

## Ledas and Swans in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*

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I become mildly irritated [...] when people [...] ask me about the 'mythic quality' of work I've written lately. Because I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business. ("Notes from the Front Line" by Carter quoted in Day 3)

Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus* are both "overtly intertextual" (Fokkema 175), containing numerous and innumerable allusions to the Bible, myths, fairy tales and other literary works of art. Among these references, however, the myth of Leda and the Swan plays a central role in both of them (D'Haen 199, Mills 173). Theo D'Haen in his essay points out the implied relationship between this myth and "the foundation of a male line in Western literature": "the rape of Leda by Zeus engendered [Helen and by that] the oldest Western work of literature known to us[,] Homer's *Iliad*" (199). It is in the context of the roles this mythological story plays in the two novels that I will examine their similarities and differences, and show the close connection between them, concentrating mostly on *Nights at the Circus*: in a sense, it really starts where *The Magic Toyshop* ends, can be read as a "sequel" to the other novel written almost twenty years earlier.

Since Carter took a rather radical stance against myth as such—she claimed in "Notes from the Front Line" that she is "in the demythologising business"—it is of crucial importance to examine in what sense this term is applicable to her works. In a 1988 interview with Anna Katsavos she said the following: "[I am defining myth] in a sort of conventional sense; also in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in *Mythologies*—ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean" (Day 4). From this point of view the story of Leda and the Swan is not only a myth in the classical sense of the word but also an element in patriarchal discourse reflecting

traditional gender roles. It is taken for granted that Leda—that is, Woman—is the passive character in the sexual intercourse that takes place. It is also natural that her name does not pass into oblivion for the single reason of her assistance in divine male creation—both biological and artistic. Her desires and identity are irrelevant—she is an object of desire and a muse. Thus the story would have an absolutely legitimate place among the myths surrounding Woman mentioned by Simone de Beauvoir:

It is always difficult to describe myth; it cannot be grasped or encompassed; it haunts the human consciousness without ever appearing before it in fixed form. The myth is so various, so contradictory, that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena—woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress, she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'être*. (Beauvoir 143)

As Simone de Beauvoir points out, in the framework of myth women are seen as the Other, as Woman, but not as actually existing human beings. They are trapped in a patriarchal discourse that defines available—and often self-contradictory—role models for them. It is from this respect that the treatment of the myth of Leda and the Swan becomes emblematic of an attitude towards patriarchal discourse both in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. The models of behaviour offered by myth—Woman as mute victim of a rape scene and man as aggressive divine creator/artist—undergo subversion in both novels, but to a different extent.

In *The Magic Toyshop* “[Melanie’s] passage to womanhood seems, in this patriarchal system, to demand a symbolic loss of virginity to an all-powerful phallic male” (Mills 175), which results in a row of theatricalised and ritual scenes, imitating and acting out the loss of her virginity. These “attempts” are, however, equally “unsuccessful”, that is, they are not real initiations into adult womanhood, though for different reasons. On the one hand, they are the reenactments of prefabricated dreams created by popular fiction and magazines (Mills 173)—like the

“love scenes” in the Pleasure Garden or in Finn’s room. On the other hand, the covert or overt element of violence and exertion of male power is always rejected, like in the actual culmination of these scenes, in the theatrical performance of the rape of Leda. In all of these cases—apart from the wedding-dress night, where Melanie is alone, and the actual or symbolic male partner is missing—Melanie is sometimes victimised and definitely always plays a passive part—that of Leda—, never making a decisive move: it is Finn who hides in the cupboard and decides not to make love to her, and she passes out when the Swan covers her.

