CHAPTER THREE

“All the women will have wings”: Angela Carter and the Construction of the Feminist Subject

Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities. . . . The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler, Gender, 147)

“We’ll have to go through it all again, in other words, or in the same words, arranged differently.” So laments the Unnamable (Beckett, TU, 370). For despite the Beckettian subject’s overwhelming desire to cease, despite the relentless deconstruction by Brooke-Rose’s postmodern culture of every provisional truth, the perpetually undermined subject must continue to reconstruct itself through cultural narratives. Angela Carter, who draws on a vast cultural library in constructing her fictional subjects and has them, in turn, draw on cultural scripts and stereotypes in performing their own identities, clearly agrees with such a view as far as it goes. Like Beckett and Brooke-Rose, she aligns diegetic status (or “reality status,” as the denizens of The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman call it) with subjectivity, so that crossing the boundary into hypodiegesis entails a loss of subjectivity—at its limit, an objectification. As a feminist, however, Carter highlights the politics of the subject-construction (and -destruction) process. First, she foregrounds the traditional gendering of subject as masculine and object as feminine; second, she takes a more active approach to subject construction, devising strategies whereby the subject might, as the Unnamable suggests, rearrange the “same words” and so construct itself differently—not in order to escape from narrative, for Carter’s subject neither desires escape nor believes it
possible, but rather to become a character in a different sort of story. Perhaps it is not surprising, given such an emphasis on the agency of the subject, its participation in its own self-construction, that Carter assumes and reinforces an independent extradiegetic reader—one who can stand above the diegesis in which the diegetic reader, unlike Brooke-Rose’s fluid DR, is fully engaged, recognize its mimesis of the extratextual world, and take a lesson from it about how to go about revising that world.

Because Carter grounds her feminist politics in the material world, she insists on the \textit{embodiment} of the subject. For if, as Beckett has shown, the body offers a crucial site for the \textit{pain} of construction, the surface on which one’s identity must be inscribed, its function as the aspect of the subject that can \textit{feel} that pain and receive that imprint also renders it the primary receptor for \textit{pleasure} and its imprints (indeed, as Carter shows, there isn’t always a clear boundary between the presumed binary opposites of pain and pleasure). As such, narrative that works its effects on the body provides, according to Carter, the only possible route to a liberation of the subject that takes the body along with it. Carter therefore enacts her metalepses on the bodies of characters, often demonstrating in vivid and gory detail the violent and material oppression, especially of women, effected by our continually reconstructed cultural hierarchies. By referring us to such insistently physical acts as tattooing or rape, Carter stresses the real pain inflicted by these structures. Carter’s metalepsis, then, is mimetic and rhetorical, designed to teach us something about the world it mirrors; she depicts subject-defining physical and psychological violation, provoking in her DR emotional, psychological, moral reactions, as she illustrates for the benefit of the EDR (and his intellectual, political, ethical responses) the operation of such violations in the extratextual world. Since, in Carter’s worlds, such invasive or violent acts are generally performed by representatives of the patriarchy, who wield the power to violate both narrative and physical boundaries in constructing subjects, especially female subjects, as objects less “real” than themselves, Carter’s metalepses speak feminist messages. Her political model offers further evidence for the theories of Teresa de Lauretis and Laura Mulvey, who view narrative as a sadistic form that enforces and reinforces the objectification of women; but, once again, in Carter’s fiction, the sadism is located in the boundary-breaching cycle of construction rather than in the drive toward the end.

In her manifestations of this model, Carter depicts what seems like \textit{excessive} violence, emulating the narratives of the Marquis de Sade, whom she sees as a “moral pornographer,” a protofeminist who satirizes the vio-
lently unequal relations between the sexes (*The Sadeian Woman* 19).² Many of Carter’s novels, especially her early works, perform just such satiric exposés; here she uses metalespsis in the reconstructive mode so favored by Beckett, as a boundary violation that ultimately reinforces the boundary, in order to play out the prevailing paradigm of subject-construction-by-tattoo (which commodifies women) or -rape (which violently “feminizes” and desubjectifies women) or -puppet-play (which subjugates and destroys women). But in many of her later novels she goes beyond satire, attempting to design a *new* pattern, by metaleptically inverting, parodying, or otherwise jostling the binaries that the current paradigms both require and perpetuate; through such moves, she aims to deconstruct those binaries and so to redirect the narratives toward different ends.³ Thus, Carter proposes ways to redeploy even these violent cultural narratives in order to generate the New Man and the New Woman (*NC* [*Nights at the Circus*] 281).⁴ Believing, as even the deconstructionists do, that one cannot escape the cultural hierarchies, that, as Judith Butler puts it, “to enter into the repetitive practices of [the] terrain of signification is not a choice for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside,” Carter exploits the mutinous nature of metalespsis to test out strategies for subverting the hierarchies from within, aiming, for instance, “through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (Butler, *Gender*, 148).

None of this analysis may seem terribly new to readers and critics familiar with Carter’s work, but what interests me in this context is, of course, the role that metalespsis plays in Carter’s feminist political project—and the way in which her metalespses help us bridge the gap between the heady games of Beckett and Brooke-Rose and what we do in “real life.” Perhaps ironically, Carter advances her political agenda through metalespses that are, in large part, *metaphorical*. Whereas we perceive the other authors’ metalespses as “literally” inverting, re-inverting, and confounding characters’ relative diegetic status, we read all Carter’s characters (with the possible exception of the Freudian phantasms in *Doctor Hoffman*) as equally diegetic. In other words, while the de- and re-constructions they undertake of themselves and one another may metaphorically reduce subjects to hypodiegetic objects, and in the process highlight the constructed nature of all diegetic-level characters, they don’t generally lower those subjects in the narrative hierarchy that we reconstruct from outside the text. By the same token, the boundary that keeps them in the diegesis and us on that “outside” remains surprisingly firm, and neither diegetic characters nor
the diegetic reader drift into the extradiegetic level as Brooke-Rose’s and Beckett’s have managed to do.

As I’ve suggested, however, this apparent limitation in fact renders Carter’s metaleptic process much more similar than Beckett’s or Brooke-Rose’s to the production of the social subject in our extratextual world: in this world, even as we participate in constructing subjects, we retain the (perhaps illusory?) sense that we all cohabit the same reality, never actually believing that some of us are more fictive than others. So, on the one hand, Carter draws us, via the DR, into her multidimensional worlds—a pull that is increased by their mimesis of our own world’s subject-construction process—and, at times, implicates us as violating voyeurs parallel to those within the texts and equally guilty of penetration-by-gaze. But simultaneously, because they occur on the D/HD boundary (buffering extratextual readers from direct impact), Carter’s metalepses fail, for the most part, to enact a transformative destabilization on extratextual readers as Brooke-Rose’s more “literal” ones do. In this way, they contribute to a distancing effect, a push in some ways more powerful than the pull.

This effect also derives, in equal or larger part, from Carter’s tendency to frame her metaleptic subjectifications as political parables, to lay out rather schematically for rhetorical effect the real issues at stake in her fairy-tale or sci-fi worlds; such schemas ultimately erect a firm boundary around those worlds, upholding the distinctions among levels of readers and encouraging extratextual readers to remain on their proper side of the border. From their position of extratextual privilege, Carter seems to hope, readers may gain some perspective on the processes whereby patriarchy constructs subjects (and objects), as well as on the strategies Carter essays for subverting those constructions; perhaps we may thereby learn to change ourselves and our world. In this way, Carter capitalizes on the ability of fiction to affect reality through the intervention of the reader who, understanding the mechanics of patriarchal culture’s ongoing reproduction of the oppression of women, goes on to perform her/his own inversions and deconstructions of the binaries that continuously reinscribe hierarchy.

Tattoos: “The first of the post-apocalyptic arts”

Perhaps Carter’s most literal translation of the inscription of hierarchical identity is the physical inscription on the surfaces of characters’ bodies. This sort of writing on the body—from scarification to tattoos (“talis-mans which help us recognize how the body is always culturally con-
structed” [Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, “Introduction,” 2])—seems an appropriate device for the exploration of subject construction through violation. Elizabeth Grosz, following Alphonso Lingis, describes tattoos as “civilized systems of inscription . . . [that create] bodies as sign systems, texts, narratives, rendered meaningful and integrated into forms capable of being read in terms of personality, psychology, or submerged subjectivity” (Grosz 141). These designs metaphorically turn (diegetic) characters into their own (hypodiegetic) stories—or rather the tattoo master’s version of those stories, which, often enough, proves to be a variant of a master narrative of power and subjugation. Thus, the tattoos offer Carter a ready form for the embodiment of metalepsis: ultimately, the hypodiegetic writing undertaken by the “master” character changes drastically the diegetic world of his or her “slave.”

The master/slave paradigm, however, clearly applies most accurately to men’s inscription on women’s bodies. Whereas, for men, tattoos can serve “as a form of self-symbolization, as a mark of identity,” according to Frances Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, when they are “applied to a woman, they indicate not her identity but that of the man to whom she is tied”; visibly designated as man’s possession, such a woman may experience the tattoo as a sort of living erasure, as a fate somehow “worse than death” (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, “Marked,” 153). The divergent effects of the tattoo resemble the two possible goals of torture as Nacuñán Sáez describes them: torture inflicted by primitive societies often aimed “to ‘mark’ people, to give them a place in the social structure, to ensure that everyone is equal to everyone in relationship with the presence of power”; contemporary torture, on the contrary, aims “not to assign a place to each human being, but rather to break him or her down, to make the ‘subject’ cease to be” (Sáez 137–38). As with her other paradigms of subject construction, Carter uses tattoos first to establish a violently sexist pattern and then to disrupt that pattern, moving from the culturally ingrained oppression of women to attempted inversions of the hierarchy.

