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*The Power of Monstrous Women: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)*

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ABSTRACT *This essay deals with three British novels written by female novelists in the 1980s: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. The protagonists of these three novels are monstrous women who enjoy power over men in different situations. The essay considers the idea of monstrosity explored in each novel—from the freakish to the carnivalesque—and argues that, first, it is difficult to assess the feminist ideology of these texts as the respective writers do not write from clearly feminist positions. Second, that whereas criticism of these novels has focused on their (questionable) feminism, little has been said about the role played by men in them or about the implicit androphobic discourse of some fiction by women. Third, that the model of female power offered by these novels is too limited; they pale besides the analysis of powerful female monstrosity offered in some novels by men. The conclusion, supported by Angela Carter's thesis that women are reluctant to acknowledge their own moral faults, is that women are offering a biased portrait of themselves, in which the exploration of women's weaknesses is too narrow, even when the issue of female monstrosity is addressed.*

Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) narrate the story of a monstrous woman. The heroines of these three 1980s British novels are not, however, horrific monsters, nor are the novels horror tales. These three novels blend fantasy and irony in the portrait of a larger-than-life, grotesque female protagonist who is presented as a triumphant woman. As Nancy Walker notes 'irony and fantasy represent, respectively, intellectual and intuitive challenges to perceived reality that reflect in the form of narrative the socio-political challenges to the status quo that the women's movement has launched in recent decades' (1990, p. 4). It is my aim to examine here to what extent those challenges are actually reflected in these novels and whether their monstrous heroines add a new dimension to the portrait of woman in British fiction.

Apart from the wry humour and the use of Gothic elements, Carter's, Winterson's and

Weldon's texts also share a picaresque framework: loosely connected episodes are used to highlight the heroine's resolute breaking down of conventions associated with proper feminine behaviour. Our three heroines—Carter's Fevvers, Winterson's Dog Woman and Weldon's Ruth—are grotesque monsters both because of their formidable bodies and their singular behaviour. Yet their encounters with apparently normal people in the different episodes reveal that monstrosity is not a matter of extraordinary physical appearance but of whether one sides with the abusers or the abused in the universal contest for power. In their struggle to simply go on living these three monstrous women learn, above all, the meaning of power: if they are special women in any sense, this is not because they are grotesque freaks, but because they learn to limit the power of the others over them and to use their own power to steer the course of their lives in the direction they choose.

The plots of Carter's, Winterson's and Weldon's novels are straddled between fantasy and reality. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* questions the very idea of reality, focusing, as it does, on the issue of whether the heroine, the bird woman Fevvers, is a real prodigy or a fraud. Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* uses plenty of elements from fairy tales—especially in the narrative of the adventures of Jordan, the heroine's adoptive son; Winterson also questions what we assume to be historical reality by tracing solid, though illogical parallelisms between the 17th-century Dog Woman and a nameless 20th-century radical feminist and political activist. Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* can be even regarded as a science-fiction novel; the ugly heroine Ruth employs all the resources of medical science, including radical plastic surgery, to remake her body to the image of her hated arch-rival Mary Fisher.

As can be seen, the emphasis on the alternative, grotesque physicality of the heroine is common to these three novels. According to M^a del Mar Pérez, in the British novel of the 1980s the images of the female angel and monster are necessarily related to women's obsession with their physical appearance and to the excesses to which this obsession has led (1994, p. 74). Yet, these three novels celebrate rather than deprecate the heroine's eccentric physical appearance, including those very excesses committed in the search for physical beauty. For Bernard McElroy 'our response to the grotesque, whether in life or in art, has as a fundamental component that sense of the uncanny which arises from the reassertion of the primitive, magical view of the world' (1989, p. 14). The uncanny and the spark of perverse glee that, according to McElroy, accompanies the grotesque are indeed present in these three novels but so is the insistence on the baser aspects of the human body that Bakhtin related to the grotesque. Fevvers belches and stinks, and so does the Dog Woman; as for Ruth, she's in most intimate terms with the shortcomings of her gigantic body. Hers is the grotesque body that, according to Bakhtin, is a body always in the making, never completely finished, ever ready to create another body (1971, p. 285).

Bakhtin adds, though, that in the grotesque body the bowels and the phallus play essential roles as the organs through which the (male) body swallows the world outside it and is swallowed by it. Lacking the phallus, women's bodies occupy an ambiguous position in the realm of the grotesque delineated by Bakhtin, for they are part of the outside world that engulfs the male body. Winterson's Dog Woman refers to her clitoris at one point in the novel as a hyperbolic orange, but this image is not quite the equivalent of Bakhtin's carnivalesque phallus. In fact, the (festive) phallus is also missing in the contemporary narrative of the grotesque written by men. As Bernard McElroy observes, 'the central figure of the modern grotesque ... is *humiliated* man' (1989, p. 22) that is to say, a man dispossessed of his power, an impotent man. For this man, the body

is not a matter for celebration but for destructive anguish which he may keep to himself, as in the case of Kafka's Grigor Samsa, or vent on others: Pat Bateman, for instance, the psychotic hero of Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) is a handsome man obsessed by turning the bodies of his male and female victims into grotesque, abject objects. Paradoxically, whereas the contemporary literature of the grotesque written by men mirrors man's pessimistic existentialism and his sense of humiliation, women celebrate the female grotesque. They celebrate excess—which may be an equivalent of the sublime, as Mary Russo hints (1994)—because excess and the power that accompanies it are seen as the solution to counteract the patriarchal model of controlled femininity. But they do not consider in depth how triumphant excess and humiliation can be bound together and this is their weakest point.

Carter's, Winterson's and Weldon's novels question the limits of femininity and of woman's body without facing the paranoia and the sense of humiliation endured by many contemporary male characters of the contemporary grotesque. The celebration of the phallus is totally out of question in these times of troubled masculinity but women have re-invented the carnivalesque image of the female body in order to use it to their own advantage. By creating grotesque female monsters they deny men the privilege of being the sole producers of monstrous portraits of women. Seemingly, contemporary women writers are not interested in considering how woman shares in the humiliation of contemporary man and prefer instead taking female monstrosity away from the hands of patriarchy. What is to be done with powerful female monstrosity now that women writers have it in their hands is not so clear, though.

