

**‘Violent operations’: Revisiting the transgendered body in
Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve***

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser foregrounds the ways in which the transgendered subject has been figured as a ‘key queer trope,’¹ playing such a prominent role in the dissemination of queer theory as to serve as ‘the most crucial sign of queer sexuality’s aptly skewed point of entry into the academy.’² Elsewhere Judith Halberstam illustrates the way in which the transgendered subject seems to embody key concepts for queer theory: ‘the split between sex and gender which is so *readable* within the transgender or transsexual body reveals the constructedness of all sex and gender [emphasis added].’³ The transgendered figure, it seems, has come to stand for queer theory and, hence, the presence of transgender themes within a literary text has sometimes been read as a kind of embodied shorthand for a queer intent. In this context, this article seeks to critically evaluate the queer recuperation of Angela Carter’s fiction, with a focus on the tensions between feminist politics and transgendered identity in her 1977 novel *The Passion of New Eve*.

As Joanne Hollows has written, ‘for many second-wave feminists femininity was self-evidently problematic’ and its critique ‘fundamental to understanding women’s oppression;’⁴ indeed, the exposure of femininity as a patriarchal construction - from Kate Millett’s ‘interior colonisation’ (1977) to Mary Daly’s ‘man-made’ women (1979)

¹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) p.5.

² Jay Prosser, ‘Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex,’ *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) p. 259.

³ Judith Halberstam, ‘Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography,’ *A/B: Auto/biography Studies* 15: 1 (2000) p. 64.

⁴ Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 14.

- is also a recurring concern in Angela Carter's early writing. To take just one significant example, in her 1975 essay on fashion and femininity, "The Wound in the Face," Carter uses the figure of the transvestite to satirically express her bemused alienation from the 'female impersonation' which normative femininity requires of women, noting that 'fashionable women now tend to look like women imitating men imitating women.'⁵ The emergence of queer theory in the 1990's saw the questioning of concepts fundamental to Second Wave feminism, including the very concept of 'women' as a political category, with Judith Butler asking: 'To what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence *only* in the context of the heterosexual matrix? [emphasis added].'⁶ *The Passion of New Eve* was published long before the advent of queer theory and Carter's work is more commonly situated within Second Wave feminist contexts and yet, as Joanne Trevenna has observed, queer frameworks are increasingly being mobilised to enable reassessments Carter's work. Trevenna more specifically notes the 'Butlerification' of Carter's fiction which, she suggests, has 'facilitated a kind of feminist 'recovery' of Carter's work since the novelist's death in 1992.'⁷ Indeed, the prominence of gender crossing as a motif in *The Passion of New Eve* seems to lend itself readily to explorations of performativity. Catrin Gersdorf, in 'The Gender of Nature's Nation: A Queer Perspective,' pronounces Eve 'perfectly queer in that s/he embodies the disparity between physiological sex and psychological gender.'⁸ Moreover, in 'Unexpected geometries: transgressive symbolism and the transsexual subject in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*,' Heather L. Johnson gives voice to the reconstruction of Carter's texts as

⁵ Angela Carter, "The Wound in the Face," *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, ed. Jenny Uglow (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997) 110.

⁶ Butler, Judith (1999), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge 9.

⁷ Joanne Trevenna, 'Gender as Performance: questioning the 'Butlerification' of Angela Carter's Fiction,' *Journal of Gender Studies* 11:3 (2002) p. 267. Trevenna argues that there are 'divergences between Carter's overtly theatrical presentation of "gender as performance" and Butler's theories of "gender as performative"' p. 268.

⁸ Catrin Gersdorf, 'The Gender of Nature's Nation: A Queer Perspective,' *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 46 (2001) p. 50.

queer *avant la lettre* when she proposes that *The Passion of New Eve* 'seems to preempt, by nearly two decades, recent developments in the discipline of gender studies.'⁹ However, Prosser's *Second Skins* has interrogated the perceived tendency of queer theory to use the figure of the trans person to represent all kinds of gender crossings; Prosser foregrounds the 'materiality of the sexed body,'¹⁰ questioning the figurative uses to which it is put as a signifier of gender transgression, and noting that the 'identity and bodily integrity'¹¹ which queer theory deconstructs is at the same time the sincere aspiration of many transsexual narratives. Judith Butler herself has contested readings of her ground breaking book *Gender Trouble* which seem to simply equate the practices of cross-dressing with the concept of gender performativity.¹² Where Butler is concerned to question reductive readings of performativity, Prosser and others further seek to articulate trans identity as a lived reality, not merely a textbook illustration of 'gender trouble'.

