Gustave Moreau, ‘Leda and the Swan’ (1882).

Mythic Deconstruction in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at The Circus*

Wiem Krifa

Most feminist postmodern writers, such as Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, revisit various metanarratives with the intention of exposing their ideological and political orientations before deconstructing them as part of the feminist agenda. Angela Carter's reexploitation of the Greek myth 'Leda and the Swan'[1] represents one feminist retelling of traditional patriarchal myths. In her novels *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*, Carter deconstructs and parodies the myth before transforming it into a more successful feminist project, through which she studies the thread between performance,[2] the process of identity construction and, accordingly, the definition of gender. Rewriting 'Leda and the Swan' represents an important part of Carter's demythologising project. Liberating women from culturally prescribed myths requires a whole process of demythologising or deconstructing of stories that have been designed to oppress women within the patriarchal system. The Greek myth has been explored by various poets and writers before Carter, notably W.B. Yeats,[3] to reinforce its mythic grandeur and accentuate its ideology. However, Carter's reuse of 'Leda and the Swan' is different in that it aims to deconstruct a set of ideologies and literary movements that helped to anchor gender inequalities. This article will explore Carter's intertextual[4] and parodic study of 'Leda and the Swan' in her novels *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*, corroborating the role performance plays in defining the characters' gender and identity. In each book, Carter tackles the myth from different thematic, textual and physical performances to achieve an unprecedented literary effect. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter refers to the myth to deconstruct[5] patriarchal power and attain gender equality for her characters. Contrary to the Greek myth, which presents the swan as violent with its 'desire to ingest and devour the other', Carter's swan defies the patriarchy and resists Uncle Philip's plan to violate his niece, Melanie. Finn, who acts as the Swan, unveils his brother-in-law's intention and joins efforts with Melanie to literally and symbolically deconstruct the swan, the incarnation of the Greek god 'Almighty Jove'. As such, through his parodic performance of the myth, Finn chooses to denounce the role of the patriarchal male as offered by Uncle Philip, instead acquiring the new identity of a man who believes in gender equity. In *Nights at the Circus*,

Carter borrows the Swan's physical features for her female heroine, Fevvers, who typifies a mixture of female and male physical characteristics, thus defying the traditional divisions of binary genders.[6] Fevvers displays both human and mythic masculine traits to surmount older, more submissive female roles. The deconstruction of myths is thus at the forefront of Carter's feminist agenda. As she proclaims: 'Myths deal in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. In no area is this more true than in that of relations between the sexes.'[7] Being aware of their impact on gender relations, Carter embarks on a neo-feminist reading of old myths seeking to reveal their gendered orientations. She referred to her feminist project of mythic deconstruction as being 'in the demythologizing business', aimed at exposing myths and their oppressive potential, which she saw at work particularly in the field of gender relations'.[8]

Before we examine the deconstruction of 'Leda and the Swan' in *The Magic Toyshop*, it may be useful to examine a brief excerpt of Yeats' original poem:

> A sudden blow: The Great wings beating Still,
> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed,
> By the dark webs …
> How can those terrified vague fingers push,
> the feathered glory from her loosening thighs?'[9]

The poem's sexual implications are evident to the reader. Leda is depicted as a passive female who succumbs to her rape by Zeus, who visits her disguised as a swan. Male dominance is widespread in Yeats' poem and accentuates female submission. In Carter's books, however, the female characters, together with the males, are empowered to deconstruct patriarchal dominance. Carter designs strong and liberated women who strive to achieve gender equality. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Melanie is forced by her uncle Phillip to play the role of Leda, together with Finn as the Swan.

> 'Well, I must lie down,' she thought … Like fate or the clock,
> on came the swan, its feet going splat, splat, splat. She thought
> … if she did not act her part well, a trapdoor in the swan's side
> might open and an armed host of pigmy Uncle Philips, all
> clockwork, might rush out and savage her. This possibility
> seemed real and awful. All her laughter was snuffed out …
> she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own
> personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place.[10]

Melanie struggles to surmount her objectification by laughing and ironically undermining the swan's status. Carter's female heroines often embody the New Woman, to help in her demythologising project, and Melanie stands as a case in point. She succeeds, to a certain extent, in overthrowing the power of the patriarchy by deconstructing the myth, though overwhelmed by fear and hopelessness. The description of the scene foregrounds the role myth plays in undermining Melanie's status as a female within the house of Philip Flower.