Thus, the message that I, as a woman, get from Carter is that a woman must pretend to be a monster in order to protect her uniqueness from the hands of patriarchy; from Winterson that all women carry an abusive monster inside ready to burst out when the time is ripe for action; from Weldon that women are trapped by their addiction to men's own addiction to pretty women. But where is the triumph in all this? As things are, these three novels suggest that, as Milton's Satan claims, it is better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven. That is to say, that seeing ourselves as triumphant monsters is a step forward in comparison to the humiliation of having men portray us as abject monsters. Hence, the sense of triumph. Yet, this seems to be a very limited solution, quite inadequate to make post-feminist women, if this is what we are, consider the dangers of not facing our own weaknesses. What is more, it is still too bound to patriarchal man's view of woman as an eminently physical object.

Speaking about Frank Wedekind's plays, *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora Box* and their androgynous protagonist Lulu, Angela Carter herself remarked in *The Sadeian Woman* that Lulu's flat breasts and bottom 'soon ... lose even the significance of the conventional attributes of the female; as if there was an inherent freakishness about breasts and buttocks at the best of times, as if half the human race were not equipped with them. As if they were as surprising and unusual physical appurtenances to find on a woman as fins or wings' ([1979], 1990, p. 68). Carter's own answer to the patriarchal reading of the woman's body as a freakish body is her heroine Fevvers. Her wings link her to Venus' doves—she was christened Sophia, that is to say, Wisdom, but is known as the Cockney Venus; her claim of having being hatched rather than born strands her in a strange territory between the human and the animal. She is also halfway between the Victorian angel in the house and the budding New Woman of the turn of the century. Yet what her wings mean is quite an enigma: as they are much more limited than those of real birds, Fevvers' wings never let her fly in complete freedom, thus being an oddly defective symbol of woman's liberation; they enable her, though, to exploit herself as a very

successful circus attraction. The limitations of her wings might thus be taken as a metaphor for the limitation of woman's aspirations to soar beyond patriarchy.

The key to the Fevvermania that sweeps the world is, precisely, the curiosity raised by the question of whether Fevvers is a marvellous freak or a fraud. As Robert Bogdan writes in *Freak Show*, '“freak” is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created; a perspective, a set of practices—a social construction' (1988, p. x). Bogdan notes that what attracts us about the freak is not only our primitive curiosity for the uncanny and the grotesque but the thrill of being challenged to unmask the manipulation of the freak's image: many freak-show owners soon discovered that what drew the crowds was the very human impulse to find out whether the freak was a fraud or the real thing. Fevvers is absolutely proficient at managing this curiosity; she understands very well that, as her interviewer Walser notes, 'in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world' (p. 17). Walser further considers this paradox:

... if she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then—she was no longer a wonder.

She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but—a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged.

She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none.

As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. But what would she become, if she continued to be a woman? (p. 161)

Fevvers cannot tolerate the idea of being an anomaly exhibited by others. Walser meets her precisely at the peak of her career, when she is enjoying the emotional and financial rewards of being her own mistress after having known firsthand the humiliation of being other people's property.

Fevvers' view of herself as her hottest property echoes that of the most famous female star of contemporary pop culture: Madonna. Madonna, the material girl, has always been in control of her own image and has successfully marketed herself as a different, maybe freakish, woman by mixing her twin vocations as sex goddess and pop singer. Like Fevvers' wings, all of Madonna's beauty and artistic talent is a matter of dispute, though her very limitations seem to enhance rather than diminish her success. Interestingly, Walser's question about Fevvers' future—'what would she become, if she continued to be a woman?'—is also pertinent to Madonna's life. She has found satisfaction beyond stardom in a relationship with a younger man leading to the birth of a baby daughter outside wedlock, hardly an extraordinary achievement for a woman bent on breaking all rules. Since at the end of Carter's novel Fevvers lies happily in Walser's arms, a similar future full of connubial and artistic bliss can be foretold for her. Madonna and Fevvers may have their place in the history of woman's liberation as role models but just because they are unique stars—freaks in the sense of prodigies—their example is limited as regards the ordinary lives of ordinary women.

Leslie Fiedler writes that freaks' 'official “autobiographies” have always been circulated by their exhibitors, but these are invariably ghost-written, a part of the act rather than a way of seeing beyond it' (1993, p. 274). Since she is her own exhibitor, Fevvers also

chooses her own ghost-writer, Jack Walser. Walser, a handsome 25-year-old Californian, is writing a series titled 'Great Humbugs of the World' for an American newspaper. Fevvers is one of the humbugs he is trying to unmask and she uses his rather naïve approach to her own advantage, mesmerising him with a rather dubious version of her life. Unable to decide whether she is telling him the truth, Walser is first seduced by her account and then by what he describes as 'a seismic erotic disturbance' (p. 52). In this, Walser is no exception, for as Leslie Fiedler further notes, 'all freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic' (1993, p. 137). Fiedler explains that this desire is 'itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a longing for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation' (1993, p. 137). Yet, Walser's slow approach to Fevvers' arms and wings and his pursuit of the truth are presented by Carter as illuminating rather than degrading processes.

Curiously enough, this interplay between masculinity and femininity is largely ignored by most feminist critics of Carter's work. Mary Russo (1994), for instance, quickly disregards the matter of why Fevvers sets her hopes for the future in Walser, focusing instead on the ongoing discussion of marriage between Fevvers and her foster mother, Lizzie, who dislikes both Walser and the idea of marriage. Not even Paul Magrs (1997), one of the few men to have written about Carter's representation of masculinity, realises the magnitude of the changes Fevvers demands from Walser. Yet *Nights at the Circus* is, above all, a love story between the woman who wants to be the New Woman and the man she chooses to be her New Man. Walser is, therefore, not so much an independent character but part of Fevvers' characterisation, just like her wings. When Lizzy objects to Fevvers' choice on the grounds that Walser is still too untouched by life, Fevvers replies:

Oh, but Liz - think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well - I'll *sit* on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century - ... (p. 281)

