Myth and Its Double: Re-reading, Re-vision, and Repetition in Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*

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The works of Angela Carter are notorious for being decidedly provocative in their nature. While their function is both palpably and patently revisionary, Carter herself has famously dubbed her occupation expressly “the demythologizing business” (*Notes from the Front Line* 40) – a statement that (however inadvertently) sheds light on the degree of importance assigned to the notion of myth, upon which Carter’s work is based in the first place. Both the foundation myths and Carter’s (re)vision of them are planted firmly in the macabre realm of fairy tales and magical realism. In characterizing Carter’s works, Merja Makinen contends that “far from being gentle,” they are marked especially by “the excessiveness of their violence and, latterly, the almost violent exuberance of their excess” (Makinen 20). That element of violence – as well as excess – quite frequently operates in tandem with eroticism: Carter’s fixation on performative femininity and her spectacularization of the female body are so potent and prevalent that Christina Britzolakis declares her “an unabashed female fetishist” (Britzolakis 177).

Nevertheless, despite Carter’s flagrant, if also deeply alluring, eroticization of violence, the ethos of her writing has always been unambiguously feminist. “Carter’s work,” writes Makinen, “has consistently dealt with representations of the physical abuse of women in phallocentric cultures, of women alienated from themselves within the male gaze, and conversely of women who grab their sexuality and fight back, of women troubled by and even empowered by their own violence” (Makinen 21). If Carter’s play between violence and the erotic amounts to a certain fetishization of the body, then one can also be sure that the feminist ethos behind it taints that fetishization with a tone of unmistakable irony.

One work of Carter’s, however, stands out and, in many ways, apart from the rest
of her repertoire: in 1978 Carter wrote *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. To begin with, the book is non-fiction; it is essentially a one-hundred-and-fifty-page long essay, in which Carter reads and analyzes Marquis de Sade’s four seminal works: *Justine, Juliette, Philosophy in the Bedroom*, and (to a lesser extent) *The Hundred and Twenty Days at Sodom* — all obscene, extremely violent, and often quite redundant and monotonous pornographies, some of which are upwards of thousand pages long. Of course, Carter does not simply produce a close reading, but rather uses Sade’s writing to expound on the state of female sexuality, (hetero)sexual relations, and the ways in which the two are framed by an economy of pleasure that is unequivocally grounded in the patriarchal conception of power and agency. Nevertheless, upon publication *The Sadeian Woman* was rather controversial and received a considerable amount of criticism from the feminist movement with which Carter so openly identified. According to Sally Keenan, a number of “radical feminist critics” accused her of “reinforcing patriarchal representations of women that degraded them” and of implying that “women can liberate themselves through exercising violence, that they should behave just as men do” (Keenan 45). For these critics, the overtly misogynist character of Sade’s work cast too large of a shadow over Carter’s attempt to read female sexual agency into it.

Even so, Carter’s choice of subject itself is not that unusual, as she addresses Sade and the Sadeian/sadistic scenario elsewhere in her work (for instance, in “The Bloody Chamber” and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*). What is remarkable, however, is the revisionary strategy which she applies to that subject in *The Sadeian Woman*. Carter’s general approach to revision can be described as taking a myth, a fairy tale, or a traditional text and *re-writing* it; she preserves some key elements of the
narrative but alters its meaning considerably by placing the source material under a feminist lens and infusing it with irony. While Carter’s engagement with Sade’s works in *The Sadeian Woman* is clearly meant to be deconstructive and revisionary — she is still, after all, in “the demythologizing business” — she deliberately chooses not to re-write them. Instead, Carter *re-reads* them for her audience, isolates the archetypes she sees at play, and recontextualizes them within the broader cultural history of sexuality, including (but not limited to) the feminist discourse of her time.

This means that the plot of the original narrative remains wholly intact. Rather than using her pen to penetrate and reconfigure the novels in question, she seems to use it to preserve them: a sizable chunk of *The Sadeian Woman* is devoted entirely to detailed summaries of *Justine* and *Juliette*. Naturally, re-reading as revision situates Carter-the-reader both alongside and in tension with Carter-the-writer. Since so much of her approach to demythologization is now focused on the value of the myth that is the source material, the value of such a revision process might seem unclear. Nevertheless, while it is true that structure and content remain the same, recapitulated but undisturbed, Carter’s re-reading is not simply iterative. For instance, in the midst of recappping *Justine*, Carter falls suddenly into the first person plural and reflective analysis: “The girls have no personal property. There is no privacy except in the lavatory. For *us* there is no hope at all...It is oddly like a British public school” (Carter 43, emphasis added). Even the plot summaries — which one would consider especially close to mere repetition — include such incongruities as unanticipated and disorienting interludes of commentary, analysis, and shifts in tone and mode of address. In this case, not only do these incongruities disrupt simple repetition, they also focus her re-readings on their implications for the present.
Carter's insistence on repeating the myth as a part of this particular demythologization process becomes a platform for the subtle but distinct creation of a kind of difference: it is in the context of an anticipated reproduction of the same that we are able to feel the full effect of those incongruities and deviations. The question that remains is what exactly is that effect? That is, why does Carter ultimately choose to re-read, rather than re-write, the works of Sade? What is made visible and what kind of critique is made possible with such an approach? More than that, what is at stake for Carter and what is at stake for the reader, with regard to literature, feminism, and our cultural and textual understanding of sexual relations?

Before we begin to dissect the kind of demythologization that takes place in The Sadeian Woman, we must first identify what falls under Carter's definition of myth. Unlike folklore, fairy tales and other traditional texts that Carter is known to revise in her fiction, Sade's works are not myths in the conventional sense; they are not myths simply because they possess elements of the fantastic. Carter seems to conceive myth more along the lines of a cultural and ideological artifact, as in the Barthesian myth. Roland Barthes defines myth as "a type of speech chosen by history," which "cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (Mythologies 110) and is therefore complicit in the creation of ideology. The speech in question is "by no means confined to oral speech" (110) and is more of a "system of communication" and a "mode of signification," than anything else (109). More important than the content is the message it conveys. For instance, one could say that the actual details of the plot of Little Red Riding Hood signify nothing in particular; however, the fact that our particular cultural competency allows us to understand the figure of the hungry, scheming wolf as a man taking possession of a
young girl’s virginity marks the story as the following myth: female sexuality is
dangerous territory and the chastity of young girls should be protected.

