



# Pornography, Ethics and Feminine Writing. A Study of Angela Carter's "Polemical Preface"

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## Pornography, Ethics and Feminine Writing.

### A Study of Angela Carter's "Polemical Preface"

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Angela Carter is a self-proclaimed champion of "demythologization," which means roughly that she does not use myth as a lore of meaning-making patterns but as a means to denounce mythology's androcentric assumptions. This "revisionist" feature of Carter's feminist writing proceeds from what might be called an "ethical requirement." "Ethics" I take to mean what the French philosopher Alain Badiou sees as a refusal to conform to an order of things, for the sake of "a fidelity to a truth" (38). It should be immediately noted that Badiou prefers the vague formula "a truth" to the age-old concept of "Truth," which normally conveys the idea of an absolute form of knowledge which, by definition, cannot be challenged, let alone be duplicated. Greek philosophy has words for such disruptions of the order of "Truth": the sophists use only "phantasmata" of Truth. Like Badiou, Carter is very reluctant to admit into her system of thinking the existence of "Truth," which of course does not mean that she is not trying at the same time to be "true" to a cause. For her, simply, "Truth" is no longer conducted to us through myths, whose "fictionality" is therefore systematically exposed as a funny ragbag of old men's tales—phantasms. As we all know, the ethical stance of her writing grounds itself on this playful reworking of myth, on this "re-vision" of the mythical heritage, a "revision" which should therefore be granted two acceptations: 1) the revisionist process implies that a different perspective may be thrown on the world of intersubjective relationships; 2) the revisionist process implies the possibility of a

rewriting of those selfsame intersubjective relations into different patterns of meaning.

This is precisely where the ethical standpoint articulates itself on a practice of writing which I suggest we content ourselves with calling "feminine writing," despite the well-known contentiousness of the phrase. But my major ambition is precisely to reread Carter's text *in context*, without importing concepts from the late nineties into a scriptural system conceived in the late seventies. Carter will then appear, I hope, as an outstanding theoretician, exploring areas that contemporary critics are only beginning to discover,<sup>1</sup> while at the same time proving capable of *effectuating things* through her own words. Let me recapitulate my initial argument with care: the revisionist nature of writing challenges the accepted order of things, as emplotted by mythology, and seeks to express a fidelity to "a truth." This, in fact, implies five crucial propositions, which my paper would like to develop: 1) the order of things is a sexual order which mythology has always legitimized; 2) the first proposition implies a corollary: the order of things is in fact *an effect* of myth, a product of discourse. Intersubjective relationships—the play of sexual difference itself—is a discursive reality; 3) the "ethical stance" which characterizes the two preceding propositions does not conceive of "revision" as the substitution of one "Truth" for another "Truth." Carter's writing will deny itself a consecrated ground from which to condemn interpretations as false or non-valid. She knows it is all a matter of interpretations, or of "visions," which are all equally plausible. Myth cannot be condemned from an exterior standpoint, since we are always already within a linguistic reality. There is no dissociating ethics and its "truth" from its "visionary" quality; 4) Carter knows in fact there is no dissociating myth from literature, or literature from myth: the ethical displacement implied by the work of "demythologization" can only consist in a literary event, and more precisely in a rhetorical game.

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<sup>1</sup> I have in mind Judith Butler's remarkable essay on "the politics of the performative" in *Excitable Speech*.

Carter's "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman*<sup>2</sup> is mainly concerned with pornography. The "Preface" signals itself as "polemical" given the cultural context of the day which Carter is obviously highly aware of (the text is published by Virago in the late seventies): indeed, what Carter has to say concerning pornography runs up against the feminist *doxa*, which sees pornography as one of the most blatant symptoms of the phallogocentric functioning of society. Pornography not only exploits women; it dehumanizes them by transforming them into commodities, objects for sale. Carter's very first sentence does ring like the *doxic* repetition of such an analysis: "Pornographers are the enemies of women..." (3). But then Carter completes her sentence in a way that nearly contradicts the first segment while at the same time providing the beginning of an explanation to the full title of the Preface ("Polemical Preface: Pornography in the Service of Women"). The rest of the sentence runs as follows:

Pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily an expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practices but never a part of it.