As happens, before becoming the New Man, Walser becomes the Wild Man that according to Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990) all man should be reconciled to. An accident in the middle of Siberia and a spell of amnesia leave him ready to be awakened to his new life by Fevvers herself, thus, the roles of the sleeping princess and prince charming are reversed. This means that, as Clare Hanson notes in her discussion of Judith Butler's celebration of spectacle as gender empowerment,

while Butler repeatedly suggests that the 'abject' position (the position of the 'freak', the not properly human) offers a critical resource which can lead to a 'radical rearticulation' of social structures, *Nights at the Circus* seems rather to suggest that a re-articulation of borders such as Fevvers engages in does little either to dissolve such borders or to modify the operation of power. Fevvers, after all, imposes her vision of herself on Walser, reversing, rather than dissolving, existing power structures. (1997, p. 67)

Not only her vision of herself, but also her vision of himself. Fevvers finally seals the pact with her New Man by telling him, but not the reader, what part of her body is a sham: her wings or her virginity. Whether Walser feels that this pact - this privileged access to woman's body - is enough compensation for the ordeal he endures before Fevvers

awakens him to his new life is not said. He is silenced as he lies beneath the shadow of Fevvers' wings, spread in the full glory of their love making with her, of course, on top. The roles may have been reversed, but the relationship remains one of dominance and subordination.

Ironically, by becoming Walser's woman saviour, Fevvers mixes the role of Prince Charming with that of the Victorian angel in the house, though she is, in any case, very far from the masculine, romantic version of angelhood. 'To be an angel, then' Nina Auerbach writes, 'is to be masculine and breathtakingly mobile: traditional angels take possession of infinite space with an enviable freedom' (1982, p. 71). Auerbach notes that the Victorian angel in the house has but one advantage over the masculine angels of, for instance, *Paradise Lost*, and this is that 'this new angel takes no orders from no father-creator, but becomes herself the source of order' (1982, p. 71). Fevvers is much less domestic than the Victorian angels in the house and aspires to be the source of a new order in which the New Man is subordinated to the New Woman. But the domestication of the male is a feat which had been already accomplished in 1848 by the most neglected of feminist heroines: the young Cathy of *Wuthering Heights*, redeemer and teacher of her beloved cousin Hareton. And what is interesting about Cathy is that her empowerment is brought about by her having learnt to resist Heathcliff's abuse. It is almost a miracle that in a situation in which she is justified in feeling anger and hatred for all men, she chooses the path opened by her dead father Edgar and seeks conciliation with Hareton, rather than a quarrel. Cathy's patient, consistent disobedience of Heathcliff's rules places her finally in a position of power that will benefit Hareton indeed, even though the issue of whether he'll be subordinated to her is also carefully skirted by Brontë. Cathy achieves this balance of power without having to make a spectacle of herself—in the literal and the figurative sense—while Fevvers somehow relinquishes her dignity by exploiting herself to reach the same ends as Cathy's.

In all appearances, Fevvers' wings are not the instruments that allow her to soar beyond patriarchy but the erotic charms she uses to seduce a man who in his total adoration of her ways often seems as fake as her wings. Fevvers' feminist achievement is indeed marked by the first sexual encounter with Walser in which she must be on top because her wings hinder any other position. But beyond this, her right to go on with her life and to choose Walser as her companion, if this is what this novel is finally about, oddly recalls the right exercised by countless fairy-tale princes who choose meek, charming princesses as wives. And if we, women, dislike these fairy-tale images of ourselves, why would men praise us for creating the likes of Walser? We may conclude, thus, that both men and women are alike in that they prefer enjoying their fantasies of themselves and the other sex to actual dialogue between the sexes; alternatively, we may praise Angela Carter for using the story of Fevvers' awakening of Walser to subtly mock women's tendency to imitate the sexist fables written by patriarchal men.

The gap between the means and the ends, and the inconclusiveness of the ending, are more worrying in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. Marina Warner writes in *From the Beast to the Blond* that fairy-tale heroines 'frequently agree with alacrity to the change of outward form, in order to run away from the sexual advances of a would-be seducer' (1994a, p. 351). A timely metamorphosis changes 'their problematic fleshy envelope, which has inspired such undesirable desire' (1994a, p. 351) until a suitable lover undoes the spell. Ruth Patchett's story is thus, an anti-fairy-tale, for the problem with her 'fleshy envelope' is that she wants it changed to attract many men. In her view, God has cast a most unfair spell on her, making her ugly and big; because of her ugliness she has lost the love of her husband Bobo and so she sets out to undo the spell and

recover him. There is no prince charming for Ruth: only her willpower carries her through the magical course of a seven-year-long metamorphosis that transforms her, as one of the characters says, into 'an impossible male fantasy made flesh' (p. 234).

The reader, however, is left wondering why so much effort goes into the making of a powerful woman who wants nothing but her man and what is worse, not even a New Man, but the same one she had in the first place. Bobo—and we are going to suppose the man's name is not an intentional pun on the Spanish word meaning 'silly, stupid', which might well be—is an ordinary, suburban man: a well-to-do accountant and a very insipid father and husband. At the end of the story he is almost nothing at all, for a spell in prison due to Ruth's machinations against him has turned him into a complete physical and emotional wreck. Why, then, does Ruth channel all her newly-discovered might towards keeping this man? And is Weldon endorsing her heroine's efforts or exposing them?

In an interview with M^a del Carmen Martín in 1991, Fay Weldon observed that when writing this novel she slowly drifted from the more active feminism of the first half to the conformist outlook of the second half. Asked whether she felt integrated within the feminist movement, Weldon retorted: 'I have never been able to find it! If there's a party headquarters I would join them. They can have my subscription, they can give me a list of things to believe. If I could get more than six out of ten I might be able to belong to it. It is such a vague strange thing the feminist movement. And who are they?' (1994, p. 21). This refusal to commit herself to the feminist cause is in itself the reason why Weldon's books are so provocative, and so ambiguous, but it is also the reason why the edge of a novel such as *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is blunt. The same can be said about Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. As Patricia Waugh notes in *Feminine Fictions*, 'imagining herself to be "free" after the transformative surgery, Ruth has in fact exchanged one form of submission for another' (1989, p. 194). What is more, this is a form of submission that adds an unpleasant masochistic tone to women's redefinition of themselves as if, tired of the struggle, big, powerful girls finally gave up and admitted that all they wanted was a man—of any kind.

