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# GROTESQUE MOTIF OF MADNESS AND FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT REASON

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***Abstract:*** *The paper discusses the motif of madness that Angela Carter employs in her novel Several Perceptions. Romantic and carnivalesque aspects of the motif are analyzed with the aim to examine its role in Carter's feminist critique of Enlightenment reason. The author argues that the 'official reason' that is challenged by the grotesque behaviour of Carter's 'mad' hero acquires the form of the middle-class culture of 'normality', rooted in the Enlightenment tradition. Undermining validity of the rationality that itself produces madness of war, Carter at the same time draws attention to its patriarchal nature.*

***Keywords:*** *grotesque motif of madness, Enlightenment reason, carnivalesque, M. Bakhtin, A. Carter.*

One of the most important grotesque motifs that Bakhtin discusses in *Rabelais and his World* is the theme of madness, which is 'inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by "normal", that is by commonplace ideas and judgments' (Bakhtin 9). As Bakhtin explains, 'In folk (carnival) grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of the official "truth". It is a "festive" madness' (Bakhtin 9).Various carnivalesque festivities, such as feasts of fools or feasts of the ass, created an opportunity to experience liberation from the strict rules that governed the everyday life of medieval people. Carnivalesque acts of madness (folly, clownery) challenged the 'official reason' (i.e. the established order and ideology of medieval society) that could not be questioned beyond the limits of the feast. Still, this festive madness cannot be seen as a simple negation of the 'official reason' because its nature is deeply ambivalent: 'It has the negative element of debasement and destruction (...) and the positive element of renewal and truth. Folly is the opposite of wisdom – inverted wisdom, inverted truth' (Bakhtin 260). In the context of carnival, folly does not represent just a playful escape into irrationality, but it becomes a source of a different, not 'normal' perception of the world that in its final effect leads to the regeneration of reason. Carnivalesque grotesque images of madness, identified by Bakhtin in the works of great authors, such as Rabelais, Erasmus or Cervantes, reflect the tradition of the folk culture of carnival in their focus on the positive, regenerating potential of unreason. 'In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation' (Bakhtin 9).

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Bakhtin's distinction between carnival grotesque and Romantic grotesque representations of madness points to a significant change in the perception of insanity in Western culture that Michel Foucault associates with the movement of the Enlightenment. Thus, while carnival grotesque perception of madness as 'a gay parody of official reason' suggests a dialogical relation between reason and unreason that, according to Foucault[1], still existed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Romantic grotesque emphasis on the isolating aspect of madness corresponds with Foucault's point that after the Age of Reason such a dialogue was no longer possible (Foucault 5-8). Romantic grotesque presentations of the insane as beings locked in their own world, in a way, paralleled the real life tendency to confine them in hospitals and the emphasis on the terrifying nature of madman whose soul is occupied by 'an inhuman spirit' (Kayser 184) reproduced the post-Renaissance approach to madness that excluded it from the realm of humanity[2]. A further historical shift from the focus on the inhuman, animal-like condition of the insane to the perspective that stresses their alienation from the world of Reason, introduced in the context of the 19th century asylum[3], found its (modified) reflection in the post-Romantic, modernist grotesque[4]. The crisis of Enlightenment reason that reached its peak in the second half of the 20th century has brought another change in the perception of insanity, reflected, for example, in the opinion that madness can be seen as a 'normal' reaction of the modern man to the 'mad' world in which he exists[5], or in, what Patricia Waugh sees as, 'a dangerous tendency in the various postmodern critiques of reason, which circulated in the 1980s, to regard alterity as a sublime space outside law, recoverable through madness, hysteria, or some metaphorised return to the body' (Waugh 350).

