal creatures, slithering creatures, the plant world—a jungle that was an inextricable tangle—in the familiar human environment. The grotesque forms confronted the privileged class's sense of order and decency; the grotesqueries collided at the division between the self and the undesirable other because the images inextricably linked the civility of the existing world with the abjected 'natural' other. Art critics such as those aligned with the Vitruvian School who restored ancient classical architecture in the fifteenth century strongly disapproved of grotesque art. Theological leaders who saw reflected in the grotesque the myth of the fall in

which humans ‘are perceived to be creatures who have fallen from our essential state of perfection into a state of finite existence with all of its existential ambiguities and vulnerabilities, anxieties and propensities for human evil’(1987) expressed anxiety at the failure of these grotesque figures to reproduce the classical and rational masculine body that was celebrated at the time. Instead, these barbarous and monstrous forms were shocking, surprising, funny, disturbing, and disgusting.

The blended forms were artfully depicted and seemed to represent some innate sense of interconnection between ‘man’ and nature somewhere beyond the rational. Julia Kristeva (1982) in her essay on abjection links the grotesque with the uncontrollable natural processes that humans experience—birth, illness, death, aging, growth and transformation—all of which classical thinking occludes because these processes betray the rational perfection of the classical body, which is always male. History records the female body as a betrayal of this rational perfection because it too has powerful cultural associations to natural processes such as birth, death, sexual desire, and menstruation that are devalued—or, in Julia Kristeva’s terms, ‘abjected’—in the patriarchal order. Female bodies with their ability to hide penises and cleave open to give birth threaten the clean perfection of the idealised complete male body.

Cultural norms associate the female grotesque with the transgressive body that sits outside cultural expectations of male bodily perfection. In *The monstrous feminine*, Barbara Creed (1993) examines depictions of women in horror films to show that this depiction of women as abject or grotesque persists in contemporary culture. She argues that horror films persistently represent women’s bodies as abject and monstrous in order ‘to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability’ (1993: 11). Creed argues that horror films that represent women as monstrous position the viewer to recognise female bodies and their functions as grotesque. Films such as *Carrie* (1976) and *Alien* (1979), for instance, portray women as monstrous in association with menstrual blood and birthing imagery. Creed argues, in line with Kristeva that ‘menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman’s life which have placed her on the side of the abject. It is woman’s fertilizable body which aligns her with nature and threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order’ (1993: 50). For Creed, the female body ‘carries a strong element of the grotesque’ (1993: 50), whereas ‘the male body signifies form and integrity’ (1993: 49).

Certainly the grotesque has also been uncritically associated with the feminine. Bakhtin links the grotesque in carnival culture with ‘the lower bodily stratum’ (1968: 12) and, in his description of Rabelais’ world, delineates the upper and lower stratum of the body along gender lines: he states that ‘downward is earth, and upward is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb)’ (1968: 21). Heaven is the element of idealised perfection and is associated with the face or head, which patriarchy also associates with rational thought and masculinity. Bakhtin links Earth with the lower parts of the body—the genitals, the belly and the buttocks—key body parts that open to the exterior in ways that betray the classical impregnable male body. He also associates Earth with the female body, which is the antithesis of the ideal and rational mind; it leaks (blood), swells and heaves (in childbirth), and fluctuates in size, shape and smell.

Wolfgang Kayser, in his examination of the grotesque in art and literature, argues the grotesque ‘contradicts the very laws which rule our familiar world’ (1981: 31). The grotesque

points to the forbidden and dangerous. However, as the association of the grotesque with nature and maternity suggests, the grotesque also has a generative power. Bakhtin argues that the grotesque has ‘an element of birth, of renaissance (the maternal breasts)’ (1968: 21) so that once the subject is lowered to its earthly position it reaches ‘the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place’ (1968:21). It is in this sense that contemporary feminist literature takes possession of the grotesque female body and reconceives it as powerful.

Why is the grotesque funny?

A stimulus that does not make sense and that poses no danger to the viewer, for example a woman giving birth to a man in a suit, causes laughter. When an incongruous stimulus, like a grotesque image, signals a playful mode, we respond to the shock with pleasure rather than fear. Andrew Stott (2005) states that ‘the grotesque could be described as an embodiment of the abject. A form of humorous monstrosity devised for satiric purposes, the grotesque marries the repulsive and the comic’ (2005: 87). The humorous grotesque functions in distinct ways: it can focus attention on a wrong and induce resistance, it can create a cohesive cooperation within a group, and it can create solidarity amongst an oppressed group.