> 'Almighty Jove in the form of a swan wreaks his will.' Uncle Philip's voice, deep and solemn as the notes of an organ, moved dark and sonorous against the moaning of the fiddle. … She thrust with all her force to get rid of [the swan] but the wings came down all round her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realising she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. The obscene swan had mounted her. She screamed again. There were feathers in her mouth.[11]

The obscene performance reveals the obscenity of the original myth with its emphasis on the physical and sexual exploitation of both passive female characters: Leda in the original myth and Melanie in the performed version of the myth. In both mythic versions, the cynical scenes are directed and guided by violent male figures, whether the God figure Jove in the original myth or Uncle Philip the puppetmaker in the performance. Carter's choice of the puppetmaker as an authoritarian figure is parodic and parallels the mythic god who sexually exploited Leda. Similar to the god, Uncle Philip controls his family members and shapes them to satiate his thirst for revenge on Melanie's dead father, added to his unconscious sublimation of his misogynist patriarchal attitude.

This particular scene affects Melanie heavily, worsening her stressful psychological situation right before the performance to the point of hallucination. The scene which precedes the performance is very telling. Melanie imagines seeing Bluebeard's bloody severed hand in the kitchen drawer and subsequently loses consciousness: '[A] freshly severed hand, all bloody at the roots. … "I am going out of my mind," she said aloud. "Bluebeard was here"[12] The sight of blood expresses Melanie's subconscious fear of being sexually exploited by the patriarchal Swan. Melanie is portrayed as doubly trapped by myths and fairy tales. In this context, Paulina Palmer observes that Melanie's fantasy 'advertises to the reader the elements of violence at the heart of the patriarchal family unit'.[13] Following

the death of her parents, Melanie stands as an example of the female victim under the roof of the God figure Uncle Philip, besides his wife Margaret, whom he metaphorically 'choked' to the point of losing her voice on her wedding night.[14] What is innovative in Carter's deconstructive rewriting of the myth is the victimisation of Finn, who is supposed to be the violent swan. Finn epitomises the New Man who believes in gender equality and helps to overthrow Uncle Philip's planned conspiracy. The latter exercises his tyranny over the women of his household and his brothers-in-law equally.

Postmodern feminists like Carter appeal for equal rights for all oppressed people, including victimised males, similar to Finn. Together with Melanie, Finn joins efforts to dismantle the Swan and to get rid of Uncle Philip's traditional patriarchal power. It is important to note that Carter's deconstruction of the myth is achieved not only by her female heroine, but also by Finn, who embodies the New Man. When he fails to perform the role of the rapist swan, he is bitten by Uncle Philip in the presence of all family members. The repercussions of Uncle Philip's physical violence on Finn are conveyed in detail and shed light on the patriarchal violence.

> [S]till he never moved. His eyes were open and staring … All his lovely movement was shattered. Melanie tried to grasp how dreadful it would be if Finn were dead but she could not think coherently because of the terrible sound of Aunt Margaret's silence. Uncle Philip, huge and sombre, came onto the stage, straightening his bow tie, which was askew. He brusquely kicked Finn's stomach but Finn did not move.[15]

Finn identifies with Melanie and saves her despite physical and psychological abuse. Both characters succeed in demolishing the myth by failing to effectively perform Leda and the Swan as directed by the misogynist puppetmaker. The Swan 'was nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings. It was dumpy and homely and eccentric. [Melanie] nearly laughed.'[16] The feminist postmodern performance of 'Leda and the Swan' contradicts the original poem and overturns its ideological implications. This is to show that power relations are based on ideas that are assumed or taken for granted rather than on any real hierarchy. Carter's intent behind this comic performance of 'Leda and the Swan' is to debunk male power and to emphasise women's unbridled freedom. The postmodern characters of Leda and the Swan revolt against the original myth's ideology. This sheds light on the importance of performance in shaping the characters' identities. 'In Carter's version, the swan has lost its majesty and is exposed to ridicule … By describing this swan as being different from the majestic creature of older myths, Carter creates a comic contrast, thus also undermining Uncle Philip's claim to power.'[17]