The slashed face of the once-beautiful Ghislaine in Carter’s first novel, Shadow Dance (1966), is perhaps the crudest form of body writing in which the novelist indulges, and it serves as a paradigm for all such interactions. Here, as Carter walks a fine line between painfully earnest political tract and hilariously overstated feminist self-parody, the body writing has been reduced to what may be its most primal form: a single scar that “went all the way down [Ghislaine’s] face, from the corner of her left eyebrow, down, down, down, past nose and mouth and chin until it...
disappeared below the collar of her shirt,” as it “shattered [her] beauty” (SD [Shadow Dance] 2–3).

The “tattoo” marks Ghislaine’s (patriarchally defined) identity as temptress even as it destroys that identity, reducing her to a possession of the tattoo master, Honeybuzzard. Morris, the focalizor of the novel, explains the origins of this defacement: as a sexual temptress, Ghislaine apparently played the role of the mythical *vagina dentata*, the projection of male fears of female sexuality, and insofar as she threatened men’s self-determination, her power had to be quashed. In her previous incarnation, Ghislaine had “gathered them up in armfuls, her lovers, every night . . . in a spilling, promiscuous bundle” (SD 3), needing to feed “the hungry mouth between her thighs” (180–81). This mouth terrified Morris, who, like many a married man, had already paid “the emotional price” for one visit to Ghislaine’s bed (7). For fear of her sexual power, he “gave” her to Honey (treating her as an object of exchange), saying, “teach her a lesson” (183). But Honey’s “lesson” takes the form of a visual representation of the *vagina dentata*—he writes Ghislaine’s threat upon her face. Because this marking seems to reify the terrifying male fantasy of Woman, as it not only makes the figurative vagina visible but points “down, down, down” toward the literal one, it increases rather than neutralizes Morris’s anxiety. He dreams of her laying “her wet, invisible mouth on his and he [wakes] up choking” (37), and he remains ever aware that “the moment she saw him she would snatch him up and absorb him, threshing, into the chasm in her face” (38). But if the negative male fantasy becomes “real,” it is Ghislaine herself who now faces the greatest danger of destruction, for “the scar was like a big, red crack across ice and might suddenly open up and swallow her into herself, screaming, herself into herself” (10).8

The mark that hints at Ghislaine’s impending disappearance also ties her to Honey, and she writes to him that “it was like a spiritual defloration when [he] knifed her” (SD 134). In part because it speaks of the metaphorically sexual act that created it, the gash serves a dual purpose: it constitutes “an erotogenic orifice” on Ghislaine’s face, in the manner of “primitive” body inscriptions (Grosz 139); but it simultaneously restricts access to that orifice to Honeybuzzard alone, by branding Ghislaine as his possession. For once Honey’s mark has “constitut[ed Ghislaine’s] body in its entirety as erotic” (Grosz 139), he must bind her visibly to him, lest he become prey to the fear “of an unbounded female sexuality out of [his] control” (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, “Marked,” 150).9 Shadow Dance thus “taps into a central anxiety of Western culture,” as Mascia-Lees and
Sharpe argue of the film *Tattoo*: “males’ fear that women will be ‘disloyal to civilization,’ failing to uphold the sex/gender system that sustains male power.” The novel’s male protagonist, like the film’s, “strives to give [the woman’s] body a univocal reading, to allow it to speak only his meaning, faithfulness to him” (“Marked” 150). This mark is legible to the society surrounding Ghislaine: no other men will approach her, for “they knew (or thought they knew) about the scar and why she wore it” (*SD* 6). So the tattoo commodifies woman and begins the process of her subjugation and destruction.

In *Love* (1971), the weird and wispy female protagonist, Annabel, attempts to reverse the gender roles that arm men like Honeybuzzard with the phallic knife of subject construction, but Carter makes it clear that, as in a palimpsest, new writing on the body cannot entirely obliterate all past scripts. Although Annabel’s husband, Lee, insists to his brother and sometime rival Buzz that “‘She’s mine,’” for “he half believed her some malleable substance on whom the one who rescued her from her phantoms could impose whatever he pleased” (*L* [*Love*] 66), Annabel, as Patricia Smith argues, “enjoys a brief tenure as the phallic mother” (Smith 26). During this tenure, Annabel “signs” her unfaithful husband by having him tattooed with “her name [written] indelibly in Gothic script and . . . circle[d] . . . with a heart” (*L* 69), a “baroque humiliation” in Lee’s view, that finalizes Annabel’s “fresh” definition of him “as having no life beyond that of a necessary attribute of herself alone” (64).

Or, rather, so Annabel imagines, for even this waif-like denizen of her own fantasy world knows how such markings are supposed to work: “She believed only that she had signed him; the mark was no more than a certificate of possession which gave him the status of any other object in her collection” (*L* 70). Moreover, as in Beckett’s torture or Benjamin’s sadism, Annabel’s marking of Lee is designed to render the writer figuratively more real even as it reduces the written to a lower level of reality. Annabel fancies herself an adept wielder of phallic power: “She guessed the institution of a new order of things in which she was an active force rather than an object at the mercy of every wind that blew; no longer bewitched, she became herself a witch” (77).

And, indeed, at first her body writing seems to have the desired effect: Although he initially believes that Annabel hasn’t even enough “emotional sophistication” to see the humiliating effect of the tattoo “and was hardly capable of devising a revenge which required a knowledge of human feeling to perfect it,” Lee soon “acknowledged that she was far cleverer
than he and began to fear her a little for he could not alter her at all, although she could change him in any way she pleased” (L 70, 71). More significantly, she seems at moments to be changing him in precisely the way that, according to Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, men alter women through tattoos, “producing” him as an absent subject. Not only does Annabel wonder “if [Lee] existed at all when she was not beside him to project her idea of him upon him” (79); at first, Lee himself “felt as though all his vitality had drained out through the perforations of the needle” (72). “He raised his arm and no shadow fell for Annabel had taken out his heart, his household god, squashed it thin as paper and pinned it back on the exterior, bright, pretty but inanimate” (74).

But in the end, Annabel’s project fails. First, her becoming a “witch” leaves her entrapped in the narrative of power and subjugation, much as the race reversal in Brooke-Rose’s Out failed to deconstruct the underlying hierarchical structure. But second, and more importantly, as with any narrative construction, there is another side to the story of body writing: body reading. To the dismay of the deluded Annabel, the marked man simply is not read the same way a marked woman would be. Other women find Lee endearing—even, or especially, in the alleged effeminacy designated by both his tattoo and his watering eyes. He moves on, proving that he is not, after all, Annabel’s possession, easily crossing the boundary from her “hypodiegetic” story back into his diegetic existence. But even before he does so, it becomes clear that in spite of the (temporary) role reversal, it has always been Lee (already constructed as masculine), not Annabel (already constructed as feminine), who harbors the grounding “self” upon which both protagonists were constructed. Something, if only an “aggressive reserve,” has “always lain beneath his acquired ease of manner” (L 74). It is his “spontaneous” smile that Annabel “plagiarizes” in order to “reconstruct . . . herself as a public object . . . [that] passed for a genuine personality” (78). And ultimately, despite her dabbling in the phallic realm of power, the woman is still the one who is constructed as absent: “She could not draw anything any more and so was forced to make . . . imaginative experiments with her own body [hair dying, face painting] which were now about to culminate, finally, in erasure” (103).

Annabel kills herself, eliminating what subjectivity and diegetic reality she has left, but Lee survives, living out an existence that bears little resemblance to the one Annabel believed she was writing for him. In a world founded by patriarchal narratives, Carter seems to argue, female characters do not have the power to reduce their male diegetic companions to hypodiegetic stories.
But if the paradigm set up by Ghislaine and Honeybuzzard has not really been altered, the inversion inherent in Annabel’s inscription of Lee may, much as Derrida argues and Brooke-Rose attempts to demonstrate, serve as a strategic first step toward deconstruction of the binary system of gender.

Already, we may spot some significant differences between the violent metalepses in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (see Introduction) and those we have begun to see in Carter’s novels. First, whereas the “literal” metalepses occurred between two multiply embedded levels in O’Brien’s novel, Carter’s metaphorical metalepses take place between the diegetic level and the (hypothetically) hypodiegetic level; second, unlike the physical torture of another through writing about their tortured bodies, the psychological control of another by writing on their bodies strikes both diegetic and extradiegetic readers as quite realistic, easily translatable to the extratextual world. Taken together, these differences mean that whereas O’Brien’s diegetic reader could afford a startled-yet-knowing laugh at the violent metalepses she encountered, Carter’s diegetic reader must (in spite of the signs of parodic excess that might well amuse in a black-comic sort of way) take the metaleptic violence of the tattooings more seriously, registering some of their emotional and psychological impact. On the other hand, unlike Brooke-Rose’s metalepses, Carter’s tattoo metalepses do not invade the extradiegetic level; remaining, as they do, in the frame of the diegesis, they do not threaten the extradiegetic reader directly, but rather leave him distant enough to see the effects of the tattoos on the diegetic characters and to draw the connections Carter seems to intend between diegesis and extratextual world.

Rape: “His peremptory prick turned me into a . . . woman”

In her next metaleptic “game,” Carter exposes and exploits a more invasive mode of subject construction, rape, which furthers the process of subjugation and destruction by desubjectifying and “feminizing” its victim. Here, the “first step” of role reversal blends into the attempted deconstruction of such binaries as gender. And although, as in *Love*, the internal readers still easily reassimilate those deconstructions into their old binary terms, Carter does grant extratextual readers a new perspective on both the traditional rape script and the possibilities for redeploying even such violent scripts in order to undermine oppressive hierarchies.

