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‘His Peremptory Prick’: The Failure of the Phallic in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977)

Ruth Charnock

Then the loudspeaker crackled again, to attract my attention: a gong sounded and a crisp voice with the intonations of an East Coast university delivered these maxims. [...]

‘Proposition one: time is a man, space is a woman.

Proposition two: time is a killer.

Proposition three: kill time and live forever.’

The gong struck again, and then the same voice delivered the following lecture.

‘Oedipus wanted to live backwards. He had a sensible desire to murder his father, who dragged him from the womb in complicity with historicity. His father wanted to send little Oedipus forward on a phallic projector (onwards and upwards!); his father taught him to live in the future, which isn’t living at all, and to turn his back on the timeless eternity of interiority.

But Oedipus botched the job. In complicity with phallocentricity, he concludes his trajectory a blind old man, wandering by the seashore in a search for reconciliation.

But Mother won’t botch the job.

Man lives in historicity; his phallic projector takes him onwards and upwards – but to where? Where but to the barren sea of infertility, the craters of the moon!

Journey back, journey backwards to the source!’

A click and the transmission was over. I had not understood one word of it, though I was very much more afraid than I had been. The matriarchs, I surmised, had captured me; and they perceived me as a criminal since they did not organize the world on the same terms as I did – the lecture, if it proved

*nothing else, proved that. I knew I was a criminal because I was imprisoned, although I knew of no crime which I had committed. But as soon as I defined my own status, I was a little comforted.*¹

Novelist, feminist, literary critic, journalist and provocateur, English writer Angela Carter (1940–92) is perhaps most known for her late works of magical realism, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991), along with her reworking of traditional fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, published in 1977, is a novel that casts patriarchy into crisis. In this sense, its patriarchal moment is one where patriarchy's might is undermined, castrated, demoted and emasculated. On a literal level, the novel is peopled by male characters who are either sterile (Zero), passing as women (Tristessa), or castrated (Eve/Evelyn). Symbolically and structurally, the novel satirizes and pillories phallogocentricity. Its female characters are often mouthpieces for proclamations regarding the death of progressivist accounts of history and of linear time. However, these proclamations are not free from the sting of Carter's tongue either. Indeed, in *The Passion of New Eve*, one can never be entirely sure which Carter is mocking the most: the maniacal, subjugating diktats of patriarchy? Or the womb-centric, pseudo-mysticism of 1970s French feminist theory and theology?² Neither is exempt from Carter's scorn and polemic.

The opening extract comes from a moment where the central character, Evelyn, a misogynist who has fled his pregnant and abused lover, Leilah, is kidnapped in the desert and taken to an all-female compound, Beulah, run by a monstrous, archetypal female named Mother. Mother, who is also a plastic surgeon, rapes and then castrates Evelyn, turning him into a woman, the Eve of the title. Just prior to Evelyn's sex change, he is forced to listen to the 'lecture', quoted in the extract.

The lecture outlines several of *The Passion of New Eve*'s key concerns: the notion of a gendered metaphysics ('time is a man, space is a woman'), the use of myth to police gender norms, here with recourse to *Oedipus Rex*, and the privileging of matriarchy as a corrective to patriarchy: 'Mother won't botch the job'. As Evelyn realizes, the 'matriarchs... did not organize the world on the same terms as I did'. In the novel, he will be made to realize what it feels like to live as a woman. And yet, *The Passion of New Eve* does not champion an essentialist view of gender. Rather, Carter sets social constructivist and essential theories of gender in play with each other, challenging the strict separation and policing of these apparently opposed camps within second wave feminist theory, and beyond.

As a patriarchal moment, *The Passion of New Eve* offers a nuanced, yet polemical reading. Although it absolutely seeks to undermine, deface and raze patriarchy to the ground, as readers we are forced to occupy two bodies: Evelyn's and Eve's. We inhabit both the patriarch and the subjugated body – the boundaries between them undone by the fact that Evelyn is 'turned' into Eve. As David Punter identifies, the novel mounts a key contestation of 'the gendered structure of narrative', one which throws the reader back on their own gendered reading position in disorientating ways.³ Do we read Evelyn/Eve as male or female? And how might this alter or throw into relief our own gendering as readers? The novel interrogates complicity with forms of gendered violence by interpellating the reader as both victim and perpetrator of gendered violence.

Furthermore, the novel treats both patriarchal and matriarchal mythologies as deeply suspect ideologies. As is evident from the excerpt, Carter satirizes matriarchal, anti-phallic and anti-historical mythologies by presenting them, according to Lorna Sage, 'as consolatory fictions (that) must be exposed and reasoned (and jeered) out of countenance'.⁴ This jeering takes the form of an overblown theological rhetoric, as in the excerpt. As such, *The Passion of New Eve* is a crucial text for thinking about the ideological excesses of the second wave feminist movement, as well as those of patriarchy. Neither, Carter surmises, should be allowed to stand within western culture.