Uncle Philip plans for Finn's and Melanie's sexual encounter represent revenge on her father, his dead brother-in-law. His internalised patriarchal ideology parallels the myth of women's passive sexuality, which is embedded within Yeats' original poem. However, Melanie's growing consciousness and Finn's successful role of the New Man shatter his expectations. Melanie refuses to be the traditional obedient woman and breaks the mythic chains. Contrary to the Greek version of Leda, who accepts the swan's violation, Melanie scorns and undermines the swan. Uncle Philip's swan, which is supposed to violate Melanie, is a 'trope [for his] patriarchal power trip'.[18] Carter designs an ironic version of the patriarchal swan, alluding to Uncle Philip as a parodied male figure. As critic Sarah Gamble says, Carter aims to depict him as a 'a parody-patriarch who rules over [a] shadow world'.[19] His claimed patriarchal authority is defied by both Melanie and Finn, the embodiment of the swan. His patriarchal domination is limited to his own puppets in his toyshop and fails to extend to his niece, Melanie. Importantly, even Finn, who is supposed to rape Melanie, backs her female revolution. Both of them stand against Uncle Philip's patriarchal power and strive to become the New Man and New Woman, enabling Carter to highlight the cultural nature of gender inequality. 'Carter possesses an overtly political concept of myth. … She shows that female submission and male domination are not natural and God-given – on the contrary – they are "man-made"'.[20] Carter's main literary tenet is the deconstruction of myths to reveal their ideological goals. For feminist postmodern writers like Carter, myths are patriarchal tools designed to limit women's freedom, relegating them to an inferior position to that of men. In this vein, Marina Warner proclaims:

> Angela Carter … acute in her feminist analysis, can still melt all the confusions and tumult of this terrifying metamorphosis [of Leda and the Swan] into the catalyst of Melanie's selfhood – of her emergence into elected sexuality directed at Another, so that, while Melanie's uncle remains wicked, tyrannical, and lewd in his role as diabolical master of ceremonies, the effect of the experience on the young girl is explosively liberating.[21]

Melanie unbridles her female self from the mythic chains and challenges the patriarchal ideology. Similarly, Finn cuts with the patriarchal heritage and builds a new identity by choosing a different performance from the one prepared by Uncle Philip. By refusing to play the role of the savage swan, Finn resists his brother-in-law's plan to violate Melanie. Following the show, Finn reveals to Melanie: "'You see, … [i]t was his fault," he said … "I'm not having any, see? I'm not going to do what he wants even if I do fancy you. So there."'[22] Uncle Philip's wicked behaviour results in the revolution of his family members. Finn is no longer the passive obedient man since he insurrects and defies the will of the God figure

and goes further to destroy the swan, the symbol of Uncle Philip's masculine power, although he knows in advance the punishment that will befall him. Instead of throwing it in the dustbin, Finn prefers to bury the swan in the pleasure garden. Hence, '[c]overt resistance turns into direct rebellion when Finn destroys Uncle Philip's puppet swan. He buries the pieces of the swan in a derelict park that had been established in 1852 to house and celebrate the achievements of Victorian capitalism. A fallen statue of Queen Victoria herself, snapped in two, lies in the park.'[23] The place is very symbolic since it hosts ancient monuments together with the fallen statue of the queen, which represents bygone values and ideologies similar to the patriarchal tenets embraced by Uncle Philip. The demolition and burial of the swan in the monumental park epitomise the downfall of Uncle Philip's patriarchal realm and the deconstruction of myths. Reporting the scene to Melanie, Finn says:

> "I buried the swan near the queen … Do you think that was kind of me? I suppose I thought they'd be company for one another."
>
> "Well," she said, "it is as good a place as any."
>
> "I'm not really sure why I went to the pleasure garden when I could have put the bits of swan in the dustbin … Do you know, though, I was almost delirious in the pleasure garden? … the queen was upright on her pedestal."'[24]

It is noticeable that Finn gains self-confidence after burying the swan and seems to be more determined after challenging the Victorian tenets. He buries the swan, the emblem of Uncle Philip's patriarchal authority, with the queen, who personifies the Victorian past and its ideologies. Subsequently, Finn cuts with the old dogmatic values and assumes his role as the new postmodern man. Thus, performance plays a significant part in constructing the characters' identities. Resisting the role of the violent swan allows Finn to perform and acquire the identity of the new man after breaking off with patriarchal tradition.