If I read the rest of the sentence aright, what is implied here is that it is not pornography as such which should be indicted, but the perpetuation of a certain practice of pornography. What Carter unambiguously condemns, therefore, is the ideology that constrains the practical effectuations of sexual relations, an ideology which precludes pornographers from *revisioning* the order of things. Like Roland Barthes a few years before, Carter is not disgusted by the obscenity of the representation; nor is she offended by the commodification of woman: what fascinates her here is the semiotic issue involved (Barthes: 1994 1136). In other words, pornography is the enemy of women only insofar as it is part of a global system of

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<sup>2</sup> All further references in the paper to the Virago Press, 1979 edition.

meaning-making through which social positions are forcibly assigned to human agents. Her theory is very clear on this point: pornography does not produce exploitation; the social system it is, rather, that produces a certain form of pornography. Pornography is only one specific expression of subjectification, or of "interpellation" at a given place as Althusser would probably have put it—the term "ideology" clearly raises the possibility of such a reference.<sup>3</sup> But Carter is very close to Barthes again: pornography functions like a "myth," insofar as it expresses a given order to whose production it also contributes. For the principal function of myth, according to Barthes, is to "naturalize," *i.e.* to transform into an inescapable set of "facts" what has always already been a system of values, historically dated. Myths emerge in order to transform history into "Nature": they give the illusion that contemporary social practices are in fact inscribed within a natural order of things (Barthes: 1957 193).

Here, Carter goes one step beyond. What Barthes seems to fail to see is that this order of things is inevitably constrained by gendric relations. Carter is this time much nearer to Michel Foucault. She does not consider that it is sexuality which conditions social practices, or intersubjective relations: sexuality is only an effect of strategies of power (Foucault: 1976 *passim*). Sexual difference results from a mass of discourses which all ensure that one class, or one gender, dictates their vision of things to the other. In short, sexuality itself is an effect of discourse, a myth, and therefore a fiction, or to be more precise a semiological system. For Carter, a caricatural symbol of this discursive strategy is the pictorial representation of sexual intercourse on the walls of public lavatories. It appears that this "universal language of lust" (4) signifies masculinity through a penis in erection and femininity through a gaping hole, as if it were in the nature of things that the masculine principle should be represented by a form of affirmation and the feminine principle by "an inert space," "like a mouth waiting to be filled" (4). Sexuality is "mythologized" when it is

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<sup>3</sup> See "Marxisme et humanisme" in *Pour Marx*.



constrained by such ideological representations of sexual difference which take it for granted that masculinity should be active and femininity passive, when the most basic representation of sexual intercourse itself obeys a prescriptive discourse which distributes functions and positions in an imperative, quasi "natural" manner.

The most interesting point here is of course that pornography is placed outside the field of morality. Pornographic representation is a matter of semiotics. To represent woman by nothing but "a fringed hole" (4) and man by nothing but "the probe"—"his prick" (4)—is not simply to reproduce an anatomical difference. It is to coin specific markers of masculinity and femininity, which of course implies the use of a specific language. The rhetorical dimension of obscene graffiti is obvious here: both sexes are linguistically constructed thanks to a well-known trope, which consists in substituting the part for the whole. This is the case of the synecdoche, a form of metonymy. This rhetorical strategy fulfils its ideological function perfectly: it is a technique of power since femininity will make sense only insofar as it is related to the signifier of masculinity. The male organ is here to fill the hole, the nothingness of femininity, to which it functions not only as a complement but also as an essential justification. As Carter bluntly puts it:

Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning. (4)