So, how does Sade’s writing fit into Carter’s (and Barthes’) definition of a myth?
In *Sade Fourier Loyola*, Barthes addresses that question himself by pointing to the
construction of the Sadeian erotic scene and linking it to that of myth. He contends that,
for Sade, to create an erotic scene is “to subject the crime (a generic term for all the
Sadeian passions) to a system of articulated language...to combine according to precise
rules the specific actions of vice, so as to make from these series and groups of actions a
new ‘language,’ no longer spoken but acted” (*Sade* 27). Barthes further describes Sade’s
erotic *praxis* as a “code of meaning,” which can be analyzed by its “units and
regulations” (26). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Barthes notes that “Sade always
chooses the discourse over the referent; he always sides with *semiosis* rather than
*mimesis*: what he represents is constantly being deformed by the meaning, and it is on the
level of meaning, not of the referent, that we should read him” (37). In other words,
orchestration and performance — that is, signification — are far more important when it
comes to understanding Sade, than are the individual signs themselves. It is not the idea
of sexual perversion that is at stake, but the extreme manner in which it is carried out; it
is not personalities of the characters that matter, but their class and their socially-defined
relations to one another. Since Barthes also expressly places myth in “the province of...
*semiology*” (*Mythologies* 111) it is clear that the works of Sade are, indeed, a mythology.

Like any mythology, the Sadeian mythology contains an ideological aspect. Here,
the ideology is deceptively self-evident: Sade’s tales of torture and erotic encounters
stand in direct opposition to the era of Enlightenment and present us with a vision of a
very real hell on earth as he sees it, one in which, writes Carter, “the freedom of one class, or sex, or individual necessitates the unfreedom of others.” (Carter 24). Carter contends that “Sade becomes a Utopian” in that way, but, of course, this Utopianism “takes the form of Kafka’s: ‘There is hope – but not for us’” (26). Thus, upon an initial reading, the ideology implicit in Sade’s myths appears to be a darkly reactionary one. If Sade offers an “absolutely sexualized view of the world” (27), the sight is decidedly not pretty: the erotic scene becomes an occasion for an unfiltered display of the ugliness of human nature and its atrocious capacity for inflicting tyranny and physical pain.

Carter, however, proceeds to dig deeper in her (re-)reading and unearths a far more fascinating, if also conflicted, ideological scenario. She observes that while Sade is a “terrorist of the imagination,” whose fiction is a nothing short of a “cruel festival, at which women are the prime sacrificial victims, when they are not the ritual murderesses themselves” (22), he is also a satirist, who, without a doubt, “treats all sexuality as a political reality” (27) and uses the perverse erotic encounter as a platform for parody. “His work as a pornographer,” Carter concludes, “is more descriptive and diagnostic, than prescriptive and prophetic... He describes sexual relations in the context of an unfree society as the expression of pure tyranny, usually by men upon women...”(24). As exorbitantly indulgent as Sade may seem – or, in fact, be – of scenes of extraordinary sexual violence (specifically against women) Carter maintains that “the pornographer as terrorist... will always be our [that is, women’s] unconscious ally because he begins to approach some kind of emblematic truth” (22). Sade’s extremism has the ability (and desire) to expose the constructed nature of the dominant/patriarchal ideology.

Carter also takes the time to delve into the rather crucial observation (made by
many before her) about the lack of actual erotic appeal in Sade’s writing. Indubitably, she sees a distinct difference between purposefully sensational and excessive sexual violence and its glamorization. She holds Sade to be truly “uncommon among the pornographers” precisely because he “rarely, if ever, makes sexual activity seem immediately appealing as such” (24). Carter sees Sade’s evident lack of glamorization as a viable means of shedding light on the tyrannical power dynamic in (hetero)sexual relations, even as they are being satirized to excess. His “curious ability to render every aspect of sexuality suspect” to show that “every disinterested caress is only quantitatively different from a disinterested flogging” (24-25) and that “the freest of unions may contain the seeds of the worst exploitation” (22) constitutes a kind of re-visionary work and Carter identifies it as such. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, Carter states plainly at the end of the first chapter (aptly titled “Polemical Preface”) that, “he was unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and in installing women as beings of power in his imaginary worlds. This sets him apart from all other pornographers at all times and most other writers of his period” (36). Without a doubt, she sees a certain anti-patriarchal ethos in his works.

From this perspective, Sade’s novels are certainly doing a fair share of demythologization and can be legitimately seen as working hand-in-hand with the feminist agenda against the myth of passive, sacred, and ultimately disempowered model of female sexuality in popular culture. Nevertheless, if Sade’s writing is engaged in demythologizing work, how is it that Carter still envisions it as source material for her own process of demythologization? In other words, why is it that Sade’s works still remain a mythology, even as they work to deconstruct another myth (one which Carter
herself has certainly worked to demythologize as well)? The answer to that quandary will take us back to the parameters of mythic construction as well as the composition of the Sadeian scene.

In *Sade Fourier Loyola* Barthes exposes the levels of artifice and orchestration that go into the make-up of the erotic scene. "Sadeian practice," he writes, "is ruled by a great notion of order" — something made patently clear by the fact that the "expressions describing a purposeful structuring of the erotic scene are innumerable and constant..." (27). While that does not necessarily mean the scene is a creation of "automatism," there is an overwhelming sense of "scrupulosity" and "performance" (28). Though the permutations are seemingly endless, they are made of the same ultimately exhaustible set of units, rearranged and *repeated ad nauseum*; it is with good reason that Sade's works have often been pronounced "monotonous" (36). Barthes goes on to list the various building blocks of what he calls the Sadeian "lexicon" (such as postures, figures, and episodes) and the rules to which it is subject; however, what is most crucial to our understanding of the matter is the notion that all of Sade's creations are ultimately meticulously assembled closed systems and that any "irregularities' are strenuously regulated" (27) in order to preserve the *repetition of the same*.