One of the 20th century writers who frequently employ the theme of madness is British feminist author Angela Carter, whose novel *Several Perceptions* (1968) is at the centre of my attention in this paper. The story of *Several Perceptions* focuses on a young man Joseph who suffers from a distorted perception of reality, whose mind is tormented with horrific nightmares, and whose attempted suicide by a gas explosion appearing at the end of the first chapter creates the central point from which the rest of the narrative develops. Influenced by the Laingian view of madness (Gamble 58), Carter joins the literary tradition of 'presenting a mad epoch through the eyes of a madman' (McElroy 97), as she focuses on the mind of the character whose obsession with his own death is paralleled with his obsessive preoccupation with the cruelties of the Vietnam War.

In the following pages I argue that besides the presentation of the isolating and alienating effect of insanity, highlighted by the Romantic and modernist grotesque, Carter's image of Joseph's madness includes some important grotesque elements that resemble typical carnivalesque resistance to the 'official reason'. My aim is to show that Carter associates this 'official reason' with the normative mainstream culture's vision of social life, questioned by the 1960s counter-cultural movements, to present a critique of the 'reasonable way of life' that originated in the middle classes' embracement of the Enlightenment rationality[6]. At the same time I argue that the principle of regeneration that the novel foregrounds appears not only in the form of a carnivalesque Christmas party, focused on by such critics as Peach or Gamble, but also in the form of Joseph's encounter with a grotesque female body. Carter uses this grotesque body to emphasize the patriarchal character of the 'official reason' that the protagonist of her novel opposes.

At the moment when Joseph, after his unsuccessful attempt to kill himself, finds out that 'he (is) sick, shocked and shaken,

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padded out in a grotesque clown costume of bandages, but still alive' (Carter 22), the gloomy tone of despair, adopted in the opening pages of the narrative, is replaced by the sense of ridiculous, stressed by Joseph's realization that he is 'no tragic suicide but a furious august now done up in comic swathes like the Michelin man' (Carter 26). The shift in the depiction of the central character from the tragic-hero-dying-of-unhappy-love stylization (Joseph plans his death as a punishment of his ex-girlfriend for leaving him) to the grotesque clown image introduces the mixing of the Romantic and the carnivalesque that is characteristic of the novel's presentation of the theme of madness. A similar move from the Romantic to the carnivalesque appears when the imagery that pictures Joseph's state of mind as the cause of his isolation from society gives way to the images in which his 'irrational' acts resemble the carnivalesque challenge to the authority of official ideologies. While at the beginning Joseph's hope that the fixation on facts could help him 'to shore up the crumbling dome of the world' (Carter 3) implies a rising gap between his mind and reality, which suggests the isolation of a madman, later it becomes clear that Joseph's conflict with the real is not portrayed so much in terms of mental illness, but more in terms of his unwillingness to accept the established truths and normalities of the 1960s society. Aidan Day, who focuses on this historical dimension of the conflict, stresses that Carter's hero experiences alienation from 'a governing order that sanctions the atrocities of the Vietnam War' (Day 34).

Indubitably, Joseph's obsession with the Vietnam War plays an important role in the novel's unmasking of the insane aspects of the apparently rational order of society. However, Carter's portrayal of the character also includes such elements that invite the reader to consider some further aspects of the relation between reason and unreason, wisdom and folly, rationality and madness. Joseph's rejection of a good education, a convenient job, as well as his willing acceptance of poverty ('Joseph was very poor at this time as he was giving all his money to beggars'(Carter 1)) are all signs of that kind of irrationality, foolishness that Bakhtin, drawing on Rabelais, sees as 'a form of the unofficial truth. By "unofficial" is meant a peculiar conception free from selfish interests, norms, and appreciations of "this world" (that is, the established world, which is always profitable to serve)' (Bakhtin 262). Like the fooleries of the Rabelaisian madman that are *normally* believed to be symptoms of insanity, also Joseph's 'failure' to adjust himself to the established (middle-class) ways of living is perceived by society as a sign of his mental illness. Thus while from the Rabelaisian (carnivalesque) perspective Joseph's 'freedom from personal material interests' (Bakhtin 262) would be the expression of the folly understood as the 'inverted wisdom, inverted truth' (Bakhtin 260), from the perspective of 'normality', represented in the novel by his psychiatrist, Joseph's 'charities' (his distribution of the little money he has among the 'meths drinkers and rag pickers') are interpreted as 'pathological indications' (Carter 62).