In *Nights at the Circus* Fevvers’ birth is implied to be the result of an event similar to Leda’s rape—in fact, she “never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*” (*Nights at the Circus*<sup>1</sup> 7). However, instead of being a symbolical descendent of a god—that is, a Swan in this case—and a human being, she is a “divinely tall” bottle blonde with “wings [...] unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingoes pink” (NC 15). She literally embodies the most important physical characteristic features of both her “parents”, thereby transferring the novel into the fantastic world of magic realism—and also becoming one of the typical mixed creatures of a carnivalesque universe. If in the original myth “the rape of Leda by Zeus engendered [Helen and by that] the oldest Western work of literature known to us[,] Homer’s *Iliad*”, then the offspring of this intercourse is a creature whose slogan is “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (NC 7) Though Fevvers certainly does not look like Helen of Troy, there is no doubt about her physicality: there is something “fishy about the Cockney Venus” (NC 8), she “launch[es] a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side” (NC 8), her smell is that “of stale feet” (NC 9), “she look[s] like a dray mare” (NC 12) and “Her face ... might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships” (NC 35), so that the question emerges in Walser if she might be a man. In fact, “there is a [carnivalesque] provocative element in the descriptions of the bodily functions” (Fokkema 166). Her identity cannot be decided in any terms, let alone the terms of her mythical story of origin, though at

<sup>1</sup> From now on NC as a source after quotations.

different points in the novel, she acts out in a modified form all the possible roles offered by it—and a lot of others. From this respect the case of the painting depicting her “primal scene”, the rape of Leda by a painter of the Venetian school, is emblematic. Walser guesses—and thus the text implies—that the reader should bear in mind of the numerous depictions of this scene the one by Titian. However, such a painting does not exist.

Nor is Fevvers the passive victim in the several episodes similar to the staged scenes of the loss of virginity—or rather rape—in *The Magic Toyshop*. In fact, the whole first part of the novel, which consists of the stories told alternately by Fevvers and Liz about the *aerialiste* during their “first interview” with Walser, is nothing else but a series of inconclusive attempts at making love to her or raping her. The first two of these stories, Fevvers’ fall from the mantelpiece in Ma Nelson’s drawing-room and her first ascent from the roof of the brothel with Liz’ help, are highly symbolic events. While telling these stories Fevvers practically also interprets them, clearly referring to a quite unambiguous parallel with sexual intercourse. The two events take place when she is fourteen, that is, at the age of puberty. The first unfortunate ascent, which seems to double the wedding-dress night scene in *The Magic Toyshop*, takes place in the drawing-room, under the picture of Leda and the Swan. The result of her fall is that she breaks her nose, or more exactly what Liz emphasises is that her nose starts to bleed since she “near busted her nose in half” (NC 30), which may be a reference to the loss of virginity. It is the fear—the fear of dying—she experiences that is emphasised, as well as in the second story which is told by Fevvers herself. She uses expressions like “The transparent arms of the wind received the virgin” (NC 34) and “I was in the arms of my invisible lover” (NC 34) in connection with the wind during the description of this first flight.

Moreover, the role she acts out voluntarily in this scene is not passive at all, since “the wind did not relish [her] wondering inactivity for long [...] and as if affronted by [her] passivity, started to let [her] slip” (NC 34), by that urging her to start to move rhythmically with her wings. Though this scene can be conceived as well as parallel to the wedding-dress night in *The Magic Toyshop*, there are some basic differences between these two scenes in *Nights at the Circus*, in the sense that the first one is much closer to the one in *The Magic Toyshop*: Melanie and Fevvers experience fear, loneliness, and fail to carry out their plan (whatever it is),

practically both events take place at midnight, when time seems to stop, both events are compared to the Fall, to the original sin or the fall of Lucifer (NC 30), the girls are almost of the same age and both end up desperate and bleeding. While Melanie is tortured by a sense of guilt, since the tearing up of her mother's wedding-dress that night seems to be the cause of her parents' death in some magical way, Fevvers is helped by Liz to go on and study enough to give a new try—she has a mother- (or rather grandmother-) figure with her, whom Melanie misses all her life. It is Liz who launches Fevvers on the first flight, helping her to gain independence, but still saves her when she starts to fall. Though Fevvers is too frightened to start this flight, and almost dies at the end of it, this event is practically the nearest thing to a pleasurable sexual intercourse described in the novel: “the wind ... clasped [her] to his bosom once more so [she] found [she] could progress in tandem with him just as [she] pleased, and so cut a corridor through the invisible liquidity of the air” (NC 35). It is only implied that when “At the end of *Nights at the Circus* a ‘swan’ [Fevvers] will gently—though passionately—make love to the male protagonist” (D’Haen 199), something similar happens. In these scenes Fevvers really plays rather the role of the swan, though without the element of violence, and retaining her femininity—in fact, approaching androgyny. *The Magic Toyshop* practically does not contain any scenes like that. While “[it] can be read as a fable of the absence of what can be written of female desire, [as a story in which] woman’s desire is yet unnameable” (Mills 177–178), in *Nights at the Circus* this desire gets articulated.