In her analysis, Carter highlights one such instance of a forcibly regulated — that is, artificially smoothed out — incongruity in Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. She zooms in on a climactic moment in which the newly-minted Sadeian libertine commits the ultimate act of transgression — and aggression — against her mother in order to demonstrate and solidify her autonomy: Eugénie rapes her mother with a dildo. The kink, the disruptive "irregularity" that suddenly arises in this (yet another) carefully
orchestrated scenario, is the possibility of the mother, Madame de Mistival, experiencing pleasure in the midst of that transgression. And yet, though she is almost brought to an orgasm, she faints before it happens. This is a palpable aberration in the overall pattern. Hardly ever is a Sadeian scene of crime orchestrated without the orgasmic payoff; its evasion seems forced: a quick and *unfitting* fix to a situation Sade suddenly cannot handle. “Were Madame de Mistival to have come,” Carter argues, “pleasure would have asserted itself triumphantly over pain and the necessity for the existence of repression as a sexual stimulant would have ceased to exist. There would arise a possibility of a world in which the concept of taboo is meaningless and pornography itself would cease to exist” (131-2). It would seem, Carter continues, that Sade simply cannot conceptualize freedom that is not also defined by the existence of tyranny. “So,” she concludes disappointedly, “he makes her faint” (132, emphasis added). Even though he is “on the very edge of an extraordinary discovery,” and “of constructing a machine for liberation,” in a single move Sade “reverts...to being a simple pornographer” (132). Even as Sade’s text performs revolutionary, demythologizing work, it stops short, bound by something below the surface.

This regressive “strenuous regulation” of a potentially valuable “irregularity,” sounds exactly like the “unevenly resolved conflict” (Balibar 87) in text that Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey identify as a tell-tale sign of ideology at work. Louis Althusser defines ideology as a system that “represents the *imaginary* relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, emphasis added), which is why myth “cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (*Mythologies* 110). Although ideology works to make those imaginary relations appear organic, traces of the
naturalization process can be seen in certain moments of contradiction or incongruence that are glossed over by a false unity of the text. Carter reveals such a moment in Sade with good reason: it proves that his work is still a myth which exposes and reproduces the ideology responsible for the sexual and political disempowerment of women.

In focusing on the highly contrived and repetitive nature of Sade’s scenarios, Carter also highlights the absence of erotics as a key aspect of the Sadeian myth. His preoccupation with order and precision in orgiastic orchestrations, leaves room for only “clinical pleasure” (Carter 138), at best. Such pleasure is precariously premeditated, arranged, and even narrated as it is being carried out with exactitude, not unlike the work of a surgeon in an operating room. Sade’s treatment of flesh, according to Carter, is thus far more akin to that of meat. “Sade is a great puritan,” she concludes, “and will disinfect of sensuality anything he can lay his hands on” (138). Carter’s observation resonates with Barthes, who notes: “Sade is not erotic: it has been remarked that in his case there is never any kind of striptease, that apologue essential to modern eroticism.” (Sade Fourier Loyola 26). Even worse, if we divorce “the crimes [sexual acts] being reported” from the discursive structure through which they are delivered, “Sade is boring” (36).

Given its far-reaching effects, there seems something especially significant about the element of repetition that dominates the Sadeian myth. Since, categorically, myth is bound to use material that already exists and has been put to different use, the structure of a myth is always already borrowed; therefore, every production of a myth is an inevitable re-production of an extant structure. The Sadeian scene recycles the same units of formation and its complicity with the patriarchal ideology lies in the fact that the scene reproduces it despite its efforts to deconstruct it. This gravitation towards the
reproduction of the same is, in a sense, a kind of fetishization of the repetition.

Here, the term "fetishism" does not entail repetition characterized by sexual desire. In fact, in this case repetition causes the (aforementioned) lack of eroticism, which is an outstandingly unusual – and, therefore, significant – trait for work that, on the level of plot, deals almost exclusively with sex. Repetition in the Sadeian scenario is compulsive: since the myth at hand cannot go beyond its operating ideological construct, it is more or less forced to repeat itself. The deferral of the erotic aspect through repetition becomes a kind of denial of pleasure; in that sense it is fittingly Sadistic.

Furthermore, the deferral of the erotic essentially exposes the contours of ideology. In showing that production is only limited to the reproduction of the same, repetition makes visible the parameters of the ideological construct, and, thereby, the presence of ideology itself. It is not only that which is repeated that is being fetishized, but also the act of repetition itself; fetishism, in this context, is defined not so much as the compulsive repetition of something, but rather the compulsive repetition of repetition. This defining element of fixed, closed-circuit repetition, that is a compulsive reproduction of the same, marks the Sadeian myth not only by a lack of erotics, but by a kind of fetishism as well.

As we have seen, although Carter readily points to the incongruities in Sade's work that are symptomatic of its penchant for repetition, her overall treatment of Sade's works is much more ambiguous. She goes back and forth between praise and criticism, between highlighting their demythologizing capabilities and their myth-status alongside their complicity with patriarchal ideology. Carter condemns Justine's blind, self-destructive obedience, but calls her "refusal to treat herself as a thing" a "triumph" (Carter 77); she marvels at Juliette's "overreaching will to absolute power" (103), but
finds her “single-mindedly destructive” (103), and notes: “I do not think I want Juliette to renew my world” (111). In Carter’s eyes, Sade is as much a revolutionary as he is a part of the ideological system he tries to fight. She deliberately avoids, even refuses, to take a definite stance one way or another.

