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Publicising the Private: Dressing Room Performances in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

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As liminal spaces between the public and private, women's dressing rooms are often represented in literary texts as sites within which gender constructs are contested. By engaging with notions of theatre, performativity, carnival and the grotesque, this article examines the ways in which the social fictions of women's duality are dispelled in Fevvers' dressing room in Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus.

Backstage in her private dressing room at London's Alhambra Music Hall, Fevvers, Angela Carter's protagonist, settles down for an interview with Jack Walser, an American journalist. As she changes from her spangled costume into her grubby nightgown, Fevvers invites readers to consider the distinction between her public and her private self. However, in the liminal space of the dressing room, a space that facilitates illusion and performance, that distinction is not so straightforward. First introduced in the eighteenth century, dressing rooms were pitched to the homeowner "as liberating spaces, in which the individual could escape, if only metaphorically, from the physical boundaries of the surrounding walls" (Lipsedge 91). For many women, access to a private space meant a break from conforming to the patriarchal ideals that the public sphere demanded. With that in mind, "the dressing room's function as a stage for a woman's dressing and undressing prompted a commonplace suspicion that women's public appearances were not commensurate with their private selves" (Chico 41). In the nineteenth century, as women ventured further into the public sphere as performers, surrounding themselves with costumes, tricks and illusions, this social anxiety escalated. Katherine Adams and Michael L. Keene's cultural study of women and the circus suggests that circus goers at the turn of the century were more enticed by the private dressing rooms than they were by the show itself, and "seemed enthralled with getting a look at the exotic space" where "circus women would comport themselves in private" (112). Like much of Carter's work, *Nights at the Circus* is concerned with how, as she explains in her essay collection, *Shaking a Leg*, the "social fiction of ... femininity was created" (38). It is the fiction of women's duality that Carter "explores, exaggerates and parodies" in the first part of the novel, through Fevvers's profession and the connotations of the dressing room (Sceats 86).

In an analysis of Carter's construction of the dressing room as an artificial set, the first and second sections of this article will identify the ways in which the space resembles the immersive theatres of the late twentieth century, substantiated by engagement with Judith Butler's theory of performativity. In an extension of this analysis, the third section will explore the dressing room's carnivalesque frame and how this frame inverts masculine power structures encoded in eighteenth and nineteenth-century representations of women's private spaces. In the final section, the focus will turn to Fevvers's "grotesque" female body, which further blurs the boundaries of privacy by presenting itself as over-exposed. Through discussion of the novel's complex layering of ideas relating to gender

and the dichotomies of public and private, both in terms of the dressing room as a traditionally private space and Fevvers's making public her private self, this article will demonstrate the function of part one of *Nights at the Circus* as a feminist performance that appropriates patriarchal discourses in order to expose them as an exaggerated and unviable fiction.

In the novel, the role of woman in private is performed just as vibrantly as Fevvers's on-stage persona, the Cockney Venus of London. In an effort to decode Fevvers's performance, this paper investigates the implications of allusions to carnival and the grotesque as Walser, the singular male audience, witnesses Fevvers's transformation from an ethereal, winged goddess into an embodied human. Whilst on stage Fevvers is "heroine of the hour," provoking wonder amidst her audience, but off stage she gives an impression of "physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems!" (15). Not only does this representation appear to confirm her duality, as suspected by eighteenth and nineteenth-century audiences, it also characterises Fevvers as a grotesque figure. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the grotesque as "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract ... to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20). As will be explored in part three of this paper, Fevvers's grotesque characterisation can be further understood through reference to Mary Russo's *Female Grotesque*, which notes that Fevvers proudly exhibits her body as a consuming, excreting and ever-changing vessel, publicising those bodily acts that are traditionally concealed in the privacy of the dressing room.