Carter's deconstruction of myths is in response to their tendency to undermine women's status. She rewrites particular myths to reveal their artificial nature. In this context, Blogett concludes that '[m]yth breakers such as Carter smash the tablets of patriarchy to fashion much better new mosaics from their shards … Carter's fictions have been actively fashioning new images to bring women to knowledge of their gendering and, increasingly, to a sense of the power Carter believes rightfully theirs.'[25] She creates female characters who are forced to embrace myths, only to revolt against them by the end. What is interesting is that the swan, which is the symbol of phallic sovereignty, is destroyed by Finn who plays its role. Though he consents to play the role of 'Almighty Jove',[26] Finn refuses to rape Melanie, as planned by Uncle Philip. Contrary to the latter's

expectations, "Finn was kneeling beside her, pulling her skirt decently down for her. The passionate swan had dragged her dress half off."[27] The patriarchal swan and Finn seem to be two different characters, though it is Finn who, unwillingly, enacts the role of the swan. Uncle Philip's dream of taking revenge on Melanie's father is dashed by Finn and Melanie. Hence, we discern the parodic aspect of the writing. Carter said, 'I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice … I'm interested in myths … just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree.'[28] Carter's recurrent allusion to this particular myth, in various books, aims at its deconstruction.

Finn accordingly steals, destroys and then buries Philip's swan. Carter's mythic demolition comes after representing Melanie as suffering under the oppressive mythic burden. At the inception of the show, Melanie 'discovers … that she must keep her place as Leda to Uncle Philip's Swan in the mythology of awakening in which women blossom into shuddering subordination',[29] until backed by her equal male partner who puts an end to this myth. By performing a given role, the characters undergo a process of identity construction and gender identification. Uncle Philip urges Finn to perform the role of the patriarchal rapist, which Finn refuses to do.

Though she describes submissive females, Carter's feminist writing deconstructs the patriarchal myths. The myth of 'Leda and the Swan' is ultimately demolished. The swan does not rape Leda and proves to provoke laughter. Uncle Philip's plan to usurp Melanie's innocence 'highlight[s] the violent nature of the myths'.[30] The theatrical playing of 'Leda and the Swan' is mocked by both Melanie and Finn, the representatives of the New Woman and the New Man. Consequently, the mythic sexual exploitation of Leda is never fulfilled, contrary to Uncle Philip's expectations. As such, performance plays an important role in the demythologising process and in the deconstruction of the oppressive gender stereotypes. Ironically enough, the Greek myth tells the story of a disguised god, 'Almighty Jove', who disguises himself as a swan and rapes Leda. Performance plays an important role in the division of gender roles and in the acquisition of gender identities, since '"identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality'.[31] By accepting the allocated roles, the characters accept the identities imposed by Uncle Philip according to their gendered positions. However, Melanie and Finn, the embodiment of the New Woman and the New Man, stand against the patriarchal will and prefer to perform different roles based on gender equality. Both swans perform different gender roles following their acquired masculine identity. The original swan represents the typical patriarchal power who debases Leda as a sexual object, whereas Finn refuses the mythic role and views Melanie as a female victim no better than his degraded status. This is to show that to perform within the matrix of power is totally different from performing freely, as Fevvers does in *Nights at the Circus*.

Carter reuses the same Greek myth in both *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*, but with a feminist postmodern revision of the definitions of gender that parallels the characters' performances and identities. 'Carter's approach to gender is inextricable from her exploration of identity and how these are … constructed: textually, historically, performatively.'[32] Hence, the definition of gender varies from one character to another and from one performance of the myth to another. According to Monique Wittig:

> [G]ender [is] a 'fictive sex' … as far as the categories of the person are concerned, both [English and French] are bearers of gender to the same extent. Both indeed give way to a primitive ontological concept that enforces in language a division of beings into sexes … As an ontological concept that deals with the nature of Being, along with a whole nebula of other primitive concepts belonging to the same line of thought, gender seems to belong primarily to philosophy.[33]

Carter's postmodern demolition of patriarchal myths guides her books *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. Unlike the victimised Melanie, who submits to the swan's will, Fevvers embodies the phallic swan with her fantastic wings. She stands for Carter's model of the New Woman, who embodies both female and masculine traits to defy gender classifications and to show that gender divisions are culturally inherited rather than naturally acquired. Introducing herself to the American journalist Walser, Fevvers says:

> Not billed the "Cockney Venus," for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me "Helen of the High Wire", due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched.
>
> "Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!"[34]

