

‘The nature of flesh, which is to say, the world’: Reading Sex in the Angela Carter Papers

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Abstract

This article seeks to recognise autofictional and autotheoretical impulses at play in the writings of Angela Carter (1940-1992). In particular, it presents a reading of Carter’s short story *Flesh and the Mirror*, first published in 1974, alongside archival materials held by the British Library. Carter’s archives reveal new dimensions to her feminist materialist practice,

and her intriguing capacity to draw on her own erotic life as the basis for short fiction and philosophical speculation. This article suggests that sexuality is vital to Carter’s work in ways more intimate than has previously been presumed. Ultimately, it urges the value of the feeling body more broadly in archival work.

‘Her raw material is herself, now, why should that interest us?’¹

Sitting in the British Library manuscripts room, opening Angela Carter’s 1968 diary, the reader is met with an image decorating the endpaper, drawn in garish felt-tip pen. It is the outline of a woman’s naked torso, from which masses of imaginative material pour: hearts, spirals, and monstrous forms, sketched in pinks and reds. The serious literary scholar, having travelled to St Pancras, brandished their membership card, and packaged their belongings into a clinical plastic bag, may well be inclined to skim past the drawing. As amusingly racy as the doodles of twenty-eight-year-old Carter are, the diligent scholar is surely hunting down something more: revelatory manuscripts, rigorous working notes, unpublished experiments in alternative forms. Angela Carter’s papers contain all three. Yet this particular drawing is representative of a vital facet of her work, exemplifying an interest in the deep-set connections between sexuality and imaginative creation. In fact, it represents an erotic charge undeniable in Carter’s archive. Boxes of letters describe the intimate details of her sexual encounters, drafts witness the process of transforming them into fiction, and working notes lie in the same journals where she jots down her compulsion ‘to fuck and fuck and fuck’ (Carter “Journal 1973”). This is perhaps unsurprising in the context of an author for whom sexuality was a matter of great public importance, frequently exploring eroticism in her published work, repeatedly asserting her ‘absolute and committed materialism’ (Carter, 33). Yet, by a combination of the previous unavailability of archival materials, the relatively recent emergence of autotheory as a distinct critical term, an understandable fear of biological essentialism, and a dash of scholarly prudishness, the place of Carter’s *own* sexuality within her oeuvre has been largely neglected. The impact of Carter’s current cultural position also bears noting. Such expressive sexuality might be seen to impinge upon the supposed sanctity of an author now mostly associated with GCSE and A-Level texts. Yet to shy away from that

¹ Angela Carter on Frida Kahlo, 1972 notebook (Add MS88899/1/101.)

sexuality is to neglect a vital element of Carter's early practices. This article hopes to demonstrate as much, and is most broadly an attempt to intervene in ironic sanitizations of her biographical reputation. In this, it retrospectively takes up the warnings of Merja Makinen, writing in 1992, that a 'white witch mythologising [...] needs watching.' (Makinen 1992). Just as Makinen pointed to a 'much more active eroticism than [...] the decorum around death can allow,' this article highlights the importance of holding in our gaze the powerful, unruly, and sometimes frankly fleshy qualities of Carter's work. A trip to the archive is one way to do just this.

The notion that Carter was somehow above the 'auto' in her writing has remained persistent in the years since her death. We might think of Susanne Gruss, writing of 'Carter [...] whose work can hardly be called autobiographical' (282), or James Ley, assessing Carter's work as 'in no way preoccupied with inwardness or psychologising' (Ley 2017). Though both are insightful critics of Carter, such claims quash the relationship between her embodied life and creative work. These qualifications carry significant political ramifications. In Carter's archive, we find a body not inherently radical, but culturally determined, made of the 'flesh that comes to us out of history' that she would dedicate much of her work to theorising (*The Sadeian Woman* 9). To read Carter in this way is therefore not an attempt to point to the universal body of the *écriture féminine*, but to draw out the influence of the idiosyncratic authorial body in particular works. It is not to pathologise or diagnose, but to gesture to hitherto neglected aspects, and the fresh readings they might enable. This is not only to enrich a reading of Carter's work in line with her own explicit interests, but also to contribute to a much-rehearsed debate on the possibilities for female flesh in feminist aesthetics. As Lauren Elkin has recently written, there is no need to bury the body as once was thought: indeed, we might even recognise it at the centre of our practice (20).