However, key to the novel's subversive effect is that Fevvers's association with the grotesque remains an elaborate performance, or as Butler suggests in her study of performative acts, "a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" (520, emphasis in original). Carter's novel makes literal Butler's suggestion that: "[t]he acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (521). As a private theatre for Walser's enjoyment, Fevvers's dressing room also engages with artistic movements of Carter's generation, in particular, Antonin Artaud's *First Manifesto* on experimental theatre, which states that:

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theatre of the action. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it (67).

Laying the foundations for the experimental theatre of the 1970s and 1980s, Artaud's work emphasises new ways of using language and the body to break down the spatial and emotional boundaries between the performer and the spectator. Thus, the movement of the action of the novel from the stage to the dressing room does not, as Walser presumes, end Fevvers's performance, but rather intensifies it. As he transitions from the comfortable distance of "his red-plush press box, watching [Fevvers] through his opera glasses" to the intimate site "of the many dressings and undressings which her profession demanded" (13, 6), Walser is forced to not only observe Fevvers's performance at close proximity, but to take part in it. In this respect, the notion of the immersive theatre chimes with the spirit of carnival, as Bakhtin explains: "Carnival is not a spectacle to be seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates ... [w]hilst carnival lasts, there is no life outside it" (7). As Walser gains intimate access to Fevvers's private self, he is ultimately forced to come face-

to-face with his own suspicions about women's duality and to recognise that what Fevvers allows him to see is a well-constructed fiction. In its exploration and embodiment of patriarchal discourses on femininity, Fevvers's performance utilises the annihilating and renewing atmosphere of carnival, negating the proposition that once the carnival period is over, all social fictions will be dispelled.

Before embarking upon an in-depth analysis of the interview's carnival frame and its subsequent inversion of power structures, it is first worth illuminating the ways in which Carter constructs Fevvers's dressing room as an artificial set. The following section will briefly outline the room's decoration, as well as Fevvers's deliberate behaviour within it, as indications of its theatricality. Fevvers's dressing room, although seemingly intimate in comparison to the impersonal backdrop of the stage, is shaped by a "touch of sham" that provides the first suggestion of its construction as a performative space (4). Mirroring narratives of women's private spaces, as discussed in the introduction, Carter builds Fevvers's dressing room as "a mistress piece of exquisitely feminine squalor, sufficient, in its homely way, to intimidate a young man" (6). It is a room that might, in another narrative, belong to Celia, Jonathan Swift's scandalous eighteenth-century heroine, whose "[b]egummed, bemattered and beslimed" chamber is exposed by a foolishly inquisitive Strephon (5.45). Fevvers's personal space rivals Celia's, carelessly decorated with soiled undergarments and festering cosmetics, all of which create an illusion of a woman immodestly exposed. However, at no point is Fevvers truly exposed; she does, after all, maintain her stage name throughout the entire interview. Almost immediately Walser observes that the room is "notable for its anonymity," displaying none of the expected personal items, such as framed photographs or lucky mascots (11). Instead, the room is furnished with what Butler describes as various "discursive means" that aid in the concealment of Fevvers's true self and the maintenance of her performed identity (*Gender Trouble* 185). Perhaps the most elaborate sign of the room's trickery is evident in the looming question "Is she fact or is she fiction?" which fills the space in foot-high letters on a wall-sized poster taken from Fevvers's recent Parisian show (3). Not only does this adornment offer a metaphorical bridge between the auditorium and the dressing room, suggesting an ambiguity between the public and private spheres, but it also reminds the reader that Fevvers's private conduct should be regarded with as much suspicion as her on-stage persona. By modelling the dressing room after its literary antecedents, Carter explodes the patriarchal anxieties of women's duality that are articulated through the eighteenth century representations of a woman's dressing room, not just to contest patriarchal authority, but also to parody their depiction of women.