Tensions between transgender and queer theory complicate the tendency to 'read' the transgendered subject simply as a textual signifier of a queer text. The recuperation of Carter's fiction through queer theory, as suggested by Trevenna, also raises questions with regard to the relationship between Second Wave feminism (the provenance of Carter's writing) and queer theory, especially where transgendered identity is concerned. Moreover, to read the transgendered subjects in *The Passion of New Eve* simply as queer tropes of gender performativity is to risk overlooking the complex - and sometimes fraught - history of the relationship between feminism and transgender. Anxiety, suspicion and even hostility have met the prospect - and lived reality - of transgender in some feminist contexts. In her now notorious 1979

⁹ Heather L. Johnson, 'Unexpected geometries: transgressive symbolism and the transsexual subject in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*,' *The Infernal Desire Machines of Angela Carter*, eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Broughton (London and New York: Longman, 1997) p. 167.

¹⁰ Prosser, 'Judith Butler' p. 264.

¹¹ Prosser, *Second Skins* p. 6.

¹² See Judith Butler's Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, first published in 1990.

polemic *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of a She-Male*, Janice C. Raymond's provocative assertion that 'all transsexuals rape women's bodies'¹³ gave expression to an aversion grounded in a feminist standpoint; her book inadvertently inspired some of the founding texts in a new activist and theoretical movement but also represents a mode of reaction to transgender within Second Wave feminism which has a problematic legacy. More recently, Gayle Rubin has captured the antagonism directed at transgender practices by some women when she refers to the perception of 'male-to-female transsexuals as menacing intruders and female-to-male transsexuals as treasonous deserters.'¹⁴ Variations on these sentiments are evident in some scholarship on Carter's novel; I wish to consider them within the context of transgender studies and to revisit both Carter's text and its reception in order to explore its implication in what Sandy Stone has called the 'battlefield of the transsexual body.'¹⁵ As Stone writes in 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto:'

Here on the gender borders at the close of the twentieth century . . . we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting in the battlefield of the transsexual body . . .¹⁶

The Passion of New Eve features not one but two male-to-female transsexuals; I am here using the term to refer to a person who identifies with a gendered identity at odds with a sexed identity assigned at birth. Eve, formerly Evelyn, the eponymous narrator of Carter's novel, is a post-operative male-to-female transsexual. Tristessa,

¹³ Janice C. Raymond, 'Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist,' *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) p. 134.

¹⁴ Gayle Rubin, 'Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender and Boundaries,' *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) 476.

¹⁵ Sandy Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,' *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) p. 230.

¹⁶ Stone p. 230.

the Hollywood icon of Evelyn's adolescent dreams, is a non-operative male-to-female transsexual passing as a woman.¹⁷ The two figures are in many ways doubled in the narrative, a strategy which culminates in their 'double wedding' - a potentially queer union to which I will return. In the often mythical, alchemical imagery of the narrative, this doubling seems to promise a mystical reconciliation of opposites. However, Eve and Tristessa experience very different fates which belie the complementary equality which the ancient hermaphroditic symbolism seems to promise. Eve's implied pregnancy at the end of the novel is not only depicted as redemptive but also implicitly validates her biological womanhood, in ways which are troubling in ideological terms.¹⁸ By contrast, Tristessa's 'exposure' as a passing male inaugurates a series of violent humiliations and assaults, culminating in her murder. In other words, the involuntary transsexual, Eve, emerges as an 'authentic' woman against whom the inauthenticity of the elective transsexual, Tristessa, is contrasted. Moreover, this authenticity rests on the criteria of reproductive sexuality - the keystone of heteronormative constructions of sexuality. In this context, the transphobic violence - both material and symbolic - which Tristessa suffers demands closer attention.

'Violent Operations': Sexualised Violence and Transsexual Surgery

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is one of her most combative texts and one in which motifs of insurgency, sabotage and sexualised aggression are rife; situated in a landscape ravaged by guerrilla warfare, the transgendered body becomes the site on

¹⁷ I will refer to the pre-operative protagonist as 'Evelyn' and the 'post-operative' as 'Eve' to indicate the differently sexed positions to which the narrator is assigned at specific temporal locations in the text. I will refer to Tristessa as 'she' throughout in recognition of her elective gendered identification.