Ruth is, in her own words, 'a wonderful mother and a good wife' that 'lacks the compulsion of the erotic' (p. 9) for her husband. Unattractive women like her harden their skin as she says 'against perpetual humiliation, until it's as tough and cold as a crocodile's. And we wait for old age to equalise all things. We make good old women' (p. 10). When her husband leaves her for Mary Fisher, Ruth finds that she craves to be 'part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust. It isn't love I want; it is nothing so simple. What I want is to take everything and return nothing. What I want is power over the hearts and pockets of men' (p. 24) — which is nothing that has not been heard before in countless sexist stories about predatory women.

Ruth stages a rather particular show of communion with the Earth—or rather the soil of her garden—supposed to unleash her magical powers. She sets out next to burn down her house, dump her children onto her husband and his mistress's lap and disappear. Her subsequent adventures in the world of the working woman are not contributions to her own personal liberation but stages on the route towards avenging herself on her husband and his mistress. When she finally lands Bobo in prison and wrecks Mary's life, indirectly causing her death from cancer, Ruth invests her money—stolen from her husband—into improving God's original idea of her. 'We are as God made us', her surgeon protests, to which she answers 'That isn't true ... We are here in this world to improve upon his original idea. To create justice, truth and beauty where He so obviously and lamentably failed' (p. 113). A series of extremely painful operations, which

Ruth enjoys with the masochistic glee of the surgery-addict, finally achieves the desired end and she becomes a clone of Mary Fisher's— a 'comic turn, turned serious' (p. 240)—beautiful indeed but not quite a paragon of truth or justice.

One might think that such a transformation would occupy the last position on a list of desperate remedies to recover a lost lover. Yet, in fact, Susan Faludi narrates in her well-known book *Backlash* (1991) a case that eerily recalls that of Weldon's bizarre heroine. In 1986, the magazine *Newsweek* published a certainly questionable study concluding that the possibilities of getting married for a woman over 35 were reduced to a scant 5% and further after that age. Spurred by this information, Diana Doe, a single woman in her late thirties, bet with a male fellow journalist of her age that she would get married before her fortieth birthday no matter what the statistics said. Instead of looking for a husband—if such thing was necessary at all to begin with—who would appreciate her brain rather than her body, Doe decided that her body needed a radical revamping. Aiming at the 85–60–85 target, she contacted Patrick Netter, a physical trainer, and drew a contract with him for help in exchange of 50% of the benefits to be obtained from publicising her metamorphosis. The 'Project', as she called her metamorphosis, was publicly presented and Doe signed a series of agreements with doctors who would work on her body in exchange for advertising their skills. She also signed a contract to publish a book titled *Create Yourself* while Netter contacted a team of television producers for the making of a 'movie of the week'.

In 1987, Doe had an operation on her breasts and decided to meet a man, whom she had first met on the phone, before going further down the road she had taken. This meeting was a complete disaster, for the man disliked her physically, and Doe was convinced that she should go on with her 'Project'. To my surprise, Faludi does not condemn Doe's plain foolishness, using her case instead to denounce the immense pressures put on women by men's preference for attractive sexual partners. Faludi never stops to consider for a moment whether Doe's extremely low self-esteem is representative of most women's view of themselves, nor does she consider to what extent American men's views of women as sexy dolls are backed by the pathetic, self-inflicted horrors endured by pliant, stultified women like Doe.

Curiously enough, the American film based on Weldon's novel does not endorse Doe's view of her body. Weldon's novel has been twice adapted, once for TV and once for the cinema. The BBC series directed by Philip Saville in 1986 and Susan Seidelman's Hollywood film *She Devil* (1989) differ considerably, not only because of the nature of the respective narrative media but also because of the different attitudes towards adaptation in Britain and the USA. The British series respects with almost complete faithfulness Weldon's double-edged bitterness while the American film tones it down, turning her controversial novel into the subject of a rather gentle comedy. By softening Weldon's ambiguities, Susan Seidelman inserts a more overt feminist reading, also emphasised by the presence of TV comedienne Roseanne in the role of Ruth. Roseanne's Ruth does not literally become Mary (played rather histrionically by Meryl Streep) because her transformation is internal and not external. Furthermore, in Seidelman's version Ruth frees herself first from her role as a suburban housewife, becoming a successful business woman, and is then generous enough to use a little bit of magic to help Mary free herself from her stereotyped image as a pretty, youngish, voraciously sexy romance writer. The idea of metamorphosis is thus keyed to appeal to the very American passion for success and a confident Ruth is seen walking the streets of New York at the end of the film just after buying a copy of Mary's new novel, a post-modernist autobiographical account of her doomed relationship with Bobo.

There is nothing in the film as horrifying as the parallel process by which Ruth's enormous willpower carries her through the painful process of her physical metamorphosis, there is nothing about the likes of American Diana Doe. Instead, Seidelman offers in the initial scenes, set in a beauty parlour, a brief reflection on the false promises of cosmetics advertising, which is rather close to Susan Faludi's denunciation of this industry. Roseanne's Ruth makes the most of her initially unattractive body but because she never considers surgery she avoids the danger of the steps taken by Weldon's Ruth. That is, Seidelman's Ruth transcends her powerlessness to become powerful without degrading herself, much as Brontë's Cathy does; in contrast, Weldon's Ruth sheds her powerlessness and her freakish body to become not a powerful woman, but a pathetic, grotesque moral monster. Weldon's reflection on Ruth's self-inflicted humiliation is conspicuously missing. If this is an ironic silence aimed at making women laugh at their obsessions, it can only be said that Weldon's sense of humour may be too cryptic for some readers. If this gap—and the gap in Faludi's discussion of Doe's Project—is supposed to point at men as the instigators of women's abuse of their own bodies, it seems necessary to fill it in with a look at how women use their bodies to control men—which some indeed do, whether other women like it or not.