What Carter is mainly concerned with is this "metonymic" positioning of femininity, whose existence can only be legitimized by the presence of the other signifier, or the signifier of the other, without which woman's right to existence seems to be denied. What is far less obvious, I think, are the fictional implications of this purely, and almost philosophical, investigation. For if femininity cannot come to full presence before her compulsory reference to the male principle is made clear, it follows that femininity cannot exist as long as it is not integrated into *a story*. Indeed, as in all congruent stories, there is a beginning—the meaningless hole—, a middle—the

sudden appearance of "the probe"—, and an end—the mouth is bound to be filled. Such "a myth of patience and receptivity" (5) assigns femininity to residence both temporally and spatially. On a spatial plane, femininity is on the side of the static and the dead: it is inert, passive matter, offered up to masculine exploitation. On a temporal plane, femininity exists only as a non-agent, waiting to be animated and granted a structural significance only through the providential intervention of the filling agent. Both temporally and spatially, femininity's presence to the world is perceived as something-in-waiting. Her truth, the revelation of her true essence is therefore of a storied nature: her "nature" is in fact articulated along a *chronotope* which subjects her to the law of the other.<sup>4</sup> We begin to see the relation between Carter the essayist and Carter the novelist: femininity is produced by a narrative strategy, characterized by the use of specific tropes. There is a *mythos* of woman's presence to the world and position among the other humans. A woman's "self" (4) is not a pure, transcendental reality, but the mythical conjugation of a rhetorical effect and of a plot (again, in Aristotelian terminology, a *mythos*). For the synecdoche is not simply a figure of speech: it is also the promise of a story, in which femininity is to be denied centre stage; her "true nature" belongs to a future with no ultimate *telos*. The signifier is always already caught within an endless chain of metonymic appearances whose ultimate referent is bound to be for ever deferred. This is what Carter calls the "mythic generation of femininity" (4-5): how femininity is produced by a discourse that emplots her at a given place.

It now becomes easier to understand why Carter polemically refuses to condemn pornography as such. What she really contests is a certain caricatural emplotment and stylisation of femininity—what she aptly calls the "mythic generation of femininity"—as it expresses itself notably in low-rate pornography, and certainly not, as the principal essay of the *Sadeian Woman* makes it clear, in Sade's novels. But one should also note that Carter is not trying

<sup>4</sup> The term is of course borrowed from Bakhtin. For a clear definition of the term, see Holquist : 1990 109-110.

here to defend a literary canon. For example, it seems that for her there is very little difference between what is offensively scrawled on a urinal wall and what is officially consecrated in an academic assignment including the story of Oedipus (22-23). This very interesting parallel, contentious as it may appear, enables us to understand what Carter really means by "demythologization." What she has in mind, I shall now try to demonstrate, is a *revision* of femininity, or rather what I choose to call, following in the steps of a short remark once made in passing by Jacques Derrida, *an operation of the feminine* (Derrida: 1978 43-44).

A detour through a later article, "Notes from the Front Line" (1983), will prove necessary here.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Carter returns to her previous indictment of "the social fictions that condition our lives" (38). What becomes much more explicit, however, is the importance she now grants to the practice of writing itself, not only to the intellectual deconstruction of the process of "mythic generation." The famous novelist she has now become, who is also already busy writing *Nights at the Circus* (1985), suddenly chooses to sketch a self-portrait of the feminine artist. This is her notorious declaration: "I'm in the demythologizing business" (38). The critic is very often content with this short, frustrating formula, which paradoxically enough is very rarely commented upon. Let us read the text carefully. A few lines further down, Carter explains that "writing fiction as a woman" should consist in striving to free oneself from the myths inherited from the androcentric or phallogentric tradition. So far, so good. But Carter immediately introduces a slightly disturbing notion: "writing fiction as a woman" should consist in seeking to produce a new vision of femininity, a revision of femininity, which, according to her, can only be the business of the "creative artist" (38). The revision of femininity demanded by the demythologized consciousness is in fact a process of creation, and this process it is that, drawing on Derrida's careful distinction between "femininity" and "the feminine," I call "the