Rape and its effects figure prominently in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). In this novel, which parodies everything from
science fiction to psycho-thrillers to sadomasochistic erotica in a sinister, off-beat updating of Gulliver's Travels, a war is being waged against the title character’s reification of everyone’s unconscious desires, a construction process that results in a population of phantasms virtually indistinguishable from real people. (One of the greatest fears of the powers that be is “that one day a man would impregnate an illusion and then a generation of half-breed ghosts would befoul the city even more” [DH (The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman) 19]—a danger that recalls the peculiar origin of Orlick Trellis in At Swim-Two-Birds.) In an effort to maintain the supremacy of rationalism, the government Ministry of Determination, headed by a priggish Minister immune to the rise of postmodernism, who “had never in all his life felt the slightest quiver of empirical uncertainty” (22), struggles to differentiate the realities from the fantasies Dr. Hoffman has unleashed. Here, the Ministry and its representative, the narrator Desiderio, overlay the equation of subject and diegetic character laid out above with a third term, the conscious being, aligning the emanations of the unconscious with object or hypodiegetic character. Now metalepsis manifests itself, for example, as the solidification effected by Dr. Hoffman of unconscious fantasies into real (conscious) beings rather than (or in addition to) the subjectification of objects or the crossing of hypodiegetic characters into the diegetic realm. 10 In its quest to re-order the world by ridding it of everything whose “reality status” is dubious, the government assumes that the products of the unconscious look real but are not—they are (and here the government’s reigning party might pledge allegiance to a structuralist manifesto) the hypodiegetic stories generated by “real” diegetic subjects. At the same time, Dr. Hoffman and his envoys work feverishly to deconstruct all such binaries.

From the outset, the plot of Doctor Hoffman suggests that rape solidifies the reality status of the violator at the expense of that of the victim (promoting the violator across one narrative boundary and/or demoting the victim across another). The novel’s first rape victim does not long survive her violation. Desiderio “penetrat[es the] sighing flesh” of the sleepwalking Mary Anne and awakens in the morning to find, symbolically, “nothing . . . left of her in the bed but some dead leaves” (DH 56). Immediately, Desiderio casts Mary Anne as a (hypodiegetic) emanation of his own desire: “I had experienced a dream in actuality,” he writes (56). When she has sated his desire, she vanishes. By later that day, the real Mary Anne has drowned, and Desiderio acknowledges that he “was in some way instrumental to her death” (61). He senses that he has annihi-
lated Mary Anne’s “self” by violating her body—the very story of rape with which our culture has indoctrinated us. For we are all (violators and victims alike) trained, as Sharon Marcus argues, to read rape as a destruction of subjectivity. The victim who internalizes this reading feels no more a “self” than the dead leaves on the bed.\(^{11}\) “The grammar of violence dictates that feminine fear concentrate the self on... the inefficacy of action, and the conviction that the self will be destroyed. Feminine fear precipitates all violence and agency outside of its subject... [and it] seems to entail a complete identification of a vulnerable, sexualized body with the self; we thus come to equate rape with death, the obliteration of the self” (Marcus 394).

But there is more to the story: In being thus desubjectified, the rape victim is also feminized, (re)constructed as powerless object even as her violator reaffirms his status as powerful (masculine) subject. Rape, in other words, is a repetition of gender construction; as Marcus explains, “social structures inscribe on men’s and women’s embodied selves and psyches the misogynist inequalities which enable rape to occur... [and] rape itself is one of the specific techniques which continually scripts these inequalities anew” (Marcus 391). This gendering effect is played out in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), the sometimes campy post-apocalyptic story of a man (Evelyn) transformed by force into a woman (Eve). The novel enacts the violence of subject construction primarily by breaching gender boundaries rather than what we would normally conceive as diegetic boundaries, but insofar as gender is a matter of construction, gender violations enact another kind of metaphorical metalepsis, a movement by a character from one self-story (masculinity) into another (femininity).

Here, the “standard” rape script is played out as the rape of the new Eve by Zero, the grunting, pig-worshipping, misogynist leader of a small cult of animality who adds her to his cartoonish harem. Although Zero believes that once “he was Masculinity incarnate” (*PNE* [The Passion of New Eve] 104), he is now sterile, and he is convinced that rape will cure him. He blames his loss of masculine potency on the witchcraft of Tristessa, a now reclusive film star who represented Femininity incarnate, and ultimately he will have to ravish and kill her to “restore the procreativity to his virility” (98). But to maintain his virility while he searches for her, he evidently must abuse a passel of “wives,” in the kind of “stylized repetition of acts” that, according to Butler, constructs gender (“Performative” 270). From his perspective, short of the restorative force of the rape of Tristessa, raping Eve seems the most potent masculinizer.
Redesigned as the ideal woman, Eve also undergoes a labored apprenticeship in femininity, as a result of which she begins to appear excessively feminine and therefore victimhood personified. “In spite of, or, perhaps, because of [Zero’s] suspicion I might be too much of a woman for him,” she reports, “he took a great fancy to me and our marital encounters, therefore, took place at a pitch of intensity that filled me with terror” (PNE 101). Zero fears that the too feminine will prove to be lesbian and hence immune to feminizing by any subtle process of masculine domination.12 By raping Eve, he can define her gender in relation to his own—forcing her into the “story” of femininity he, in all his patriarchal wisdom, has written; and, in a cutting commentary on society’s usual mode of feminization, Eve suggests that it works. Not only does it effect the destruction of her subjectivity (“More than my body, some other yet equally essential part of my being was ravaged by him,” causing “an experience of [a] crucial lack of self” [101]), This destruction fixes her gender identity: “The mediation of Zero,” she says, “turned me into a woman” (107–8).

Given access to Eve’s realistic pain (“He attacked me until I thought I would die of it,” she tells us; and “I cried because of the pain he caused me” [PNE 107]; “When he laid me down on his bed, I could have torn out his eyes if he had not started to bind my wrists together when I began to show too much turbulence” [108]), the diegetic reader feels this rape much more immediately than O’Brien’s DR felt Dermot Trellis’s torture. But even as the DR cringes with horror, the EDR remains aware of the irony in Eve’s voice, for he knows not only that, as Evelyn, this victim was first a selfish and cruel violator, but also that Eve still thinks of her/himself less as a woman than as a “story” of femininity. Thus, for the EDR (and the ETR), the horror of the rape may be alleviated by the intellectual understanding of a parable with a political message.

At the very least, the ETR should recognize the erasure of the self as the traditional story of rape. But not all Carter’s characters submit to the conventional reading of that story. In Doctor Hoffman, Albertina, Hoffman’s daughter and Desiderio’s companion, recodes rape as sadomasochistic fantasy, thereby reasserting her own status as the subject of desire as well as the object of violation.13 In so doing, Albertina furthers her father’s deconstructive crusade to dissolve the boundaries between reality and fantasy, subject and object—with mixed results.

As Desiderio tells the story, Albertina is raped by a society of centaurs. Our narrator has no doubt that the event is a rape, that Albertina submits “involuntarily” after a “hideous struggle,” and that not even the centaurs
“seemed to extract the least pleasure out of the act” (DH 179), an act that nearly annihilates Albertina. Her suffering seems to confirm the “reality status” (that is, diegetic status) of the centaurs and to put Albertina in her place among the “ritually degraded and reviled” females of the centaur society—far from the male centaurs’ “equal,” except in terms of diegetic status (176). But once she has recuperated, Albertina reinterprets her violation as a masochistic fantasy: “She had become engrossed in the problem of the reality status of the centaurs and . . . she was convinced that . . . the beasts were . . . only emanations of her own desires, dredged up and objectively reified from the dark abysses of the unconscious” (186). Although such an interpretation may not qualify as a specifically feminist strategy—it reflects not only Albertina’s father’s perspective but that of the Great Father Freud as well—it does perform a strategic deconstruction of certain binaries. Given her deconstructive bent, Albertina does not see her characterization of the centaurs as banishing them to the other side of an unbridgeable gulf. In her view, desire always has such power to generate beings who may (“metaleptically”) share space with their desirer: not only can she evade further torture by “concentrat[ing her desires] to a single point” and igniting the society’s sacred tree, facilitating her escape (191), but she herself (as object as well as subject, fantasy as well as reality) owes her apparent existence to “the power of [Desiderio’s] desire” (204).

Such a fluid world, however, is beyond the comprehension of the anti-Hoffman forces, and it is their (binarizing) rationalism that prevails in the novel. In the hierarchical terms of the Ministry of Determination, Albertina’s interpretation invalidates her physical suffering, rewrites her experience as unconscious, and so, in their view, as unreal. And if Albertina becomes an actor in a “story,” interacting (bodily) with characters of her own invention, her own “reality status” is jeopardized, especially if that more fictive episode in some sense defines or “writes” her, as, according to Jessica Benjamin, sadomasochism does: in Benjamin’s terms, the masochist gains coherent selfhood only vicariously, through association with the powerful self of the sadist (Benjamin 61). In other words, Albertina has made her reality (/diegetic) status dependent on that of the characters she has just defined as fantasies (/hypodiegetic); if one must be either/or, she falls into fantasy as well.