Jeanette Winterson's *Dog Woman*, thus nicknamed because she breeds racehounds for a living, is both a freak and a moral monster. Her gross physicality is expressed in terms that border on the surrealistic as, for instance, in the scene in which she catapults a circus elephant out of sight with a thrust of her heavy body. The *Dog Woman*'s jolly, unselfconscious view of her mountainous body gives rise to a number of very funny erotic scenes, such as the one in which she tries to have sexual intercourse with a willing but not quite proficient lover. In her own words:

I did mate with a man, but cannot say that I felt anything at all, though I had him jammed up to the hilt. As for him, spread on top of me with his face buried beneath my breasts, he complained that he could not find the sides of my cunt and felt like a tadpole in a pot. He was an educated man and urged me to try and squeeze in my muscles, and so perhaps bring me closer to his prong. I took a great breath and squeezed with all my might and heard something like a rush of air through a tunnel, and when I strained up on my elbows and looked down I saw I had pulled him in, balls and everything. He was stuck. I had the presence of mind to ring the bell and my friend came in with her sisters, and with the aid of a crowbar they prised him out and refreshed him with mulled wine while I sang him a little song about the fortitude of spawning salmon. (p. 119)

In other senses than her sexuality, the *Dog Woman* can be compared to another monstrous giantess, that of Ted Hughes' story for children, *The Iron Woman* (1993). Winterson's and Hughes' viragos use radical, violent methods to teach patriarchal men to behave properly—that is to say, as women would like—but they cannot be taken as role models because they are as violent and narrow-minded as any patriarchal man. Both read as parodies—though it is not clear whether they are parodies of the excesses of feminism or of patriarchy.

Ted Hughes' text deals with a black, metallic giantess who emerges one day from the filthy river mud to prevent men from further poisoning the waters. She might thus be a symbol of the current conservationist vogue, associated with (eco)feminism and with nature marked female. Initially, the giantess's plans include the total extermination of the polluters, though she later relents and limits herself to transforming all the men in

England into man-sized fish condemned to surviving in their bathtubs. All the women and the boys under 18 are left untouched by this sudden universal metamorphosis because the giantess regards them as innocent of the destruction of the land. Eventually, once she symbolically destroys greed, the men revert to their human form; their hair turned white becomes a token of the Iron Woman's power.

The horrific punishment that the men of England suffer seems an act of feminist wishful thinking, but the Iron Woman is such an unsympathetic figure that no young member of its target readership (this is a book for children) can possibly want her to exert her power on its father, brother, or male friend at all. The Iron Woman may thus be either a feminist or an anti-feminist figure, depending on whether the abusive treatment she gives men is seen as a fair punishment of patriarchy or as an unfair punishment of all men. Ted Hughes may even have written his tale as a tongue-in-cheek indictment against Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady. Yet, since Thatcher is not a feminist, interpreting the meaning of Hughes' Iron Woman from this point of view is even more problematic.

Both the Iron Woman and the Dog Woman are monsters because they act in morally questionable ways and also because they are gigantic. Their physical size seems to be an indication of the dimensions of the disgust impelling these two women to wage war on men. As the unnamed modern counterpart of the Dog Woman notes, 'it seems obvious, doesn't it, that someone who is ignored and overlooked will expand to the point where they have to be noticed, even if the noticing is fear and disgust' (p. 140). The Dog Woman does possess a formidable body capable of eliciting fear and disgust, a body that enables her to kill men as she pleases. However, it is doubtful whether the reader is supposed to sympathise with her androphobia or to condemn it as the dark side of contemporary feminism; it is also disputable whether the reader is supposed to feel amused by the Dog Woman's various sexual misadventures or horrified by them. What is to be made, for instance, of the episode in which the Dog Woman bites off the penis of a man who has persuaded her to perform a fellatio for him? She naively claims that she has hurt him because until then she believed that men's genitals could grow again if an accident happened. Later, when she is better informed, she comes to the conclusion that if that is not the case, 'this seems a great mistake on the part of nature, since men are so careless with their members and will put them anywhere without thinking' (p. 120). If this is simply provocative humour, the least that can be said about it is that Winterson does not quite dominate the register—the worst is that it is at the level of sexist dirty jokes at the expense of women.

There is, at any rate, little that is humorous or satirical in the Dog Woman's killing of ten Puritan men, justified by her having followed too literally a Royalist preacher's injunction to avenge the King, or in her hacking into pieces two clients of a brothel where she occasionally works. The particularity of the Dog Woman is that she remains a monster to the end, when she declares: 'My actions are not motivated by thought of gain, only by thought of justice, and I have searched my soul to conclude that there is no person dead at my hand who would be better off alive' (p. 147). One must necessarily wonder why the Dog Woman's words have elicited no protests from men and what kind of triumphant heroine she is.

The attitude of the 20th-century version of the Dog Woman, seems more sober: 'I don't hate men', she says, 'I just wish they'd try harder. They all want to be heroes and all we want is for them to stay at home and help with the housework and the kids. That's not the kind of heroism they enjoy' (p. 145). This modern version of the giantess is a rather attractive woman who believes that she carries within herself a monster of

enormous proportions that will burst out of her body when her tolerance of men's hypocrisy finally collapses. At a point in the novel she has a long fantasy in which she hallucinates how her own body becomes indeed that of her real gigantic self. In her fantasy, she becomes a virago not unlike Hughes' Iron Woman, trapping in a huge sack all the men who displease her. Unlike the Iron Woman, she is more selective, though, and only chooses men in positions of power, who will become the target of a peculiar kind of re-education. In her wishful thinking incarnation as the giantess she imagines herself imparting justice to men:

I force all the fat ones to go on a diet, and all the men line up for compulsory training in feminism and ecology. Then they start on the food surpluses, packing it with their own hands, distributing it in a great human chain of what used to be power and is now co-operation.

We change the world, and on the seventh day we have a party at the wine lake and make pancakes with the butter mountain and the peoples of the earth keep coming in waves and being fed and being clean and being well. And when the rivers sparkle, it's not with mercury ... (p. 138)

Hughes' and Winterson's imaginary, pseudo fairy-tale giantesses manage, thus, to impose their view on men and to guarantee the quality of the sparkling, unpolluted waters. Feminism and ecology replace men's greed apparently because all the men are cowed into submission not with powerful arguments but with powerful magic. Why the 'compulsory training' dreamed by Winterson's heroine or the unsound methods of Hughes' Iron Woman are better than patriarchal men's unfairness and misogyny is the question that neither text answers. As can be seen, the same ambiguous figure of powerful female monstrosity can be used for different purposes that even contradict each other. They ultimately reveal that the real issue at stake in the representation of monstrosity is power, or, alternatively, that women's dream of power can only lead to creating monsters, no matter how effective they may be in redressing the wrongs of monstrous patriarchy.