Concerning the other rape attempts, Fevvers does not seem to be in any need of a Knight to help her escape. The scene in the Gothic mansion of “Mr Rosencreutz” (NC 74) can be clearly compared with the Grand Duke’s attempt to rape her in Petersburg and with the theatrical performance of the story of Leda and the Swan in *The Magic Toyshop*. As opposed to Melanie’s passing out on this occasion, Fevvers fights for herself, although not always with the same success. To defend herself from Mr Rosencreutz’ blade that he wants to use during the ritual, she has a sword of her own, which she is quick to show, even if she does not use it. The sword can be interpreted as a phallic symbol, in the same way as the Mr Rosencreutz’ blade and also as a clear reference to castration—it is not by chance that he is so much surprised by it and that earlier in the brothel when “[the young men’s] eyes would fall on the sword [she]

held ... Louisa or Emily would have the devil's own job with them, thereafter" (NC 38). The old "magic sword" (NC 192) is bequeathed to Fevvers by Ma Nelson—nothing short of a phallic mother-figure—, and clearly implies that Fevvers transgresses traditional gender boundaries. She escapes both times without external help, though not without suffering some losses and she is never the passive victim in these cases, never acts out the role of Leda "perfectly". Just like in her rewritings of fairy-tales, "Carter reverses the gender biases ..., which assign action and adventure to boys and quiescence and passivity to girls" (Abel et al. 17). Fevvers seems to be similar to her "modern fairy-tale heroines [who] are rescuers and fighters [and] whose growth is enabled by strong female relationships" (Abel et al 170).

In the case of both novels the covert or overt aim of male characters in the rape scenes is actually to fix female characters in the gender role offered by the story of Leda and the Swan—it is the actual rape that would make them Ledas, attach a certain meaning to them, read them as signs in a patriarchal discourse and by that appropriate—in the case of Fevvers literally buy—them. But while Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* is not conscious of this hidden purpose—it is only Finn who draws her attention to the manipulations of Uncle Philip during the almost fatal rehearsal of the rape scene in his room—, Fevvers consciously resists any attempt to read her as a sign, to cage her in a fixed patriarchal discourse, though her obviously symbolic nature is a constant urge for male characters to try to do so. She is Cupid—the sign of love—, she is Winged Victory, she is Divine Sophia, she is an angel, she is the Yeatsian golden bird on a golden bough, she is the Angel of Death, she is the New Woman—and she is none of them. She is Fevvers—the first and unique creature of her sort, without any acceptable pattern of behaviour to follow within the patriarchal discourse, as Lizzie says to her: "You never existed before. There's nobody to say what you should do and how to do it. You are Year One. You haven't any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create" (NC 198).

Both female characters are forced to escape attempts at fixing them in patriarchal discourse by leaving houses—which are more often demolished by fire at the same time than not—in fact, to fly in either or both senses of the word. On the one hand, in terms of the myth of Leda and the swan flying in its literal sense is associated with the Swan. In the sense of escape it is something—why is it so "natural"?—that does not

even occur to Leda as a possibility: the innumerable artistic adaptations of the myth often show her as less than half-reluctant. So from this respect neither Melanie nor Fevvers follow the pattern of the myth—in a sense, both of them are rather swans than Ledas. On the other hand, as Sarah Gamble has also pointed out, one cannot not notice the obvious parallel between the text of *Nights at the Circus* and Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa". She says the following about the nature of feminist texts:

Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. [...] A feminist text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It's volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her/she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter. (Cixous 258)

Just like Cixous, Carter plays with the two possible meanings of flight, especially in Fevvers' case. It is in this light that I will examine the symbolic flights from houses in both novels. "Carter said that she had often been asked why there were so few mothers in her books, and had realised that in her imaginative topography houses stood for mothers ... [while] it is Grandma who presides over the space of [her] matriarchal house of fiction" (Sage 6). Getting out of the house—or rather being pushed out of it—then should mean for a woman being excluded from a protective space and should be a kind of initiation which leads to maturity by identification with the closest role model, that is, with the mother (Cronan Rose 225).