Even in such a rigidly binary world, of course, the possibility remains that the “real” Albertina is indeed a masochist and did want to be violated by the “real” centaurs. But by refusing to admit fantasy into the mix, such a reading performs no deconstructive move, and far from the
potentially subversive strategy essayed by Albertina, it repeats another oppressive strategy of the patriarchy. For it is just this sort of rereading that leads to the trying of rape *victims* (for being too sexual) when they press charges against rapists: it is as if binarizing patriarchal society had difficulty reconciling the subject-status of the one who seeks reparation with the object-status of the victim. If this now-desiring subject didn't “want” sex, the reasoning goes, she would have done something differently; she must have wanted something that her attacker could provide. Desiderio himself has performed a similar transformation on his encounter with Mary Anne, who, he argues, *wanted* it: not only is the “beautiful somnambulist . . . dreaming of passion” (*DH* 56), her fantasies extend beyond violation to her own destruction. “I dreamed about a love suicide,” her rapist reports her saying the following morning. “But then, I always do” (57).

On the surface, such patriarchal rereadings may seem to restore a certain degree of equilibrium, for instead of one subject (or diegetic character) and one object (or hypodiegetic character), as in the traditional reading of rape that Marcus outlines, they seem to posit two interdependent subjects. Unlike the oscillating mutual construction of Larissa and Armel in Brooke-Rose’s *Thru*, however, through which subjects perpetually turn the tables on each other—or even the longer-term equalizing effect of role reversal in Beckett’s *How It Is*—the traditional sadomasochistic scenario creates yet another violent power hierarchy, allowing the (“feminine”) masochist the *illusion* of subjectivity just so long as she acquiesces to degradation at the hands of the more powerful subject. In other words, her subjectivity has become paradoxically dependent on domination by the subject who objectifies her. (Moreover, insofar as the sadist and masochist roles are gender-coded, the rereading does nothing to change the gender hierarchy.) If Desiderio successfully reduces Mary Anne to a (hypodiegetic) dream image (and/or a dead body), it matters little whether, as a co-inhabitant of his diegetic level, she once shared his subject status and dreamt the same dream. Ultimately, whether victim or willing participant, she has lost her subjectivity along with her life. In her death, she serves as a warning to Albertina, whose own dreamlike quality will not prevent Desiderio from killing her too, in the end.

Although, at least at the time of Albertina’s rape, we may be unsure of her reality status, the DR, as *Desiderio’s* addressee, would tend to believe him that the centaurs exist on Albertina’s level (and his own). So, as in *New Eve*, the DR reads the gang rape as “real,” an intolerably painful
“ordeal” from which “poor Albertina took a long time to recover”—as “her fever did not leave her for three days and she could hardly walk but only hobble for more than a fortnight” (DH 184). Although the victim “was brave and soon stopped flinching when she saw the bay” (184), the emotional effect on the DR might well last a bit longer, along with the sympathetic but patronizing response to Albertina’s revisionist analysis of both creatures and event—a response that the DR shares with Desiderio, as they both treat Albertina as a real but traumatized and so deluded being. But if there’s no hypodiegetic-diegetic metalepsis here, there is even more emphatically no diegetic-extradiegetic metalepsis, and so the ETR once again remains safely outside the range of metaleptic effects where we can speculate on Albertina’s psychological needs and defenses, as well, anthropologically, on the centaurs’ society and misogynist practices. Through such rhetorical metalepses, we are induced to read these scenes as satire on our society.

The satire becomes even more blatant in New Eve, where Carter tries a two-pronged strategy for undermining rape’s construction of its victim as feminine non-subject, beginning with a much more sophisticated role reversal than Love’s Annabel had the wherewithal to attempt, and combining it with a specifically feminist deconstruction that outdoes Albertina’s post-hoc interpretation. For the first step, New Eve builds on the recognition that “masculine” and “feminine” do not necessarily correspond to “men” and “women.” In a society founded on such polarities, men, too, can be (re)constructed as “feminine” by being objectified through violation by more powerful subjects (whose power is thereby produced or reinforced as they are reconstructed as “masculine”). In the novel’s role-reversed rape, Mother, a self-made goddess or “sacred monster” (59) who is leading a militant feminist revolution, takes Evelyn by force. “I caught one glimpse of her gaping vagina as I went down; it looked like the crater of a volcano on the point of eruption. . . . Then her Virginia-smoked ham of a fist grasped my shrinking sex; when it went all the way in, Mother howled and so did I. So I was unceremoniously raped” (PNE 64). More scientific than the Zero, Mother has a grand plan for feminizing Evelyn of which the rape represents phase one. She castrates him and replaces his male genitalia with female organs, brainwashing the New Eve with images of Tristessa and a full artillery of other symbols of femininity in order to match the psyche to the body. Operating through a combination of physical violation and bombardment with (patriarchal) cultural icons impossible for a real woman to duplicate, Mother’s wildly
ritualistic gendering of Eve, like Zero’s, satirizes society’s construction of femininity. In launching the eradication of the masculine, womanizing subject Evelyn has heretofore been (in metaleptic terms, eroding his diegetic status), this inverted rape has something of the traditional feminizing and desubjectifying effect (rendering him a “hypodigetic” female character “written” by Mother).

As with Love’s tattoo scenario, of course, this inversion only marks the first step toward deconstruction. In fact, the woman Evelyn becomes seems not to dismantle patriarchal gender structures but to depend entirely upon them, to become, as Zero thinks her, too feminine. But in this parodic gambit, she represents the start of the proliferation of gender identity that Judith Butler sees as the only way “to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (Gender 148). And even as it feminizes Evelyn, the rape seems to equate Mother with her own powerful icon of “femininity,” the vagina dentata in her devouring mother aspect. If this sexist image of Mother holds sway, she joins Eve in her parody, proliferating yet another gender norm as she becomes “too much mother, a femaleness too vast, too gross for [Evelyn’s] imagination to contain” (PNE 66). By a sympathetic audience of Mother’s followers, both parodies, Eve’s and Mother’s, are read as a revolutionary feminization of society, but to less biased viewers—including the EDR—both appear, at times, to have become such outrageously overstated archetypes (hypodigeses) that they run the risk of losing their claim to reality (diegetic status). To such extradiegetic viewers, the hyperbole reveals the absurdity of both the patriarchal tactics of gender enforcement and those feminist moves that retain the gender binary and merely revalue its poles. So the deconstruction has begun.

And it continues: if the rape feminizes Mother, it simultaneously masculinizes her. She becomes, as rapist and feminizer of Evelyn, “the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of difference”—all, according to Teresa de Lauretis (119), attributes of the male mythical subject. Insofar as she paradoxically incorporates masculinity into her excessive femininity, displaying an ambiguous gender identity, she advances the deconstruction of the binary of gender. (Here, I would argue, even the ETR senses an unsettled androgyny in Mother—even from our analytic distance, we cannot quite distill her mixed gender associations.)

Carter pushes the deconstruction still further in the rape of Tristessa, orchestrated by Zero but performed by Eve. When Zero locates Tristessa, he discovers that she has a male body, although the “real” Tristessa appar-
ently also corresponds to the feminine self she has projected to the world. Not only is the movie star simultaneously “the invention of all our imaginations” (hypodiegetic) and “real” (diegetic) \( (PNE \ 118) \), but her artificial womanhood partakes more deeply of ideal femininity than does the “real” womanhood that we tend to forget is also constructed. It is no wonder that Tristessa weakened Zero’s masculinity: the transvestite tricked him into desiring a man—a “feminine” desire, according to his heterosexual world view. In order to refeminize Tristessa, Zero, true to his gender philosophy, must rape him/her, but now he will do so by proxy. His harem dresses Tristessa in a wedding gown and Eve in top hat and tails; then, Tristessa’s disused penis is aroused through oral sex, and he is shoved on top of Eve. “‘I thought,’ [Tristessa] said, ‘I was immune to rape. I thought that I had become inviolable’” \( (137) \) As he philosophizes, Eve grows “tired of waiting. I clasped my legs about him and drew him into me. He came immediately, amidst the roars of vile applause.” Much as Evelyn had done when raped by Mother, Tristessa “tumbled out on to the floor, uttering great cries” \( (137–38) \).

Insofar as such “tumbling out” and crying presents an image of birth, it underlines the reconstructive aspect that complicates, and (deconstructively) coexists with, the desubjectifying aspect of the gendering violation: the rape metalepsis might yank Tristessa out of one story of herself, but it simultaneously generates a new self-story for her/him (and shows, in the process, how such normalized scripts as heterosexual marriage reinforce gender as hierarchy). Seen in one way, this rape-generated story, in accord with the costumes, genders Eve masculine and Tristessa feminine. But, perhaps recalling the terrifying femininity of Mother, Eve opines that her success in drawing out the man in Tristessa has “ratified” her “womanhood” \( (PNE \ 138) \).