According to the Greek myth, Helen of Troy is the daughter of Zeus, who raped Leda. Hence, we notice that Carter alludes to the same myth. In *The Magic Toyshop,* Carter metamorphoses the swan into a more tolerant creature, while in *Nights at the Circus* she strengthens the mythic Helen of Troy, seeking to alter the fragile, taken-for-granted female figure into a powerful woman who overcomes gender boundaries delineated by the patriarchal order. The same physical characteristics of the mythical figure who rapes Leda are intertextually borrowed to create Fevvers, Carter's heroine. This is to show that power

relations are variable and gender roles are interchangeable. Fevvers represents the male mythic figure himself, through the appropriation of the wings, and the name that alludes to her feathered female body. The description of her alludes to Helen, who 'took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts.'[35] Fevvers' physicality explicitly confirms the writer's aspiration to borrow the swan's physical features together with those of Helen of Troy to design Fevvers as a transgendered character.[36] Fevvers, as the embodiment of the New Woman, inherits the previously dogmatic patriarchal traits as one way of deconstructing the whole system of patriarchal tenets which have worked to restrict female freedom and to deprive women from certain aspects considered as typically masculine. The same myth is deployed differently in both books, but with a common intent, which is the deconstruction of its cultural essence. While in *The Magic Toyshop*, the swan's sexual exploitation of Leda is modified by Finn's gender metamorphosis and Melanie's ironic, passive performance of Leda, in *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers, the incarnation of Helen of Troy, is hatched by nobody and asserts her new female presence and '[t]he importance of human selfhood'.[37] Empowering the mythic female victim by acquiring the physical might of the victimiser is in itself a feminist postmodern step towards mythic debunking. Fevvers represents both the raped female figure and the physical power of the mythic rapist, thereby trespassing the traditional gender boundaries.

The deconstruction of myths is a typical feminist way of asserting feminine writing. The Greek myth of 'Leda and the Swan' stands as one example among the various patriarchal myths that combine to suppress women's identities, their rights and style of writing through their descriptions of females as passive and inferior to males. The feminist retaliation is conspicuous through their opposition to metaphysical dogmatic claims that deny feminine power. The unique traits that perhaps most distinguish Fevvers from the other characters is her wings and gigantic body, which attract various psychologically unbalanced and lustful men. Set at the end of 19th century, the novel presents Fevvers as the authentic New Woman with her metaphorical wings, which help her to surmount the patriarchal world and break the mythic chains. As Ma Nelson, her foster mother, informs her, she is 'the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound to the ground'.[38] Her wings, metaphorically, enable her to soar over previous Victorian limitations and mythic boundaries that have anchored the superiority of men over women. As such, Fevvers cuts with past female generations and questions the myth of women's sexual passivity by acquiring the wings of the swan, which grant her the power to evade men's sexual assaults. The winged Fevvers, as the New Woman, symbolises the rise of human rights and the emergence of women's rights at the dawn of the 20th century. In contradistinction to the mythic female victim, Fevvers saves herself from being sexually exploited, as for example when she is working as a freak female in Madame Schreck's 'museum of women monsters', where she is exhibited to cater for the sexually perverted men who visit the museum to satisfy their voyeuristic desires.

The British parliamentary member Rosencreutz is used as a historiographical[39] character, who seeks to purchase Fevvers from the museum of monsters. Fevvers flies away to rescue herself by means of her wings. He prepares for her death in order to extract a substance from her female body that will keep him young forever. 'You mind your bare head, or you'll catch your death! … Oh, my rejuvenatrix! The fructifying disc is just now nudging his way up the backside of yonder hillock! Lie down on the altar!'[40] The mythic rumours surrounding Fevvers' body are behind his attempt at homicide. He goes on to attribute to her the names of 'Azrael' and 'Gabriel' because of her wings. These are her saviour, each time she feels entrapped by a masculine threat. Ironically enough, the swan who violates Leda in the Greek myth represents Fevvers' source of power through the appropriation of wings. Carter employs the myth of 'Leda and the Swan' in order to dissect it. Through the characters' performative roles, whether in *The Magic Toyshop* or in *Nights at the Circus*, identities and gender orientations are constructed. Performance, as Judith Butler theorises, is the core essence of gender and identity. As we have analysed previously, Carter's characters, both men and women, attain their hoped-for identities through performance. Fevvers' wings allow her to earn a living as a circus aerialist, a trapeze artist in a circus in St Petersburg. She enjoys economic freedom at a time when most women were still dependent on male breadwinners:

> Fevvers symbolises that gathering of confidence among women in the late nineteenth century which led to the gains in self-possession and autonomy made by women in the twentieth century. In 1899 hardly anyone had seen a mentally and emotionally newly constituted woman, in the same way as no one had seen a woman with wings.[41]

Fevvers' fame is explained by her enigmatic wings, whether they are real or fake. In contradistinction to the mythic swan who deploys his powerful wings to violate Leda, Fevvers' wings fortify her female status, free her body from violation and assert her economic independence. The writer rewrites the myth from a feminist postmodern scope as one way of mythic deconstruction. Fevvers' fantastic body is the result of Carter's debunking and redesigning of the myth to fit her postmodern feminist agenda. Fevvers' show and performance at the circus grant her an exclusive identity that fluctuates between reality and fiction. Her physical description appears to be more fictitious than real:

> She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off! LOOK AT ME! She rose up on tiptoe and slowly twirled

> round, giving the spectators a comprehensive view of her back: seeing is believing. Then she spread out her superb, heavy arms in a backwards gesture of benediction and, as she did so, her wings spread, too, a polychromatic unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingoes pink.[42]

Fevvers' wings gain the attention of the spectators as an extraordinary non-human feature. The metaphors used by Carter to depict Fevvers are of great importance. Calling her 'an eagle', 'a condor', 'an albatross', 'flamingoes' alludes to the swan, the incarnation of the Greek god. Carter metaphorically usurps the swan's grandiosity and offers it to her New Woman character as a backlash to the patriarchal mythic fabrication. In *The Magic Toyshop*, the swan seems threatening to Melanie, though comic momentarily, and at certain levels intertextually reminiscent of Yeats's depiction. However, in *Nights at the Circus*, there is a shift in Carter's style of writing while portraying Fevvers and her gestures at the circus. The writer's emphasis on the verb 'look' highlights the role performance plays in the novel. 'Look, not touch', 'Look! Hands off!', 'seeing is believing'[43] are meant to exclude the possibility of Fevvers' physical exploitation. Fevvers' fantastic body is to be seen, not touched and made use of. At this level, we can notice that Carter's mythic deconstruction and severance with the realm of patriarchy is limited since Fevvers is still objectified and satisfies the male gaze. The delicate depiction of her movements and gestures as part of her performance serves to build her identity as the New Woman, who is depicted as a transgendered creature hatched out of nowhere. In this case, Fevvers' movements, theatrical corporeal exposition and every external gesture aim to shape her New Woman's identity. As Judith Butler theorised:

> [a]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.[44]

Thus, identities are aligned to performance since the characters' identities are set up through their external bodily gestures and physical engagements, such as the case of

Fevvers, who controls her own gender and identity. The dissolution of boundaries between masculine and feminine physical traits is real and yields Fevvers' transgendered female identity.

The final scene is an overt attempt to deconstruct the mythic aspect of the novel by interrogating the reality of Fevvers' mythic bird origin. The American journalist Walser follows Fevvers all along her circus journey before falling in love with her and marrying her. He wavers the whole time on the question of whether she has an authentic bird origin or not. His quest is to uncover Fevvers' fake bird origin and her unnatural wings. Upon closer scrutiny of Fevvers' body, he finds an answer to whether she has a belly button or is really hatched while in bed with her:

> Smothered in feathers and pleasure as he was, there was still one question teased him.
>
> 'Fevvers …' he said … 'Fevvers, only the one question … 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"?'
>
> She began to laugh.
>
> 'I fooled you, then!' she said. 'Gawd, I fooled you!'
>
> She laughed so much the bed shook.
>
> 'You mustn't believe what you write in the papers!'[45]

The passage above hints at Fevvers' admission of fooling Walser and this implies the fakeness of her wings and bird origin. This instance of metafiction[46] also conveys the writer's message to her readers that myths should be deconstructed regardless of their origins. To debunk a myth by creating a similar one is an unconceivable joke, as Carter implies. Fevvers' ironic assertion to Walser not to believe what is written in the papers can be interpreted as Carter's own reminder to her readers that the character of Fevvers is fictitious and far from being real. Myth-breaking texts such as *Nights at the Circus* display Carter's 'demythologizing business', but nonetheless create a self-deconstructive myth which revolves around the character of Fevvers. 'As myth is supposed to convey universal truths, it is regarded as quite a serious affair. Carter, however, undermines this seriousness. But even though "demythologizing" is her aim, she also introduces into each of her texts a mythic level',[47] which she debunks by the end of the novel, just to show that myths are not built on a solid ground but are rather ideologically fabricated and internalised as a universal truth. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes theorises that to debunk a myth, we should fabricate an 'artificial myth',[48]