Further mixing of the Romantic and carnivalesque grotesque elements that lie at the heart of Carter's treatment of the theme of madness in *Several Perceptions* appears in the scenes that show Joseph during his compulsory sessions with psychiatrist Ransom. Although it is his encounters with the psychiatrist that most clearly reveal that Joseph's 'madness' can be read as a form of resistance to 'normality' ('"A good deal of your sickness is merely a failure to adjust to the twentieth century," (Ransom) said' (Carter 63)), they also show that, unlike in Rabelais' books, in Carter's novel the presentation of the old conflict between the unofficial and official truth lacks the cheerful atmosphere typical of carnivalesque parodies of the'official reason'. This difference becomes

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especially apparent at the moments when the joyless tone of the narrative clashes with the carnivalesque forms of Joseph's rebellion against authority. For example, when Joseph tries to shock his psychiatrist by posing the question 'What would you say if I told you I'd desecrated a church?' (Carter 61), he speaks about the act that created a firm part of the medieval feasts of fools, being seen as a manifestation of the 'gay folly (that) was opposed to the "piousness and fear of God"' (Bakhtin 260). However, the psychiatrist's answer ('I'd remind you Shelley's dead', said Ransom, 'Byron, too' (Carter 61)), indicates not only that he perceives this act in terms of a purely negative blasphemy which was so popular with Romanticists, but also that Joseph, who is 'delighted' by Ransom's recognition of the connection, consciously stylizes himself into the tragic role of a Romantic rebel (Carter 61).

Another example of the absence of the carnivalesque merry laughter can be found in the scene where 'Joseph and his grotesque angel conceived a bizarre joke; they decided to send a piece of excrement to Lyndon Johnson' (Carter 83). Like the desecration of the church, this act of Joseph's rebellion against the established authority (this time the one that he holds responsible for the atrocities of the Vietnam War) points to the medieval festive rituals of debasement in which scatological elements held an important position. As Bakhtin explains, stressing the positive nature of the scatologies that appear in Rabelais' works, 'the slinging of dung, the drenching in urine, the volley of scatological abuse hurled at the old, dying, yet generating world (...) represent the gay funeral of this old world (...) (and if these images are) applied to the gloomy, disincarnated medieval truth, (they symbolize) bringing it "down to earth" through laughter' (Bakhtin 176). What allows Rabelais to adopt the positive perception of excrement as 'joyous' matter is, of course, its function in the process of regeneration in nature, which is paralleled with a similar process of renewal in the sphere of society. From this perspective, Joseph's sending of excrement to the White House appears not only as a sign of the hero's derisive attitude to the presidential authority, but also as an expression of the need to 'bury' the 'old' truth of the White House ideology and bring regeneration to the war-stricken world.

The potentially positive, regenerating aspect of the scatological image is in Carter's presentation of Joseph's derisive act strongly reduced due to the scene's lack of any sign of the gay laughter that plays a crucial role both in Rabelais' books, as well as in the debasing rituals of the carnivalesque feasts of fools. The whole scene is dominated by what Bakhtin marks as typically Romantic, 'infernal' humour (Bakhtin 41), which is signified in the text by the expression '*bizarre* joke' (my emphasis) and, even more noticeably, by the fact that while preparing his grotesque Christmas gift, Joseph 'laugh(s) in a demonic fashion' (Carter 83). Moreover, Joseph's own perception of his joke in terms of purely negative, gloomy humour is further emphasized when Joseph realizes that if his psychiatrist learnt about the joke, his 'actions would be translated from *ironic* moves in a *black farce* to ideas of real madness' (Carter 84, my emphasis).Thus, in the images that present Joseph's 'madness' as a reaction to the outside (social, political) world the regenerating aspect of the grotesque is reduced to the minimum by its association with the Romantic tradition (desecration of the church as purely negative blasphemy, sending of excrement as a purely derisive act, demonic, destructive laughter aimed at the figure of authority).