What do Winterson, Carter and Weldon finally say about the power of monstrous women and what do they contribute to the portrait of contemporary woman? Nancy Walker argues that women writers create fictions 'that are not conclusive, because conclusions, like traditional mythologies, do not allow growth and evolution' (Walker, 1990, p. 55). But is it that simple? Can female novelists get away with the telling of the tale, refusing to take sides and letting others, especially the women they address, draw their own conclusions? This should not be the case. The growth and evolution of women's images of themselves in fiction can only take place first, if the process of self-examination is taken more seriously, that is, if women openly acknowledge that they pursue power, just as men do, and that this can reveal unpleasant truths about femininity; second, if a dialogue with men is started – even more, if we can laugh together at each other's glaring faults. These three novels contribute little to the ongoing debate about what woman is, for they are unanswerable: there is no possible reply to them except a rather incongruous celebration of inconclusiveness.

It can be argued that Carter, Winterson and Weldon needn't make a political statement in favour of feminism with their work and that their subversiveness lies precisely in their refusal to do so. Yet it might well be that this subversiveness is not appreciated, or simply that it does not exist at all. Lorna Sage tells us that Carter's work is 'the most fashionable twentieth-century topic' (1994, p. 3) among doctoral students in

Britain, which indicates how well accepted she is by the cultural establishment. Marina Warner claims that in fact

Angela Carter would have been astonished by the praise in her obituaries: she would certainly have had some caustic phrase for the general enthusiasm Her profanity was of the unsettling variety that made it necessary to examine one's own received ideas. It was so very impolite, with its particular blend of feminism, its blend of the irreverent and the Gothic, its dazzling linguistic intricacy and relish for imagery. (1994b, p. 255)

But, is it really true that her work caused such discomfort or that it was so very impolite? Wasn't she, like Fevvers, another sham, the provocative conformist? For, what else can explain her acceptance and popularity today, even if she did not enjoy them when she was alive? The same can be said about Winterson, who attributes to the Dog Woman the fire of London in 1666 but cannot invent for the Dog Woman a place in the history of woman's liberation, or about Weldon and her pseudo-glamorous Ruth. Where, indeed, is that power to offend that Winterson, Weldon and Carter are credited with?

Hermione Lee's well-known protest against John Bayley's not so enthusiastic obituary of Angela Carter (1992) can be used to illustrate the difficulties of establishing where the power to offend of women like Carter, Winterson or Weldon lies. Lee is understandably annoyed by Bayley's unjust conflating of post-modernism, feminism and political correctness and regrets that the issue of political correctness is arbitrarily used to disqualify legitimate feminist discourses, especially in America: 'if you want to dismiss a feminist author, you can make her sound rigid and intolerant by giving her the "PC" label' (1994, p. 313). Lee argues insistently that Carter's own feminist discourse was genuinely subversive and far from political correctness, resisting not only patriarchy but also well-established feminist discourses. She looks at Carter's last book, *Expelives Deleted* (1992), a collection of essays and other short pieces, to prove her point that Carter was a subversive writer to the very end of her life, and quotes Carter herself in reference to her important task as demythologiser saying that this is 'filthy work, but somebody's got to do it' (1994, p. 317).

But if Lee's defence of Carter against Bayley's prejudiced linking of all feminism with political correctness strikes a chord, her claim that Carter was an alternative type of feminist rings hollow – and this is because she chooses to highlight Carter's ambivalence towards the high priestess of modern feminism, Virginia Woolf, instead of comparing Carter to her male contemporaries. The true measure of Carter's subversiveness (or Weldon's, or Winterson's) cannot be surmised from the fact that even though she 'partly disliked' Woolf (1994, p. 307), Carter was writing a libretto for an opera based on *Orlando* at the time of her death. Carter appears to be here a brave Little Red Riding Hood facing the big bad Woolf. And who, indeed, is afraid of Virginia Woolf? Ironically, what angers Lee is that Bayley – a man – does not find Carter subversive enough, but she never wonders who Bayley is comparing Carter to. For if we think, for instance, of Carter's good friend and admirer, J.G. Ballard, there is no doubt at all about whose works have a greater power to offend. Read Ballard's *Crash*, if in doubt.

Lee has defended Carter's feminism, while denying her political correctness, claiming her works for Literature beyond their debatable ideological content. Others like Patricia Duncker (1984) have denied that Carter's work follows feminist ideas at all, seeing in her books a secret agreement with patriarchy. But the point I am making here is that these discussions are meaningless unless the work of women writers like Carter, Winterson and Weldon is compared to the work of male writers and unless the male reader is taken into

account—if he is not offended by these female prodigies (both the characters and the writers), there is no point in demanding that he be. Being daring or subversive within a self-enclosed domain is not the same as being daring and subversive in the open. The work of the writers under discussion is, of course, in the open as far as the book market is concerned, but it is somehow walled in as far as its discussion is concerned, in contrast to men's fiction.

In comparison to the humiliated and humiliating monstrous heroes of men's fiction of the grotesque—from Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* to Brett Easton Ellis' Pat Bateman in *American Psycho*, passing through Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*—the monstrous women of recent fiction are, like Fevvers, freakish but not threatening, powerful but within limits and far from sublime or uncanny. For really disturbing, unsettling female monsters—in the sense of being really disruptive of essential ideas about femininity, and even about humanity—one must go to the work of men such as Alasdair Gray in *Poor Things* (1993), Ian Banks in *The Wasp Factory* (1984) or Alan Warner in *Morvern Callar* (1994).

These three Scottish novelists—and we may wonder whether their Scottishness is a significant factor here—offer a portrait of woman as a monster much more provocative than Carter, Weldon and Winterson; what is more, much more challenging to women. Gray's Bella Baxter is an attractive woman made from the body of a drowned mother and the brain of the female foetus she was carrying when she committed suicide. The novel, a feast of intertextual allusions to many other texts about monstrosity, traces Bella's very rapid progress from pseudo childhood to womanhood. The woman who emerges in the 1880s from the laboratory of the eccentric, eminent surgeon Godwin Baxter—who makes her to be his companion—is a truly liberated woman whose extraordinary capacity for empathy qualifies her to heal, first, herself of the abuse that led the drowned woman/mother to commit suicide and, later, her patients when she becomes one of the first women doctors in Britain.

In her relations with men Bella is naive but straightforward; and so is she in her relation with her body and her mind. She is a prodigy of strength and directness—a favourite with a number of women readers who read and re-read Gray's text, and perhaps a distant relative of Carter's Fevvers. The twist in Gray's extremely clever novel is provided by the inclusion of a final text written by the feminist Victoria Baxter, who claims that Bella is a fiction born out of the rather torpid mind of her husband inspired by her own person. The female reader charmed by Gray's imagining of Bella as a positive, strong character—despite her bizarre origins—is set reeling with this blow calculated to upset all pre-conceptions about what a politically correct male fantasy of woman is. And that is the challenge of the text: the woman reader cannot help falling if not in love, at least in deep sympathy with the monster and out of sympathy with the righteous Victoria, who is silly and conceited enough to imagine that she can have inspired Bella at all. As happens with Brontë's young Cathy, Bella's empowerment results from her determined, stubborn resistance to Godwin's plans for her; she is constantly growing in dignity—even during the period she uses her body to survive in Paris working as a prostitute—because every step she takes unmasks yet another petty tyranny of the males around her. Godwin cannot help the victimised woman who kills herself, but he remakes her into somebody who will not stand abuse and who, what is more, unmasks the abuser by the sole force of her convictions. Gray suggests, of course, that if woman's fantasy is Victoria, the feminist, men will stick to their fantasising about women—but also provokes women into re-considering who they are, where their role models come if not from the fantasies of men. To men he says that just as Godwin cannot control Bella,

they should not expect to control their fantasies and much less the real women around them. And even though Bella does not know the meaning of political correctness—not even of simple correctness—she never commits the unpardonable sin of androphobia.

Warner's Morvern and Banks' Frank are by no means as likeable as Bella. This is why they are remarkable as monsters. I must note that despite the insistence of feminists like Julia Kristeva (1982) and Barbara Creed (1993), contemporary men tend to represent the male rather than the female body as the site of abjection. None of the female monsters I am discussing in this section are grotesque—very few are in fiction and film by men—whereas grotesque male bodies abound. Curiously enough, men are seemingly more interested in defining the boundaries of female moral monstrosity (focusing on their behaviour), whereas women like Weldon, Carter and Winterson have explored the links between grotesque physicality *and* behaviour. Morvern's own behaviour is marked by a monstrous callousness. Though she is not threatening as, for instance, a male serial killer might be, she is cold and uncaring to limits that make the reader doubt whether she is human at all. Morvern puts herself in the track of literary fame by stealing the manuscript of a novel she finds next to the battered, dead body of her boyfriend, killed by a stranger. Whereas Fevvers, Ruth and the Dog Woman produce an endless flow of thoughts about their own condition as women and freaks, Morvern acts out in almost complete silence (her surname, Callar, means 'to remain silent' in Spanish) a version of womanhood that goes against the grain of the (stereotyped) definitions of woman as a sensitive human being. Morvern is terrifying because she feels nothing, without suffering in any way from any pathology of the body or the mind: she just *is*. Her terrible indifference to everything is what makes her powerful: she is above woman's fear of man, above woman's obsessions with their bodies, above woman's love for children. And because she is such a politically incorrect portrait of woman—despite being very different from the more active, aggressive women of men's sexual fantasies—Morvern forces the reader to consider whether the dehumanisation portrayed by men in their fiction also applies to women beyond gender barriers. For, is Morvern a monstrous woman or a monstrous human being?

Banks' Frank is a teenager who believes that the family dog castrated him when he was three years old, until he discovers that his father has been lying to him all his life: Frank was actually born Frances Lesley and not Francis Leslie. Frank, who is a particularly vicious young man fond of killing animals and children, justifies his outrageous acts as manifestations of uncontrollable hormonal flows in his young male body. The hormones, in fact, do flow chaotically in his body but this is because his deranged father is using them to halt the onset of menstruation in Frances. The mystery and the irony of Banks' novel is that it is never known what causes Frank's criminal behaviour: the struggle of the male and female hormones uneasily mingling in his/her body, or psychological conditions beyond his (or her) gender. Banks manipulates the reader who finds out that Frank is female at the same time as s/he does; the readers' beliefs about male violence are shattered when the truth is out as much as Frank's sense of his own masculinity. Of course, in this very politically incorrect novel, the misogynist Frank feels degraded when he discovers that he is one of the Others—the reader is challenged to question the automatic association of masculinity with violence and to consider whether women would become violent monsters if they were taught not to restrain their violent urges.

A common characteristic of the six novels I am discussing here is that they question current notions of political correctness. The point I am making here is not that Weldon, Carter or Winterson are politically correct in any degree—in my view, there is no question that their intention is to shock the reader—but that they do not risk enough.

In fact, they can not, because the ambiguous link between political correctness and feminism will always secure them a gallant defence from other women, who may feel called to defend either political correctness or a particular feminist current of thought. Men do not enjoy that protection. Bristow and Broughton write that 'in creating "dream-monsters" that undermined the timelessness oppressively accorded to myth, [Carter] frequently put herself in danger of being misunderstood' (1997, p. 8). But, in any case, this is a small risk compared to, for instance, the fury Brett Easton Ellis unleashed when he published the most irritating, devastating portrait of male monstrosity in *American Psycho* (1991).

It may be argued that I am myself protesting against the political incorrectness of Winterson when I note the androphobic sense of humour of the Dog Woman. In fact, my protest is against the unfairness of the game, and women's privileged position. The true test of political correctness is whether the roles in a particular narrative can be 'safely' reversed. In the literary game they cannot: to begin with, as a lesbian writer, Winterson is entitled to a respect denied to heterosexual male writers. She can voice androphobic opinions through her characters whereas men cannot truly criticise a particular woman for they appear to be criticising all. In contrast, even when a woman has a genuine intention to subvert and disrupt established discourses she is limited by the fact that there is really no subversive discourse left to women, for feminism is becoming (or has become) the norm replacing men's discourse. Ironically, the patriarchal discourse seems to have become the only genuine site of subversion—of offence—in a western culture dominated by a sense of decorum based on (some) feminist values. A woman writing from an anti-feminist position (and, of course, a man) is more likely to generate authentic subversive discourse than a radical feminist.