Of course, on one level, the type of womanhood thus ratified, for all its power, retains the negative valuation that men have given it in the image of the \( \textit{vagina dentata} \); it is as much a patriarchal construction as the groom’s “manhood.” One can flip the picture of Eve and Tristessa back and forth, causing figure and ground to shift again and again, but both perspectives result in the same two genders, valued in the same old way, which define each other by their violent “opposition.” The layering of masks affects no metamorphosis of the underlying categories, and the conventional garb of bride and groom emphasizes that the script by which gender is (always) performed leaves room for only two roles. Not even an Evelyn-turned-Eve dressed as a man raping a male transvestite can step outside this polarity; even she can only read her own performances as “ratifications” of gender.
as we know it. Robert Clark seems to focus on this limitation when he criticizes Carter for representing “femininity as a male construct” without managing to “find any alternative basis on which to construct a feminine identity,” thus “offer[ing] a knowledge of patriarchy . . . in ways that reproduce the consciousness they recognize as unhappy”—what he calls “a feminism in male chauvinist drag” (Clark 158–59).18

But Clark fails to grasp fully the nature of drag, for Carter does not only reproduce gender polarity: first, she proliferates it, aiming for the sort of subversion through repetition that Butler recommends, and second, she reproduces both polarities in a single character, implicitly problematizing the very notion of polarized identities.19

In this spirit, the only mutually satisfying, nonviolent sexual act in New Eve can be read as a feminist intervention in gender construction. The free sexual union between Eve and Tristessa that follows the rape may seem at first like a facile resolution joining two individuals who just happen to be “both . . . the bride, both the groom” (PNE 135); and, indeed, some critics have read the love-making as “enact[ing] the royal marriage envisioned by alchemists, . . . a fantasy of heterosexuality at its most reciprocal” (Jordan, “Enthralment,” 36)—which is, perhaps, the preferred interpretation of the diegetic reader. But both partners comprise patchworks in which each unblended layer of gender has been defined by rigid, binary conceptions, and the union that results proliferates those norms in mocking a conventional romantic notion of true marriage.20 Hearkening back to Plato’s hermaphrodite to underscore the absurdity of considering such a distinctly hybrid whole as “natural,” Carter creates a parody whose hyperbole and proliferation mark an attempt to deconstruct the gender binary:

How can I find words the equivalent of this mute speech of flesh as we folded ourselves within a single self in the desert . . . W[e] peopled this immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were—every modulation of the selves we now projected upon each other’s flesh, selves—aspects of being, ideas—that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of our selves; the concentrated essence of being, as if, out of these fathomless kisses and our interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex, we had made the great Platonic hermaphrodite together, the whole and perfect being . . . We brought into being the being who stops time in the self-created eternity of lovers. (PNE 148–49, emphases mine)
The description chants “self,” “being,” “essence” as if some incantation can conjure up an inner reality. But the proliferation of references to a depth-model subject whose essence precedes social constructions becomes comic by its very excess, and the only “self” it conjures is the word. For Carter, Eve, and Tristessa (as well as the EDR) all recognize the constructed nature of the “original” that all gender performance copies: Eve notes, “Although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations” (101).

Unfortunately, Carter seems to lament, just as, in Love, others could not read Lee’s tattoo as a mark of Annabel’s possession, society cannot read parody as subversion but recuperates it as another repetition of the same old script. An army of young boys—adolescents already conversant in the violence of gendering—interpret the coupling as a rape of Eve by Tristessa. They kill Tristessa and take Eve, the alleged victim, the alleged woman, under their protection. And the extratextual reader nods sagely, recognizing that one hypodiegesis has merely been co-opted by another, for we have by now been trained to understand that the boys’ traditional, “realistic” version is as much a story as any other.

Evidently, the cooperation of the reader of rape—like that of the reader of tattoos—is crucial to the success of any subversive strategy. But if the dramatized readers cannot reinterpret the story of rape or gender, perhaps we (the ETR, the EDR, the DR) can. If so, Carter will have symbolically rehabilitated the “violator,” for she spends a good deal of these novels insisting on the simultaneously constructive and violating power of the reader. Carter makes it clear that, as in Beckett, to be perceived is to be. Tristessa, as a construct “made” of an “interrupted continuum” of film, epitomizes the subject made real only through the intervention of a constant gaze (PNE 167, 119), but as Doctor Hoffman’s peep-show proprietor insists, “everything depends on persistence of vision” (DH 107, emphasis mine). And that dependence renders the subject vulnerable to violation by the gaze. Desiderio discovers this vulnerability early on: he notices an uncanny coincidence between the images he views in the peep show and apparently real events that take place around him, and more than once he feels a tremendous sense of guilt for having evidently seen violation into reality. In these incidents, the violating gaze seems inextricably bound up with rape, as it will again in New Eve when Zero “flagellate[s Eve] with the unique lash of his regard” (PNE 90). Since the violating gaze seems a manifestation of masculine power and desire that, like rape, feminizes and
objectifies women (as is commonly argued by feminist theorists), it makes sense that, in Carter's worlds, the usurpation of the gaze by women seems to deprive men of their masculinity. Before his transformation into Eve, Evelyn has suffered a violating gaze that suggests that the male victim's correlative of gaze-rape is gaze-castration: when he is brought into Mother's operating theater for the surgery that will unman him, he notices the glare of all the spectators' eyes: “My fevered imagination thought that all the women in the world were seated there, with saucer eyes fixed upon the arena where my exemplary amputation was about to take place” (PNE 68). In both versions of the wounding gaze, the look violates a subject in order to reconstruct him/her as an object, as a story of pain.

If the dramatized viewers, the characters who construct through violation, serve as models for extratextual viewers (and their diegetic-level projection), as many reader-response theorists would argue, we find ourselves in an uncomfortable position. The notion that viewing a peep-show image causes events to occur parallels the now widespread belief that readers never merely passively absorb predefined meanings but always actively create meaning. By “expos[ing us] as complicit, caught in the moral ambiguity of looking,” as Laura Mulvey has written of Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo (Mulvey 24), Carter finally launches a process of erasing the last diegetic boundary, that between text and reader, whose disappearance would write us into the script as objectifying subjects. Indeed, in one sense, that boundary has always been flimsy, for the very lushness of Carter's prose and the fullness of her imagined worlds draw readers, via their diegetic projections, into her texts in a way that a more minimalist art would not. The genres on which she draws, particularly fantasy, tend, unlike realism, to seduce readers into letting down their rationalistic guards, into “pretending” to believe in their possibility along with, say, Desiderio, whose belief in the Minister's logical universe is temporarily broken down by Dr. Hoffman.

But even in writing us into the role of violators, Carter does not (yet) take the dissolution of the text-reader boundary as far as Brooke-Rose has done, for whereas in Thru, we felt metalepsis as a threat to our own subjectivity, here Carter's metalepsis insists we retain the power that threatens others' subjectivity. For even as she draws us in by our alliance with the DR, Carter also insists on the solidity of the boundary between DR and EDR, so that the latter may register the force of the rhetoric and learn something about rape and gender. Like Desiderio, who kills his beloved Albertina and her father and returns to a clearly bounded world, Carter
ultimately pulls back from the edge of the abyss just before it sucks her—and us—in. In *Doctor Hoffman*, Carter does not encourage me, at least, to regret the loss of what was clearly a terrifying alternative to our rationalistic world, or even to feel curious about what would have happened had our surrogate, Desiderio, agreed to let go of his moorings and lend the doctor the power of his unleashed desire—or the power of the generative gaze so clearly, in this world of reified psychoanalytic constructs, “privilege[d] . . . in the function of desire” (Lacan 85). The boundary between diegesis and ETR is maintained even more consistently in *New Eve*, where, although both Eve and Tristessa are violated by the gaze, Carter does not build any empathy with either victims or violators, all of whom are so obviously compilations of gender norms and stereotypes (that is, hypodiegeses) that one cannot find a (diegetic) core to hold onto. Carter so schematizes the novel with her political agenda that we run very little risk of entrapment. Instead, these novels seem to teach us something about the dynamics of the rape script, the complicity of the audience in writing it, and possible strategies for revising it.

Puppets: “A very expensive toy, indeed”

In an apparently dramatic contrast to the violently intrusive acts of rape or tattooing, Carter also embodies metalepsis in puppet play, and despite its benign appearance, it is this model that provides Carter with her most insidious metaleptic move of all. For if tattoos mark women on their bodies as men’s possessions, and rape invades their bodies in order to desubjectify and feminize them, then making women into puppets, as animated or inert as their masters would have them, effectively reduces them to two dimensions, evacuating what remains of their subjectivity and leaving only a constructed surface that may then be manipulated according to its master’s desires. Such puppet play, in other words, finishes the job of subjugating and destroying woman. Although it requires some kind of magic (at least, as we shall see, an impossible beginning *ab ovo*), and so does not translate directly to our extratextual world (where we are always already constructed), puppet play ultimately leads, in *Nights at the Circus*, to Carter’s most successful strategy for deconstructing the gender binary. In this novel, Carter enhances her rhetorical metalepses with a transformative effect similar to Brooke-Rose’s but, as usual, fraught with political motives.

The puppet games of make-believe in which Carter’s characters indulge serve as parables of the discursive construction of subjects and reality. As
with her other thematic devices, Carter graduates from establishing a patriarchally oppressive script to rewriting it. Here, her revision exploits aspects of two kinds of “revolutionary” play: carnival and what Richard Schechner calls “dark play.” If the sexist puppet metalepsis objectifies women, rendering them hypodiegetic or unreal, Carter’s revisions blur the boundaries that the puppet-woman crosses, in the manner of carnival—for Carter calls the puppet show “a no-man’s-limbo between the real and that which, although we know very well it is not, nevertheless seems to be real” (LP 24).\textsuperscript{25} The revision of the puppet script in \textit{Nights at the Circus} goes one step further by refusing to restore those distinctions, as carnival ultimately would; instead, like dark play, it “subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules” (Schechner 36). It thereby creates something new that, like other postmodern texts (perhaps epitomized by Brooke-Rose’s \textit{Thru}), cannot be read in terms of the old order, frames, or rules.

In the elaborate puppetry of \textit{The Magic Toyshop} (1967), Carter sketches out the standard script, in which a patriarchal puppet master manipulates women in an effort to make them conform to one of the opposing but traditional feminine images of angel or whore. When the novel begins, Uncle Philip, toymaker extraordinaire and newly appointed guardian of protagonist Melanie and her siblings, has already reduced his wife, Margaret, to a mute, “bird-like” puppet (\textit{MT} [\textit{The Magic Toyshop}] 42). He next trains Melanie in her household duties, rendering her “a wind-up putting-away doll, clicking through its programmed movements” (76). And he hopes to finish the job by staging a puppet show of the story of Leda and the swan . . . and Melanie as Leda. Although Melanie ultimately escapes her uncle’s clutches, she does momentarily become the doubly objectified puppet/rape victim. She first feels “herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality”; then she faints; and, even after she has come to, she feels (like \textit{Love’s Lee}) that “she cast no shadow” (166–69). \textit{The Magic Toyshop} leaves no doubt about the sadistic nature of the puppet master—the “ideal villain,” according to Carter (Haffenden 95)—who turns “his” women into puppets.