Naturally, as Sally Keenan notes, any expectation of “a clear conclusion that could be slotted into a feminist agenda” would miss the fact that Carter is notorious for “engag[ing] with contradictions without seeking necessarily to resolve them” (Keenan 40). Still, the fact that The Sadeian Woman’s “complex parodies, its theoretical seriousness, and its complete refusal to settle in one fixed place” amount to an “almost heretical disagreement with certain aspects of feminist thinking current in the 1970s” (39) is not merely an incidental byproduct of Carter’s challenging nature. If the work’s refusal to “assimilate...into some feminist orthodoxy” is indicative of its “attempts to extend the limit of feminist thought” (54), it is because in The Sadeian Woman Carter treats the feminist discourse as a myth in its own right.

Going back to Barthes’ definition of myth, one can see how the 1970s’ feminist discourse is also a historically, rather than organically, produced “type of speech:” it is a response to particular social conditions at a particular moment in time. It is no accident that Christina Britzolakis’ assessment of “the wide range of post-1968 theoretical [feminist] debates” with which Carter engages as “a distinctly semiological conception of culture” (Britzolakis 174, emphasis added) echoes back to that defining link between Barthesian myth and semiology. Not surprisingly, the feminist discourse constitutes an ideology of its own. Diametrically opposed as it may be to patriarchal ideology, feminism also “represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of
existence,” insofar that the socio-political and economic reality does not support the notion of women’s empowerment that lay at the heart of second-wave of feminism; nor does this reality recognize the structures of feeling, desires, and sexual pleasure as part of the female experience. What is more remarkable, however, is that like Sade’s writing, the feminist discourse is also characterized by repetition. Despite (second-wave) feminism’s contraposition to patriarchal ideology in terms of content, there is a significant amount of structural reproduction where the construction of logic is concerned.

Self-evidently, as someone who writes from a feminist stance, Carter does not reject the entirety of feminism. Rather, she seems to treat it as myth due to the divisive predominance and popularity of two particular lines of thinking in the movement: staunch anti-pornographic sentiment and gynocentric essentialism. Arguably, on a very basic level, the near-puritanical, anti-sex attitude with which feminists like Robin Morgan, Susan Kapeller, and Andrea Dworkin1 decried the value of all pornography is an iteration of the manner in which patriarchal ideology denies female sexual pleasure. In other words: rather than allow for possibilities of female agency and empowerment, both the patriarchal and the (radical) feminist ideologies advise women to “abstain” altogether. If Carter likens the anti-pornography feminist figures to “‘good girls’ – sentimental, naïve, and sexually repressed” (Sheets 98), it is because to her they represent the “kind of self-regarding female masochism” (Carter 57), that ultimately serves the patriarchy. In both cases, “good girls” are expected not to play a part in the experience of (hetero)sexual pleasure. In this way, anti-porn feminism retraces and recycles patriarchal ideology.

Feminist essentialism engages with repetition in a similar way. Its heavy focus on

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1 See Sheets’ essay for a discussion of the critical response to The Sadeian Woman from the anti-pornography faction of second wave feminists.
the determinism of the female body, the innate differences between the sexes, and the separatist sanctification of women over men resound with the same unbalanced, biased mode of thinking operating in patriarchal ideology\(^2\). Gynocentrism is an inversion of phallocentrism, but not of the overall essentialist framework, which is simply repeated. After all, the Barthesian myth “is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication,” and it is “because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance” (*Mythologies* 110, second emphasis added). Since feminist essentialism recycles the same tactic employed by the system of oppression it is trying to dismantle, it only reiterates the problem. She who buys into such essentialist notions of “the sacred woman,” according to Carter, “denies her value in this world...” (Carter 57). In a reality in which (hetero)sexual relations are subject to the politics and power dynamics of the marketplace, a woman’s body becomes “by far the most valuable thing she has to sell” (57). A feminist essentialist’s poetic fixation on the (female) body ignores all the operating social constructs of reality: “she does not realize her flesh is sacred, because it is as good as money” (66), writes Carter.\(^3\)

In addition to engaging in repetition, the myth of feminism is also marked by a

\(^2\) Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray are two of the most influential figures in feminist essentialism. See “The Laugh of the Medusa” and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (respectively) for examples of poetic and rhetorical dramatizations of sex differences, glorification of the female body and psyche, and separatist philosophy.

\(^3\) Of course, Carter is also sure to stress the woman’s capacity for sexual pleasure even as she explores how the power dynamics of (hetero)sexual relations seem to prevent it. She praises Sade’s search for a “complete divorce between sexuality and reproduction” (121) and marks him as a revolutionary rarity who saw female sexuality as something beyond just its reproductive function. “This theory of Maternal Superiority,” writes Carter, “is one of the most damaging consolatory fictions...[that] springs from the timeless, placeless, fantasy land of archetypes where all the embodiments of biological supremacy live” (106). Carter’s is not merely the view of a cynical Marxist, for pleasure is of enormous importance to her conception of sexuality and the body; but for her feminist essentialism still falls into the territory of the problem, rather than that of the solution.
lack of erotics. In Carter’s view, anti-pornography feminism remains blind to the possibility of the “moral pornographer” who could “put pornography in the service of women” (Carter 37) and open up “a spyhole into the territory that has been forbidden to them” (36) – that is, the territory of pleasure. Feminist essentialism does, on the other hand, distinctly address the subject of female sexual pleasure. Luce Irigaray, for instance, talks extensively about the erotic capabilities of the female body made possible by its unique genitalia. “For example,” she writes, “woman’s autoeroticism is very different from man’s... Woman “touches herself” all the time... for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact” (Irigaray 24). At the same time, however, she views heterosexual sex as “a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis” (24). Irigaray rejects the notion of female pleasure in heterosexual relations much in the same way that the patriarchal ideology rejects the notion of female pleasure outside of them. The essentialist conception of erotics is ultimately no less limited and restrictive than the one espoused by the patriarchy.