¹⁸ Lilith speculates " 'What if Tristessa made you pregnant? . . . Your baby will have two fathers and two mothers'" (187) and Eve remarks that that "[Lilith] took it for granted that I was pregnant" (187). While Lilith's authority may be in doubt, her supposition is pre-empted by Eve's anticipation of her own "tribute to evolution" (186). The status of Eve's pregnancy is not absolutely resolved at the end of the novel, but the possibility that Eve - as a male-to-female transgendered person - may have conceived serves an important symbolic purpose in distinguishing her from Tristessa.

which a violent conflict is waged. The initially male narrator's involuntary sex reassignment and her subsequent sexual servitude - inflicted by matriarchal and patriarchal autocrats respectively - is made to stand for the war between the sexes. The depiction of sexualised violence in feminist fiction generally, and in Carter's work specifically, is a contentious issue which scholars have examined in detail. In *The Passion of New Eve* sexualised violence is committed by both male and female characters; Evelyn is 'raped' by Mother as a man and repeatedly by Zero as a woman. In her 1997 article, 'Sexual and Textual Aggression in *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*,' Merja Makinen suggests that such reversals of gendered paradigms of oppression challenge 'passive stereotypes that uphold suffering and eroticise victimisation.'¹⁹ She places Carter at the forefront of a generation of Second Wave feminist writers shattering 'myths of femininity': 'Depictions of women wielding violence can be both demystifying and cathartic. In the 1970s, Carter took the initiative to show the exhilarating thrill of women's sexual and textual aggression.'²⁰ The violence exercised by Mother on behalf of the community of women at Beulah is certainly provocative; however, I want to examine what becomes of the male to female transgendered body in a context where textual violence is waged in terms which rely on binary categories of sex.

The relationship between 'corrective' medical practices and heteronormative imperatives for sexed, gendered and sexual bodies is an especially complex one where transgendered subjects are concerned. Henry Rubin, in 'The Logic of Treatment,' contrasts two histories in relation to hormonal treatments; the 'homosexual history' successfully strives for an end to 'unwanted treatments' whereas the goal of the 'transsexual history' is the 'creation rather than the removal

¹⁹ Merja Makinen, 'Sexual and Textual Aggression in *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*,' *The Infernal Desire Machines of Angela Carter*, eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Broughton (London and New York: Longman, 1997) p. 163.

²⁰ Makinen p. 163.

of a diagnosis.’²¹ Advances in reconstructive surgery, as well as endocrinology, have enabled new possibilities in relation to the transition between sexes, but eligibility for surgery has historically been conditional on the subject’s capacity to conform - however strategically - to medicalised categories of diagnosis. As Sandy Stone has written in “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto:”

candidates for surgery were evaluated on the basis of their *performance* in the gender of choice. The criteria constituted a fully acculturated, consensual definition of gender, and *at the site of their enactment we can locate an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender* [emphasis in original].²²

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Tristessa seeks sex reassignment surgery from Mother, in her former civilian capacity as a cosmetic surgeon; the latter justifies her refusal of Tristessa’s request on the grounds of what she diagnoses as her ‘ineradicable maleness,’²³ inaugurating a denial of Tristessa’s elective trans identity which persists, often in violent form, throughout the novel and its critical reception. Jay Prosser acknowledges the popular conception of sex reassignment surgery as a form of self-inflicted violence:

Without doubt what renders transsexuality most unnatural in the cultural imagination is sex reassignment surgery. The logic of its conception as mutilation is that if the bodies operated on are not already wounded or deformed, then the surgery itself must wound or deform.²⁴

The equation of this surgery with castration is more than clinical; it mobilises symbolic associations which provoke fear and aversion at the prospect of the ‘emasculated’ man. The sex reassignment surgery denied to Tristessa is, of course, imposed on the involuntary Evelyn in *The Passion of New Eve*; moreover, the ways in

²¹ Henry Rubin, ‘The Logic of Treatment,’ *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) p. 489.

²² Stone 228.

²³ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1977) p. 173.

²⁴ Prosser, *Second Skins* p. 81.

which it is depicted as a punishment for his transgressions against women as a man has important implications for the ways in which trans identity is constructed in this novel. On discovery of the surgical fate planned for him by Mother, he asks 'of what crime had I been guilty to deserve such punishment?'²⁵ Later, apprehending Leilah's possible role in his abduction and enforced reconstruction, Eve wonders: 'was my body her revenge?'²⁶ In this novel surgical sex reassignment becomes an act of retributive violence which permanently 'wounds' Eve; in this context, elective surgery would seem an act of radical self-harm. It seems deeply ironic that when Eve later refers to a 'violent operation'²⁷ she has in mind not her own coercive surgery but Tristessa's freely chosen decision to pass as a woman. Denied surgery by Mother, Tristessa conceals her genitals by tucking them between her legs; it is this gesture - and her subsequent career as a screen icon of femininity - which is implicitly depicted as an act of self-mutilation.