Aspects of Carter's work might be regarded as 'auto-orientated,' understood alongside an increasingly popular mode in literature and philosophy that privileges embodiment, hybridity, and an emphasis on the self in the production of texts and concepts. Such forms have been

recently recognised in Lauren Fournier's 2021 *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, but have long allowed marginalised writers in particular to explore selfhood through the imaginative freedoms of fiction-making, often enabling the expression of that which might otherwise test the limits of social permissibility. The relevance of this to Carter can be seen in Paul Barker's account of *Fireworks*. Barker described 'what seems like a direct reportage of being picked up in the street and taken back to a cheap mirrored hotel for an instant seduction. I was never sure how close she got to prostitution' (1995). There is no evidence that Carter engaged in sex work in Japan, but the tone of such comments shows the judgement that might have abounded had she been publicly franker about inspiration drawn from her own sexual life. 'Inspiration' is here a pointedly loose term: auto-orientated work is not that which replicates the experiential, but which *uses* experience in broader service. Its nature might be best understood in terms presented by Carter in a letter to Carole Howells: 'the real world in a dialectic with private experience' ("Letters from Angela Carter"). In its use of intimate realities to produce philosophical speculations and hybrid forms, the short story "Flesh and the Mirror" brings the 'private' and the 'real' into unsteady conversation, interrupting conventional epistemological and representational models.

Though autofiction is the primary focus of this article, Carter's work might also be considered through an auto-theoretical lens. The archive includes Carter's journals, containing her working notes on the left-hand side of the page, and her personal diary entries on the right. Such details gesture to the proximity through which she understood life and work. Often, the two become inseparable. In one entry from March 1972, titled 'Fucking II: Infinity in the Mirror,' Carter describes sex with Sozo Araki, wondering 'how to describe the orgasm, when we fuck, your cheek pressed against mine [...] that most intimate of contact' ("Journal 1972"). Such details blend together with theoretical speculations and jottings on 'the symbolic matrix of the mirror' and the 'primordial form' (Carter "Journal 1972"). Several connections appear between these early notes and "Flesh and the Mirror," as when Carter wonders in her journal 'how to describe the orgasm?,' only for the narrator of the

story's first draft to later ask: 'how can one express the essence of carnal delight?' ("Journal 1972"; "Japan one"). If Fournier describes autotheory as the intertwining of 'explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory,' 'Fucking II: Infinity in the Mirror,' shows Carter's processes to be unapologetically autotheoretical, intermingling her own sexuality with notes on Marx and Lacan (7). These interlacings of intimacy and philosophy have not yet been wholly accounted for by Carter scholars, yet to acknowledge them is undoubtedly to complicate her creative process, demonstrating the significance of embodied sexuality within her earlier intellectual frameworks.

"Flesh and the Mirror" as Auto-Fiction

In March 1969, Angela Carter won the Somerset Maugham Award for *Several Perceptions*. With the prize money, she travelled to America with her then-husband, before carrying on to Japan, alone and meeting a new partner – Sozo Araki. As much recent scholarship has testified, this period was an incredibly formative one for Carter. In September 1969, Carter returned to Japan after a brief trip home, and, finding that Sozo was not there to meet her, wandered the city alone. According to a letter to Howells the next day, what followed was a love-hotel, and passionate sex with a stranger who Carter named the 'Summer Child' ("Letters from Angela Carter"). The story is a mildly scandalous one, and Carter relishes in its gossipy details in that first retelling. This 'grand tour of Japanese eroticism' was to prove emotionally and sexually significant, but what is often not acknowledged is its significance to Carter's literary work too. The shock of returning unmet, the casual sex that followed, and the eventual breakup with Sozo would come to inspire Carter's philosophising, and inform "Flesh and the Mirror" as retold across multiple drafts and versions. This much is acknowledged by Carter's official biographer, Edmund Gordon, who, though he does not use the term autofiction, notes that 'the events of that night emerge again and again in Carter's published and unpublished work' (186). The archive allows us to be more specific, tracing the development from erotic encounter,

to epistolary gossip, to a 15,000-word treatise, to the six-page story that appears in *Fireworks*.