Although *The Sadeian Woman* focuses first and foremost on the myth of Sade’s writing, its engagement with the myth of feminism is rather significant. It is in the process of deconstructing the former, that Carter is able to uncover (or, perhaps, recover) the latter and draw our attention to the fact that the two are inextricably bound. A revision of Sade, it seems, cannot happen properly without a concurrent revision of the feminist discourse. Carter’s process of demythologization appears to target fetishism and the lack of erotics precisely because they characterize both the Sadeian and the feminist myth. Of course, on the whole, the myth of feminism is still distinctly secondary to that of Sade. Nonetheless, even as she’s working closely with the latter, she’s drawing heavily and
deliberately on the former.

The first aspect Carter addresses in her demythologization process is fetishism. Since we’ve identified Sadeian fetishism as a kind of fixed, close-circuited repetition and a compulsive reproduction of the same, logically it would follow that the most effective means of working against it would be to disrupt that cycle of repetition and introduce some kind of difference. It’s important to keep in mind, however, that Carter’s demythologization is a deconstructive process that aims to expose myth so that the reader will learn to recognize it as such; it is not merely a destructive process that does away with myth without letting the reader examine its cracks and take apart its operations. Therefore, it seems vital that whatever difference is introduced arises from the existing structure – a detail that could also serve to explain Carter’s decision to re-read rather than rewrite her source material.

Demythologization, then, does not only entail the rejection of myth, but also its acceptance and even partial validation in order to fully expose (and expound) its artificial nature. It is in this regard that Carter’s repetition with a difference becomes significant. Naomi Schor defines irony as precisely the strategy that would allow one “to both reject and to reappropriate the discourse of reference” (Schor 98) in such a way. She goes on to cite Donna Haraway in identifying irony with “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (99, emphasis added). This (controversial) element of undecidability is rather characteristic of the fact that in The Sadeian Woman Carter keeps so much of the source material intact (in the form of plot summary) that as a result she paradoxically alters her means of revising that material. Carter’s use of irony lies in the fact that the introduction of difference – that disruption of
fixed repetition – still acknowledges the worth of sameness and repetition.

Carter’s irony is repetition with a difference, in which the seemingly dubious act of repetition is just as crucial to the demythologization process as the difference that crowns it: her participation in the ritual of repetition grants her access to the myth, her introduction of difference allows her to crack the myth open. Rather than rewrite Sade’s narratives altogether, Carter restates them in their original capacities in order to proceed with her analysis and critique: the crucial difference is introduced as a natural extension of the reproduction of the same. In a similar fashion, she begins with and reproduces the feminist lens in the “Polemical Preface” (in her defense of a “free sexuality for women” (Carter 36)), even as she proceeds to reject parts of the feminist discourse.

In the context of re-reading, repetition with a difference largely consists of revisiting the plot and reframing the logic of the story, so as to shed light on an entirely different set of conclusions about the intratextual reality (which, in turn, bears a relation to the extratextual reality). For example, having first recapped the plot of Justine, Carter goes on to condemn the innocent, powerless, and much-abused heroine as “a monster of the fear of sexuality” (Carter 49), who is complicit in her own oppression. Carter reads against the grain and repositions the tragic heroine as a petty villain. “She is a child,” writes Carter, “who knows only how to be good to daddy, her god, the abstract virtue to which she constantly refers, prevents her from acting for herself” (55). Though she does not approve of the punishment Justine receives at Sade’s hands, she certainly offers a justification of it, dismissing the victim of vicious, undeserved male violence as “foolish and ignorant” (55).

Of course, even as Carter (re)uses the same plot to tell a different story, she does
not specify which myth (Sadeian or feminist) she’s deconstructing at a given moment in her re-reading: that is, which falls under the category of “repetition” and which creates “the difference.” At first glance, it may be tempting to conclude that Carter simply alternates; that there are times when she uses Sade’s work to deconstruct the feminist discourse and other times when she uses the feminist discourse to deconstruct Sade’s work. After all, Carter deviates from her alliance with (and reiteration of) Sade as often as she does from her alliance with (and reiteration of) the feminist discourse. However, the matter is more complicated than that. Case in point: despite the fact that she condemns Justine and praises Juliette, placing them in dialogical opposition to one another, she then contradicts herself by stating that, ultimately, “both are without hope and neither pays any heed to a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling” (79). She ends up landing neither here nor there.

When Carter does align herself with Sade, she does so for reasons entirely unrelated to Sade’s own philosophy. When she decries Justine’s passivity, she really decries her refusal to see that the misogynistic system in which she is trapped is socially constructed, rather than divinely ordained. It is from a feminist stance that Carter resents her docility and her complicity with the patriarchy. It is also from that same stance that Carter approves of Juliette’s ability to grasp that “to be a woman is to be automatically at a disadvantage in a man’s world” (78) and put all of her efforts – immoral as they may be – into empowering herself.

On the other hand, in a similarly contradictory fashion, Carter’s implicit categorization of Sade’s characters as feminist or non-feminist is tied largely to their
respective relationships to power: she frowns upon Justine’s (self-imposed) weakness and admires Juliette’s ruthless strength. Given that Juliette is empowered by the fact that “she rids herself of some of the more crippling aspects of femininity” (79), we can see that while Carter praises her status as a “New Woman in the mode of irony” (79), she does so through a Sadeian lens, rather than a feminist one. In asking “if we admire the campaigns of a great general, is it hypocrisy to refuse to admire Juliette’s?” (80) and evoking Tamburlaine the Great, Carter effectively ties Juliette’s appeal to militarism and despotic rule. While these have no place in the feminist discourse, they fit rather naturally into the Sadeian one.