similar to Carter's strategy of myth-breaking. Within the same context of remythologising for the sake of demythologising, Jeanette Winterson also writes in her book *Boating for Beginners* that it is necessary to 'fight fire with fire', to metaphorically denote the fact of deconstructing one myth through the creation of another.[49] Despite Carter's parodic re-mythologising style, we can state that her demythologising focus prevails as she succeeds in unveiling the patriarchal tenets upon which the myth is grounded. The Greek myth of 'Leda and the Swan' provides the writer with the perfect means to put her demythologising goal into effect.

Carter's feminist postmodern project of demythologising attempted to deconstruct the Greek myth of 'Leda and the Swan' by exposing its patriarchal roots. Carter's innovation lies in debunking the myth via the creation of a counter parody myth. The deconstruction of the myth in *The Magic Toyshop* highlighted Carter's unprecedented feminist postmodern achievement in creating equal female and male characters, who vehemently work to demolish Uncle Philip's mythic world. *The Magic Toyshop* unfolds the dialectic between the deconstruction of patriarchal myths and stressing gender equality. At the outset of the novel, Carter fools the reader by portraying the myth's successful function, only to debunk it later on by fully deconstructing it. What is innovative as far as Carter's demythologising is concerned is the role performance plays in demolishing the myth and shaping the characters' identities and gender. Carter's feminist mythic deconstruction in *Nights at the Circus* underscores the preeminence of performance in constructing gender and identity of the characters. Carter's pioneering work is showcased in the twisting of events and exchange of gender features. While in *The Magic Toyshop*, she debunks and parodies the physical attributes of the swan, in *Nights at the Circus* she gives the very same traits to her heroine, Fevvers. It might appear paradoxical to deconstruct a myth by creating a new one, but her remythologising is meant to be self-debunking by the end of the novel, to justify her claim that myths are patriarchal lies created to ensnare women and anchor male superiority in the human consciousness. Carter's groundbreaking creation of Fevvers, despite its remythologising nature, helps to unveil the ideological essence of myths. Her radical feminist project is exhibited in the revolutionary continuity between both novels with a common goal, that of mythic deconstruction.

Wiem Krifa

Notes

1. 'Leda, in Greek legend, usually believed to be the daughter of Thestius, king of Aetolia, and wife of Tyndareus, king of Lacedaemon. Some ancient writers thought she was the mother of Tyndareus of Clytemnestra, wife of King Agamemnon, and of Castor, one of the Heavenly Twins. She was also believed to have been the mother (by Zeus, who had approached and seduced her in the form of a swan) of the other twin, Pollux, and of Helen, both of whom hatched from eggs. Variant legends gave divine parentage to both the twins and possibly also to Clytemnestra, with all three of them having hatched from eggs of Leda.' 'Leda and The Swan', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leda-Greek-mythology (accessed 10 February 2023).
2. 'Feminist writers have frequently adopted a theatrical concept of performance to explore the cultural construction of gender. … [T]he term has achieved prominence in relation to postmodern theories of identity. The philosopher Judith Butler conceptualizes gender, and indeed all, identity in terms of performance. Butler's suggestive theory has been enthusiastically taken by many feminists.' (Andermahr Sonya *et al*., *A Glossary of Feminist Theory* (New York: Arnold, 2000), 195-6).
3. The sexual frankness of such poems as 'Leda and the Swan' could provoke shock in those days. The *Irish Catholic Bulletin* and other journals deemed some of his work obscene and anti-Catholic.' W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Wordsword Editions Ltd, 2008).
4. 'It was Julia Kristeva who, between 1966 and 1974, invented, defined, and launched the notion of intertextuality in semiotic theory and literary studies with her essays in the journals *Tel Quel* and *Critique*, and in the monographs *Séméiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* of 1969, *Le Texte du roman* of 1970, and *La Révolution du langage poétique,* published in 1974. … The compound noun 'intertextuality' was clearly a neologism: it was coined by analogy with terms from the Latin prefix 'inter' ('between, in, among, or shared') that denote complexity, connectedness, and mutual dependence of the two component conditions. Yet the immediate starting point for Kristeva's intertextuality was the concept of intersubjectivity.' Mark Juvan, *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* (Indiana: Purdue University, 2008), 11.
5. 'The term deconstruction denotes a particular kind of practice in reading and, thereby, a method of criticism and mode of analytical inquiry. … Deconstruction, so far, has been the most influential feature of post-structuralism because it defines a new kind of reading practice which is a key application of post-structuralism. [Derrida] shows that a text (any text – be it a polemic, a philosophical treatise, a poem, or for that matter, an exercise in deconstructive criticism) can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be … seen by criticism as a single, stable 'meaning''. (J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 209-10.)
6. Cecile Tougas, 'Opposition and Postmodernism', *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009, 68-77, *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.1525/jung.2009.3.1.68 (accessed 7 February 2023).
7. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1979), 69.
8. Quoted in Susanne Schmid, 'Angela Carter: ''Mythomania and Demythologising''', *Myth and its Legacy in European Literature*, edited by Neil Thomas and Françoise Le Saux (Durham: Durham Modern Languages Series, 1996), 145.
9. W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Wordsword Editions Ltd, 2008), 182.
10. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 166.
11. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 166-7.
12. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 118.
13. Paulina Palmer, quoted in J.A. Radway, *Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (2009), 184.
14. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 124.
15. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 132.
16. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 165.
17. Schmid, 'Angela Carter: ''Mythomania and Demythologising''', 148.
18. Nicoleward Jouve, 'Mother is a Figure of Speech', *Flesh and The Mirror: Essays on The Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (Virago Press, 2001), 154.

