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BURN, SWAN, BURN:

THE DESTRUCTION OF ANGELA CARTER'S MAGIC TOYSHOP

QUEIME, CISNE, QUEIME: A DESTRUIÇÃO DA LOJA MÁGICA DE BRINQUEDOS DE ANGELA CARTER

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ABSTRACT: Patriarchy has not only set parameters to the behavior of women, but also acceptable – and therefore deviant – forms of masculine performance. In her essay *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter develops her argument that patriarchy is an oppressive system by excellence that sustains the idea of a dominant one over a submissive other. Although those positions are usually respectively occupied by men and women, that is not a systematic demand. And even so, the dominant figure is also controlled by the strings of performative expectations. Her script *The Magic Toyshop* fictionalizes those ideas and opens up a possibility of disruption of these paradigms.

Keywords: Gender Studies. Literary Criticism. Masculinities.

RESUMO: O patriarcado não só sistematizou modos de comportamento femininos, mas também formas de performatividade masculina aceitáveis – e, conseqüentemente, desviantes. Em seu ensaio *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter desenvolve sua tese de que o patriarcado é um sistema opressivo por definição que promove a ideia de que alguém sempre é dominante sobre um outrem submisso. Embora essas posições sejam comumente ocupadas, respectivamente, por homens e mulheres, isto não é uma definição sistemática. E, de todo modo, a figura dominante também é controlada por fios de expectativas performativas. O roteiro de Carter de *The Magic Toyshop* transforma essas ideias em ficção e abre a possibilidade de subversão desses paradigmas.

Palavras-chave: Estudos de gênero. Crítica literária. Masculinidades.

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INTRODUCTION

Angela Carter (1940-1992) was a British feminist author who wrote during the second half of the twentieth century. Openly feminist, she wrote novels, short-stories, poems, and dramatic pieces, commonly bringing into light discussions about gender and female existence. Although she is mostly well-known for her rewritings of classical fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter also wrote many pieces of dramatic literature, which were compiled into the book *The Curious Room* (1997), from which derives this article's main object of analysis: *The Magic Toyshop*.

The objective of this article resides in analyzing how *The Magic Toyshop* postulates an allegorical representation of the patriarchic reality, the normative models for masculine and feminine behavior and the possibility of different aesthetics of existence, which might culminate in the destruction of the system itself. In order to do so, in our introduction we will develop some ideas regarding patriarchy and masculinities. Moreover, we will present how these concepts are manifested in the literary oeuvre and how the destruction of the prescribed norms is made possible.

Besides her literary pieces, Carter also wrote a polemical essay on the ideology of pornography called *The Sadeian Woman*, in which she studies the works of Marquis de Sade. In a moment when the feminist movement positioned itself strongly against pornography, Carter argued that its problem was not the sexual industry per se, but the way in which the male-female binarity was showcased by it, reducing the people who are involved in the sexual relation to their formal elements, in such a way that

the prick is always presented erect, in an alert attitude of enquiry or curiosity or affirmation; it points upwards; it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space like a mouth waiting to be filled [...] – man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting (Carter, 1996, p. 4).

The reduction of sex relations to penetration is not new. As Michel Foucault demonstrates in his genealogical work on sexuality, (Foucault, 2020) even in Ancient Rome, the discussions around sex were founded on ideas of who penetrates who, in a way that the penetrated– whether it be a man or a woman – is surrendering power to the pleasure of the penetrator. Accordingly, bell hooks postulates that

Many women and men still consider male sexual performance to be determined solely by whether or not the penis is hard and erections are maintained. This notion of male performance is tied to sexist thinking. While men must let go of the sexist assumption that female sexuality exists to serve and satisfy their needs, many women must also let go a fixation on penetration (hooks, 2000, p. 90).

Carter understands that idea as a mythical construction, in which “man” and “woman” are merely archetypal representation of positions within a system of power and therefore devoid of any reality – “the abstraction of the flesh involves the mystification of the flesh” (Carter, 1996, p. 16). “Myth” here is an important phrase because it reveals how this binary construction is culturally built and not naturally imposed. That is to say that there is a system of power that invents normative forms of behavior – be it sexual or not – and later on presupposes itself as natural, as if it had an ontological origin. In Carter’s words:

There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but, separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioral modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals. And these archetypes serve only to confuse the main issue, that relationships between the sexes are determined by history [...] (ibid., p. 7).