'Exposing' Transgender: Discourses of (In)Authenticity

'Transgender' is a term which has emerged in recent decades to describe a particular configuration of identity, a specific community and a growing body of theory, influenced by but not identical to queer theory. Transgender, according to Judith Halberstam, is a term which 'can be used as a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity';²⁸ this expansive definition includes those who 'pass or cross-dress or simply refuse normative gender categories.'²⁹ As a term referring to cross-identifying subjects it is not simply another way of describing - and certainly not of conflating - transsexuals and transvestites. Evidently, 'transgender' presents conceptual challenges similar to those embodied in

²⁵ Carter p. 68.

²⁶ Carter p. 172.

²⁷ Carter p. 144.

²⁸ Halberstam, 'Telling Tales' p. 68.

²⁹ Halberstam, 'Telling Tales,' p. 62.

'queer' as a result of its turning away from identity politics and towards an inclusivity which has been described as 'subjectless'.³⁰ However, as a term with which some transsexuals, among others, identify it signifies a crucial shift. As many commentators have noted, the conventional aim of the transsexual has been to disappear: to become invisible, unremarkable and undetectable. As Jamison Green has trenchantly noted of female-to-male transsexuals: 'If transsexual men want to disappear, to not be seen, it is because they are afraid of not being seen as men, of being told they are not men, of being unable to refute the assertion that they are not men. All men fear this.'³¹ To identify as transgendered, then, is to take up a different position in relation to gendered norms, other than strategic conformity. By identifying *as* transgender, transgender people are not seeking to conceal a prior sexed identity or current cross-gender identification but to embrace the lived integrity of an identity position as transgendered. Much feminist anxiety around transgender has its roots in a concern that the person who cross dresses or changes sex is complicit in normative gender regimes, the assumption being that they conflate sex and gender in an essentialist fashion. However, here the emphasis on transition across or between sexes and / or genders is not as a transitional route to a fixed destination but as a condition in its own right. As Prosser has put it:

If transsexual has been conceived conventionally as a transitional phase to pass through once the transsexual can pass and assimilate as nontranssexual - one begins as female, one becomes a transsexual, one is a man - under the aegis of transgender, transsexuals, now refusing to pass through transsexuality, are speaking en masse as transsexuals . . .³²

³⁰ See David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz: ' . . . what might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent.' 'Introduction: What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?' *Social Text* 84-85, 23:3-4 (2005) p. 3.

³¹ Jamison Green, 'Look! No, Don't! The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men,' *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) p. 506.

³² Prosser, *Second Skins* p. 11.

However where new discourses of transgender seek neither to disavow a differently sexed / gendered history nor to arrive at a normatively fixed end, transphobic discourses continue to seek to 'expose' or 'unmask' what they construct as inauthenticity and deceit.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Tristessa's gender identification is posited as inauthentic by Eve who describes her as a 'female impersonator . . . forever cheated of experience';³³ Eve is insistent in denying the reality of Tristessa's experience, pronouncing that 'he had been she; though she had never been a woman . . .'³⁴ For Eve, it seems, the discovery of Tristessa's transgendered identity is equivalent to - and as irreversible as - the exposure of a falsehood. This is a recurring motif in transgendered life stories, as Judith Halberstam has noted:

Eccentric, double, duplicitous, deceptive, odd, self-hating: all of these judgements swirl around the passing woman, the cross-dresser, the non-operative transsexual, the self-defined transgender person, as if other lives - gender normative lives - were not odd, not duplicitous, not doubled and contradictory at every turn.³⁵

In a discussion of reconstructions of the lives and deaths of jazz musician, Billy Tipton, who was posthumously 'exposed' as female, and Brandon Teena, who was brutally murdered in Nebraska in 1993, Halberstam describes transgender biography as 'a sometimes violent, often imprecise project which seeks to brutally erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person and which recasts the act of passing as deception, dishonesty and fraud.'³⁶ Taking its cue from Eve's narrative perspective, a recurring motif in Carter scholarship on this novel is the interpretation of the discovery of Tristessa's transgendered condition as the

³³ Carter p. 144.

³⁴ Carter p. 144.

³⁵ Halberstam, 'Telling Tales' p. 70.

³⁶ Halberstam, 'Telling Tales' p. 62.