As such a villain, Philip is not unique in the Carter corpus, and, as was the case with tattoos, Carter’s first novel, \textit{Shadow Dance}, offers the simplest, most straightforward presentation of the patriarchal puppet story. Honeybuzzard, the slasher of Ghislaine, specializes in far cruder puppets than those of Uncle Philip; but although he patches his “Jumping Jacks” together out of cardboard and glue, he does have an eerie ability to “pull people’s strings,” to control not only their representations but the hypo-
diegetic characters to which he thereby reduces his erstwhile diegetic companions. Morris certainly experiences a chill of horror when he recognizes his own features on his partner’s first masterpiece. Having just acknowledged Honey’s power over both him (“I shall never be free of him” [SD 80]) and the forces of nature (“Time passed until Honey halted it” [81]), Morris is outraged when “Honey pulled the string once more and Morris’s cardboard self convulsed in its St Vitus’ dance” (81). Morris recognizes the power vested in the paper toy and fears its abuse: “He thought he would burn the Jumping Jack when he got the chance” (82). The Jumping Jack resembles the voodoo doll—a metaleptic bridge that allows actions in the doll’s world to affect its human model. As such a toy, the Jumping Jack partakes of multiple elements of the Freudian uncanny: the double, which, says Freud, is “the uncanny harbinger of death,” and the “magical practices” whose “over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality” allies them with a third element, the “belief in the omnipotence of thoughts” (“Uncanny” 235, 244).

In a sense, this belief defines the character of Honeybuzzard, who spins lies so elaborate that he begins to credit them himself. “Believe what you want to believe,” he advises Morris. “What you want to believe is the truth” (SD 128). But it is one thing to revise the past (in a historical hypodiegesis?), where no one can get hurt any longer; it is quite another to “write” the future through the torture of puppets—to construct the Jumping Jack that, like the “horror painting” of Ghislaine that Morris imagines painting, “would justify treating her as a thing and not a human being” (20).26 When Morris interrupts Honeybuzzard in the process of making a Ghislaine Jumping Jack, he catches his breath and asks, “You can do that?” Honey replies, “Why not? She always did jump when I pulled her strings, poor little girl” (127).

Honeybuzzard seems unable—or unwilling—to distinguish between Jumping Jacks and human beings, and his experiments with pulling strings turn real (diegetic-level) people into his (hypodiegetic) creatures, vulnerable to his manipulation. After their transformation, he places even less value on their lives than he once did, and he feels as free to destroy them as he would to dismantle a paper puppet or to end a story. When, “possessed by some personal devil,” he startles an old woman, eliciting “a wild, animal shriek” followed by a death-like fit, Honeybuzzard explains his behavior in Jumping-Jack terms: “I wanted to see what would happen,” said Honeybuzzard in the voice of an adult pointing out an obvious fact to a dull child. ‘I wanted to pull her string” (SD 138–39).
The old woman, as it happens, survives, but Ghislaine, Honey’s exemplary victim, is not so fortunate. She is transformed at the hands of Honeybuzzard from beautiful seductress into marked and ostracized object, and finally to corpse. From Morris’s perspective, Ghislaine has always seemed somewhat unreal, even toylike. “She used to look like a young girl in a picture book,” he recalls, “light and fragile and her bones so birdy fine and little,” “a ravishing automaton,” consisting solely of “the white body and all this long, yellow hair” \( (SD 2, 4, 7) \). But, as we have seen, in her original form, this doll encompassed not only the angelic image of woman but also its whorish opposite. When Morris “gives” her to Honey, saying, “teach her a lesson” \( (183) \), he seems to hope that his friend can eradicate the whore in her, leaving only the angelic doll. Working her like a puppet, Honeybuzzard instead evacuates her subjectivity and turns her into his toy, animated only by his desires. Thus reduced to a mere extension of Honey himself, Ghislaine becomes convinced of her master’s omnipotence. Because he now holds her strings, even after she has temporarily escaped to the safety of the hospital, Ghislaine believes that she can turn to no one but Honey in her efforts to reassemble her life. Her return to her master (the writer of her self-story, like the master in \textit{The Unnamable}) renders her all the more an object of his control and ultimately seals her fate. “‘She’s coming back crawling to me!’ whispered Honey. ‘Oh, my God, ain’t it a gas? What do you make of that! I could marry her for that, almost—but she’s going to have to crawl much farther than that for me, first; she’ll have to crawl till her knees are all bloody, poor little girl!’” \( (SD 74) \). Since she no longer has a will of her own, of course, Ghislaine must continue to crawl as Honey demands. In a self-congratulatory final scene, the master finds that his puppet actually lies “down in front of him . . . on the floor” and recites the climactic line: “I’ve learned my lesson, I can’t live without you, you are my master, do what you like with me” \( (169) \). Once Ghislaine has been reduced to Honeybuzzard’s story—a repetition of the master narrative of the subjugation of women—he can no longer conceive of her as his (diegetic) equal and he wishes only to leave her in the hypodiegetic world he has invented. Treating her as his Jumping Jack, Honey does indeed do what he likes. When his friends find Ghislaine’s body in an abandoned building, his current girlfriend asks why Honey has killed her; “‘He wanted to,’” replies Morris \( (180) \).

In death, Ghislaine finally strikes Morris, for one, as human, and he notes with sudden pity her bitten fingernails and her cratered cheek. But
by treating her as his plaything, Honeybuzzard has reduced a real woman to permanent residence in the realm of the inanimate; she has become a degraded version of the doll she once appeared to be. Thus Carter demonstrates the most extreme destructive effects of the violently metaleptic construction of the female subject. Here where the story is so starkly outlined, the diegetic reader sees Ghislaine as real (diegetic), despite her metaphorical rewriting by Honeybuzzard, and receives Honey’s manipulation and murder of her as a true story, theoretically experiencing the appropriate emotional and moral responses. The EDR, for his part, recognizes in it a representation of all the “stories” of battered women that fill the newspapers and so begins to see those stories as a matter of puppeteering, as Carter’s rhetorical move has its intellectual, ethical, and political effect.

*Shadow Dance*’s frozen image of fallen angel—so easily, if somewhat painfully, assimilated into both readers’ consciousness—contrasts nicely with the winged wonder who eventually transcends both binding binaries and a conclusive reading in the 1984 *Nights at the Circus*. Here, by seemingly eliminating the pre-constructions that obscure the vision of the dramatized readers in *Love* and *New Eve*, Carter generates an ambiguity that dramatized, diegetic, and even extratextual readers find irresolvable. In this deconstructive realm, free of the mutual exclusivity of such binaries as supernatural and natural, puppet and human, angel and whore, even masculine and feminine, the subject can oscillate indefinitely, floating freely back and forth over all such borders.

In its revision of the puppet script, *Nights* provides its somewhat toylike woman a toylike means of escape from an all-too-realistic death at the hands of a power-happy man. For Fevvers, the winged *aerialiste* of *Nights*, the key to freedom lies in the fact that she hovers on the borders between multiple antinomies. A “symbolic woman” (*NC* 161), she seems *from the start* (“literally” *ab ovo*, for she claims to have been hatched) to vacillate between the twin images of angel of the house and lady of the night. Raised, allegedly a virgin, in a brothel (“known to all the netherside of London as the Virgin Whore” [55]), Fevvers prostitutes her angelic self nightly in the circus ring. But though more literally “birdy” than Ghislaine, more actually “birdlike” than Aunt Margaret, she does not resemble quite the same kind of toys that her predecessors do. For one thing, she is vast in scale, an asset that first leads Jack Walser, the reporter who, in the process of attempting to “expose” her as a “humbug,” falls in love with her, to wonder, “Is she really a man?” (35). Her masculinity...
crops up from time to time—in her “strong, firm, masculine” handshake (89), in the way she “shook out a last few drops” from a hose pipe (166)—to titillate the reader. But it is her publicity slogan, the question “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (7), that most consistently puzzles the extratextual reader as well as her fellow diegetic characters, and even, at moments of existential despair, herself. When, “for one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffer[s] the worst crisis of her life,” she highlights the relation between the reality question and another sort of gender question—to what extent is any woman a projection of men’s fantasies?—as she asks, “Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?” (290, emphasis mine).

And the ambiguity becomes yet more complex. Whereas the novel’s dramatized spectators might be able to write Fevvers off as some kind of projected image, a fiction through and through, extratextual viewers, for whom the performer is as diegetic a character as the reporter who interviews her, merely wonder whether her winged state is a fiction, a hoax, and her flight a masterpiece of pulleys and strings. Then the question becomes: whose hoax is she? For if Fevvers is some kind of puppet, she seems like just the kind of puppet a Carter character might be if she had any say in the matter; in other words, perhaps she somehow controls herself as she suspects of Madame Schreck, owner and curator of the museum of woman monsters in which Fevvers is temporarily trapped: “Although I knew very well it was all so much show, . . . all the same she had some quality of the uncanny about her, over and above the illusion, so you did think that under those lugubrious garments of hers you might find nothing but some kind of wicked puppet that pulled its own strings” (NC 58).