Mythology is understood by Carter as a great system of power that echoes from the masculine ideal of a society led by God, the King, and the Law. Not only does she believe that it is important to show that God only exists as a shadow that corrupts what formal institutions are supposed to be, she also affirms that the replacement of it by men – as Nietzsche would – or by a goddess that presupposes itself as a feminist overpowering of masculine precepts is just as harmful. A materialist comprehension of reality is the only possible way to reach true reciprocal sex:

In this world, which was made by God, sexuality is inhuman. In other words, in a society which still ascribes an illusory metaphysic to matters which are in reality solely to do with the relations between human beings, the expression of the sexual nature of men and women is not seen as a part of human nature. Sexuality, in this estranged form, becomes a denial of a basis of mutuality, of the acknowledgement of equal rights to exist in the world, from which any durable form of human intercourse can spring (ibid., p. 141).

Therefore, two vital ideas are brought into light: firstly, that the ideology of pornography is not bad by definition, but only to the level of its representation of sex as

ultimately images of one in position of power using another who is under for self-pleasure, and which reaffirm a culturally constructed idea that uses sex as a metonymic picture of oppressions derived from/created by sexual differences. Secondly, that femininity and masculinity both are socially constructed archetypes that are performed and observed.

“Gender performance” is a concept that was highly developed by the North-American researcher Judith Butler. Her theory is that there is no ontological paradigm to gender, but that it only exists as constant performative acts related to certain aesthetics of existence. Performative behaviors are not created by choice, though, but they come from history – and geography – and are demanded by the social environment under risk of punishment: “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler, 2007, p. XV).

As the analysis in *The Sadeian Woman* continues, Carter postulates the idea of “art as a means of *knowing* the world” (Carter, 1996, p. 13) and that is where she sees the problem with pornography and why she will subvert social expectation of femininity and masculinity in *The Magic Toyshop*. To her, the problem is that pornography universalizes concepts of men and women that are not real, as they presuppose that sex is located outside history, which is not true, after all, “Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh” (ibid., p. 11). It is important to notice – due to the objectives of this article – that Carter is not only talking about the feminine representation or pleasure, but about men and women both. In fact, she affirms that the “fictional maleness of the pornography consumer encompasses the butch hero of homosexual pornography; it is a *notion* of masculinity unrelated to practice” (ibid., p. 14).

The idea that patriarchy also creates a normative masculinity and oppresses the male freedom of existence is not new. Holter, for example, emphasizes how maleness is frequently presented as neutral, which is nothing but the manifestation of an installment of power, since “it is the form of society—the existence of historical, changing forms of patriarchy or gender-unequal societal structures—that creates certain types of masculinities and the ways that power becomes connected to them” (Holter, 2005, p. 20). In addition, in *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks points out that “Male children are often subjected to abuse when their behavior does not conform to sexist notions of

masculinity. They are often shamed by sexist adults (particularly mothers) and other children” (hooks, 2000, p. 75). Therefore,

While men are frequently the agents of the oppression of women, and in many senses benefit from it, their interests in the gender order are not pre-given but constructed by and within it. Since in many ways men’s human needs and capacities are not met within the order of modern societies, they also have a latent “emancipatory interest” in their transformation (New *apud* Holter, 2005, p. 15).

Carter analyzes two characters created by Marquis de Sade: Justine and Juliette. The former is built as a holy woman, devoted to her own virginity and who will be raped and murdered. The latter is in the extreme opposite side of the spectrum: she is a desiring woman who longs for sex and who is a criminal murderer. Sade’s literature is brought into scene because he clarifies the mythological idea of maleness, as the brutal tortures, and the murders that surround his texts’ orgies reveal “that male political dominance might be less a matter of moral superiority than of crude brute force and this would remove a degree of glamour from the dominance itself” (Carter, 1996, p. 23). Being a myth and violent construct, it is not naturally connected to men, and might be used, for example, by Juliette. In this way, in relation to Sade’s work:

He describes sexual relations in the context of an unfree society as the expression of pure tyranny, usually by men upon women, sometimes by men upon men, sometimes by women upon men and other women; one constant to all Sade’s monstrous orgies is that the whip hand is always the hand with the real political power and the victim is a person who has little or no power at all, or has it stripped from him. In this schema, male means tyrannous and female means martyred, no matter what the official genders of the male and female beings are (*ibid.*, p. 24).

It is clear, then, that Carter’s ideals are connected to Butler’s definitions of gender performativity: maleness is connected to an oppressive form of dominance whereas femaleness is related to subjugation, regardless of the persons’ sexes. The British author does not necessarily agree with Sade, though. In fact, she realizes that he is still trapped by the oppressive ties he tries to destroy, as he understands that women have to go through a moment of violent “fucking” – in the active meaning of the word – in order to get away from the position of only “being fucked”. Carter sees that movement not as emancipatory, but as just as unjust, and understands that “His overt misogyny is a single

strand in a total revulsion against a mankind of whom [...] he cannot delude himself he is not a member” (ibid., p. 34).