'exposure' of Tristessa as a 'male cross-dresser'. For example, both Roberta Rubenstein and Heather L. Johnson, writing in differently inflected feminist frameworks, categorise Tristessa and Eve as transvestite and transsexual respectively; Rubenstein refers to Eve and Tristessa as 'the transsexual and the transvestite who have inhabited both genders'³⁷ and Johnson remarks on a 'distinction . . . between the treatment of the transvestite and that of the transsexual.'³⁸ The transvestite is posited here as a kind of incomplete transsexual and Tristessa's gendered identification is implicitly reduced to impersonation. Johnson does seek to reconsider Carter's novel within the context of transgender biography, but attributes Sandy Stones' 'posttranssexual' identity to Eve, rather than Tristessa, on the grounds that she discloses rather than conceals her pre-operative sexed history. Eve seems to emerge as the more authentic transsexual on the basis of her sexed identity alone; her forcible reassignment is privileged over Tristessa's elective transgendered agency.

The 'exposure' of Tristessa is a persistent motif in Carter criticism which, in glossing Carter's text, seems to uncritically reproduce Eve's judgment.³⁹ Hence Makinen asserts that: 'Tristessa is in fact a male cross-dresser who has *no experience whatsoever of being a real woman*. Not only that, Tristessa has little sexual experience of women . . . [emphasis added].'⁴⁰ This assertion raises the question of what would constitute a 'real woman,' as well as seeming to infer, rather paradoxically, that Tristessa might have made a better woman had she been a more successful heterosexual man.

Similarly, Rubenstein asserts that Tristessa is '*unmask[ed]*' as a transvestite who has

³⁷ Roberta Rubenstein, 'Intersexions: Gender metamorphosis in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Lois Gould's *A Sea-Change*,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12:1 (1993) p. 111.

³⁸ Johnson p. 175.

³⁹ Interestingly, Eve is spared a similar exposure as a former man; while the reader is party to this history, Eve is never made vulnerable to the consequences of public knowledge. So convincing is Eve's new body in this speculative novel that the question of her capacity to pass as a woman, in the absence of any subjective feminine identification, is effectively suspended. While Eve is far from safe as a woman, she is never at serious risk as a transgendered person.

⁴⁰ Makinen p. 157.

successfully *disguised* his male sex throughout 'his'/her Hollywood career [emphasis added].⁴¹ Both Rubenstein and Makinen read Tristessa as not only revealing the cultural construction of femininity but also as being complicit in the patriarchal construction of femininity - as a kind of 'patriarchal stooge,'⁴² to use Prosser's words. Hence Makinen claims that 'Tristessa's cross-dressing is a *male appropriation* of femininity, not a radical form of gender-bending [emphasis added]'⁴³ and Rubenstein writes that when 'Tristessa's true biological sex is unmasked . . . Carter *exposes the lie* at the base of male romantic fantasies of femininity [emphasis added].'⁴⁴ Tristessa is depicted as suffering a form of false consciousness in succumbing to a 'lie' of femininity, but as a sexed male she is also regarded as an agent of male colonisation of female experience. Here femininity is understood only as patriarchal construction imposed on women and not as a gendered mode of being, with complex and multiple manifestations, which can be assumed by differently sexed agents. Moreover, there is a tension between an insistence that the femininity assumed by the transsexual is culturally constructed, and hence inauthentic, and a presumption that 'women' have a prerogative to femininity based on 'real' female experience.

'Immune To Rape'? Transphobic Violence

Disturbingly, Eve's conviction that Tristessa 'had never been a woman'⁴⁵ is little different to Zero's, whose exposure of Tristessa's biological sex is the impetus for a terrorising ordeal. Here symbolic violence joins forces with material violence which, much like Evelyn's sex reassignment surgery, seems to have a punitive, corrective function: namely, to forcibly inscribe on Tristessa both a biological maleness and a

⁴¹ Rubenstein p. 107.

⁴² Prosser, *Second Skins* p. 90.

⁴³ Makinen p. 158.

⁴⁴ Rubenstein p. 110.

⁴⁵ Carter p. 144.

male heterosexuality, the latter constructed as an inevitable consequence of the former. The violence which is directed at Tristessa's body can be understood as homophobic not because its object is homosexual, but because its motivation is to do with fear of and hostility towards the possibility of same sex desire. The forms which sexual intimacy take for Tristessa, if any, prior to her encounter with Eve are not revealed; here the text reinforces prevailing assumptions about transsexuals as asexual beings, although she does weep over the death of her devoted Chinese male companion. However, Zero's long-planned assault on Tristessa and her ultimate demise are both implicated in homophobic violence; Zero hunts Tristessa down as a 'dyke'⁴⁶ and Tristessa is summarily shot by a boy soldier on whose cheek she has placed a kiss. However, the 'rape' to which Tristessa is subjected can be considered more specifically transphobic.