There are two things that become apparent in Carter’s re-reading. The first is the discovery of the feminist myth. The second is that its introduction into process of demythologizing the Sadeian myth leads to a complicated relationship between the two; ultimately, however, it opens the floor to conflicting and contradictory assessments as well as undecidability. Carter’s revision of Sade’s writing through feminism is always already concurrent with her revision of feminism through Sade: Sade becomes the added difference in her reproduction of the feminist discourse at the same time as the feminist stance becomes the difference in her retelling of Sade’s tales. The act of repetition, in this case, serves to highlight the differentiation that occurs. The result is a continuous tension, a sustained undecidability between the rejection and validation of the two myths; she never makes a conclusive choice one way or the other. The differentiation leaves rifts and split ends: her self-contradictory utterances become moments of undecidability.

It’s worth noting that Carter anchors this technique by incorporating chiasmic construction on the level of rhetoric to mirror the repetition with a difference taking place
on the level of plot. Phrases such as “though she [Justine] is virtuous, she does not know how to do good” (55), “Sade must censor Delbène, as he creates her” (82), “the more earnestly he strives, the further the goal recedes from him” (149), etc. appear frequently throughout the book. While the chiasmus is imperfect — it is not an exact repetition and reversal — the overall sentiment of self-refutation is certainly there. In effect, the presence of repetition with a difference on both a large and small scale (both plot and rhetoric) in *The Sadeian Woman*, underscores the importance of undecidability in Carter’s re-reading.

Carter’s process of demythologization entails the purposeful creation of holes and openings for the reader to occupy — another aspect of Sade’s/pornographic writing that is reproduced⁴; the difference, however, is in the fact that unlike Sade, who keeps his texts fastidiously closed, she leaves hers open and open-ended. For instance, though in the “Polemical Preface” Carter positions herself in the defense of Sade, by the end of “Speculative Finale” she effectively abandons him, pronouncing him “the lamb led to slaughter as well as the butcher with the insensible knife” (144).⁵ For her, every “transgression” that could open up the possibility for sexual freedom “becomes [a] regression” in the end (147), because Sade “is still in complicity with the authority he hates” (136). Furthermore, “the Sadeian woman,” writes Carter, “subverts only her own socially conditioned role in the world of god, the king and the law. She does not subvert her society, except incidentally, as a storm trooper of the individual consciousness” (133); she is the anachronistic feminist trailblazer no more. As a result, whereas in the Sadeian text the reader is positioned in a limited and circumscribed relation to the erotic scene, Carter’s reader is simultaneously drawn into and disoriented from the text.

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⁴ In her discussion of pornographic writing, Carter refers to a “technique” that “ensures that the gap left in the text is just the right size for the reader to insert his prick into...” (Carter 16).

⁵ Yet another instance of chiasmic construction.
It becomes clear that in the process of re-reading, Carter ends her book in a place markedly different from the one in which she started it. More than that, although there is a "preface" that offers a sort of introduction to the subsequent chapters, there is no epilogue-like chapter at the end. The book is only framed from the one side (with the "preface"); it literally remains open-ended. "The School of Love" tries to position itself as the climax and it would be easy to mistake it for a conclusive turning point in the book, at which she rejects the thesis she had posited in the "Polemical Preface."

Nevertheless, the "Speculative Finale" that follows (ironically) offers no final conclusion. First she infantilizes and defangs Sade's monstrous characters, comparing them to "little children who are easily cruel" (148), then she paints them as demons in a hell-game; she likens the tragedy of the libertine to "a fall like Lucifer's, from Heaven to Hell" (150), but points to the possibility of redemption "in the Holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women" (150). Sade and this world are left in ambiguous terms: horrific, but pitiable; tragic, but possibly redeemable. The postscript consists of an unframed, single block quotation without any sort of explanation. In the final moment, Carter substitutes another voice for her own and leaves us in a confusing (or perhaps confused) silence. She robs the reader of a final, conclusive statement and brings us back to undecidability.

Carter is able to crack open the myth and counteract its aforementioned fetishism through repetition with a difference, because, as we can see, the text remains open. It is an open-endedness that resists both structural and ideological closure.

The other aspect that Carter addresses in her demythologization is the lack of erotics in Sadeian (as well as feminist) discourse. Her method entails the introduction of two kinds of pleasure into the process of revision: textual and transgressive. There are
two ways in which Carter constructs textual pleasure: through the erotics of interpellation and through the erotics of textual play itself. Part of Carter’s ironic engagement of Sade is to consciously adopt the pornographic mode, “that is, writing that can ‘pull’ a reader just as a woman ‘pulls’ a man or a man ‘pulls’ a woman” (Carter 17). Indeed, despite the premise of the formal essay form, Carter often inserts the first person singular: “…my fertility is governed by my diet, at the age at which I reached my puberty, my bodily juices, my decision” (106, emphasis added). Likewise, she frequently steps away from the abstract/theoretical third person singular and instead addresses the reader directly: “My freedom makes you more unfree” (89, emphasis added). Ultimately, her most effective means of “pulling” the reader is with the first person plural: “…we will assure her we have her husband’s, our father’s, full approval of the infamies we have committed and drive her from our bedroom” (122, emphasis added). Eliding the author-reader divide altogether, makes the reader her automatic accomplice. At the same time, by playing up the reader-character identification to the point of absurdity, Carter (characteristically) does not leave interpellation seamless. Her intermittent disruption of the pleasure of identification enables the reader to experience to silt the pleasure of voyeurism in addition to that of participation.

Carter’s repeated interpellations of the reader effectively disrupt the text as well as grant it a certain sense of unity, insofar that the disruptions are constant. Overall, they play a vital part in her erotic code. Carter also punctuates her confidence in the reader by adopting an informal tone and regularly using words like “fuck” and “cunt” in place of the more appropriate euphemistic expressions one typically expects from an essay. More

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6 Heta Pyrhonen concludes that, as a result, “Carter writes from the position of the subject of the drive,” more specifically, “inviting readers to join her” (Pyrhonen 109).
than that, she makes the reader privy to explicit summaries of the sexual adventures of various Sadeian characters, which is arguably watered-down pornography in its own right, one that beckons the reader much in the same way as does any pornographic text. Thus, she creates the kind of intimacy that always holds the possibility of breaking down the separation between what lies within and what lies outside of the text; between intra- and extra-textual realities. In that dangerous closeness lie the erotics.