A more subtle indication of the theatricality of the space is offered in Carter's discreet use of stage directions, which prompt a "[p]ause of three heartbeats" during Fevvers's extensive monologue, giving an insight into the aspects of her confessional narrative that are both conscious and perhaps even scripted (100). Fevvers's autobiographical narration of her life also reflects the confessional trend in experimental theatre and feminist performance art of the 1970s and 1980s, which portrayed identity "as a question of ambiguous construction or outright artifice" (Schmor 158). By placing Fevvers in the company of a male audience, and more specifically, a man who wishes to construct his own narrative of her, Carter deals not only with ideas of gender and performance, but with the notion of patriarchal representation. In his account of postmodern performance, John Brockway Schmor suggests that "[c]onfession, in other words, becomes an act of survival rather than recovery, of

fashioning a self immune to present reality rather than tracing a true self in a coherent past” (158). Fevvers’s crude, highly personal and sexually explicit narrative might be understood in the same terms, as a tale of nineteenth-century London told with a contemporary feminist agenda.

In a further comment on ideas of identity and representation in the dressing room, Carter makes extensive reference to “the inverted world of the mirror” and Fevvers’s perception of herself, and Walser, through it (57). Carter’s employment of the mirror engages with the Lacanian notion of recognition, during which the reflection transforms “a fragmented body-image [into] a form of its totality,” thereby constructing an unattainably unified sense of self (1164). In Fevvers’s case, the reflection in the mirror does not depict the unified self, but rather, the constructed, performed self. In this respect, the novel inverts Gilbert and Gubar’s discussions of female authorship and the metaphorical looking glass, as an object through which the female author must peer in order to recognise that “what she sees in the mirror is usually a male construct” (17).¹ Not only is Fevvers confronted with an image of her own construction, but she also seems acutely aware of this reversal. She gestures towards this awareness when she “tip[s] the young reporter a huge wink in the ambiguity of the mirror and briskly strip[s] the other set of false eyelashes” (5). Walser is thus forced to recognise that what he sees in the mirror is a female construct. Fevvers’s heightened consciousness in the dressing room, as indicated by the structure of her performance and her engagement with the mirror symbol, leads Mary Russo to suggest that “*Nights at the Circus* is unique in its depiction of relationships between women as spectacle, and woman as producers of spectacle” (165). Russo’s use of the term spectacle reminds us of Fevvers’s main purpose, that is, to put on an elaborate and spellbinding performance in her private theatre of supposed femininity; crucial to which, is the spirit of carnival.

As noted in the introduction, Carter’s creation of a private theatre in which Fevvers can play out the social fiction of duality relies heavily on the spirit of the carnival. In the following section, this carnival frame will be examined, with emphasis on the reversal of order and its facilitation through the site-specific power dynamics of the dressing room. In Bakhtin’s explanation, carnival periods were lawfully licenced for a fixed timespan and “built a second world and a second life outside of officialdom,” which allowed Early Modern society to explore comic entertainments such as “clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs’, and “a vast manifold of literature of parody” (6, 4). Fevvers’s performance and confessional narrative encapsulates all of these elements, relying on a similar sense of impermanence, an effect which is achieved primarily through the novel’s temporal manipulation. Around halfway through Walser’s interview, the narrator notes, “Big Ben had once again struck midnight. The time outside still corresponded to that registered by the stopped gilt clock, inside. Inside and outside matched exactly, but both were badly wrong” (58). Identified in relation to the novel’s lack of temporal continuum, this sense of wrongful order becomes emblematic of the dressing room’s carnivalesque effect, in which everything from patriarchal authority to Victorian manners is subverted.

In contrast to the bright and airy space that Fevvers inhabits on stage, her dressing room is cramped and stifling, trapping Walser in a socially and physically uncomfortable position. In addition, the distinctly feminine atmosphere of the dressing room plays with carnivalesque notions of reversal.

¹ For another discussion of the mirror and how nothing exists outside of constructed identity, see Michael.