However, while the grotesque formations bring delight in their playful silliness, the nonsense is never complete. Wolfgang Kayser suggests that grotesque images disturb ‘cultural order by depicting life not only as playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister’ (1981: 21). A humorous response to the grotesque helps to distance the viewer from what could be a terrifying realisation about themselves because no matter how far the grotesque exceeds *us*, the dark and horrible other that we see in the grotesque is a reflection of our natural mortal bodies.

The human body is a site for grotesque humour because there is a tension between the idealised complete body, and the abject body and its functions represented by the genitals, the anus, urine, blood, vomit, and excrement. Laughter, mockery and satire relieve the fear of mortality that the abject body incites—at the same time that laughter itself ironically emphasizes the grotesque body. Stott makes precisely this point in regards to women’s laughter and the grotesque. He argues that women ‘have been systematically denied the power to be funny’ (2005, p. 99), especially because ‘comedy is culturally associated with a degree of sexual openness’ (p. 99). As a result, women who are funny and especially if they are laughing are ‘fearfully bodily and biological creatures’ (p. 100) who pose a threat to ‘the ideals of beauty and romance transposed onto women by men’ (p. 100). In other words, the laughing woman is abjected as grotesque.

However, it is precisely through humour and the grotesque that women are challenging patriarchal norms in powerful feminist literature. The social structure can never completely ignore the abjected female body because at the same time as threatening the patriarchal order in its opposition it also helps to define order. But when feminist literature deploys the abjected female body for its own purpose of ridiculing patriarchal standards it becomes an instrument of humour.

In the patriarchal context, the dominant voices of male culture-makers have used their privilege to name subordinates. Thus, those who name the grotesque do so as an act of power.

Stallybrass and White agree that ‘with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of power, it is they that generally gain the authority to designate what is to be taken as high and low society’ (1986: p. 4). However, marginalised groups can reappropriate the grotesque, as we see in feminist literature, through transgressive strategies of political irony, anti-hierarchical condescension or satiric wit. Nancy Walker, in her book on irony and fantasy in feminist literature, makes a clear connection between humour and negation of power of the dominant. She states that ‘pointing to the absurdity of the official languages of a culture is a method used commonly by members of oppressed groups’ (1995: p.4). Feminist literature, to which I will now turn, resists the power of horror that unconscious patriarchal structures locate in the grotesque female body, often using humour to make explicit and ridicule the androcentric bias of the social order. Walker, who probes women’s revisionary narratives, uses the term ‘disobedient’ to describe feminist writing. She suggests that women writers who resist traditional representation are claiming language at the same time as acknowledging the tradition that excluded them (p.3).

Angela Carter’s *Nights at the circus* is a humorous feminist text that stealthily claims the language of the dominant patriarchal culture to re-envision femininity and the female body. This text demonstrate the way feminist literature uses humour to reclaim the grotesque female body as a site of power rather than disgust, and to expose and challenge the androcentric unconscious that marginalises othered subjects.

Nights at the circus

Angela Carter’s *Nights at the circus* exemplifies a humorous feminist text that empowers the female grotesque to laugh at a literary heritage that marginalises women’s subjectivity. In this text, Carter inverts the power that social norms invest in masculine authority and subverts the normative boundaries of grotesque femininity. Female flesh, wild hair, raucous laughter, and fantastic stories at the margin of credibility are the locus of power in a narrative of social transformation. Linda Hutcheon argues that works like Carter’s, ‘deconstructs and decenters patriarchal discourse’ (1994: p. 32) using strategies such as irony, metafiction, polyphony and the inversion of the grotesque.