Rape is repeatedly and explicitly depicted as a weapon of sexualised violence in *The Passion of New Eve*; the prominence of this motif would seem to firmly locate Carter's 1977 novel within the sexual politics of its time - an era in which Janice C. Raymond could seek to mobilise feminist anger against male-to-female transsexuals through her metaphorical use of 'rape.' Radical feminist critiques of rape have been central to Second Wave frameworks for the analysis of sexuality and violence; as Vicki Bell has noted, 'sexuality has been posited as a, if not the, central site of women's oppression.'⁴⁷ An understanding of sexual violence as playing a key role in the induction of women into patriarchal roles is a defining legacy of radical feminist Second Wave thinking and is reflected both in Carter's fiction and its reception. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve suffers 'marital rape[s]'⁴⁸ by Zero so 'furious' that she fears 'I would die of it;'⁴⁹ she describes this regime of sexual terror as 'savage an

⁴⁶ Carter p.91.

⁴⁷Vikki Bell, *Interrogating Incest: Feminism, Foucault and the Law* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 5.

⁴⁸ Carter p. 102.

⁴⁹ Carter p. 107

apprenticeship in womanhood as could have been devised for me.’⁵⁰ Jean Wyatt offers the following exposition of Carter’s feminist literary strategies:

What Carter is unwilling to compromise or soften in these early novels is her depiction of woman’s structural position within patriarchy: becoming a woman requires, in *The Passion of New Eve*, a literal castration and, in *The Magic Toyshop*, a ‘rape’, an alienation of a woman’s subjective agency that amounts to a mutilation.⁵¹

In their introduction to *Rape and Representation*, Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver write that ‘rape and *rapability* are central to the very construction of gender identity [emphasis added];’⁵² the problematic assumptions about sexed bodies and heterosexual sexualities which are latent in this formulation, are summed up effectively in Rubenstein’s reference to ‘the anatomical asymmetry between male and female, most obviously embodied in the experience of heterosexual intercourse: to penetrate versus to be penetrated.’⁵³ The extent to which the feminist recognition of the reality and fear of sexual violence as constructing gendered identities serves to reinforce the construction of woman as victims has subsequently been the subject of much scrutiny. For example, Carine M. Mardorassian in her article ‘Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape’ foregrounds the ‘need to resist the facile opposition between passivity and agency that has motivated popular and academic discussions of violence against women.’⁵⁴ Carter’s audacious imagining of female-perpetrated rape is symptomatic of her complex relationship to emerging feminist orthodoxies but where the ‘rape’ of Evelyn by Mother reverses hierarchies of gendered power Tristessa’s ‘rape’ arguably serves to reinforce sexed categories of identity.

⁵⁰ Carter p. 107

⁵¹ Jean Wyatt, “The Violence of Gendering: Castration Images in Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and ‘Peter and the Wolf’,” *Angela Carter: Contemporary Critical Essay*, ed. Alison Easton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) p. 77.

⁵² Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, ‘Introduction: Rereading Rape,’ *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) p. 3.

⁵³ Rubenstein p. 105.

⁵⁴ Carine M. Mardorassian, ‘Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape,’ *Signs*, 27:3 (Spring 2002) p. 771.

As one of Zero's many 'wives', Eve is in effect a sexual slave; she is violently raped by Zero more than once as an assertion of his power and contempt. At each of these 'violations' Eve knows herself as a former (male) 'violatee',⁵⁵ thereby depicting her victimisation as an extension of Mother's punishment. Eve's body has been constructed as a male 'masturbatory fantasy'⁵⁶ as if to ensure that she will suffer sexual objectification and exploitation; she is raped as a woman, but seemingly punished for the man that she was. By retaining this narrative perspective it is as if Eve experiences her rapes as a man, and indeed Evelyn does claim to have been 'unceremoniously raped'⁵⁷ by Mother whilst still biologically male. Where Zero's penetrating body is an 'instrument of torture'⁵⁸ for the female Eve, Mother is an agent of emasculating humiliation when she 'grasp[s]', 'engulf[s]' and 'expel[s]'⁵⁹ Evelyn's penis. Hence, while Carter provocatively reverses the gendered power relations at work in the act of heterosexual rape in her depiction of Evelyn's 'rape' by Mother (and before her Leilah) she nevertheless genders the nature of the assault so that penetration is viciously violent and incorporation less seriously demeaning. This distinction might serve to recuperate Carter's rewriting of rape in the light of critiques that her play with power takes too many liberties with women's real experiences in a patriarchal culture; however, when applied to the 'rape' of Tristessa other questions emerge.