It takes Fevvers out of the patriarchal environment in which she is scrutinised as a physical embodiment of the Victorian angel, and places Walser in a matriarchal environment, dominated by Fevvers and her servant, Lizzie, who unnerves Walser with an “air of bristle, like a terrier bitch” (10). Aside from his peculiar company, Walser’s unnerving experience is further illustrated through reference to the “black iron mantelpiece whose brutal corner, jutting out over his perch on the horsehair sofa, promised to brain him if he made a sudden movement” (5). Likewise, Carter points out that:

His quarry had him effectively trapped. His attempts to get rid of the [champagne] glass only succeeded in dislodging a noisy torrent of concealed *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes’ nest of silk stockings ... that introduced a powerful note of stale feet, the final ingredient in the highly personal aroma, ‘essence of Fevvers’ that clogged the room (5).

In a reversal of the hunting metaphor, Walser becomes the vulnerable figure, trapped in a quarry of Fevvers’s intimate garments.² Not only does the entrapment undermine Walser’s patriarchal authority, but also emphasises the reversal of power structures by placing Walser in a dominant matriarchal environment that is deeply and viscerally redolent of the female body. Walser’s anxiety is further enhanced by the sense of claustrophobia in the room, offering a physical illustration of its association with the immersive quality of the carnival; he is, quite literally, out of his depth.

Walser’s overwhelming experience is also explored through the dressing rooms cave-like characteristics, commonly thought of as the origins of the grotesque, as Russo puts it: “the grottoesque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral” (1). In this dank, unventilated space, Walser’s immersive experience is amplified by the dressing room’s overwhelming sensory impact, which is perhaps best illustrated through its smell, described in the extract above as “essence of Fevvers” (5). At an early point in the interview, the narrator identifies a make-shift ice bucket, filled with ice recycled from the local fishmongers, as the “source of the marine aroma ... that underlay the hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas that made you feel you breathed the air in Fevvers’s dressing-room in lumps” (4). In this description Carter reiterates the image of Fevvers’s dressing room as a cave-like embodiment of the grotesque, an impression which is later developed by Walser’s doubtful glimpse of “a fish, a little one, a herring, a sprat, a minnow” in the bath (19). In a further embellishment of the aquatic theme, the narrator describes Fevvers’s corset as “a giant prawn emerging from its den, trailing long laces like several sets of legs” (6). Both of these comic illusions implicate Fevvers as a kind of siren, a powerful mythical creature known for her ability to manipulate the will of men. In Fevvers’s presence, Walser loses his autonomy, as is evidenced when he urinates in her chamber pot as instructed, rather than exiting the dressing room to “recover his sense of proportion” (57), as he would prefer. Fevvers’s authority prevents Walser from extracting himself from the carnival. Instead, he releases “the brown arc of the excess” from behind the dividing screen (58), noting that the bodily function “brought him down to earth again” (58). As Fevvers transforms her private space into a public exhibition, Walser’s experience of the performance turns

² For a detailed explanation of hunting and masculinity, see Bates’s *Masculinity and the Hunt*.

personal, a momentary reversal as the audience – Walser – is exposed, while Fevvers, the performer, is concealed.

The room is the site of both defecation and consumption: the smells from the chamber pot, the ice bucket, and the unthinkable stew in the bathtub mingling with the fragrance of Fevvers's insatiable appetite. Here, Carter once more draws upon ideas of carnival, which were inherently connected to notions of excess, whether gastronomic or sexual (Bakhtin 8-9). During the course of their interview, Walser watches in awe as Fevvers consumes three bottles of champagne, two rounds of tea, a heaped plate of pie and mash with greenish liquor, and a bacon sandwich. Particular attention is paid to the way that Fevvers eats, noting that "[s]he gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety" (21). Fevvers's conduct reflects the revelry of the carnival, during which society would be liberated from the "norms of etiquette and decency" (Bakhtin 10). However, Carter makes sure to remind the reader that Fevvers's performance is deliberate, noting that "[s]he gave [Walser] another queer look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of her gluttony would drive him away but ... sighed, belched again, and continued" (21). In addition to defying the norms of nineteenth-century etiquette, Fevvers's gastronomic display also offers another glimpse into the challenging power structures of the novel as it represents "the transformation of women's symbolic status to consumer from consumed" (Parker 144). Early in the interview, the narrator notes that "[i]t was impossible to imagine any gesture of hers that did not have that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it; there was enough of her to go round, and some to spare" (9). In this two-part observation, the narrator draws attention to the fact that for the essence of carnival to be wholly fulfilled, Fevvers must do more than simply perform the grotesque - she must embody it.