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<sup>5</sup> Reproduced in A. Carter, *Shaking a Leg. Collected Journalism and Writings*. All further references to this edition.



operation of the feminine." What is clear now is that Carter's programme of "demythologization" concerns primarily creativity, *i.e.* a *linguistic operation*. By operation I of course understand: 1) the construction and operation of a work of art, of a semiotic arrangement; 2) an act of surgery performed on a patient, who is then given a chance of articulating "the feminine." The patient is obviously language, which according to Carter should be "decolonized" (22). What the reader is supposed to understand here is not very clear, but what is manifest once more is that Carter cannot divorce the idea of an operation of the feminine from a linguistic operation: the artist cannot rest content with publicly denouncing inequalities, criticizing existing structures of feeling, or even displaying her capacities as a feminist semiotician. She must act, force the enemy out, reappropriate a vital space. But the feminine does not precede the action; it proceeds from it. The decolonizer must write the feminine. In pragmatic terms, *she must produce the feminine, or effectuate it*. She must find a linguistic posture ("writing *as* a woman"), invent a semiotic position, which demands that she produce new ways of meaning-making. In other words, what is implied is that the decolonization of discourse should have the capacity to reinscribe the experience of sexual difference within a new system of relations between the signifiers, within a new *mythos* of differentiation, within a *new fiction* of difference. This is how Carter sums up the operation:

I personally feel much more in common with certain Third World writers, both female and male, who are transforming actual fiction forms to both reflect *and* precipitate changes in the way people feel about themselves—putting new wine in old bottles and, in some cases, old wine in new bottles. (42)

What emerges from the first segment of the quotation is that there is no essentially "feminine writing." There are only minorities, both female and male, whose business it is to operate changes in perceptions of the self and in intersubjective relations. What matters for Carter therefore is rather a positioning of the self, a posture, a *process of subjectification*, which is dictated neither by biology nor

by culture, but by the effect of fiction. To transform fiction, Carter explicitly remarks, is also to change structures of feeling and forms of intersubjectivity. Writing "precipitates changes." In my own formulation, the feminine is operated through writing, through the invention of another posture in the world constructed by semiotic relations. Of the means required in view of this poetic achievement, Carter gives apparently no clear indication. My contention it is that everything is already in the way the message is formulated. In fact, I take the end of the quotation to be a crucial clue in Carter's theory of writing.

Let us note first that in order to illustrate her theory she uses a metaphor, or rather a complex metaphorical cluster: "putting new wine in old bottles and . . . old wine in new bottles." I choose to leave aside the overtones of swindling implied in the image—a choice that deliberately takes me away from the issues of commodification of mythology and therefore from one of the most common features of postmodernist criticism today—in order to concentrate on *the inner workings* of the image. A quick reading of this cryptic formula will give the unfortunate impression that Carter seeks in fact to reactivate the age-old distinction between form and contents, or container and contained. Arguably, the "new wine" of the first metaphor may stand for new forms of amorous play, and the "old bottle" may very well refer to the traditional forms of literary production likely to accommodate such "revisions." In the same spirit, the "new bottles" of the second metaphor would stand for the new forms of expression available on the contemporary literary market, and the "old wine" would then refer to classic intersubjective relations. This interpretation of Carter's text may appear acceptable, but to me it seems to be totally irrelevant. First, the metaphorical cluster conjugates two rhetorical devices which we should normally expect to be firmly dissociated: the two metaphors imply a metonymic form of association which is now intellectually unacceptable. We remember of course Carter's strong diffidence about synecdoches. As we all know, a synecdoche is used to mean the whole through the part, but also sometimes the container for the contained, and vice versa. In Carter's formula, it is expected that the