The novel begins in London, where Evelyn has his last night in the city before moving to New York. He takes a date to the cinema where an old movie is showing, starring Tristessa de St. Ange, a 1940s film actress, idolized by Evelyn in his youth. Tristessa will come to play a pivotal role in the novel when she does appear in the flesh. A transvestite, s/he works in the novel to satirize Hollywood's production of images of perfect and persecuted womanhood, images that collude with women's subjugation and the eroticization of this subjugation.

From this early image of the shimmering fantasy work of the silver screen, the novel lurches, violently, into a dystopian nightmare, when Evelyn lands in New York. Carter's dystopian New York is terrorized by a faction referred to only as 'the Women', who leave their tags on the walls of expensive hotel lobbies: 'the female circle – thus: ♀ with, inside it, a set of bared teeth. Women are angry. Beware Women! Goodness me!' (11). Carter's protagonist, a sex-crazed misogynist who owns, only, that he has 'an ambivalent attitude towards women' which sometimes manifests in him 'tying a girl to the bed before I copulated with her', does not take the threat of these bared teeth entirely seriously as directed at his own manhood (9). However, the novel soon corrects him.

Evelyn embarks upon an affair with an erotic dancer, Leilah. Evelyn exoticizes, eroticizes and defiles Leilah, tying her to the bed when he leaves her in his apartment to go to work. Leilah, as Evelyn depicts her, is 'a born victim' – one who willingly (although with a modicum of, seemingly, staged resistance) subjugates herself to Evelyn's rule. In turn, to Evelyn, Leilah quickly becomes 'an irritation of the flesh, an itch that must be scratched; a response, not a pleasure' (31). When Leilah becomes pregnant, Evelyn refuses to marry her and tells her 'firmly... that she must have an abortion' (33). After she haemorrhages and, subsequently, is sterilized, Evelyn abandons her 'to the dying city' and flees to the desert (37).

Already surrealistic in tone and imagery, from this point in the novel, *The Passion of New Eve* becomes increasingly so as Evelyn voyages deep into the desert and is kidnapped by a gang who seem, initially, to be 'the Women' from New York, except these captors' symbol looks 'like a broken arrow or truncated column' (45). Following his capture, Evelyn is taken to an underground lair, the 'place they called Beulah' (47). Beulah will be the site of Evelyn's forced sex change – the place where Evelyn will become Eve, ruled over by the monstrous Mother. Beulah's symbol, the broken column, is made manifest in a stone monument:

A stone cock with testicles, all complete, in a state of massive tumescence. But the cock was broken off clean in the middle.... The top half of the cock, ten feet of it, lay in the sand at my feet but it did not look as if it had fallen accidentally. (48)

The symbolic and the premonitory collide in this edifice. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the phallic is profoundly under threat: patriarchy, rendered as a tyranny at the end of its tether. The novel satirizes the emergence of a new kind of patriarchy (or, at least, a new version of the old kind of patriarch) in 1970s America: one run by the cult leader-guru-sexual mystic, à la Charles Manson, and represented most fully in *The Passion of New Eve* by the impotent Zero and his harem of devoted, subjugated wives.

The edifice is also a very real pre-sentiment of Evelyn's forthcoming castration – itself 'a complicated mix of mythology and technology' (48). The novel moves between these two modes – the seeming timelessness of myth revealed, as Roland Barthes has suggested,⁵ to be a complexly encoded set of culturally policing discourses, and the technological, equally revealed as profoundly motivated by ideologies that aim towards myth. That is to say, *The Passion of New Eve* makes a technology out of myth and a myth out of technology, particularly when it comes to turning Evelyn into Eve.

From his arrival at Beulah, Evelyn is locked into a 'simulacrum of the womb' (52), where he is forced to listen to a piped-in female voice which shifts register between apocalyptic end-of-days prophesy and a 'lulling chorus' which murmurs 'NOW YOU ARE AT THE PLACE OF BIRTH' (52). Evelyn is subjected to a series of medical tests, washed and shaved by his 'captress' who looks at him with 'utter contempt' (55). Evelyn is dressed to look like his captress, then taken through a labyrinthine series of passages to meet Mother, 'the Minotaur at heart of the maze' (58).

Carter lingers over the Mother's body, which, as Aidan Day describes, is the result of 'a kind of super plastic surgery', which has rendered her as the archetypal maternal.⁶ Mother 'was breasted like a sow – she possessed two tiers of nipples, the result ... of a strenuous programme of grafting, so that, in theory, she could suckle four babies at one time' (59). Mother's physical capacity dwarves Evelyn's in every sense; he knows that 'there was no way in which I could show her my virility that would astonish her' (60). This is a narrative of masculinity unmanned in the face, and body, of the technologically enhanced female:

Before this overwhelming woman, the instrument that dangled from my belly was useless. It was nothing but a decorative appendance attached there in a spirit of frivolity by the nature whose terrestrial representative she had, of her own free will, become. Since I had no notion how to approach her with it, she rendered it insignificant; I must deal with her on her own terms. (60)