Similar negative grotesque elements seem to dominate the images that remind the reader that Joseph does suffer from a certain degree of mental instability. Besides the actual suicide attempt, it is Joseph's dreams that indicate his serious mental problems. At the beginning these

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dreams take form of the nightmares in which he acts as a killer of children or as his own murderer. Filled with horrific grotesque images of death and destruction, these nightmares do not just allow a deeper examination of Joseph's personality, but also illustrate that in the pages leading to his attempted suicide, Carter's depiction of his irrational state of mind draws on Romantic grotesque imagery[7]. However, the dream that appears later in the novel reveals the influence of a different tradition:

> They ordered ice-cream and, when the glass dish appeared, there lay Mrs Boulder in her vanilla-coloured suit. Her eyes were closed and her hands crossed upon her breasts. As soon as he picked up the wafer biscuit, the bowl began to grow; soon it covered the table. He dug the spoon in about her navel. She was very rich and creamy to taste. The more he ate, the larger she grew (...) Joseph realized he would have to clamber inside the bowl to continue eating as the bowl was now far bigger than the table and still growing in size. He did so (...) and scooped up greedy fistfuls of Mrs Boulder's delicious viscera, cramming his mouth full, but suddenly he realized this creamy snow was melting; before he could escape a shuddering avalanche swept down upon his head, and he was gone for good, dead and buried all at once in the polar night of Mrs Boulder's belly. (Carter 75-76)

Joseph's obsession with his own death is in this case enwrapped in the imagery typical of the carnivalesque grotesque in which the negative act of dying always encompasses the positive element of regeneration. Creating this image Carter most probably did not follow the tradition of the carnivalesque grotesque in any conscious way, as she was more indebted to the psychoanalytical theory of Freud whose writings, rather than those of Bakhtin or Rabelais, had a major influence on her 1960s works. Nevertheless, even if Joseph's dreams 'betray the influence of twentieth-century psychoanalytical thought' (Peach 53), the images that dominate the above-quoted passage betray their connection with the world of carnival. As Stallybrass and White state, there exists

> a complex relation of the discourse of psychoanalysis to festive practices. The demonization and the exclusion of the carnivalesque has to be related to the victorious emergence of specifically bourgeois practices and languages which reinflected and incorporated this material within a negative, individualistic framework. In one way or another Freud's patients can be seen as enacting desperate ritual fragments salvaged from a festive tradition, the self-exclusion from which had been one of the identifying features of their social class. The language of bourgeois neurosis both disavows and appropriates the domain of calendrical festive practices. (Stallybrass, White 176).

The analyzed passage clearly resembles carnivalesque banquet scenes in which excessive eating and drinking signify 'the triumph of life over death' (Bakhtin 283) and at the same time connects them with an image of the grotesquely hyperbolized female body that points at the carnivalesque grotesque representations of woman as 'the bodily grave of man' (Bakhtin 240). According to Bakhtin, both carnivalesque banquet images as well as the grotesque images of the female body are in folk culture closely linked to the cycle of life, death and regeneration, underlying the natural connection between people and the world. The fact that Joseph is, on the one hand, depicted as swallowing the 'creamy snow' of Mrs. Boulder's body and, on the other, as finding his grave in the 'polar night' of her belly indicates that Carter's presentation of the female body echoes the tradition of the carnivalesque grotesque which treats it as a symbol of the Mother Earth that provides people with the life-preserving food and to whose belly they return after their death. Functioning as a symbol of the Mother Earth, the female body acquires a strongly ambivalent

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character since besides being perceived as 'the bodily grave of man', it also represents the life giving principle. Thus, although Joseph's dream appears to proceed from the life-affirming act of eating, through which the 'victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed' (Bakhtin 283) to the seemingly negative image of his own destruction, the fact that his death is portrayed as his disappearing in the female belly, which does not only bring destruction (for the things 'swallowed')[8], but also gives birth suggests that the idea of death is not strictly separated from the possibility of revival. Unlike his nightmares, this dream suggests Joseph's subconscious anticipation of the process of the mental regeneration that he undergoes as a result of his later real life encounter with Mrs. Boulder's body.