19. Sarah Gamble, 'Monarchs and Patriarchs: Angela Carter's Recreation of the Victorian Family in *The Magic Toyshop*', *Neo-Victorian Families* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401207249_011 (accessed 3 February 2023), 37.
20. Neil Thomas and Françoise Le Saux (eds), *Myth and its Legacy in European Literature* (Durham: Durham Modern Languages Series, 1996), 147.
21. Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamophoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling The Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 113.
22. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 151-2.
23. Aiden Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998), 28-9.
24. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 172-3.
25. Harriet Blogett, 'Fresh Iconography: Subversive Fantasy by Angela Carter', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Questia. 45- 55. Web. 2 May 2014, 6.
26. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 164.
27. Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Ute Heidmann, "'New Wine in Old Bottles'', Angela Carter's Translation of Charles Perrault's ''La Barbe Blue''', *Marvels & Tales*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Fairy Tales and Translation (2009): 40-58.
28. Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 171.
29. Sue Roe, 'The Disorder of Love: Angela Carter's Surrealist Collage', *Flesh and The Mirror: Essays on The Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (GB: Virago Press, 2001), 69.
30. Gamble, 'Monarchs and Patriarchs', 34.
31. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, edited by Linda Nicholson (Routledge: London, 1990), 17.
32. Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and The Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 86.
33. Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind and Other Essays' (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 32.
34. Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006), 3.
35. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 4.
36. Transgender: ''A recent coinage, the English umbrella term ''transgender'' incorporates a range of practices and constructs that resist sexual or gender stability or normativity, and, as a result, overlaps with terms such as ''queer,'' ''gender fluidity,'' ''transvestism,'' ''transsexuality,'' ''butch,'' ''effeminacy,'' and ''androgyny''.' W. Todd Reeser, 'Introduction', *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2013), *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378819. (accessed 7 February 2023), 1.
37. Helen Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at The Circus* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 14.
38. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 25.
39. Historiography: For Linda Hutcheon 'in the postmodern writing of history and fiction … there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and the transparency of representation'. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 92.
40. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 94.
41. Day, *Angela Carter*, 176.
42. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 12.
43. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 13.
44. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 89.
45. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 349.
46. 'Metafiction is fiction that calls attention to its representational techniques and knowledge claims … [It] harbors a range of possible narrative strategies that include metanarrative constructions such self-reflexivity.' Amy J. Elias, 'Postmodern Metafiction, *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, edited by John N. Duvall (Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2011), 13-29.
47. Maggie Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence: Critical Fictions/ Fictional Critiques* (London: Pagrave MacMillan, 2012), page no.?
48. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (J. Cape 1972), 27.
49. Jeanette Winterson, *Boating for Beginners* (Phillipa Brewster and Ezra The White Rabbit, 1985), 4.