Carter’s novel begins in a traditional narrative form but incrementally fractures polyphonically. Maria Biscaia claims that the feminist novel is a dialogic product that is polyphonic. I suggest this fracturing works to destabilise the socially constructed and abjected femininity of dominant discourse. In the first third of the novel *Fevvers*, the winged aerialist, dictates her life story to Walser, a young New York journalist who is traveling the world ‘for a series of interviews tentatively entitled: ‘Great Humbugs of the World’ (1984: p. 8). The fact that he selects *Fevvers* as his initial humbug relays to the reader that he has the authority to determine the truth about women, supported by a media corporation that finances him to ‘travel wherever he pleases whilst retaining the privileged irresponsibility of the journalist’ (p. 6). After this introduction to *Fevvers* and her unusual origins, the polyphonic layering begins. The narrative voice shifts from the protagonist’s first-person narrative to Walser’s internal thoughts, to Lizzie (*Fevvers*’ adoptive mother cum manager), to a first-person narrator, to a third-person narrator. Like many of Carter’s texts intertextuality also disrupts the traditional novel form because it reminds the reader that single narrative voices are not as reliable as dominant ideology would have us believe. Intertextual insertions

resonate with texts that come before them; disruption plunders other marginalised voices for its purpose.

At the heart of Carter's text is the disruptive polyphonic fracturing of the single misogynistic voice of patriarchy. Carter ironically appropriates the power that patriarchal laws governing femininity deploy when it names the gargantuan female body. Her grotesque protagonist rather than inciting disgust is a physically desirable gargantuan female. Carter endows Fevvers with a cornucopia of grotesque body parts and behaviours: an extraordinary raucous and metallic voice, a larger than life body, enormous feet, teeth as big and carnivorous as Red Riding Hood's grandmother, gargantuan enthusiasm, and table manners of the Elizabethan variety.

Fevvers seems to relish her gargantuan body and knows that it acts as an aphrodisiac for rich and powerful men. Before a performance, when 'she dropped her wrap and donned her plumed topknot, it was as though a huge, not altogether friendly bird appeared among them. She cast a glance at the opulence reflected in the mirror, admired her own bosom. In the auditorium, they demanded her' (1984: p.211). Walser, although not rich, is one of these powerful men. He is overawed by Fevvers' embodiment, but she 'ignore[s] his discomfiture' (p.5) during the distillation of her tale. She 'yawn[s] with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark ... and then she stretche[s] herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does' to which Walser 'confronted by stubbled, thickly powdered armpits, felt faint; God! She could easily crush him to death in her huge arms' (p. 57). Carter names Fevvers a marvellous giantess, she has 'gargantuan enthusiasm' (p. 21), and when she shakes Walser's hand as they depart after the night of storytelling she has 'a strong, firm, masculine grip' (p. 103). This text represents the feminine as independent, in solidarity with other women, and physically powerful. Inherent in the power is a beautiful grotesque that defies masculine objectification.

Irony works hand-in-hand with polyphony to continue the disruption of the grotesque female body. In this way, Carter opens up the concept of the grotesque or abject female body to a different meaning. Linda Hutcheon theorises irony as occurring at the edge of what she names communities. These discursive communities overlap and involve transmission and reception of intended ironies. She suggests that when two concepts come together they create a third meaning which is relational to both. This third meaning is ironic and involves 'the oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings' (1994: p. 66). I argue that when feminist literature deploys irony as a narrative strategy for claiming language it challenges the dominant ideology, and Hutcheon states that 'for those positioned *within* a dominant ideology, such a contesting might be seen as abusive or threatening; for those marginalized and working to undo that dominance, it might be **subversive** or **transgressive**' (p.52 bold in original). The irony in this feminist text plunders the dominant ideology's meaning of the female grotesque and infers a new meaning that disrupts the power relations inherent in the ideology.

Fevvers embodies those characteristics earlier described as grotesque: she is part woman, part animal; she performs acts of superhuman ability; she has oversized limbs, eyes, mouth, and bottom; and she gorges on food and champagne. Nevertheless, her male audience finds her hyperbolic body, desirable rather than grotesque. However, Fevvers' otherness is ironically refocused as the subject of the narrative rather than the object of the masculine gaze. Carter

succeeds in doing this in more than one way. She crafts language to recast traditional positions of power that I will explore in the next paragraph, and she refuses to represent marginalised characters as powerless; for example, she empowers Fevvers to recognise and flee the entrapment of the powerful men she encounters in the novel.