Joseph's making love to Mrs. Boulder's grotesque body, marked by fatness and ageing appears to have a similar effect as the carnivalesque contacts with the bodily element that in the context of medieval carnivals provided at least 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' (Bakhtin 10). When Mrs. Boulder reminds Joseph that 'Father is only a word (...) but mother is a fact' (Carter 116), on the one hand, she makes a private remark about the unknown father of her son, but on the other, she also points to the old conflict between the materiality and actuality of the (maternal) body and the abstract ideology of father figures, which is central to the carnival vision of the world. As Joseph's response to Mrs. Boulder's remark reveals, just like carnivalesque festivities, Carter's text draws one's attention to this conflict to relativize the validity of the 'official truth' of 'fathers': '"You mean, Father is only a hypothesis?' suggested Joseph (...) "You mean, Father is a kind of wishful thinking," pursued Joseph. "Screw you, Ransom, my father figure" (Carter 116-117). Giving the power to subvert the patriarchal authority to Mrs. Boulder who makes her living as a prostitute, Carter creates here a version of the 'wayward, sensual, concupiscent' woman of the 'Gallic tradition', whose 'materiality and baseness' is set in contrast with man's 'stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism' (Bakhtin 240). In the Gallic (popular comic) tradition woman represents the 'material bodily lower stratum' that debases the 'high' culture of man, unmasks its sterile elements, and brings the element of regeneration (Bakhtin 240). Like this Gallic woman, Mrs. Boulder can be read as an embodiment of the female principle that for Joseph opens the possibility of liberation from the established order of 'normality' represented by the patriarchal figure.

This possibility is reinforced in the concluding part of the novel that presents a carnivalesque Christmas Eve party organized by Joseph's hippie friend to celebrate the temporary truce in the Vietnam War. Carter's critics often read the carnivalesque party as suggesting the idea of cultural renewal through the new ways of living introduced by various countercultures. Peach reads it as 'a metaphor for the collective, utopian future envisaged in 1960s hippie counterculture' (Peach 56) and Day believes that 'the counterculture (...) is celebrated as an alternative model of human relationships to that of the old order of fathers and wars (Day 38). However, as it seems, the carnivalesque party presents the idea of regeneration not so much on the social or cultural level but more in the form of Joseph's personal 'rising' from the world of the dead:

> A girl in white Levis and a hat with cherries and flowers on it cried out: 'Well, I never, it's Joseph's Harker, detached herself from the crowd and kissed him . . .
> 'I thought you were dead,' she said.
> 'I rose again,' explained Joseph. (Carter 126).

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The brief allusion to the rising Sun god of the ancient winter solstice celebrations indicates that Joseph's mental renewal is not determined only by his 'finding solidarity with the counterculture' of the hippies (Day 38), but that it is also put into the context of the cyclical rebirth of nature, central to the culture of carnival. The Christmas party includes such important carnivalesque elements as the celebration of the regenerating bodily freedom (suggested by Joseph's having casual sex with a plump girl Rosie) and a brief presence of all embracing carnivalesque laughter. The utopian atmosphere of the carnivalesque party brings the narrative to a positive resolution that reinforces the potential of the carnivalesque to bring at least temporary liberation from the authority of patriarchal figures and their 'official reason'.

To conclude, in *Several Perceptions* Carter presents an image of madness that mixes both Romantic and carnivalesque grotesque elements. This mixing appears in the images that present Joseph's 'mad' behaviour as well as his disturbed mind (his dreams). Thus Joseph's sending of excrement to the American president can be interpreted as a sign of insanity (psychiatrist's perspective) or as a weakened version of the carnivalesque act of debasement that points to Joseph's subconscious wish to 'renew' the 'official reason' of the authority responsible for the Vietnam War. Similarly, in the image presenting Joseph's disturbed state of mind (his dreams) Romantic grotesque elements suggest real mental illness (focusing the reader's attention on the possible psychoanalytical explanations of the character's problems), while carnivalesque grotesque imagery is again associated with the idea of renewal, this time Joseph's own mental regeneration. This regeneration is paradoxically achieved through the rejection of the man of reason (the psychiatrist) who is in the novel associated not only with rationality in the sense of mental sanity, but also with the rational order understood in its social, cultural and political aspects.

In this way Carter joins the postmodern critique of Enlightenment reason, perceived here as underlying the traditional bourgeois, middle-class culture whose specific character was created in the 17$^{th}$ and 18$^{th}$ centuries by its separation from everything low, grotesque, from the 'messy, disruptive, violent *nonsense* of carnival' (Stallybrass, White 190, my emphasis). Carter creates a character that in his 'madness' challenges the 'normal' way of life as defined by this 'official reason' of middle classes (Joseph's rejection of a good education, a convenient job, his willing acceptance of poverty) and who is put in a clear opposition with the mainstream culture by his association with what this culture perceives as the 'low', contaminating sphere of the grotesque (represented in the novel by the dirt producing and degenerating old bodies of his patients, the grotesque body of the prostitute, a figure that threatens the middle-class norm of sexual behaviour, and the subversive carnivalesque counterculture of the hippies that reject the manners, norms and traditions of their father figures). Carter uses the conflict between the protagonist's 'madness' and the 'official reason' to undermine the validity of the rationality that itself produces madness of the (Vietnam) war. Furthermore, when Carter puts emphasis on the presentation of the representative of the 'official reason' (the psychiatrist Ransom) as a father figure, she draws attention to its patriarchal character and thus enriches her critique of the Enlightenment reason with a feministic perspective.

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## Notes

[1] According to Foucault, systematic attempts to put the mad into internment appeared from the 17th century onwards.

[2] In contrast to the Renaissance during which madness still existed as part of the human world (either in the form of folly that mocked reason, or as the insanity that pointed to the existence of the dark side of human nature), in the Enlightenment madness lost its connection with humanity and society started to treat the mad as animals [Foucault 56-71].

[3] In the chapter on the birth of the asylum, established as a specific institution for the mentally ill, Foucault illustrates how the asylum incorporated patient into the power structures that produced for the insane the position of alienated subjects.

[4] The relation between mad (or possibly mad) protagonist and outside world is a topos that frequently appears in the 20th century literature [McElroy 95].Besides the works of Kafka, important examples of this trend, analyzed by McElroy, include the work of Gunter Grass (*The Tin Drum*), Vladimir Nabokov (*Pale Fire*) and Samuel Beckett (*Watt*).

[5] McElroy points out the opinion of post-war psychiatrist R. D. Laing who in his work *The Divided Self* (1960) argues 'that the world, at least the Western world as it is presently constituted, is itself based on schizophrenia and that certain kinds of schizophrenia, far from being aberrations, are inevitable responses to modern experience, and should be recognized as healthful and creative states of mind' [McElroy 94].

[6] As Stallybrass and White show in their study, the rise of middle classes as the dominant social group in the 17th and 18th century was closely associated with their appropriation of Enlightenment values and clear rejection of everything that could be marked as irrational, disruptive, dirty, grotesque.

[7] An examination of Joseph's personality on the basis of his nightmares can be found in the study by Linden Peach, who, drawing attention to the Gothic character of their imagery, reads the horrific dreams as the expressions of 'the negative aspects of [Joseph's] subconscious' [Peach 52].

[8] As Bakhtin says, in folk (carnivalesque) culture the earth is seen as the 'mother which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger that has been improved' [Bakhtin 91].

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