In order to compel the consummation of the forced marriage between Eve and Tristessa, Zero instructs one of his wives to arouse Tristessa with her mouth. Staring in amazement at her own erection, Tristessa falls against Eve's body to whom she

⁵⁵ Carter p. 102.

⁵⁶ Carter p. 75.

⁵⁷ Carter p. 64.

⁵⁸ Carter p. 86.

⁵⁹ Carter pp. 64-5.

whispers: 'I thought I was immune to rape.'⁶⁰ In an act which echoes that of Leilah - who 'tears'⁶¹ an orgasm from the barely conscious Evelyn - Eve now 'draws'⁶² Tristessa into her where the latter ejaculates. On one level this scene seems to be offered by the text as 'proof' of what Mother, refusing Tristessa's request for a sex reassignment surgery, diagnosed as her 'ineradicable maleness.'⁶³ This maleness is assumed to reside in the fact of her penis, and her arousal and ejaculation are then taken as evidence of the restoration of her (male) heterosexuality - here a seemingly inevitable consequence of Tristessa's sexed maleness. In this sense Carter's narrative trajectory and Zero's homophobic mania seem, uncomfortably, to be fellow travellers. At the same time, however, this is an act of specifically transphobic violence in that it is designed to violate Tristessa's integrity as a transgendered person. Tristessa is forcibly inscribed into an identity other than the one with which she identifies; her forced sexual intimacy violates her gendered identity not because it is with a woman - a same sex encounter would not necessarily negate her gendered identity - but because she is made to be intimate as a sexed male. Self-evidently, for Zero Tristessa's rape is a punishment for her gender transgression and an attempt to enforce a normative role on her. But uneasily this text also seems to offer this 'rape' as a corrective - one which reveals the 'truth' of sex: namely, that Tristessa cannot be permitted to be a woman. Eve - the 'new' woman - is complicit in this lesson, becoming once more the violator.

The 'Double Wedding': Reproducing 'Sex'

Eve and Tristessa's 'marriage' - both the forced nuptials overseen by Zero and the consensual sexual encounter in the desert - are potentially queer moments in

⁶⁰ Carter p. 137.

⁶¹ Carter p. 27.

⁶² Carter p. 138.

⁶³ Carter p. 173.

Carter's novel. In the former the performativity of gender is foregrounded and in the latter the indeterminacy of sex suggested. The queer quality of the 'double wedding'⁶⁴ resides in a secret to which Zero is not party: Eve's status as a post-operative transsexual. Both Eve and Tristessa are individuals sexed male at birth but living as women; hence multiple identifications and relations are possible, depending on how sex and gender are interpreted and how desire is expressed. The theatricality of the event only underlines the provisionality of gender, with bride and groom dressing in costumes drawn from Tristessa's cinematic repertoire: Tristessa dressed as Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* and Eve multiply cross dressed as Georges Sand in a suit. The 'interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex'⁶⁵ experienced by Eve and Tristessa in the desert seems to dispense with sexed identity as a determinant of sexual identity but the motif of the restitution of Tristessa's maleness through heterosexuality persists: 'the glass woman I saw beneath me smashed under my passion and the splinters scattered and recomposed themselves into *a man* who overwhelmed me [emphasis added].'⁶⁶ Indeed, an insistence on binary categories serves to contain Eve and Tristessa's queer union within heteronormative terms: 'Eve and Adam both, on a mission to repopulate.'⁶⁷

Pregnancy, as a narrative device, is often used in narrative fiction to provide an implicitly redemptive closure as if the conception of a child inevitably vindicates what has gone before. As such, this device often disregards the realities of pregnancy, birth and motherhood for women, reducing the pregnant body to a vehicle to carry the narrative's promise of a projected future. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve's inferred pregnancy promises to authenticate her status as a biological woman, problematically reviving motherhood as the final sanction of 'true'

⁶⁴ Carter p. 135.

⁶⁵ Carter p. 148.