contained take on its true meaning from its relation of contiguity to the container, in the way the single organ used to refer to the whole body in one of the very first sections of this paper. Here, however, this type of association is exposed as curiously disjunctive. We are all ready to accept by now the idea that the pornographic graffiti function on a relation of necessary complementariness between the two signifiers. I am afraid it seems highly questionable—and I hope this is not taken as a typical form of French prejudice—that an old wine will owe its specificity to a new bottle; and I am equally afraid that a new wine will not see its characteristics changed by being poured into an old bottle. In other words, no “mythic” system of meaning will help us here. This is not only solid (French) common sense: Barthes used to repeat that mythic explanations are always stalemated whenever the language of the maker or the language of the producer makes itself heard. The maker knows that myths will not do when real work is required. Interestingly, Barthes defines this kind of practical language as a “revolutionary” intervention of the maker (Barthes: 1957 234): the revolutionary knows that things do not always fall into mythically predetermined patterns and that sometimes pragmatic operations produce a truth obscured by mythic discourse.

The revolution Carter seems to be concerned with does not of course imply physical action: she knows one can do things with words. She knows that her ethical rejection of mythic explanations of femininity may produce a “truth,” a fictional truth of course, “the feminine,” whose pragmatic impact may be as great as any other action, and to which some readers and critics will try to express their fidelity. In fact, her complex nexus of incongruous metaphors engages the reader to think differently, to break free from myth, and finally to produce a new fiction of the self and of intersubjectivity. The fiction the reader is thus expected to produce in the act of reading is one that violently disrupts the mythology of metonymic relations. For, in violation of all the most basic laws of (French) oenology, each of Carter’s disturbing metaphors pulverizes the classical notion of the metaphor as a “borrowed container”: instead, she suggests an impossible truth, something like a qualitative



porosity between the container and the contained. The old container transfigures the new liquid, the old liquid is transfigured by being rebottled—a miraculous, purely pragmatic event which establishes a form of fluidity between the signifiers. In other words, the metonymic relation seems to be contaminated by a more modern metaphorical principle, according to which poetic might can only be produced through the dynamic agonistic interaction of two signifiers.<sup>6</sup> The reader is therefore invited to imagine this extremely puzzling case: form may change the very nature of things; conversely the contained may transform the shape of the container, in a kind of amorous play in which all strategies of power have been abolished. What remains is a linguistic game, which operates as a play of instability and interchangeability.

What the rhetorical and pragmatic logic of Carter's text invites the interpreter to think is that a "demythologization" of sexual difference can only rest on a semiotic achievement, that a revisionist rejection of traditional assignments to residence can only take place in the sphere of linguistic games. This "tropical" indictment of pornography and semiotic rehabilitation of Sade could only run up against the Anglo-Saxon feminist *doxa* of the day. Seen from such an angle (one that is undoubtedly influenced by the French philosophy of the late sixties and early seventies), pornography is not morally condemnable: it simply makes visible the truth of gendric relationships. What a man does to a woman in a pornographic film is another version of what inscribes itself universally on urinal walls—the metonymic positioning of femininity. If pornography has not changed, it is simply because it has failed to acknowledge the possibility that techniques and strategies of power could be redefined (17). For Carter, pornography is a metaphor of intersubjective relations that has forgotten its metaphorical quality, and that has therefore perpetuated a "mythology": pornography is a metaphor that has ended up taking the metonymic representation of femininity for the

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Ducrot and Todorov: 1977 350 ff.

truth of femininity. Here, we are very close to what seems to be the major philosophical assumption of Carter's essay: that the myth of femininity thrives on the effacement of metaphorical consciousness, an effacement which gives metonymy free rein to pass for the truth of gendric relations. This is what fascinates Carter in her analysis of Sade's literature. Sade's pornography refuses the mythic dimension of gendric positioning. His pornography is therefore moral:

The moral pornographer would be an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. (19)

When positions are redistributed by linguistic games, when postures break free from myth, pornography can be revolutionary: in other words, a revisionary exercise in the service of women.

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