Sade would have been understood as a great disruptor, except for the fact that he does not break the final taboo: even though Juliette takes on a role of maleness, of phallic mother, she is never “allowed to come, and so to come alive. She cannot be corrupted into the experience of sexual pleasure and so set free” (ibid., p. 128). Therefore, although Sade does place women in the male role within the patriarchic system, he fails to complete his project because he fails to open up the possibility of destruction of the system he questions. “By denying the possibility of corruption, Sade denies the possibility of regeneration” (ibid., p. 129), in such a way that if the phallic mother “were allowed to taste one single moment’s pleasure in the abuses that are heaped upon her [...] that would overthrow the whole scheme” (ibid., p. 128).

Finally, she will postulate a different possible outcome to the gendered existences: reciprocity. Beyond the oppressive opposition of the mythical male and femaleness, Carter sees the possibility of sexual acts led by mutual desire. That is saying that “Sexuality, stripped from the idea of free exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty” (ibid., p. 141) and that “Where desire is a function of the act rather than the act a function of desire, desire loses its troubling otherness; it ceases to be a movement outwards from the self. The arrows of desire are turned back on the heart, and pierce it” (ibid., p. 146). That means that an unequal relation would also be harmful to the desiring part, which is commonly assumed as the dominant and the benefactor. There is, However, another possibility, in which “a partner acts on us as we act on it; both partners are changed by the exchange and, if submission is mutual, then aggression is mutual.” (ibid., p. 146).

Maleness and femaleness are understood by Carter as positions within an oppressive system of power that requires domination and violence and that are not necessarily connected to either men or women in the sexed meaning of such phrases. Although men are frequently attached to maleness – which derives from the way patriarchy prescribes their behavior –, there are other possible masculinities. Also, as a system, it was created, and might be destroyed. All of this will have its allegoric fictionalization Carter’s script for *The Magic Toyshop*, which will be analyzed next.

1 BURN, SWAN, BURN

The Magic Toyshop is the script of a movie written for television by Angela Carter and commissioned by David Plowright in 1985. It derives from the homonymous novel written by Carter in 1967 and follows the story of Melanie, who is nearly sixteen. She has a younger brother, Jonathon – who spends his time building toy boats –, and a younger sister, Victoria – who is still a small child. Due to the sudden death of their parents, they go on to live with their uncle Philip.

Philip Flower lives above a toyshop he owns, alongside his dumb wife Margaret² and her two brother, Finn and Francis. In the basement, there is a theater in which Philip puts on performances by human-size puppets he makes and which are handled by Finn and Francis. The idea of Philip as a sort of dictator is made explicit in the first morning after the kids arrive, when Melanie is instructed not to wear pants – “Slip up and change into a skirt, else he’ll create something terrible” (Carter, 1997, p. 261) – and when we learn that Margaret is dumb because Philip “likes his women quiet” (ibid., p. 261). As the story follows, he even gifts her a necklace that is way too tight, to ensure her silence.

The magic within the shop is always built into the atmosphere, but is only confirmed at the end of the story. There is a cuckoo that seems to keep a real bird within itself, and a doll and a mouse who seem to move. Additionally, Finn explains: “I paint the feathers and the fur and the skin but himself breathes the life in” (ibid., p. 262). As uncle Philip learns that Jonathon likes to build toy boats, he decides to take him in as his apprentice.

The kids are invited to watch a theater performance, but it is a disturbing show about an artist who creates a ballerina, breathes life into her and then murders her. Due to a mistake, Finn ends up breaking one of the puppets, which leads Philip into deciding to replace it with Melanie herself.

From the beginning of the text, we understand that there is a mutual romantic interest between Melanie and Finn, which is concretized when they are alone together and she asks him what he is waiting for in order to kiss her. It is important to notice how the girl makes the first move, which brings back Carter’s aforementioned idea of women

² Margaret’s dumbness echoes the way Carter presents the mythological femaleness in *The Sadeian Woman*: “as a woman, my symbolic value is primarily that of a myth of patience and receptivity, a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled” (Ibid., p. 4-5).

as desiring beings and the necessity of reciprocity in relationships which she develops in *The Sadeian Woman*. With Philip's resolution, Finn is supposed to rehearse the play with Melanie. The script is about a girl who is walking on the beach when she gets attacked and raped by a swan.

Two disruptive moments occur during this rehearsal. Firstly, when Finn lies on top of Melanie as the swan, she caresses his hand, which scares him, because he knows uncle Philip would get angry over it. It is clear, then, that reciprocity is not within Philip's field of desire. Secondly, as he understands what is supposed to happen next, Finn refuses to rape her, as he says: "I won't do it because he wants me to do it, even if I want to do it" (ibid., p. 279). Finn, thus, proposes a different possibility for his own existence, differing from what is expected by Philip's rules.