In *The Magic Toyshop* Melanie unintentionally locks herself out of the house at the wedding-dress night, but having realised that she is not mature enough to act out the role she has chosen, climbs back into the house in a frenzied state, like a child. However, both nature and the house itself seem to have conspired against her to make it as difficult as possible—as if the house, which is clearly associated with her mother, wanted to take revenge on her for her blasphemous treatment of her

mother's wedding-dress, for putting it on, and by that trying to take her mother's place. An apparent contradiction between the need to break out from the house as a symbolic representation of a patriarchal discourse and the traditional association of houses with female space and mothers can be resolved by taking into consideration the mother's role in maintaining dominant discourses. As Rosalind Coward claims in her book *Our Treacherous Heart*:

Feminism is almost invariably seen as a struggle—or head-on collision—with men. But the truth is that the deep struggle of feminism was with the previous generation of women. Feminism could be called the daughters' revolt, so central has been the issue of women defining themselves against the previous generation and distancing themselves from their mothers. (quoted in Sage 7)

The situation at the end of the novel seems to be absolutely unambiguous in this respect, though: Uncle Philip's house, which is obviously a representation of a male dominated universe, burns down by that facilitating something like a "real" initiation at this time. The house itself clearly resembles the mysterious castles of Gothic stories and fairy-tales, while Melanie and Finn act out the role of the Princess and the Prince or Knight, respectively. It could be argued that while flying a patriarchal universe, Melanie only acts out another prefabricated story of the same discourse by asking Finn to save her. As Mills points out, this ending still may not be a "real" initiation into adulthood and womanhood for her: "it is into the keeping of another male that [her] escape from the older patriarch leads" (178). The story ends here, it is not known what their future will be like, it is only implied that it might be very similar to Melanie's quite sad expectations.

In *Nights at the Circus* there are several escapes from different houses that resemble in some way Uncle Philip's house: Ma Nelson's brothel burns down in the same way as his house, Madame Schreck's house is definitely like a medieval castle with a dungeon, and the Siberian "modern" prison is not much better, either. All these houses seem to be out of their time, in the same way as time seems to have stopped in Uncle Philip's house. Ma Nelson's house "was built by the Age of Reason" (NC 26), but it "seem[s] almost too *modern* for its own good" (NC 26) and in it "all still stimulat[es] the dark night of pleasure" in the

same way as “the clock in her reception room must show the dead centre of the day or night, ... the still hour in the centre of the storm of time” (NC 29). Madame Schreck’s house is compared with a graveyard, with hell, with a Gothic castle, while she herself is nothing else but death impersonated as a skeleton. The Siberian prison may be a forerunner of 21<sup>st</sup>—or 20<sup>th</sup>?—century prisons: though Fevvers’ story takes place at the turn of the century, and ends on New Year’s Eve in 1900, there are deliberate anachronisms and “numerous manipulations of time, place, scenery and character” (D’Haen 199) all through the novel. All of these houses are inhabited solely by women. The utopian “sisterhood” (NC 39) in Ma Nelson’s house is shattered only by her death, and it is to defend the house from male intrusion and order that the ex-whores burn it down, while the freak-women in the “museum” and the prisoners and gaol-keepers in Siberia join their forces to get rid of Madame Schreck and the Countess, respectively, and establish a new existence of their own. The latter examples can be interpreted as worlds dominated by female characters, who, however, only reinforce the dominant patriarchal discourse. Practically the element of breaking out of such a world is the point where *The Magic Toyshop* ends—but *Nights at the Circus* does not stop here: all the life-stories go on and have a happy ending, like fairy-tales. In fact, Fevvers and Liz use the possibility to tell the *aerialiste*’s life-story to tell several life stories, till Walser feels like “a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night” (NC 40). The stories are all rewritings of fairy-tales, of literary works of art, even of Carter’s own rewritings of fairy tales, such as the story of the Sleeping Beauty, or the Beauty and the Beast. These women get a voice only through Fevvers, who, in her turn, can speak only through Walser in the first part of the novel.

As far as Fevvers herself is concerned, her life-story seems to consist of nothing else, but repeated escapes from different houses. Though she “both hate[s] and fear[s] the open country” (NC 81), she is forced to fly—in both meanings of the word—either by a friend or by an enemy. The scene of her first flight from the roof of Ma Nelson’s house is of crucial importance here. Since her first attempt from the top of the mantelpiece was unsuccessful, Liz feels that she “must shove [her] off the roof” (NC 33) and she does so. Fevvers evaluates her help by saying that “it seemed that Lizzie ... was arranging [her] marriage to the wind itself” (NC 33), which connects the motifs of flying, leaving the house

and losing virginity, that is, gaining maturity, and implies that it is impossible without the help of the mother or grandmother. Fevvers, like Melanie at the wedding-dress night, has to go back to the house at the end of the first flight, and she has difficulties as well—in fact, her life is at stake—, but Lizzie helps her back and saves her. This is one of those motifs that is completely missing from *The Magic Toysshop*, implying that one of the reasons of Melanie's failure is the lack of a proper model and of the help of the (grand)mother-figure.

What are the implications of the mythical story of Leda and the Swan concerning textuality, or, to ask the same question in a slightly different form, what are the possibilities for defining herself as a subject for a woman within a patriarchal discourse? Catherine Belsey in her essay "Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text", offers two alternatives:

[For women] the attempt to locate a single coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses, and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures. One way of responding to this situation is to retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become "sick" [...] Another is to seek a resolution of the contradictions in the discourses of feminism. (Belsey 586)

It could be argued that the first alternative is not an alternative at all, since it turns a woman into a symptom, a sign, into something mute that is unable to define itself, something that depends on being read by a discourse that is not hers. This is the position of Leda—the dumb muse—in the myth, while the swan is traditionally associated with male poetic creation.

While *The Magic Toysshop* ends with a symbolic outbreak—flight—from the patriarchal discourse, it does not seem to offer any alternative: female characters might be swans in the sense that they can fly but they are definitely dumb swans—in the literal as well as in the figurative sense of the word—and use body language instead of symbolic articulation and instead of creating and/or appropriating a language for their own purposes. In this sense Finn and Francie appear in a basically feminine position, since they are powerless: Francie hardly ever speaks, and Finn's constant flow of speech is temporarily arrested after he is beaten up by

Uncle Philip. The block is broken only with the symbolic burial of the swan at the very end of the novel. What is more, in the course of the novel Melanie tends to see herself only in terms of ready-made ideas of womanhood: it is not by chance that the story, which is told from her perspective, is full of intertextual references from the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, through the Romantics to contemporary romance. Finn actually accuses Melanie in one of the crucial scenes of “Talking like a woman’s magazine” (MT 155). This does not hinder him though, in his turn, from also constructing himself in a ready-made story, which is even realised by Melanie: she knows that Finn, after having buried the swan, a symbolic representation of Uncle Philip’s power, wants to hear the words “He’ll murder you” (MT 172) because that confirms his role as a rebel against power, on the one hand, and as a Christ-like sacrifice on the other hand. Since until the end of the novel—until the outbreak—the characters remain within the space of patriarchal discourse, only the first option seems to be available for them. Apparently, the possibility of subversion is not open for them, yet. Aunt Margaret starts to speak only when the fire breaks out and though her communication—her voice—is firm, her discourse I presented rather as a possibility beyond the limits of the novel than as an actually existing alternative. The very last sentence of the novel leaves Melanie and Finn in the garden—a place that is by that time absolutely overburdened with symbolic meanings and associations. In fact, intertextuality seems to be a device for defining them within the patriarchal discourse—just like in the emblematic case of the story of Leda and the Swan.

The situation changes dramatically in *Nights at the Circus*: as Lorna Sage has pointed out, “Yeats in the Leda poem produces a grand rhetorical question: ‘Did she put on his knowledge with his power ...?’ Well, annoyingly enough, yes, in this version” (Sage 49). Fevvers is characterised by an overflow of speech (Fokkema 170–171). What Carter does in *The Magic Toyshop* as an author, that is, “attempts to subvert traditional patriarchal themes and imagery in fairly subtle and covert ways” (Mills 134), is carried out in *Nights at the Circus* by a character, Fevvers, as well as by “the” narrator “in fairly overt ways”. Leda, who is a passive, mute victim suffering the rituals of inconclusive initiations and fails to come to terms with herself, to create an independent identity for herself in *The Magic Toyshop*, turns into Helen, starts to speak out and reinvent the paradigm in which she was engendered to launch a new

tradition “that redefines the future of humanity from a feminist ideology” (D’Haen 199). Instead of using only body-language, her speech is her body, just like in Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn’t painfully lost her wind). She doesn’t “speak”, she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the “logic” of her speech. [...] In fact, she physically materialises what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she’s saying, because she doesn’t deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. (Cixous 251)

From this point on the only remaining question is how her overflowing speech should be read. Maybe not so surprisingly the validity of the stories told by Fevvers and Liz is called into question at the very end of the novel, when after really making love to her at this time, Walser asks her: “... why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the ‘only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world?’” (NC 294) and the answer is “I fooled you, then! ... Gawd, I fooled you! ... To think I really fooled you! ... It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence” (NC 294–295). It should imply that either none of these stories are completely true, or at least one of them is not true, or there is at least one story missing. “The autobiography she sells to Walser [really may be] a staged performance” (Fokkema 172)—a repeated expression of Fevvers’ fear of the loss of her independence, freedom, and identity by giving in to possessive male desire that would cage her and fix her as a sign. The aim of telling these stories—not only about herself, but about other women as well, still all of them repeating the basic scheme of women escaping, gaining freedom and establishing an existence on their own—seems to be not telling the “truth”, but storytelling itself and giving rewritings of “the literary past, the myth and folklore and so on [that] are a vast repository of outmoded lies” (Carter quoted in Mills 133–134).

- What is more, Fevvers, “this overliteral winged barmaid” (NC 16) is not only a narrator, but also an author herself, who is, by the way, conversant not only with the male literary tradition, mythology and folklore, but also with modern and postmodern poetics. While in *The*

*Magic Toyshop* intertexts play with the characters, in *Nights at the Circus* Fevvers herself plays with intertextuality, probably with the hidden slogan that nothing is sacred. Parodies of postmodernist and magic realist poetics, Bakhtinian ideas and even some points in feminism are given by her—that is, she parodies practically all of the most important paradigms that seem to read her and the novel itself. She refuses and resists to be interpreted as a sign either by literary tradition itself or by literary criticism and thus, by way of analogy, undermines any attempts at reading the novel itself smoothly, without gaps and contradictions within these paradigms. The narrative is like Fevvers' body: it finally turns out that she actually does not have a navel—a centre—and the story ends at the note of her laughter, a nonverbal device. “The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing” (NC 295). It might be “the big belly laugh” that certain extreme feminist ideas usually produce in readers according to Carter (Day 167). In Bakhtinian terms it might be the original universal medieval grotesque laughter of the carnival—a laughter that, as opposed to the totally destructive Romantic grotesque embodied by the Clowns in the novel, demolishes only in order to recreate. It might be that Fevvers' case is similar to La Zambinella's elaborated in *S/Z* by Roland Barthes, though at this time it is not castration that is unnameable but a woman as a subject defies attempts to pinpoint her in any myth about Woman and to be read as a sign. This, however, does not mean that she does not exist. According to Hélène Cixous:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain for this practice can never be theorised, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system ... (Cixous 253)

Thus the end note might be “the laugh of the medusa”, the victorious laughter of a woman who has not only escaped patriarchal discourse, just like being encoded in the emblematic myth of Leda and the Swan, but has also rewritten it. As far as her reading is concerned, though, maybe just like a poem, Fevvers—and a woman—“should not mean but be”.

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