Unlike eighteenth and nineteenth-century narratives, which restrict the exhibition of the body to the confines of the dressing room, "in grotesque realism ... the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people" (Bakhtin 18). In exhibiting her body so freely, Fevvers embraces the publicised body of grotesque realism and demands that Walser confront his patriarchal anxieties regarding the female form. Moving repeatedly between an angelic, bird-like phenomenon and a fleshy, grounded woman, Fevvers's body reflects the patriarchal suspicion that within every woman is a "creature of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel" (Gilbert and Gubar 28). Russo also identifies this duality, stating that "Fevvers straddles high and low culture," her wings being emblematic of her duality throughout the novel (159). On the one hand, Fevvers's wings resemble Bakhtin's celebratory grotesque in that they are "grandiose, exaggerated [and] immeasurable" (19); on the other, they confirm literary representations of women's duality, concealed as they are beneath the "splitting, rancid silk" of her dressing gown (18). Walser emphasises Fevvers's suspected tendency towards deception, noting, with a twinge of disappointment, that, "at close quarters, it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel" (9).

However, as if to undermine reductive representations of women as either angel or monster, Fevvers embarks upon her own narrative about her wings, demonstrating an acute awareness of patriarchal anxieties. As Russo points out, Fevvers's confessional narrative disrupts a long literary tradition in which "woman is ... to be cruelly observed in intricate detail, but never allowed to make

words” (6). In her own words, Fevvers emphasises her association with the earthly and the natural, therefore denying her representation as an ethereal creature of the heavens. Fevvers’ account of her wings’ development begins as such: “For, as my titties swelled before, so these feathered appendages of mine swelled behind” (24). Her wings are implicated in puberty, emerging “not half their adult size, and moist, sticky, like freshly unfurled foliage on an April tree” (24). Fevvers’s choice of earthy words directly aligns her wings, and by extension, her body, with Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque, as an earthbound, life-giving vessel. Later, Fevvers goes on to confess to Walser that she dyes her wings pink, whispering: “[i]n my white girlhood and my earliest years, I kept my natural colour. Which is a kind of blonde, only a little darker than the hair on my head, more the colour of that on my private ahem parts” (25). Fevvers’s wings are therefore problematised in the patriarchal mind by their polarity, as both alluring and beautiful, but having been born from the abject. Jonathan Dollimore explores this paradox in his study of sexual disgust, when he suggests that “the very same bodily orifices which disgust us because of their excretions ... also excite us sexually” (46). Later, this insight is put to work as Fevvers’s various orifices are exhibited for the purpose of unsettling Walser in order to confront him with his own patriarchal anxieties.

Russo suggests that “the grotesque cave tends to look like ... the cavernous anatomical female body,” and as an extension of the dressing room itself, which entraps Walser in its claustrophobic environment, Fevvers’s bodily orifices threaten to engulf him (1). Much like the inverted hunting metaphor that is at play in the depiction of Fevvers’s dressing room, the threat of Fevvers’s body relies on the reversal of traditional power dynamics; for Walser, to be engulfed by Fevvers’s body is to relinquish control. Fevvers’s characterisation as a siren and the implication of mythical enchantment elaborates upon this sense of powerlessness, as does the depiction of Fevvers’s eyes, which feature as a recurring symbol throughout the interview. The narrator notes that “[n]ight had darkened their colour; their irises were now purple ... and the pupils had grown so fat on darkness that the entire dressing-room and all those within it could have vanished without a trace inside those compelling voids” (31). Fevvers’s hypnotic eyes symbolise the reversed power structure of the scene, which demonstrates a distinctively female gaze turning upon a male subject. In addition, the notion of her eyes as figurative black holes suggests that the setting, as a mere projection of her imagination, might disappear as quickly as it has been manifested; taking Walser with it. A similar sense of mysticism is provoked by “her cavernous, sombre voice ... imperious as a siren’s” (47), as it holds Walser “prisoner” throughout the night (47). This reiteration of Fevvers as siren emphasises the function of the room as a kind of feminine prison. At the mercy of his female host, Walser therefore embodies “the central figure of the modern grotesque”; “a man dispossessed of his power, an impotent man” (194-195).

