

Angela Carter's "John Ford's 'Tis A Pity She's A Whore": A Schizoid Text

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It seems that a great part of postmodern fiction is a rewriting of well-known texts belonging to the bulk of Western tradition, and it also seems that this corresponds to a general shift in the arts occurred by the nineteen-sixties, related to a thorough questioning of two modernist premises: the rejection of mimesis as informing the work of art, and the elevation of formalist ideals to primary aesthetic principles. Literature after the sixties turned back to representationality, but it did not produce the kind of mimesis praised and practised by nineteenth-century Realism. Certainly, it was not an innocent return because it possessed a revolutionary component, in the sense that now the objects to be represented already existed as represented objects and the reader was made aware of that confusion between projection and the real object. Literature, as well as other products meant for cultural consumption, stopped being concerned with inventing new stories, new characters, new plots, and began to pay attention to the way in which the world projected by other narratives was constructed.¹

This shift of interest brought about a tendency to quote, to paraphrase, or to rework previous styles or works, and, as a consequence, writers got into the habit of creating complex texts in which the conventions of different genres collapse, in which the discourses of theory and practise are juxtaposed, and the opposition between high and popular dissolves. The result was the appearance of literary works which were, on the one hand, self-reflexive and metafictional in form, and, historically grounded, on the other, since this revisitation of already written texts was concerned with an ironic, parodic and critical revision of the past.

This revision of the past is also markedly political, because the stories and images created in this new light are not neutral, though they might sometimes seem so 'aestheticized' as to take the risk of being regarded as mere narcissistic products.² They are political because they become the site for a new preoccupation with power and domination, and prin-

¹ This characteristic of the contemporary world is commented on and defined by Baudrillard with his concept of the simulacrum: "The very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*. . . . There used to be, before, a specific class of allegorical and slightly diabolical objects: mirrors, images, works of art (concepts?)—simulacra, but transparent and manifest (you didn't confuse the counterfeit with the original), that had their characteristic style and *savoir-faire*. And pleasure consisted then rather in discovering the 'natural' in what was artificial and counterfeit. Today, when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the aesthetic fascinations is everywhere" (Waugh 186-188).

² Linda Hutcheon discusses the question of the political goal of these products arguing that the recurrent use of irony and parody informs one of the most relevant features of the postmodern age which is its involvement with a de-naturalizing critique. Through this de-familiarization of the natural consensus about social, cultural and political relations and systems postmodernism works within an undeniable political ground.

cipally with the ideological bias of language as forming ourselves. This is the way in which the arguments of postmodernism are politically useful for feminists: as Craig Owen said, “it is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorises certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others. . . . Here, we arrive at an apparent crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation” (Foster 58-59). For postmodernist representation entails certain assumptions about the common-sense naturalness and the transparency of traditional mimesis as constructed by an interested, dominating and mastering subject position.³

Angela Carter’s works seem to be clearly inserted in this feminist/postmodernist cross-road: the critique of patriarchy was achieved in her novels and short stories by means of some postmodernist techniques and strategies which destabilise the ontological status of the literary work, showing the artificiality and the constructedness of every piece of representation. Carter linked the cultivation of a marginal view to feminism and socialism and even there she avoided integration into the mainstream of these movements. She took nothing at face value. Instead, her fiction showed her constantly challenging the boundaries of any received system of belief, and she was always playing the role of a kind of “cultural saboteur, using her writing to blow up comfortable assumptions and habitual patterns of thought” (Gamble 4).⁴

In terms of form, her texts proposed a view of fiction as a composite in-between fantasy and analysis, allegory and rationalism. In this sense, it is evident that she cultivated an increasing interest in the defamiliarization of literary discourse by splitting the narrative into different ‘texts’ belonging to different realms of culture, in order to demonstrate that there is no such thing as ‘the real,’ but only representations, images and tales about reality. Moreover, being primarily a feminist, she was particularly concerned with the way in which the concept of woman had been naturalised by culture as the silenced other. This is why she shared the view of that trend in postmodernism installed in the critique of representation, since her fundamental goal was to lay bare the fictionality of feminine identity.

In the stories included in the collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, published posthumously in 1993, the narrative exploits the strategy of deconstructing legends and myths from the European heritage together with more modern imaginative constructions taken from American culture, emphasizing the fact that such stories, modern or old,

³ When Lyotard defined the concept of postmodernity in 1984 as a stage of disbelief toward metanarratives, he set the ground for a series of debates and discussions about the various narrative systems by which human culture orders and gives meaning to experience. This issue of the role of metanarratives in the discourses of knowledge is indispensable for feminist theory and criticism, as trends of resistance, since it is the basis of their critique of patriarchy and its interconnection with capitalism, imperialism and liberal humanism.