On the other hand, the puppeteer may be Lizzie, Fevers’ Marxist-anarchist “foster mother” who has trained and protected her from childhood, and whose supernatural powers resemble Honeybuzzard’s: she, too, can stop time—she somehow halts Big Ben at midnight on the night of Walser’s interview with Fevvers—and she exploits a form of voodoo that keeps minor illnesses plaguing the Charivaris, a family of trapeze artists who have tried to sabotage Fevvers. Moreover, in one of its characteristic plays on gender ambiguity, the novel suggests that if the control lies with Fevvers, the magic may reside in the sword she has carried since her youthful stint as “Winged Victory” in Ma Nelson’s whorehouse: clearly a phallic symbol of power. If Lizzie is in control, she keeps the key to her witchcraft “(where else?) in her handbag” (277), as Carter exploits the Freudian symbolism of the purse as vagina.
So although Mr. Rosencreutz, who buys Fevvers away from Madame Schreck, may err in thinking his acquisition the gateway to eternal youth, he hits quite near the ever-moving mark when he “apostrophises” Fevvers as

“Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species . . . Lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament, reconciler of opposing states, through the mediation of your ambivalent body, reconciler of the grand opposites of death and life, you who come to me neither naked nor clothed, wait with me for the hour when it is neither dark nor light, that of dawn before daybreak, when you shall give yourself to me but I shall not possess you.” (81)\(^2\)

The Grand Duke who wines and dines Fevvers in Petersburg does aim to possess her. He wants to resolve all her ambiguities and render her his plaything, disarming her of her phallic sword, diminishing her more literally than Honey does Ghislaine or Philip does Margaret or Melanie, and installing her in a miniature egg where she will become a hypodiegetic story written only by him. As his ice sculpture modeled after her symbolically melts, Fevvers finds herself, at least figuratively, drawn in by the Duke’s collection of eggs—two of which already contain representations of her. The first, a crystallization of the \textit{mise-en-abîme} with its multiple hypodiegetic embeddings, “opens up lengthwise to reveal an inner carapace of mother-of-pearl which, in turn, opens to reveal a spherical yolk of hollow gold. Inside the yolk, a golden hen. Inside the hen, a golden egg. Now we have diminished to the scale of Lilliput but we have not done yet; inside the egg there is the tiniest of picture-frames, set with minute brilliants. And what should the frame contain but a miniature of the \textit{aerialiste} herself, in full spread as on the trapeze and yellow of hair, blue of eye as in life” (\textit{NC} 189). The second contains a bird singing her theme song, “only a bird in a gilded cage,” and “for all the delight she felt to see” it, Fevvers finds it “exceedingly troubling and turned away from it with a sense of imminent and deadly danger” (190).

As in the Freudian uncanny, this miniature “double” appears to the winged woman as a “harbinger of death,” and the uncanny effect of the encounter is compounded by the familiarity of the form of the Grand Duke’s toys (says Freud, “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Uncanny” 220)). More significantly, there is not only an uncanny resemblance
between the miniature and the life-size Fevvers; the resemblance itself consists in the uncanny nature of both: the ambiguity of the miniature, which seems to be an artifact but is eerily realistic, reflects the defining ambiguity of the larger “original.” In other words, the mise-en-abîme reconstructed inside the egg generates a mise-en-abîme in the larger text. And if Fevvers teeters on the edge of the egg’s abyss, and the reader, in turn, stands poised on the edge of the text’s abyss, we may also recall Walser’s (almost uncannily) similar experience upon first meeting Fevver’s gaze: “Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the aerialiste were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold” (NC 30). Having, in a sense, crossed that threshold, Walser has been swallowed up by the circus world (a universe of performance and so in a sense hypodiegetic) that the aerialiste represents, and he has fallen into the abyss where “fiction” and “reality” merge. Once certain of his identity as “a journalist masquerading as a clown,” Walser has been turned “willy-nilly . . . into a real clown”—that is, into a real construction, a living oxymoron (145).

For all her celebration of ambiguity, Fevvers wants to take a step back from this abyss. Although she delights in, indeed relies on, others’ inability to distinguish between appearance and reality, Fevvers herself holds stubbornly onto a belief in essences. As she tells Lizzie, “My being, my me-ness is unique and indivisible. . . . The essence of myself may not be given or taken, or what would be left of me?” (NC 280–81). This segregation between appearance and reality seems to her the only way to retain control over her own destiny—for appearances, as we have seen throughout Carter’s work, may be variously interpreted, and women too often become hypodiegetic puppets in a fairy-tale ruled by male fantasy. So Fevvers’s fear that a tumble into the egg’s abyss will subject her to the Duke’s reading of her calls to mind her uncannily similar experience as an adolescent posing as a statue in the house of love: “I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited, I waited . . . although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my appearance for ever!” (39).
Rebelling against the imprisoning Duke, however “magic” a prince he may be, Fevvers turns the tables on him, using his toys as the type of meta-leptic bridges he has designed them to be, but, empowered by her gender ambiguity, crossing one he did not intend for her use: rather than shrink into the shell (/hypodiegesis) he has prepared for her—one containing an empty (and, of course, gilded) cage, complete with perch (NC 192)—Fevvers leaps onto the miniature (and “masculine”) Trans-Siberian Express that fits inside another shell and rides it clear out of the Duke's reality.

Despite her insistence on maintaining the essence/appearance binary, it seems likely that the magic power that enables our heroine to escape hinges on the sort of ambiguity that keeps her perceivers (again, dramatized, diegetic, extradiegetic, extratextual) from pinning her down: an indeterminacy made possible by her ab-ovo ambiguity that leaves no palimpsest of previous binary definitions. As the whore the Duke takes her for, Fevvers could be stuck “caressing” him forever; as an angel, she easily slips off into another dimension. As a feminine creature, she is “aware of the hideous possibility she might” indeed shrink (in both senses of the word) and wind up trapped in a quintessentially feminine egg; insofar as she partakes of masculinity, she can play equally well with a boy’s toy, a train—and, significantly and simultaneously, with the penis that the train in some sense symbolizes. For though the Duke “weakly slapped the hand that held the train,” insisting, “‘Not that one. The next [egg’s] for you’” (NC 192), his guest and intended victim lets go of neither phallic toy, and, as the moment of his orgasm gives her the opportunity to escape, it is the Duke’s masculinity that is his downfall, even as Fevvers’ “masculinity” may save her skin. And yet, the winged wonder has already lost her phallic sword, a circumstance that suggests that Lizzie’s feminine-handbag witchcraft holds ultimate responsibility for the escape. After all, Fevvers finds Lizzie already aboard the first-class compartment when she arrives, safely ensconced in its new (un)reality, be it hypodiegetic or a parallel diegesis. For the ambiguity between real and unreal remains key: as “fact,” the giantess would be hard-pressed to squeeze through the doors of the minuscule train; as “fiction,” she can travel in style anywhere she likes. And she won’t become the Grand Duke’s plaything. In a sense, especially given her association with the myth of Leda and the Swan, who appear in a painting hung above the mantelpiece from which she first tested her wings (28), Fevvers may carry the legacy of Melanie, from whom she inherits her refusal to yield to a patriarchal puppeteer’s control. (Of course, her wings attest to her simultaneous descent from the swan, “her
putative father” [7] and so serve as another marker of her gender ambiguity as well as her active rather than passive quality.) Fevvers invents herself. From her unprecedented beginnings as a whorehouse mascot who sprouts wings and learns to fly, Fevvers continues to work with Lizzie to become the New Century’s New Woman, “warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact” (281, 286).

Of course, there is a hitch. Not only is a paradigm inherently fictive, a construction rather than a “plain fact,” but that construction is not entirely in Fevvers’ control: even the congenitally ambiguous *aerialiste* must construct the New Woman out of the old one, for her repertoire can only contain the roles that patriarchal culture has written (a point Carter makes as clearly as Butler does). In addition, given the performative nature of her self-construction, she requires an audience in order to solidify her identity. Although she escapes the Duke’s particular hypodiegetic prison, Fevvers does not escape woman’s fate of definition by masculine perception. In her earliest role of Cupid, Fevvers says she “served [her] apprenticeship in being looked at—at being the object of the eye of the beholder”; in later life, it is the “silent demand to be looked at” that makes her stand out (*NC* 23, 277). Without the constructive gaze of the other—her fellow diegetic creatures who, as in Beckett, see her into existence—she begins to fade away,30 and it becomes clear that it is not only “mages, wizards, [and] impresarios” who believe “she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself,” but Fevvers herself (289). It is seeing herself reflected in Walser’s eyes not as a real (diegetic) winged woman but as “two perfect miniatures of a [hypodiegetic] dream” that causes “her outlines [to] waver” and brings on her existential crisis, “Am I fact? Or am I fiction?” (290, emphasis mine). Only when she has been restored to the stage can she take comfort in her own solidity, thanks to “the eyes that told her who she was”—“Their eyes,” the narrator sings with melodramatic flourish, “restored her soul” (290, 291).

If Fevvers, however, is made and unmade by others’ eyes, *Nights* also offers a subversion of the power of the gaze that would desubjectify women. During their (miniature) train travels, Fevvers and Lizzie pass “the settlement of R., near which, in the year, 18—, the Countess P.,” after having murdered her husband, set up an elaborate prison for other women who had done the same (*NC* 210). Knowing “that to look is to coerce” (222), the Countess incarcerated the murderesses in a textbook-perfect panopticon constructed on the model designed by Jeremy Bentham and explored by Michel Foucault:
a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows. In that room she’d sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her. . . . During the hours of darkness, the cells were lit up like so many small theatres in which each actor sat by herself in the trap of her visibility. . . . The countess, in the observatory, sat in a swivelling chair whose speed she could regulate at will. Round and round she went, sometimes at a great rate, sometimes slowly, raking with her ice blue eyes . . . the tier of unfortunate women surrounding her. She varied her speeds so that the inmates were never able to guess beforehand at just what moment they would come under her surveillance. (NC 210)

The panopticon, as Foucault explains, “automatizes and disindividualizes power” by making the prisoners into their own keepers: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Discipline 202–3). Thus, inmates may have the illusion of subjectivity or diegetic status, but they mold themselves into hypodiegeses and into just the kind of subjects (in both senses of the word) the authority figure wants them to be. Although the Countess has committed the same crime against the patriarchy as her charges have committed, she has repented and wishes to save her (patriarchally constructed) soul by reconciling other rebels to the righteousness of patriarchal power.