⁶⁶ Carter p. 149

⁶⁷ Carter p. 165.

femininity. However, it simultaneously acts to affirm Tristessa's maleness - and by implication her heterosexuality - and in doing so invalidates her transgendered identity. As Foucault has demonstrated in his *History of Sexuality* (first published in 1976), reproductive sexuality was the benchmark by which the legitimacy of sexual desires and practices were judged in the late 19th sexological discourses. Michael Warner gives the name 'reprosexuality' to the conflation of 'heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity' arguing that 'reprosexuality involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality: it involves a relation to the self that finds its proper temporality and fulfilment in generational transmission.'⁶⁸ In this context, Eve's conception is especially charged, and even more so because of the prominence given to the theme of fertility and infertility in *The Passion of New Eve*. Evelyn is held indirectly accountable for Leilah's dangerous and damaging abortion and his punishment entails his planned impregnation, by artificial insemination, with his own sperm - a fate which Eve flees and the narrative evades. Zero's pathological hatred of Tristessa is founded on his irrational conviction that she is the cause of his infertility. Both Mother's and Zero's eugenic ambitions are thwarted and yet the fantasy of a post-apocalyptic repopulation is fulfilled in Eve when she announces: 'I myself will soon produce a tribute to evolution.'⁶⁹ The marriage between Eve and Tristessa is a potentially queer moment in the text but one whose capacity to signify different ways of being and living is curtailed by a narrative which concludes with the triumph of reproductive sexuality: Eve's unborn child is a token of what Lee Edelman describes as 'reproductive futurism.'⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Michael Warner, 'Introduction: Fear of a queer planet,' *Social Text* 29 (1991) p. 9.

⁶⁹ Carter p. 186.

⁷⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) p. 2. Edelman writes that the figure of the child, including the unborn child, has 'come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust' p. 11.

To conclude, *The Passion of New Eve* is a retrospective and often proleptic narrative, its narrator anticipating the change Evelyn is to undergo from a vantage point in which she is already a woman - and yet the narrative often remains masculine in perspective, with the new Eve confessing to retaining a 'cock in her head'⁷¹ which renders her accounts of her own sexual sensations as a woman curiously voyeuristic. Hence, when Eve claims Tristessa as her double, she appropriates her in her own image: 'We are beings without a history, we are mysteriously twinned by our synthetic life.'⁷² But Tristessa is no more a person without a past than Eve is; she may not be able to coherently recount her history after the ordeal of her 'passion' but to suggest that it does not exist is to deny her lived reality. In the queer union of Eve and Tristessa any number of cross identifications are possible between individuals sexed male at birth but living lives as women. However, I have suggested that the doubling of Eve and Tristessa serves ultimately to reinforce the binary logic on which categories of sex, gender and sexuality relies. By doubling an elective male-to-female transgendered person - Tristessa - with an involuntary, reluctant and resistant male-to-female transsexual - Eve - the authenticity of Tristessa's gender identity is implicitly called into question by the narrative. The reversion to tropes of reproductive sexuality to signify the future arguably reinforce the very categories which Carter's text offers to question. In her 'Posttranssexual Manifesto' Sandy Stone argues that:

To attempt to occupy a place as a speaking subject within the traditional gender frame is to become complicit in the discourse which one wishes to deconstruct. Rather, we can seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force.⁷³

⁷¹ Carter p. 75.

⁷² Carter p. 125.

⁷³ Stone p. 230.

The Passion of New Eve dramatises the 'textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body'⁷⁴ within the context of a radical feminist polemic, but where Eve survives Tristessa ultimately remains its victim.

Through this reading of *The Passion of New Eve*, I have expressed a resistance to reading Carter's work as somehow anticipating the insights of queer theory and would further emphasise the merits of historicising her work; that is, of reading her texts as having a dynamic relationship to developing, and sometimes conflicting, discourses of sex, gender and sexuality in the context of her own writing. A retrospective reading of *The Passion of New Eve* within the framework of transgender theory offers new insights into the complex relationship between Second Wave feminism and heteronormativity; if some dissonance emerges between Carter's take on sexed identity and that conceptualised by queer theory this does not disqualify Carter's texts as worthy of interest. To suggest that Carter is not our eternal contemporary is not to suggest that her texts are no longer relevant; equally to read her novels as other than textbook illustrations of contemporary gender theory is not to suggest that they are somehow outdated or redundant. In Carter's novel tensions between certain iterations of Second Wave feminism and what might now be termed transgender politics are dramatised in provocative fashion; as such, *The Passion of New Eve* provides a valuable opportunity to revisit and examine important debates about the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality which too ready an appropriation of Carter's texts as 'queer' might overlook.

⁷⁴ Stone p. 230.

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