Ironically, Carter takes a powerful gendered language and turns it on itself. The narrator craftily twists meaning and interrupts expectations when she describes Fevvers dressing room: 'the room, in all, was a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor' (1986, p.8). We associate filth and disease with squalor. But what is feminine squalor? Could it be bloodstained underwear? Or is it the used accoutrements of a female performer? Whatever it is the narrator borrows the authority inferred in the word 'masterpiece' and transfers it to 'mistresspiece' elevating grotesque femininity to the higher status equivalent to a masterpiece. Additionally, in describing Fevvers manner after she has let 'a ripping fart ring round the room' (p. 8) the narrator wonders at her 'bonhomme—bonfemmerie?' (p. 8) as though testing the reader's willingness to reimagine the pejorative French term, 'bonne femme'-old woman, and to instead consider applying the masculine 'bon homme'-good man to the character. Carter recasts gendered language that names the female grotesque with an authorial intrusion that destabilises the dominant cultural norms governing language.

The female voices in this text satirise the dominant cultural expectations of femininity. It is possible to read this text as an acerbic rejoinder to Coventry Patmore's nineteenth-century poem 'Angel in the house' (1854). In this poem, Patmore's idealised woman is domestic, docile, obedient, and angelic. Carter, however, creates an altogether different angel in the house. Her protagonist has the wings of an angel but none of the docility and blind obedience. Carter favours a larger-than-life aerialist whose physicality opposes Patmore's suffocating feminine attributes. At the age of seven, Fevvers' guardians notice little downy buds on her shoulder blades and at once declare her 'Cupid! Why, here's our very own Cupid in the living flesh!' (p. 22). Fevvers explains to Walser in her dressing room how she first 'earned her crust' (p. 22) sitting in the alcove of the drawing-room of the brothel house in which she was living where she literally became the angel in the whorehouse—'the guardian cherub of the house' (p. 23). The ironic twist is that this 'angel' rises beyond the roof of the house and literally flies away from domesticity and servitude.

The polyphonic strategy works metafictionally to draw out voices that have created, as Judith Butler describes, a 'discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (1993: 13). The refusal in Carter's text to reiterate one single view of gender, which challenges the reiterative performance of gender that Judith Butler and later Pierre Bourdieu (2001) discuss, is itself a grotesque act that invites the reader to laugh at rigid social constructs.

The monstrous feminine, in the terms that Barbara Creed defines it, forms part of Carter's project that acknowledges that in the dominant culture men objectify women who become a consumable product. Rather than passive acceptance of the consumable woman, Carter represents Fevvers as a woman who consumes on a grotesque scale; she represents a fearful and dangerous model that shatters fixed notions of passive consumable femininity.

Fevvers portrays confidence independence, entrepreneurial initiative, greed, and self-determination on gargantuan scale even to the point of endangerment. Her greed blinds her sense of self-preservation when she enters a transaction with a Grand Duke: she offers him a chance to experience her exotic body in exchange for diamonds to match the bracelet and

earrings he has already gifted her. In the marble halls of the Grand Duke's mansion she 'smiles like a predator' and tells herself 'Here comes Property Redistribution Inc. to take away your diamonds, Grand Duke' (1986, p. 218). But, Fevvers finds the Grand Duke's wealth and manner disgusting; he 'pressed his bearded mouth to the palm, giving her a sensation of hot, wet, turbulent, unpleasant hairiness' (p. 217). The reader both laughs at and finds grotesque the romanticised exchange that is traditional romances represent as a desirable outcome for any woman. Carter refuses to adhere to the traditional storyline of the beautiful passive woman who submits to the wealthy older man. Before Fevvers is overwhelmed by greed for the Grand Duke's riches, 'she contemplated life as a toy' (p. 225), an object of the Grand Duke's desire, and with 'the bitter knowledge that she'd been fooled' (p. 226) she forgoes the dazzling riches he owns and returns to her freedom with her loving mother Lizzie.

The grotesque points to the forbidden and dangerous and in a patriarchal society it has been uncritically associated with women's bodies. Revisionist feminist literature appropriates the abjected female body, the repository of this fear, and inverts the power structures that name it. The disobedient writer negates the power of the dominant authority. Humour and narrative strategies such as irony, satire, polyphony and metafiction create new meaning. Humour alleviates the shock of the horror invested in the grotesque body and polyphony and metafiction disrupt the traditional novel. At the heart of Angela Carter's text is the disruptive polyphonic fracturing of the single misogynistic voice of patriarchy. Carter appropriates the power that patriarchal laws governing femininity deploy when it names the grotesque female body.

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