The allegory is built. Philip – and his magic toyshop – is a symbol for the oppressive patriarchic power. He is the epitome of the normative masculinity, which imposes rules, requires silent agreements, modulates behaviors and sees sex as a one-sided practice. Margaret is the normative woman – she is Sade's Justine – the victim who quietly accepts the system, even if it pains her. Finn represents another possible masculinity: he follows the system until his relation to Melanie leads him to understanding that the toyshop is not what he wants or what he believes in – and which even causes Philip to call him effeminate. Francis is the man who lives within the paradigms, does not really question them, but is also not a main source of oppression. Melanie is the young woman who is not in accordance with the norms; she knows her own desires and she question what should be taken as matter of fact. Jonathon is the young boy who is being taken by the system to be turned into a source of its propagation, the new toymaker. Lastly, Victoria is the too young to understand what is going on child, who is just put before all this violence as if it was normal. "Flower's Marionette Microcosm" is just the metonym of patriarchy. And the swan, its symbol.

The swan is the magic toyshop's God, King, and Law.

The aforementioned moment in which Philip calls Finn effeminate is very important in order to understand how Carter is creating this idea of masculinity. If Philip is the metonym for a patriarchy that understands maleness as a place of oppression, a possibility of existence that does not oppress must not be defined as male.

All of this system will start getting destroyed after the play. Melanie goes on stage and delivers a great performance. However, before the swan attacks her, she notices how fake it looks from up close – when faced from a conscious position, patriarchic symbols are nothing but a made up, poorly-painted wooden puppet. This echoes the idea that male dominance is but a bunch of created icons that are socially taken more seriously than they should. After the show, Jonathon realizes he does not like the play.

The characters start to slowly and quietly rebel. Firstly, Finn sneaks into the theater at night and destroys the swan. It is important to highlight the fact that a man is responsible for destroying the oppressive symbol of the swan, so that Carter affirms that men may also be an important weapon against patriarchy – which echoes her affirmations in *The Sadeian Woman* that an unbalanced reality is also not fully satisfying to the oppressor.

Next, Melanie tells Jonathon that he should leave and go live the life he desires by the sea. In a magical moment, the boy enters a painting and is suddenly on a ship. There is, therefore, another possibility of his existence as a soon-to-be grown-up man: Jonathon does not have to be Philip's apprentice, he can live the life he has always dreamed of.

Margaret rips off her necklace, speaks – so she was never naturally dumb, she was ordered to be quiet by Philip –, takes Victoria and leaves as uncle Philip tries to stop them. There is nothing in biology that defines womanhood as a quiet submissive entity, and, away from her husband, she can provide little Victoria with a different kind of perception of reality.

As all of this happens, there is a bonfire going on at the park in front of the house and towards which Finn and Melanie flee. Uncle Philip goes to his theater, but all of the puppets have come to life and start attacking him – that which was created and harmed by the system can turn against it and serve as a destructive form. Lastly, Francis leaves the loud shop, in which the toys have all started moving and screaming, holding a doll that looks just like Philip – he had always been just another creation. Francis throws it into the bonfire and, as someone who was just an echo of the toyshop's rules, he disappears into thin air. Melanie and Finn are left alone, each having lost a brother and a sister, and with new possibilities of existence ahead of them. The shop is destroyed.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchy is commonly associated to the oppressive force of men over women. However, Angela Carter argues that it might not be so simple, but that maleness and femaleness are aesthetic forms of existence that derive from patriarchy, and not the other way around. That is to say that the idea of a prediscursive (or biological) sex that would create gender inequality and the forms of oppression that derive from it is actually an invention of the gendered system itself, as “there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along” (Butler, 2007, p. 11).

In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter not only creates an allegory to this system, but also opens up a possibility of its own destruction. The shop is presented as the workplace for Philip, the great patriarch, the normative man, maleness. Everything created in there echoes his rules, especially the rapist swan, the great symbol for his power and beliefs, the phallus. However, both the women and the other men in the story do not comply with the set paradigms.

As they escape the magic toyshop, Finn and Jonathon get the possibility of living a different masculinity and Margaret is finally allowed to have a voice. Carter not only showcases patriarchy as oppressive to both men and women, but she also reveals how unnatural it is: the swan looks fake when you pay close attention to it, even though Philip tries to make it as real as possible and breathe life into it. But if it was made up, it can also be destroyed. Finally, the puppets themselves rebel against the toymaker, which means that the system provides the weapons that may be used to its own destruction. As someone may build a swan, someone may destroy it.

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