Carter's erotics of textual play arise from what Heta Pyrhönen identifies as the “semantic incongruities among textual layers, intra- and intertextual experimentation, and repetition creating dissimilar similarity” cultivated in her mode of writing (Pyrhönen 109). These three elements relate back to the moments of nonsense, undecidability, and excess in the text. At times, Carter shouts from the pages, in apparent, if nonsensical, response to the Sadeian scene she has just recapped: “Vengeance. Transgression. Glory!” (Carter 124). Other times, she makes it purposely unclear whom she is addressing (the reader or the Sadeian characters): “Home again, home again, fast as you can” (130). Other times yet, she exceeds the parameters of authorship, speaking directly for the Sadeian character, in a reverie of theatricality: “Home again, home again, fast as you can my lovely Mama, to the husband who has prepared this instructive afternoon for you” (131). Such instances tamper with the boundary between the realm of the author and that of the reader. Carter creates confusion and irregularities; her authorial stance continuously moves within and between texts (as well as outside of them); she pronounces (the aforementioned) repetition with a difference, which unsettles the reader’s expectations. Furthermore, since Carter’s text is quasi-pornographic at the same time as it is scholarly and analytical, the reader is both interpellated by and removed from
it, respectively. In other words, he must navigate between identifying with and inserting himself into the text due to its pornographic undertones, and engaging with it from a distance due to its academic overtones. This results in aporia and, in effect, changes the nature of the work that the reader is now bound to undertake.

Roland Barthes describes texts that are riddled with aporetic incongruities and a lack of closure as texts of bliss (*jouissance*), that is, pleasure of a more extreme, near-orgasmic caliber. A text of bliss “imposes a state of loss” and “discomforts;” it “unsets the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to crisis his relation with language” (*Pleasure* 14). This is, of course, the case with *The Sadeian Woman*, since the process of demythologization purposely avoids finality, induces undecidability, and works against the grain of readerly assumption. Appropriately enough, Barthes characterizes such texts as *perverse* “in that they are outside any imaginable finality;” nonetheless, “perversion alone does not suffice to define bliss; it is the extreme of perversion which defines it: an extreme continually shifted, an empty, mobile, unpredictable extreme” (51-52). The bliss of readerly engagement with such a text, then, lies in the fact that it is blatantly and deliberately irresolvable. Here, the reader’s task is not “the *comfortable* practice of reading” (14) that “fills” and “contents,” but rather embracing the ecstatic tension in which “nothing is reconstituted, nothing recuperated” (52). In deferring closure indefinitely through its state of loss and openness, the text is able to *sustain* the erotics of yearning for completion and finality. The work is infused with the potential for ecstasy, or, rather, textacy.

Alongside textual pleasure, Carter also deploys the pleasure of transgression. She does so by means of transgressive readership and transgressive (authorial) utterance. In
the first place, Carter’s decision to read Sade’s works is already doubly transgressive. She, as a woman, and as a feminist, would categorically not have been Sade’s intended audience. For Carter, to read the works of Sade (particularly with the aim of redeploying them in the service of feminism) is to violate the parameters of his intended readership; it is a transgression against Sade. Likewise, as we had already mentioned, from many feminists’ point of view, the fact that Carter indulges in Sade’s notoriously misogynist writing and attempts to validate it is equally an act of transgression against feminism. There is an innate element of pleasure in crossing into a doubly forbidden territory.

Secondly, in line with Carter’s transgression against feminism, there is the undeniable possibility of some kind of perverse, transgressive pleasure in her pointedly explicit recitation of the Sadeian scenario, as well as her own occasional imitation of it. Habitually, and with little warning, she conjures up and inserts her own crass visions of extravagant erotic violence: “The public executioner ejaculates as the neck of his victim snaps” (Carter 17); “she is raped by a thousand eyes nightly” (67); “the libertines turn the Blessed Virgin over on her belly and sodomize her” (76); “Eugénie will fuck her with a cunt-cracking dildo” (121); etc. Indeed, Carter “revels in what she finds there [in Sade], blood, scars, perversion” (Crunelle-Vanrigh 142, emphasis added); the act of recitation, imitation, and production of her own transgressive scenes augments the pleasure of reading the forbidden.

The trick of performance allows her the double pleasure of embodying Sade, the taboo in all of its abject glory, and of mocking and exposing the artifice and absurdity of Sade’s over-the-top scenes of sex and violence. It is with good reason that Robert Clark calls Carter’s writing “feminism in male chauvinist drag” (Clark 158). Furthermore, on
an epistemological level, Carter is performing intellectual drag. Because she re-reads as a feminist playing a male chauvinist, she enables her reader to do the same and be exposed to the mutual dependence of feminist and patriarchal ideologies. She confronts the reader with the points of contact between the two ideologies and, again, causes him/her to feel the tension in being simultaneously attached to and repelled from the power of their respective arguments. Part of the pleasure of transgression, it seems, also comes from precisely that moment of “crossing;” from finding oneself at the threshold separating the two ways of thinking and from the pleasurable pain (or, perhaps, the painful pleasure) of being torn between them.

These instances of transgression decidedly break with the formality of an essay. Rebecca Munford rightly assesses that Carter’s writing – and this is particularly true of The Sadeian Woman – “dismantles the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms and unsettles the workings of power, legitimacy, and the sacred” (Munford 2). The Sadeian Woman continuously traverses the line between academia and obscenity, structured argument and nonsensical outbursts, objectivity and subjectivity. Therein lays the final element of transgressive pleasure of this text: its repeated violation of genre.