Here, Carter deals a further blow to the myth of phallic power. 'Free will', in combination with technology, renders the male instrument 'useless' and 'insignificant'. The terms of engagement shift from the patriarchal to the matriarchal: Evelyn must deal with the Mother 'on her own terms', rather than assuming the terms of phallic logic. As throughout *The Passion of New Eve*, this encounter places gendered forms of power under question, specifically via second wave discourses about new reproductive technologies. Evelyn's inability to 'astonish' the Mother is part of a wider conversation regarding men's sexual function once women can, supposedly, deny, grant or control sexual access to their bodies, a conversation which gestures outwards to the free love movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

As 'her own mythological artefact', Mother embodies an anti-essentialist notion of womanhood: one made rather than born, to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir.⁷ The constructedness of Mother's body undoes the 'natural' right to domination presumed by patriarchy generally and Evelyn specifically in the novel. As Mother tells Evelyn: '[t]o be a *man* is not a given condition but

a continuous effort' (63). Here, Carter also anticipates social constructivist positions on gender, typified by Judith Butler's ur-text *Gender Trouble* (1990).

But Mother is also a mouthpiece for a combination of theological and French feminist readings of gender, prevalent within the second wave. The latter is characterized by the 1970s work of Hélène Cixous.⁸ In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) Cixous proposes that women *need* to speak in a different language to men if they are to be liberated from the structures and strictures of patriarchy.⁹ In *The Passion of New Eve*, female characters are frequently rendered illegible to male characters – as with Evelyn's observation at the beginning of the novel that Leilah speaks in a language he cannot comprehend: 'her argot or patois was infinitely strange to me, I could hardly understand a word she said' (26).

French feminist essentialism and social constructivism meet and spar throughout *The Passion of New Eve*, which is one of the reasons it is such a productive text for thinking about the way these two discourses abut. However, neither theorization of gender is portrayed as an absolute or a solution to patriarchy in the novel. Carter does not pillory patriarchy in order to elevate matriarchy, although matriarchy is privileged, in terms of its relative representation, in the novel. Rather, it is 'gender-based determinism' that is under critique – a notion that is rendered a myth by Carter, as Sarah Gamble argues.¹⁰

So, then, we are not to look to the Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* as a solution or consolation for the smashing of patriarchy. As Evelyn realizes, just before he is raped by the Mother: 'that women are consolation is a man's dream' (60). Elsewhere, Carter argues that any idea of essential maternity is, equally, a myth:

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men) ... Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods.¹¹

The Mother, whilst functioning as a wielding site of power in *The Passion of New Eve* is also, frequently, rendered silly – a parodic embodiment of theological cultism, such as became popular in certain second wave quarters in the 1960s and 1970s.

Following Evelyn's raping by Mother, he is led to 'the operating table, where Mother waited with a knife' (69). There in a 'warm, inter-uterine, symmetrical place', watched by 'rows of silent, seated women', Evelyn is castrated by Mother

'with a single blow' (69–71). Over the following two months, Evelyn is turned into Eve. Eve escapes back into the desert, only to be kidnapped again by arch-patriarch 'Zero the poet' and his wives. Rendered as ridiculous as the monstrous Mother, Zero, fittingly for a phallic symbol, is monopedal:

He had only one eye and that was of an insatiable blue He was one-legged, to match, and would poke his women with the artificial member when the mood took him He loved guns almost as much as he cherished misanthropy. (85)

Zero is a quintessential misogynist and works in the novel as a perfect counterpoint to Mother. His first act is to 'unceremoniously' rape Eve and then appoint her as another wife in his harem (86). All of his other wives love Zero 'blindly', utterly subjugated to his will and rule (87). Sexually enslaved to Zero, his wives have swallowed the myth of patriarchy's supremacy, enacted through their marriage contract: 'they believed it predicated their very existence, since they'd decided to believe that sexual intercourse with him guaranteed their continued health and wellbeing' (88). As the quintessential patriarch, Zero '[believes] women were fashioned of a different soul substance from men, a more primitive, animal stuff' (87). Accordingly, he beats and defecates on his wives, showing more care towards his pigs: 'he let the pigs do as they pleased [but] demanded absolute subservience from his women' (95). Here, the novel plays out what Aidan Day, referring to Carter's gender polemic, *The Sadeian Woman*, calls 'a Sadeian structure of relations':

[T]he vacuity that Zero projects on to his women and which they then internalize lies, in fact, in himself. Carter points to this through his name, but also through presenting him, for all that he loved guns, whips, Wagner and Nietzsche, as deficient in the maleness he himself mythologizes. He is one-eyed, one-legged and infertile.¹²

The Passion of New Eve argues that patriarchy itself is structured on this relation: projecting *its* lack on to women, so as to conceal its own impotency. But Carter also suggests, out of step with other feminist positions of this period that women willingly subjugate themselves to this patriarchal myth and that, in fact, this subjugation may feel very much like pleasure – as enacted by Zero's adoring and defiled wives. As such, the novel is crucial for thinking through the nuances not only in the dynamics of patriarchy but also in the theories that would seek to oppose it.