But the Countess’s experiment fails. First, she fails to recognize that penitence requires a (“diegetic”) subject, that no object can feel the remorse that would win her release. And second, she does not count on the more humane, forgiving, boundary-crossing gazes of the guards she has hired, which the murderesses can, rebelliously, meet eye to eye, through the food gates in their doors in their own boundary-crossing assertions of subjectivity and equality that undermine the prison hierarchy and the “automatic functioning of power.” When one inmate discovers this loophole, she begins a silent “metaleptic” revolution, which builds until, one day, during the exercise hour, “at one accord, the guards threw off their hoods, the prisoners came forth and all turned towards the Countess in one great, united look of accusation,” turning the desubjectifying gaze upon their jailor (NC 218,
emphasis mine). Having reduced her to their previous social and diegetic status, and locked her “in her observatory with nothing to observe any longer but the spectre of her own crime,” the women, now empowered not only by their reversal of the jailor/jailed hierarchy but by the deconstruction of the binary (guard/inmate) that used to divide them against themselves, set out into a “white world,” “a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they,” as the victorious subjects of their own construction, “could inscribe whatever future they wished” (218).

Given this feminist precedent, Fevvers believes she has reason to be optimistic. Despite her reliance on patriarchal constructions and equally patriarchal audiences, she foresees a time when the gaze will not be used to violate or objectify or force others into the story or straitjacket of gender—a time when all women will be able to hover over a borderland of ambiguity where they can escape the tyranny of binary structures. “Once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I” (NC 285).

Although Lizzie hastens to warn Fevvers that the reinvention of subjects (and reality) is “going to be more complicated than that” (286), Carter has offered us her most promising feminist strategy. Unlike the (airplane-assisted) flight of the translator in Brooke-Rose’s Between, which kept her out of reach of the discursive territories on offer down below and so forever unconstituted as a subject, Fevvers’s (body-dependent) flight somehow allows her to enter multiple, even seemingly mutually exclusive realms simultaneously, and so (more like Brooke-Rose’s Mira in Amalgamemnon), to be constructed as some new, irresolvably ambiguous kind of subject. If Fevvers’s wings seem to us simultaneously “real” and “unreal,” and if we can finish Nights at the Circus still accepting our inability to pin down a definite identity for its protagonist,31 we may get a glimpse of a deconstructive mode of reading, one which, like Brooke-Rose’s acceptance of postmodern flux, works against—or soars above—our deeply ingrained binaries. Such a reading practice may also translate into the sort of non-objectifying gaze invoked by the inhabitants of the failed panopticon.

Reconstructing the Reader

So far, this sounds in large part like the same sort of rhetorical metalepsis that Carter has offered in her other novels. But insofar as Nights both breaks down the boundaries between levels of readers that earlier novels
maintained and produces in us a confusion or instability not unlike that which *Thru* induced, it achieves a kind of transformative effect.

At the end of *Nights of the Circus*, Fevvers exclaims, “To think I really fooled you!” (295). Although she addresses her remark to Walser, the reader must feel “fooled” as well, for we cannot be entirely sure of who or what she “really” is. Carter has noted that the teasing conclusion “is inviting the reader to take one further step into the fictionality of the narrative, instead of coming out of it and looking at it as though it were an artefact” (Haffenden 91). But if her description is accurate, the move represents a strategic shift for Carter, who, as I have argued of *Doctor Hoffman* and *New Eve*, has heretofore maintained the distance between her diegeses and the EDR in order to teach a feminist lesson.

Although some Carter critics find that, throughout her work, “the reader is captured” (Clark 154) or entrapped by “the refractions of the mirror operating between reader and text” (Punter 217), and while, as I have shown, readers are often positioned as wielders of the violating gaze, I find that Carter generally offers her extradiegetic and extratextual readers an escape hatch. I might easily extend this impression to *Nights at the Circus*, where, what with Fevvers and Lizzie spelling out Carter’s politics for us, we needn’t look far for the intellectual vantage point that will remove us safely beyond the reach of metalepsis; even if we cannot resolve the text’s or Fevvers’s ambiguities, we may philosophize about the point of their irresolvability.

Critics have acknowledged a similar removal of the reader from the terrain of the diegesis in Carter’s other novels. Sally Robinson has written that *Doctor Hoffman*, for instance, “paradoxically addresses its reader as feminist . . . that is, it invites the reader to occupy a position not sanctioned by Desiderio’s narrative itself but, rather, a position on the outside of that narrative” (Robinson 105). Merja Makinen makes a more extreme argument about Carter’s work more generally, although she sees the distance as conducive to an appreciation of the novels’ *humor* rather than their *politics* (but the latter may be dependent on the former): “To enjoy the humour—the payback with many of Carter’s texts—readers need to position themselves outside phallocentric culture (at least for the process of reading)” (Makinen 6–7)—if such a thing were possible. And even Robert Clark, despite his complaint that Carter repeats the sins of sexist society (a thesis that would be consistent with a reading experience of being caught up, yet again, in a violator or victim role without acquiring a new understanding of the process by which this happens), acknowledges that Carter’s “texts become a sequence of broken reflections . . . in
which the reader captures momentary and fugitive awareness of the social
system that engenders him/her” (Clark 154).

Elisabeth Bronfen, however, has argued that such explicit intellectual-
ization and politicization might itself become a trap for readers, as the
heavily rhetorical bent forces them to interpret Carter’s texts in specific
ways rather than allowing them the true freedom of the extratextual co-
creator. In describing the “impasse” that Carter’s “explicit commentary”
in *Doctor Hoffman* imposes on us, Bronfen equates the reader with the
woman who “can only exist as and in the meaning her lover, as author of
her, intends” (Bronfen 421). Although the analogy is slightly off the
mark—Carter would be restricting not our self-definitions (at least not
directly) but our reading of “others”—Bronfen may be right in seeing no
difference *in principle* between this positioning of the reader as feminist
and our positioning as violators: in both cases, Carter may well manipu-
late us, like puppets, to do her bidding (and so indirectly reconstitute our
subjectivity).

Of course, as most of these readings suggest, the trap outside the text,
unlike the trap inside it, may allow Carter to teach a feminist lesson about
metalepsis. After all, if we collapse into the DR and fall into the fiction,
we become yet more victims or violators in the ongoing chain of violent
subject-construction; if we can retain our academic distance, we can
understand the dynamic, offer a critique of it, and, perhaps, begin to
change it. In that sense, the trap outside the text offers a gateway to
another kind of freedom.

But if Carter succeeds in blurring her usually firm boundaries between
levels of readers and stranding all of us inside the ambiguities of *Nights at
the Circus*, she may finally have found a way of enacting the very sort of
subversive metalepsis she has been striving, in her gender-inverted rendi-
tions, to depict—the kind with a *transformative* effect. For if there is a
paradoxical confinement in our release to extratextual reality, there is a
paradoxical freedom in our entrapment (which Carter describes as an
“inviting in”) in *Nights*. Moreover, if we, reading the novel “for” a politi-
cal message, step back from the edge of the abyss (and so fall into the
“trap” of feminist interpretation), we in effect replicate Fevvers’s own step-
ning back from the abyss of the Duke’s egg (which step lands her in yet
another, also feminist, narrative) and so, in a sense, *reblur* the boundary
between the extratextual reader and the diegesis even in our redrawing of
it. On the other hand, in our resulting “imprisonment” in our “own” (that
is, Carter’s feminist) construction, we may resemble the Countess, while
Fevvers, released under our very noses from the prison of binary constructions, may, like the panopticon’s escapees, roam free, continuing to write herself on an infinity of blank pages.

This proliferation of paradoxes could almost persuade me that Carter finally subtly erases the boundary between diegesis and extratextual reader, deconstructing for us “outsiders” the binary of inside and outside even as, “inside” the text, the circus (or Fevvers) does so for Walser. (Walser, having become “a reconstructed reader,” as Beth Boehm points out, transcends his need for the central binary and, by the end of the novel, “demands not ‘are you fact or are you fiction,’ but rather, ‘What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?’” [Boehm 45–46]). If we are no longer sure where this leaves us, perhaps we have learned our lesson without having to remain outside to formulate it: as we did through Brooke-Rose’s Thru, but now with “real,” political consequences clearly applicable to our (narrative) lives as well as to our reading of novels, we have discovered what it’s like to be unable to read in binary terms and unable to stabilize an object with a conclusive reading. If we can apply this deconstructive reading practice to such oppressive binaries as gender, we might find a way to transcend violent subject construction for good and all. And so, by dissolving the frame that kept us certain of what we saw inside it, Carter translates the intellectual, political, ethical rhetoric into an emotional and psychological transformation of sorts. If only for a moment, she has brought us beyond the sort of impasse faced by readers of Beckett: as we hover with Fevvers at the end of Nights at the Circus, we may feel the weightlessness of a being who need no longer restructure what is continually deconstructed, who need not strive for an impossible finality. When, if ever, the new dawn dawns, the boundaries will be in a perpetual state of flux, and we will all be “naturally metaleptic.”