Having analyzed how Carter counteracts myth’s fetishism with irony and its lack of erotics with the introduction of pleasure, we can take a closer look at where her particular approach to demythologization stands in the larger context of revision. As we already know, Carter chooses to re-read rather than rewrite the myths of Sade and the feminist discourse; the question that follows, is, of course, what is made possible by that choice? Roland Barthes contends that rereading has the potential to be radical, as it is “an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would
have us ‘throw away’ the story once it had been consumed” (S/Z 15-16). In fact, he maintains that, because rereading creates a plurality, an openness of possibility insofar that “the signifier is being provided with an additional feature: shifting” (15), it actually “saves the text from repetition” (16). “Rereading,” Barthes concludes, “is no longer consumption,” a comfortable reading of a closed, packaged text, “but play” (16), an act instrumental to creating texts of bliss.

The practice of re-reading as revision has perhaps most notably been addressed by J. Hilles Miller. He states that “reading is subject not to the text as its law, but to the law to which the text is subject. This law forces the reader to betray the text or deviate from it in the act of reading it, in the name of a higher demand that can yet be reached only by way of the text. This response creates yet another text, which is a new act” (Miller 120). He believes that every textual utterance is a version, a specific translation of that law to which the text is subject, of some sort of “clear matter” (113) that is simultaneously conveyed and obscured by the text. Thus, accordingly, every reading and re-reading is a different attempt at approximating that which can never be expressed with exactitude. In such a way, re-reading becomes a practice of creating difference, rather than sameness, because it is an attempt at replicating that which is always already an imperfect copy tainted by difference.

The advantage of re-reading as an approach to revision, then, is the fact that it is a relatively organic or authentic production of difference, insofar that the difference comes from the process of re-reading alone, as a natural byproduct. It allows for more ambiguity; it is a production of difference that does not displace and invalidate but rather unsettles the text being revised, unlocking a multiplicity of meaning and leaving it open.
It does not seal it back up, and as such avoids the closed-circuit construction that is ultimately characteristic of myth. Rewriting, on the other hand, is a more artificial process: the text under revision is far more removed from the new, resultant text. It is also in greater danger of falling into the trap of producing yet another closed text, that is, a myth: without emphatic recapitulation of the source text, the element of difference may simply get absorbed into the new structure; without the context of repetition (sameness), the added difference may get lost.

What a re-reading effectively enables Carter to do is turn her attention to herself as a reader (as well as a writer) and to cross-examine the feminist stance from which she deconstructs the Sadeian myth. Rather than only demythologize the works of Sade, she is able to tease out the myth clouding in her own critical lens — that of the feminist discourse — and demythologize it as well. Sarah Henstra suggests that “rather than aligning herself with predator or prey, Carter adopts a stance as onlooker, from which she ‘thinks through’ both experiences and allows them to cast each other into relief” and that her reading is contrapuntal, “actively participating in the construction of meaning as the story unfolds and supplementing its version of narrative reality with another” (Henstra 109-10, emphasis added). Such an interpretation, however, insists that Carter’s re-reading is a means of easing the tensions she locates in the source text, resolving its conflicts, and bringing it towards closure. This is problematic because, again, closure is a key feature of myth. To position Carter as a mediator (“onlooker”) between the inter- and extra-textual realities is to imply that she manages the revision process from some external stance.

I would argue against both those notions. Although, indeed, Carter does not does

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7 Sarah Henstra points out that another “vital consequence of Carter’s choice to reread Sade’s work rather than rewrite it as she does other texts (as in The Bloody Chamber) is that her essay engages with the contemporary political field of such debates” Henstra 106, emphasis added).
not align herself "with predator or prey," she also does not ever actually cast either side—be it limited to Sade's Justine vs. Juliette, or within the larger context of feminist vs. Sadeian discourse—as either predator or prey. The fact that she does not align herself with either of the myths points to certain recognition on her part that they themselves are also already revisions of other existing myths. Sade's work, with all of its humanly impossible extremes and perversions, nonetheless stands on its own as a revision of the puritanical conception of (hetero)sexual relations of endorsed by the patriarchal ideology in the 18th century. Even without Carter's analysis, one can see how his pornography at the very least sheds light on unconventional sexual acts and contributes to a more inclusive repertoire of sex and gender practices. Likewise, the feminist discourse is, self-evidently, a conscious revision of the preexisting patriarchal ideology.

In this gesture of recognition, the ambiguous nature of Carter's own revisions comes into focus. Their openness and undecidability serve to remind her as well as us that every act of revision can still be susceptible to mythologization precisely because closure and resolution are such tempting points of arrival. Carter's method seems to be the deferral rather than the definite "construction of meaning." The fact that she ends The Sadeian Woman in a very different place from the one in which she started it, signals that she herself might have undergone a process of self-revision in order to avoid (re)producing myth in her revision of other myths. Thus, Carter is by no means an "onlooker;" rather, her discourse becomes both the outcome and the subject of the revision process.

What the act of re-reading ultimately makes possible, then, is three things. First, it enables the discovery of a plurality in a text, which encourages play, an aporetic flirtation
with the difference, and textual erotics, thereby counteracting their initial lack in myth.

Secondly, it allows for the difference – that unnamable discrepancy between the first and second reading – to emerge more organically than it would in a rewriting; since re-reading does not decidedly privilege the new text over the old it is less vulnerable to becoming unambiguous and closed in its construction, and thereby less vulnerable to becoming a myth. Lastly, re-reading enables the revisionist to deconstruct more than just the source material at hand, but also the lens through which s/he is viewing it. Carter is able to tease out and identify a myth that influences her own conception of Sade’s work precisely because the kind of labor in which she is engaged allows her to examine her own readership.

In sum, what seems to be finally at stake in choosing to re-read rather than rewrite as a revision strategy is the possibility of uncovering more myths that may lie beneath the guise of a means of demythologization. Re-reading isolates the text and the act of reading itself. It allows for the critical eye to devote its attention to the realm of the reader as well as of that which is being read. Ultimately, re-reading ensures that the work of demythologization does not get compromised by its own methods and that the process as a whole leaves enough room for that element of undecidability that makes demythologizing possible in the first place.
Bibliography:


