

**‘Putting new wine in old bottles’: Angela Carter and the  
Renewal of Literary Canons.  
The Case of “Overture and Incidental Music for  
*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”  
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**Abstract**

In “Overture and Incidental Music for A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” included in *Black Venus* (1985), Angela Carter provides a brilliant free adaptation of William Shakespeare’s well-known comedy in order to censure already obsolete patriarchal and masculine principles. Taking as the focal point the figure of Golden Herm and its relations with the other characters in the story, especially Titania, Oberon, and Puck, this essay attempts to analyse Angela Carter’s zeal for adapting old stories and conventions to nowadays thinking. The British novelist proposes an active reading of the play that goes beyond traditional sexist prejudices and manages to call into question the validity of these masculine principles. After all, as she herself explained with the metaphor, it is a matter of “putting new wine in old bottles.”

When it seemed that Angela Carter had told everything she had to, a new surprise always emerged from her pen. In her works, not only did Angela Carter devote herself to engender original microcosms inhabited by singular beings, like, for instance, in *Heroes and Villains* (1969), Madame Shreck’s museum and the ‘Panopticon’ of *Nights at the Circus* (1984), or the city of Beluah in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Her imagination played with everything she had at hand, and, in this way, the classics could not be of less importance. Carter modified and altered them in order to create new realities, to renew already obsolete patterns, or what is more important, to criticise models of behaviour; is

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short, to expose her sociological, political, and feminist ideals. As Elaine Jordan explains,

The demythologizing business is not only a rational process but a making of new fictions which do not pretend to be more than that: to be of use in asking some questions of the contemporary moment in the light of historical possibilities before taking to the road again, thinking, writing, again. (1992: 35)

Angela Carter, as well as other feminist writers, resorted to the renewal and re-writing of classical works with the aim of searching for a place where the rights of women could be defended and where women could reaffirm their identity, without being manipulated by the masculine authority. Angela Carter thus employed her imagination and her creative capacity to elaborate such *re-writing* of the classics, with which she pretended to defend the feminist ideals exposed in many of her works. The versions of the folk tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) are, perhaps, the most outstanding examples of this interest in the rejuvenation of narrative patterns and traditional archetypes.

Then, if part of her labour as feminist writer was devoted to the interpretation and modification of classical models, it is evident that, as British writer as well, Carter allocated a branch of her production to the influence and analysis of the most relevant figure in the Anglo-Saxon tradition: William Shakespeare. Among his works, Carter drew special attention to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595–1596). Not only did this comedy function as an important technical and narrative element in the development of the plot of her last novel, *Wise Children* (1991), it was the focal point of “Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*” as well. The analysis of this short story, included in the collection *Black Venus*, published in 1985, is the aim of this paper, through which I shall attempt, on the one hand, to examine the innovative elements that Carter introduced in the new version of the Renaissance comedy, and, on the other, to study how this renovation was tightly connected to Carter’s eagerness to adapt the old stories and traditions to nowadays literary and ideological necessities. That is to say, as Linden Peach affirms, “how she used other texts generally—seeking to ‘extract the latent content from the

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traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories” (1998: 168). Following Jordan again, we read that

Angela Carter writes as a reader of texts and signs, and animates readers to a similar active response, resisting passive consumption that wastes away time and life. She accepts open-endedness, the possibility of different readings of her work, and she is not without contradictions. (1992: 22)

Carter continually committed herself to an active response from the reader that would allow her to manipulate and modify stories avoiding monotony or a passive attitude of reception. Thus, the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that, conducted by Melchior Hazard, takes place in *Wise Children* considerably differs from what had traditionally been done. Of course, laughter is guaranteed on seeing the series of actors and actresses that, dressed for a Broadway musical rather than for the presentation of a Shakespearean comedy, makes up an authentic carnival spectacle. Less grotesque, however, results the description of the characters of the world of the fairies offered in “Overture and Incidental Music,” even though this does not play down its originality.

Adapting Shakespeare's play, in “Overture and Incidental Music,” Carter mainly focused on the description of the fantastic characters that inhabit the forest where the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place. She left aside the other characters that, coming from Athens, go deeper in this forest. Following the style of *Moby Dick*, the first narrator of the story, Golden Herm, who represents Titania's adoptive son, introduces himself as Ishmael would do: “Call me the Golden Herm.” Though being the cause of the arguments between Titania and Oberon, this character almost lacks a name and hardly appears in the original Shakespearean work. In spite of this, the British writer put the first words of the story in his mouth. This character acquires considerable relevance, since he would be the focal point on which the behaviour of the other characters would be dependent: Oberon, Titania, and Puck, as all of them, especially Puck, feel a deep attraction towards Titania's little step-son.

