

A Style of One's Own: Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967)



lecture Overview:

- **Gender and genre**
- **Women writing myth**
- **feminism and the fairy tale**
- **Gender and the grotesque**

Gender and genre

- Genre essential to thinking about writing in gendered terms
- Genre forms inherent part of feminist literary subversion, often through strategy of rewriting
- Genres of writing often gendered both in terms of authors gender identity, their narrative content and convention, and their readership (e.g. romance novel vs adventure tale)
- Part of project of feminist project in 1960s was to subvert traditionally male genres and the traditional gendering of genre in various ways, including:
 - Writing in and rewriting genres traditionally dominated by male writers
 - Rewriting and undermining the traditional values of supposedly feminine genres
 - Rewriting genres and styles of writing that support concepts problematic for feminists, including realism
- Problematising of realism as a mode of writing already evident in 1950s and earlier (cf. Woolf)
- Realism seems the opposite of the kind of writing employed in genres such as the myth, fairy tale, and romance, all genres which are important to *The Magic Toyshop*
- Realism relies on the idea that we as readers all share the same reality – otherwise the events in a realist text wouldn't seem realistic to us:

I) “It is more useful to identify realism in terms of the intended effect on the reader: realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that the characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen.”

M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), pp.302-305 (p.303)

- Cf. “Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner” arguably challenges this idea by presenting us with the reality of a working-class protagonist, undermining the middle and upper-class literary voices, norms, and values that, up until then, had been largely the norm; but it's also still a realist text

Women writing myth

- Carter challenges realism and its assumptions of a universally shared reality by delving into and appropriating genres such as the myth, fairy tale, and romance
- Cf. last week's lecture on how *The Magic Toyshop* subverts traditional romance narrative
- If realist narratives assume and reinforce certain social norms – certain shared ideals and conditions of their readership – then the fantastic can help writers expose, break out of and challenge those ideals;
- The fantastic can provide alternative, non-normative modes of seeing the world, and alternative models for the way we live in it:

- 2) “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent.’”

Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), p.4

- Feminists of 1960s aimed to do exactly this: uncover female heritage, a female literary canon, and female voices in general that had thus far been silenced in literature and history
- Ancient Greek and Roman myth, i.e. the Classics, which relies on the fantastic, is a particularly canonical kind of myth, and
- The Classics have also had a history of being studied mainly by men (and it was actually seen as masculine for women to study Latin or Greek in the early twentieth century)
- Myths, despite their elements of the fantastic (e.g. gods transforming into various animals) , usually seen as containing some serious, universal lessons about the world
- What feminists have done is look at these revered ancient myths and analyse the highly problematic ways in which they represent women and the relationship between the sexes
- As Mary Beard noted only the other day in a lecture on the public voice of women (cf BBC iPlayer), Greek myth is also one of the first recorded instances in which a man tells a woman to shut
- Women writers such as Carter purposely rewrite these myths and the gender norms and images of women they propagate
- Leda and the Swan adapted by Carter in *The Magic Toyshop*
- Original myth: Zeus transforms into swan and rapes Leda, who then becomes pregnant with their child
- Myth is often presented in language which makes rape seem like a natural, innocent act – a game almost – void of violence
- Carter presents her take on this when Uncle Philip makes Melanie take part in a performance of Leda and the Swan: Melanie rebels and the swan is eventually buried with the Queen Victoria statue in the park
- Rebellion against the supposed “eternal truths” and gendered images myth presents us with; idea of women as passive sexual objects to be (violently) pursued and used by men

feminism and the fairy tale

- *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* (2005): combines two collections of fairy tales Carter edited in 1990 and 1993; tales from around the world which defy idea of fairy tales as romantic and soppy; strong and subversive female characters
- *The Bloody Chamber* (1979): collection of short stories which rewrite classic fairy tales
- *The Company of Wolves* (1984): dir. by Neil Jordan, co-written by Angela Carter; rewrites tale of Little Red Riding Hood
- Desire to tease out that fairy tales contain plenty of (latent) sexual and violent content
- Aim to undermine the stereotypes produced in our adaptations and contemporary versions of fairy tales (i.e. Prince Charming; young, virtuous princess; evil stepmother)
- Fairy tales as survival guide for women passed down from mothers and grandmothers

- *The Magic Toyshop* as a fantasy world with fairy tale motifs
 - Melanie the young but rebellious heroine (and orphan); Finn the opposite of beautiful Prince Charming; evil villain not in form of stepmother or witch but in guise of Uncle Phillip who presides over magic toyshop; evil stepmother replaced by Aunt Margaret, who is kind as well as sexually devious in her relationship with her brother
 - Narrative structure, too, follows that of a classic fairy tale
- 3) “Angela Carter...refused to join in rejecting or denouncing fairy tales, but instead embraced the whole stigmatized genre, its stock characters and well-known plots, and with wonderful verve and invention, perverse grace and wicked fun, soaked them in a new fiery liquor that brought them leaping back to life. [...] She was to become fairy tale’s rescuer, the form’s own knight errant, who seized hold of it in its moribund state and plunged it into the [fountain of youth] itself.”

**Marina Warner, "Chamber of Secrets: The Sorcery of Angela Carter",
The Paris Review (17 October 2012)**

Gender and the grotesque

- Cf. last week’s lecture: women as impersonators of normative femininity
 - Make-up is their mask, and in case of *The Magic Toyshop* it is Uncle Philip who literally and figuratively manufactures masks
 - But Carter also highlights the existence of the gendered masks through the grotesque
 - Grotesque often assigned to something that isn’t quite right and in some way excessive
 - Uncle Phillip’s puppets function as a form of the grotesque
 - Melanie is appalled and scared by them because they are unassembled – random heads and legs everywhere, bodiless faces staring at her
 - They are grotesque, because they are not assembled; and the fact that they’re seen as artificial random parts highlights their artificiality
 - When we see the components assembled, they’re merely puppets, but when they are disjointed, they become frightening, much like the gendered masks we’ve been talking about
 - When we see the components of gender “done wrong” or “over done” they seem grotesque because then we are reminded of their artificiality, of the fact that they are not natural
 - Grotesque useful to women writers because it can highlight what is rendered unacceptable and transgressive in culture:
- 4) “[For Mikhail Bakhtin] the grotesque becomes associated with all that is exiled to the margins of propriety and acceptability. [Some contemporary women writers, like Angela Carter] have, however, played a part in women’s own appropriation and deployment of grotesque imagery in order to expose and critique the processes involved in creating socially acceptable images of the feminine.”

‘Grotesque’, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 1998), p.243