⁴ “I can date to that time and to some of those debates and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968, my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a woman. How that social fiction of my ‘femininity’ was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing. This investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives . . . is what I’ve concerned myself with consciously since that time” (Carter 70).

are equally grounded in the naturalisation of patriarchy through literary texts as well as through other cultural products as, for instance, cinema.

Among them, the story "John Ford's *'Tis A Pity She's A Whore*" makes itself significant in this ideological uncovering through a clever linguistic juxtaposition of two different texts written (one actually, the other potentially) by two different John Fords, in two different periods of history and within the conventional frames of two different genres: one being the Jacobean dramatist whose play *'Tis A Pity She's A Whore* was published in 1633, and the other, the famous American director of westerns. These two series of broken texts enriches the external narrative which tells the story of a widower living in the American prairie with a son and a daughter who grow up and awaken to sexuality together ending with the melodramatic deaths of both after the girl's pregnancy and undesired marriage. The story line is the same for the three texts—the tale, the script and the Jacobean play—but the change of discourse corresponding to a broken structure of alien paragraphs makes the tale an actual exemplification of Roland Barthes's definition of a 'text' (as different from a 'work') in his essay "The Death of the Author":

We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture. (Quoted in Marshall 122)

The literary work as a 'tissue of quotations' would be a good definition for Angela Carter's tale, but this complexity is made much more complex, if possible, due to the introduction of an obtrusive narrator in first person singular whose metafictional voice comments on some aspects of the characterization and the plot, in a way which makes it the site of the ideological and feminist critique.

Intertextuality, metafiction, fragmentation and splitting are, in a way, the things that attract the reader's attention at first sight, and the effect is to stress the materiality of every paragraph of the tale, deconstructing the very essence of literature as projection of worlds. The different texts which are juxtaposed without any other transitional element take different forms and produce an absolute break of the logical hierarchy organizing the narrative. Starting from the fact that even the authorial voice is here confuse because of the coexistence of the implicit author of the tale together with the explicit appearance of the two John Fords, to the more striking technique of introducing different names for the characters (Giovanni and Annabella, Johnny and Annie-Belle), and the addition of footnotes explaining the author's distinct strategies when representing the same action, the traditional suspension of disbelief required of the reader is here absolutely impossible, because he/she is trapped by the clash of discourses and does not know if he/she is reading a tale, a piece of criticism, a Jacobean play or a script for a western.

The transgression in the coherence of the narrative elements derives from the narrator's status in metafictional texts, which in no moment behaves as a cohesive element, but rather seems to change from one status to the other, reinforcing the idea of alien texts united without formal connectors. From the apparent absence of narrator within the discourses of the

play and the script, the reader has to move to the narrator of the tale proper, which is always shifting:

- (a) taking the role typical of the fairy tales:

There was a rancher had two children, a son and then a daughter. A while after that his wife died and was buried under two sticks nailed together to make a cross because there was no time, yet, to carve a stone. (20)

- (b) commenting on questions outside the world of fiction:

America begins and ends in the cold and solitude. Up here, she pillows her head upon the Arctic snow. Down there, she dips her feet in the chilly waters of the South Atlantic, home of the perpetually restless albatross. America, with her torso of a woman at the time of this story, a woman with an hour-glass waist, a waist laced so tightly it snapped in two. And we put a belt of water there. America, with your child-bearing hips and your crotch of jungle, your swelling bosom of a nursing mother and your cold head, your cold head. . . . When I say the two children of the prairie . . . were the pure children of the continent, you know at once that they were *norteamericanos*, or I would not speak of them in the English language, which was their language, the language that silences the babble of this continent's multitude of tongues. (21)

- (c) taking the traditional omniscient perspective:

Since his wife died, the rancher spoke rarely. They lived far out of town. He had no time for barn-raising and church suppers. If she had lived, everything would have been different, but he occupied his spare moments in chiselling her gravestone. They did not celebrate Thanksgiving for he had nothing for which to give thanks. It was a hard life. (22)

- (d) making striking questions which have no answers, implying the narrator's loss of control over the narrative:

What did the girl think? In summer, of the heat, and how to keep flies out of the butter; in winter, of the cold. I do not know what else she thought. (23)