Walser’s impotence in the scene stems from that fact that his main strength as a journalist, his “habitual disengagement,” is undermined by his highly personal involvement in Fevvers’s show (7). Walser experiences more than just fear of Fevvers’s female form; he is, as Dollimore might suggest, aroused by it. Like the spirit of carnival itself, the female body can be understood, as Julia Kristeva explains in her theory of abjection, as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and does not “respect borders, positions, rules” (4). In Walser’s case, the patriarchal rules of dominance over the female form are disturbed when he experiences “a seismic erotic disturbance” on realising that Fevvers “could easily crush him to death” (57). Not only does Fevvers’s dominance threaten to

diminish his patriarchal authority, but it also excites him in a way that he cannot understand. Here, Walser exhibits the complicated relationship between arousal and fear that is illustrated in Dollimore's study of sexual disgust. Walser's imprisonment in the dressing room, though challenging at points, is therefore not wholly unpleasant. Ultimately the enchantment and mysticism of Fevvers's performance has a positive effect. From within the dressing room and its self-contained carnival period, Walser is able to engage in an emotional response that allows him to explore, challenge and renew his patriarchal preconceptions.

Fevvers's transformation throughout the course of the night, through the removal of her idealised costume and her indulgence in multiple post-performance snacks, creates a sizable, and almost comical, distinction between her public and her private self. In the performative space of the dressing room, Fevvers appropriates the polarised patriarchal representations of women as either angel or monster, ultimately ensuring that her private self becomes just as much a fiction as her on-stage persona. Having been forced not only to witness Fevvers's theatre of supposed femininity, but also to take an active part in it, Walser is crucial to the denial of patriarchal prejudices. As his personal boundaries are broken down and his patriarchal anxieties soothed by a kind of exposure therapy, Walser develops such a fondness for Fevvers that he is unable to write the reductive report he intended. Martin points out that "creating grotesque female monsters" denies "men the privilege of being the sole producers of monstrous portraits of women," and in this case, Fevvers has succeeded (195). Like the carnival period of Bakhtin's narrative, which encourages society's indulgence in fantasy and excess, if only for a matter of days, Walser realises that his experience in Fevvers's dressing room, which encompasses curiosity, disgust, fear and enchantment, must come to an end; and so must those social fictions of women's duality that Fevvers has so expertly performed.

As the sound of Big Ben's sixth chime rings across the awakening city, dispelling the perpetual twilight, the enchantment of the private theatre fades and so does Fevvers's elaborate charade. Walser notes that she "seemed to have diminished in size, to have shrunk to proportions only a little more colossal than human" (101). In the end, Walser recognises the grotesque creature of the dressing room as merely a mask, as he celebrates the "style [and] vigour" with which it was performed (104). The effect of the performance is heightened in its reference to Artaud's manifesto on experimental theatre, as it abolishes the stage and replaces it with the dressing room, inviting Walser to be "engulfed and physically affected" by the environment (67). Walser leaves the theatre having relinquished his patriarchal agenda, and joins Fevvers on Colonel Kearney's Grand Imperial Tour, not as a reporter with the desire to expose or "explode" the female performance as a sham (9), but as someone who needs to have his "sense of wonder polished up again" (105). As for Fevvers, the success of the performance allows her to return to her unencumbered human form, and at the end of the night, no longer a theatrical character, the narrator notes that "[s]he yawned, not like a whale, not like a lioness, but like a girl who had stayed up too long" (101-102).

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