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The fact that Carter gave voice to a character that lacks prominence in the original comedy is not the most notorious feature of her story. Nevertheless, what makes Carter's narrative so adventurous is, without any doubts, the hermaphrodite condition of Titania's stepson. Golden Herm continually talks about his sexual ambiguity and states how, in order to avoid confusions and "to get the casting director out of a tight spot" (273), he has always been identified with a boy. Carter, however, did not introduce Golden Herm as a sexually ambiguous character gratuitously. She used his hermaphrodite state to highlight her constant concern with the differences between the sexes. According to Peach, "the Golden Herm is an hermaphrodite—lusted by Oberon who sees him/her as a boy— through which Carter pursues her interest in the blurring of sexual boundaries" (1998: 146). This seems to be a frequent and recurrent topic in the work of the novelist, because characters such as Tristessa, Evelyn or Albert Albertina represent this paradigm of sexual ambiguity, following, to a certain extent, the trend marked by Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* (1928). In spite of being the object of a lot of criticism, at the top of which Elaine Showalter, above all, stands out, Woolf's attitude towards androgyny gains much more importance in the decade of the 80s, since it entails, as Toril Moi explains, the ideal condition that deconstructs the male-female duality (1999: 26). After all, this is what, as a last resort, Carter pursued in "Overture and Incidental Music" by means of the figure of Golden Herm. Possessing both sexes without having a clearly defined one, Golden Herm is, however, the character that most sexual attraction arises in the other characters around him. Thus *he/she* says so: "I am unfamiliar with the concept of desire. I am the unique and perfect, paradigmatic Hermaphrodite, provoking on all sides desire yet myself transcendent, the unmoved mover, the still eye of the tempest, exemplary and self-sufficient, the beginning and end" (282).

Golden Herm's condition is in that way portrayed as an ideal state because *he/she* lives away from the passions that men and women feel for the opposite sex. However, this does not mean that the characters around *him/her* do not desire *him/her*. Puck, for instance, thinks up numerous tricks to get close to *him/her*. Equally, Oberon uses every trick he can think of to snatch *him/her* from Titania, for whom Golden Herm is her dearest one. These three characters, notwithstanding, identify Golden Herm as a boy. At the very beginning

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of the story, Golden Herm vigorously cannot avoid complaining about this, as it is quite obvious that *he/she* is a hermaphrodite being. Regardless of this, as Titania argued, because the script calls for it Golden Herm must have the appearance of a boy. In other words, the characters around him try to shape, all things considered, *his/her* sexual identity. M<sup>a</sup> del Mar Pérez Gil gives reasons for this flawed construction of Golden Herm's sexuality suggesting that

en el cuento de Carter, es este niño [Golden Herm] quien empieza contando 'la verdadera historia,' quejándose primero de la confusión que ha habido respecto a sus sexo. Golden Herm, como se llama el niño, dice que en realidad es un hermafrodita y que la historia que la gente ha creído (la de Shakespeare) es una versión patriarcal. Mediante este comentario, el cuento expondría el grado hasta el que las versiones oficiales patriarcales consiguen adquirir el status de verdades para el individuo. (1996: 172)

Accordingly, what Angela Carter attempts to do by means of the figure of Golden Herm is to destroy the insurmountable barriers that exist between the male and female genders. As a result, this would create an ideal sexual state that would prevent the arising of these gender differences, which actually leads to so many problems. The abolition of the supremacy of the male over the female sex would thus be possible, as well as the elimination of the patriarchal version of the story, which has conventionally been considered the only truth.

Angela Carter renewed the Shakespearean story with the aim of adapting the old stories to the necessities of women, who have always been left out of important events or decisions. As Nancy Walker affirms, this is a common place among contemporary women writers:

Contemporary women writers have a different but related concern, which is that the stories or scripts not only describe what is assumed to be women's experience, but also attempt to prescribe appropriate roles and responses. By retelling these stories,

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women question their authority precisely by showing them to be stories, or fantasies. (1990: 31–32)

Apart from Golden Herm, in the story Angela Carter paid attention to other characters that live in the forest, of whom the novelist offered portrayals that equally vary substantially from those in Shakespeare's original. In opposition to the daintiness of the hermaphrodite figure, Puck and Oberon appear as highly promiscuous masculine characters who try at all costs to obtain sexual favours from the androgynous being. Both possess physical attributes proper to beasts and wild animals. Thus, Puck

was hairy. On these chilly nights of June, Puck inside his hairy pelt was the only one kept warm at all. Hairy. Shaggy. Especially about the thighs. (And, h'm, on the palms of his hands.) Shaggy as a Shetland pony when naked and sometimes goes on all four. When he goes on all fours, he whinnies; or else he barks. (277)

Oberon, for his part, also appears as a wild and barbarous being, with horns on his forehead and a nasty appearance. Besides, on top of that, he is up to mischief:

His face, breast and thighs he has daubed with charcoal; Oberon, lord of night and silence, of the grave silence of endless night, Lord of Plutonic dark. His hair, long, it never saw scissors; but he has this peculiarity —no hair at all on either chop or chin, nor his shins, neither, but all his face bald as an egg except for the eyebrows, that meet in the middle. [...] Since he is in his malign aspect, he has put on, furthermore, a necklace of suggestively little skulls, which might be those of the babies he has plucked from human cradles. (282)

On the other hand, Titania, whose description reminds us, to a certain extent, of the figure of Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*, appears

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as a creature that perfectly fits in the role of matriarchal authority: “Titania, she, the great fat, showy, pink and blonde thing, the Memsahib ... Auntie Tit-tit-tit-ania (for her tits are the things you notice first, size of barrage balloons)” (273). As a consequence, Golden Herm finds *himself/herself* between the two opposite poles. On the one hand, *he/she* is flanked by the high promiscuity of the masculine characters; on the other one, *he/she* is adjacent to the protective desires of the maternal figure. Subsequently, the differences between both genders, male and female, become blurred in the blending of the two in the androgynous character. Angela Carter wipes away the divergences between the two sexual categories in order to create an only sex that may contain both male and female genders and destroy the patriarchal and masculine power.

By means of the use of fantasy and the re-writing of part of the plot of the Shakespearean comedy, Carter endeavoured to put forward a new perspective that would tear down the prejudices that gender distinctions have caused through history. And not only is fantasy an essential element, it is also irony that plays a fundamental role:

The pervasive use of irony and fantasy as narrative devices in the contemporary novel by women [...] does call into question assumptions about identity, gender, relationships, and women’s potential and achievements. Both devices propose alternatives — irony by pointing to a contrast between conventional surface reality and the possibility of another set of truths, and fantasy by promoting an imaginative recreation of experience. (Walker, 1990: 37)

Carter employed an absolutely ironic tone throughout the story to denounce that no truth should be imposed and that everything depends on the point of view. This would lead her to present a forest that has little in common with the place traditionally ascribed to the plot of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Instead of a forest in Athens, she affirmed that the story took place in a forest in England. This place has little in common with that *locus amoenus* always depicted for the Shakespearean comedy. Quite the opposite; this forest is one more of all those that form part of the British landscape. It is a cold, humid,

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dark forest where fairies do not breathe a gentle breeze. Quite the contrary, they do not stop sneezing because of the cold they have caught due to the humid weather. Carter broke with the idea of an idyllic landscape with the purpose of propounding an ironic, though realistic, interpretation of a fantasy (Peach, 1998: 147). Carter pulled down the conceptions leading the representation of the famous comedy. Consequently, for Carter the placid and paradisiacal scenery of a midsummer English night became, as a result of the weather conditions, the nightmare of a midsummer night: "A midsummer nightmare, I call it" (274).

All in all, by way of the appearance of the hermaphrodite character, of the lascivious Puck and Oberon, and of the protective and matriarchal Titania, and through the picture of the cold, humid, and dark forest, Angela Carter succeeds in showing a completely opposite image to the one conventionally assigned to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Carter suggests that the court of Oberon and Titania has been idealised over the centuries and that the original court was a much sedate place" (Peach, 1998: 146). Carter brought the reader to a point prior to the beginning of the comedy and she lets them see what is being built up behind the curtains (Peach, 1998: 146) with the aim of demystifying the versions that have been customarily considered unique and true. Hence, as Peach points out, the title of the work, *overture*, is perfectly validated.

We can conclude, then, that, through this new perspective that Carter provides of the Shakespearean comedy, she attempts to put an end to those patriarchal beliefs that have been imposed along the centuries. Changing plots is a method of subversion and, subsequently, an attempt to adapt the old stories to the demands of nowadays criticism. Alison Lee's remarks are very much to the point on this matter when she suggests that

it is impossible, having read her pointed insights, to think the same way about any object of her critique. From pornography to mainstream art, from family romances to cultural difference, Carter probes the hidden reality behind the image and reveals that reality with stroke of her acerbic pen. (1997: 7)



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What is true is that, from now on, it seems impossible to re-read the Renaissance comedy without bearing in mind Carter's thoughts in "Overture and Incidental Music". It is evident that Carter succeeded in her task: an active reading of the story that goes beyond traditional prejudices and manages to call into question the validity of these principles so as to adjust them to the ideas leading present feminist criticism. As she herself asserted in "Notes from the Front Line" (69), "reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode". Carter undoubtedly made these bottles explode and, though she filled them up with new wine, this new wine does not cease having the same quality as a mature one. Angela Carter's creative capacity will never stop surprising the eager reader ready to re-read stories through a new critical prism.

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