- (e) inserting a metatext commenting on the tale:

It is the boy—or young man, rather—who is the most mysterious to me. The eagerness with which he embraces his fate. I imagine him mute or well nigh mute; he is the silent type, his voice creaks with disuse. He turns the soil, he breaks the wills of the beautiful horses, he milks the cows, he works the land, he toils and sweats. His work consists of the vague, undistinguished 'work' of such folks in the movies. . . . And I imagine him with an intelligence nourished only by the black book of the father, and hence cruelly circumscribed, yet dense with allusion, seeing himself as a kind of Adam and she his unavoidable and irreplaceable Eve, the unique companion of the wilderness. (25-26)

- (f) discrediting and negating what has happened before:

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY

(Close up) Johnny and Annie-Belle kiss.

"Love Theme" up.

Dissolve.

No. It wasn't like that! Not in the least like that. (24)

(g) correcting some sentences:

The light, the unexhausted light of North America that, filtered through celluloid, will become the light by which we see America looking at itself. Correction: will become the light by which we see *North* America looking at itself. (29)

This way of managing the narrative, constructing what Brian McHale calls a *schizoid text* as regards the impossibility of reading it in a linear and traditional way, shows the materiality of texts, the materials which are not to be confounded with the reality they help to represent. So the reader is forced to manipulate these materials in order to grasp some meaning, and with this effort he/she also realizes the absence of a unique subject position, above all, because the reader can easily feel a clash of perspectives in the act of reading, a clash corresponding to an opposition of gender. Thus, the narrative is split into at least two types of representation: the one naturalizing the patriarchal myths about what means to be a woman, significantly embodied in the two texts written by male authors, and the other practising a feminist critique of representation, achieved by means of the narrator of the tale proper which assumes the role of demythologizing the identities created by the other texts: when the script presents the reality of the prairie as some ideal pastoral scene with shots showing the beauty of the landscape, the narrator introduces the other side of the scene by telling how hard this girl works to attend her father and son; when the piece of music called 'Love Theme' is said to start, the narrator inserts the issue of sexuality as invalidating this ideal representation of the couple's relationship. This corresponds to an evolution in Carter's career related to the creation of an emphatically female narrator, presenting the world of the text from a female subject position. The irony achieved through the male and female perspective clashing one against the other shows the gap open by patriarchy between male constructs about 'The Woman' and the silenced voice of women's experience.

It seems to be evident, in the light of this idea, that Angela Carter's selection of texts to be revisited is not at all innocent, and the two share a visible ideological background. On the one hand, Westerns belong to a highly formal code with a strong patriarchal bias, invented as a kind of male epic where women are even less than secondary characters, and John Ford's approach to the formula produced the same celebration of the male hero plus a visible touch of sentimentalized domesticity; on the other, the Jacobean play is also given to sensationalism and can be considered as leading towards the melodramatic effects so typical in the films meant for women in the history of the movies (melodramas, for example). Both products naturalize women as suffering characters, secondary, of course, and objects of male desire.

It is, to sum up, by means of the rewriting of these cultural products with the aid of some postmodernist techniques and strategies that this author is putting into practise her feminist agenda. So I can argue that as theories of resistance, postmodernism and feminism share a key project: the reinterpretation and critical reworking of history, the rejection of the past as a set of facts which we can be innocently recovered through texts and the questioning of the cultural products that have manipulated the way in which we apprehend ourselves. By juxtaposing old and new products of our culture, as the seventeenth-century play and the twentieth-century western, Angela Carter highlights that things have not changed so

much, that the same stories are at the core of pieces taken from high and low culture as well as from literature and other discursive products, and that these same stories are told and retold again throughout the history of Western culture so that, as Carter says, they have been fictionalizing our identities for long. As different as they might seem at first sight, the Jacobean drama and the western are here displayed in a way which one interacts with the other giving the impression of a unique pattern of story line, showing the workings of 'metanarratives' which feed one another and which permeates literary and film genres. Though the main stress here is put on the deconstruction of concepts of gender and sexuality, Carter does not stop there, and there are some clues to see a criticism of capitalism and imperialism too, as it can be implied by the selection of the American western as one of the sources of her critique. Intertextuality, fragmentation and the production of a schizoid text—all of them forming part of the postmodern aesthetics—are, here, tools for the deconstruction and the dismantling of these ideological implications which have been silencing and obstructing the voice of the marginal, in a way which demonstrates the efficiency and success of the feminist/postmodernist crossroad.

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