Here it might be necessary to appeal to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to understand why women's monsters are not fulfilling the function for which they have been created—why women cannot break away from the current respectability of the feminist discourse. 'The appeal of the carnivalesque for Bakhtin, Brecht and Angela Carter', Linden Peach writes, 'is that it valorises the subordinate, the anti-authoritarian and the marginal' (1998, p. 141). Peach notes, though, that Carter herself is among the critics of Bakhtin who have highlighted the point that carnival culture is tutored by officialdom. The carnivalesque, and the grotesque body in it, are possibly just a safety valve, which is why Peach concludes that, in Carter's work, the carnivalesque does not imply commitment: it is 'a theme and not necessarily a position from which she writes' (1998, p. 144). Instead of Bakhtin, Peach mentions Shakespeare as the great unacknowledged source of the contemporary carnivalesque in Carter and others.

Actually, this would have amused Bakhtin himself: Shakespeare is a 'safe' influence, sanctioned by the officialdom of literary gatekeepers. The carnival is kept outside the gates once more and woman takes it 'as a theme', nor necessarily 'a position'. Bakhtin's vindication of the popular culture that informed Rabelais' world is often invoked to analyse contemporary fiction—as I have myself done in my references to the grotesque body—but his vision has been sanitised. Rabelais' work is the direct heir of the lost culture Bakhtin describes; the contemporary texts are not the heirs of Rabelais, but of the official culture that has enthroned (and tamed) Shakespeare. The parody in Carter, Weldon and Winterson is not Rabelaisian but modern parody. Following Bakhtin, this means that it is incapable of regeneration through laughter though it can articulate a great deal of bitterness. The difference between Rabelaisian and modern parody lies in the process that Bakhtin traces and that leads to the repression of laughter beginning in

the Renaissance—the very subject of Umberto Eco's mock Rabelaisian *The Name of the Rose*.

An essential quality of laughter in popular celebrations, Bakhtin argues, is that it includes all: there is no separation between those who are laughed at and those who laugh. And the laughter is provoked, of course, by the celebration of the grotesque in human life, through the body or through language. The emergence of new notions about the body in the Renaissance, based on the classic, self-contained view of the human body, and the later development of bourgeoisie culture led to an unnatural view of the female body, in which the 'horrors' of childbirth and sex mix badly with the subtle body language women—ladies—had to use in public.

Carter, Winterson and Weldon still struggle today to break away from the still body of the lady and use their monstrous women to bring back to light bodily functions long concealed from the reader's eyes. But the recovery of the grotesque from the clutches of the bourgeoisie myth of the angelic woman is not so easy. Fevvers, the Dog Woman and Ruth awe men into submission because of their grotesque bodies. They produce the same effects that beautiful women produce—to the point that Ruth sees that she might as well become one. The additional problem is that this relative empowerment is achieved at the cost of risking laughter, which is why these three monstrous women prefer their men to be silent admirers rather than articulate men. The grotesque—the monstrous comic—is an invitation to laughter, but who can laugh here? Certainly, not men. Winterson's Dog Woman would rather kill them than let them laugh at her grotesque body, Ruth's Bobo has been zombified by his spell in prison and does not even understand who she is, Fevvers's Walser just stops writing about her. Women do not find it easy to laugh, either, for if we find ourselves grotesque, laughable, how shall we prevent men from laughing at us?

What Carter, Winterson and Weldon do is to use the grotesque from an ideological point of view—whatever this may be for each of them—that perverts the carnivalesque foundation of the grotesque body. Theirs is monstrosity that can be looked at, provided the monster controls the feelings and reactions of the on-looker; it cannot be truly subversive because these monsters are not prepared to tolerate extreme reactions. Are we to conclude that women cannot write truly challenging, shocking fiction about powerful women? As I see it, that is the case, though I would not agree with Winterson's statement that 'if it doesn't shock, it isn't art' (Onega, 1989, p. 13). Men are much more proficient than women at describing the depths of human misery, both male and female, and also more skilful at producing portraits of powerful, monstrous femininity, for that is precisely what they fear most. Twentieth-century men are also experts in the art of writing grotesque fiction about the humiliated and humiliating patriarchal man because, of course, the long patriarchal tradition and the new feminist tradition(s) invite them to consider masculinity apart from femininity. Women are trying to catch up but they—we—are trying to simultaneously expose woman's monstrous side and to make it endearing to the on-looker. That is, we are taking no risks, maybe for fear of questioning the 'respectable' image of woman built by feminism. Playfulness and irony are allowed, but not real exposure of women's defects. This is precisely what Angela Carter herself meant when she wrote:

On the whole, women writers are kind to women.

Perhaps too kind. Women, it is true, commit far fewer crimes than men in the first place; we do not have the same opportunities to do so. But, from the evidence of the fiction we write, we find it very hard to blame ourselves even

for those we commit. We tend to see the extenuating circumstances, so that it is difficult to apportion blame, impossible to judge – or, indeed, to acknowledge responsibility and then take up the terrible burden of remorse as it is summed up in Samuel Beckett's phrase 'my crime is my punishment'.

I cannot think of any woman in any work of fiction written by a woman who is taken to this final revelation of moral horror. We forgive, we don't judge. (Carter, 1986, p. ix)

What is missing, then, in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Sexing the Cherry* is the power to make women face up to the monster in them, in us – for being women does not exclude us from the monstrous traits inherent in being human. And a clear sign of this unease is that the grotesque – the comic monstrous – is chosen over the horrific because it is easier to deal with comedy than with horror. Without this willingness to see deep inside us, to relinquish this absurd moral superiority, and to let men see into our own defects (not the ones they have imputed to us) not much is gained, no matter how pleasant the reading of these novels may be and how high their undeniable artistic value may be. They please paradoxically because their power to upset is consciously or unconsciously undermined by the novelist's fear of agreeing with patriarchy's view of woman as a powerful monster. Only when women enjoy the same amount of power as men will they be able to portray women's monstrous and only too human side with total sincerity. Until then possibly other women monsters such as Fevvers, the Dog Woman and Ruth will epitomise women's longing to be really powerful and the limitations of the fictional solutions to the problem of how to achieve power and what to do with it once it has been achieved.

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