Critics have long noted how in “Flesh and the Mirror,” Carter plays with pronouns, intertwining ‘she’ and ‘I’ so as to periodically destabilise the self within the text (70). Carter’s narrator is not merely replicating experience, but using it as the basis for an exploration of reality and representation. The value of archival materials is thus the added layer of meaning they present: not only is Carter’s narrator exploring such concepts, her own authorial self is embarking upon a similar process in the very crafting of the work. In Carter’s letters to Howells, we find multiple references that resurface as fiction. Carter describes sex with ‘a young man with sequin eyes’ and their post-coital conversation about left-wing theatre (“Letters from Angela Carter”). Both details appear again throughout various drafts of the story. Many graphic details are edited out, yet some of the most scandalous remain. Carter writes to Howells of ‘the first time [she has] ever been fucked by two men on the same day, which is why [she] refused cunnilingus [...] it would seem to [her] the taste of sperm was unmistakable’ (“Letters from Angela Carter”). In the published version of “Flesh and the Mirror”, the narrator notes more demurely, ‘I would not let him kiss me between the thighs because I was afraid he would taste the traces of last night’s adventure’ (76).

There is an understandable discomfort upon trawling through Carter’s materials in this way, yet just as she held a career-long theoretical commitment to the public politics of sex, Carter saw these intimate revelations as documents of great literary value. The letter that details the evening with the ‘Summer Child’ is titled ‘An Action Packed Letter – a must for the Carter archives!’ and any potential irony is crushed by multiple references to anecdotes as ‘more material for Victims’ or ‘dossier material’ to be carefully filed (“Letters from Angela Carter”). On November 12th 1972, Carter wondered whether she ought to ‘write it out properly, to get it out of [her] system.’ Digging through her archive, it becomes increasingly clear that she did, again and again, and that the published version remains heavily reliant on her own sexual encounters. The letters to Howells, accessible since 2016, are often intensely poetic renderings of embodied feeling and, like her autotheoretical notebooks,

ought to be the subject of much further study. To read them critically is to echo Carter's own feelings, writing that her 'endless letters' are 'ongoing creative work,' 'the only creative work [she has] done' and a 'main form of creative activity' ("Letters from Angela Carter").

Revising "Flesh and The Mirror"

"Flesh and the Mirror" has been subject to reasonable attention, but no critic thus far has accounted for interplay between its auto-orientated construction and thematic concerns. Tracking the changes that Carter made across the versions available to us can elucidate elements of the 'final' version previously overlooked. More specifically, "Flesh and the Mirror" comes to seem increasingly concerned with female vanity, the transmutation of experience into art, and hierarchies of cultural production. Reading "Flesh and the Mirror" through the archive allows for both a categorisation of the text as erotic autofiction, and an interpretation wherein the text self-reflexively interrogates such modes itself.

"Flesh and the Mirror" is told from the perspective of a young woman returning to Japan. Like Carter, she finds no partner there to greet her, and like Carter, she finds solace in the arms of a stranger in a love-hotel. During the course of their sex, the young woman notices her reflection in a mirrored ceiling. She feels alienated from it, and wonders about the extent to which she has curated her life in the image of classical romance. The supposedly more 'real' flesh she sees in the mirror provides her with little comfort, and she returns to romanticising. The narrator concludes by noting the 'artfulness' of life, and the difficulty of 'acting naturally.' Ultimately, the image in the mirror hasn't aided self-realisation, but has merely emphasised an unsettling question: might all life be reduced to curated performance? The archive allows us to see how Carter approaches that question differently over the course of the writing process. In its first and second drafts, the text attempts to critique romantic love, while the issue of representation appears secondary. By the final draft, however, it is mediation itself that is centred. The shifting use of the image of the mirror exemplifies this. In Carter's diaries, the image of the mirror articulates a worrying intersubjectivity

between her and Sozo. Carter derides her willingness ‘to become a mirror, to abandon myself [...] to live through another [...] being his mirror’ (“Journal 1972”). The idea reappears in the first draft of “Flesh and the Mirror,” as ‘mirrors showed his face where mine should be’ (“Japan one”). There, the mirror exposes the ‘self-lacerating nature’ of romantic love. The intersubjective relationship is literally flesh-destroying, as the mirror bears witness to the ‘connection between love and liberty’ gone awry. By the final draft, however, the mirror reveals only the narrator’s *self*-consciousness, a new awareness of ‘myself as I.’ The dangerous ‘metaphysics of love’ are forgotten, as the mirror is reimagined to present feminised self-perception, ‘the subject of the sentence,’ ‘the action I/she performs’ (71). By the final draft, it is not interpersonal dynamics that are at stake, but the mediated female body in the mirror. This helps clarify the changes Carter made to the title, from ‘Victims of Circumstance’ and ‘Liebestod,’ both referencing multiple doomed lovers, to ‘Flesh in the Mirror,’ and “Flesh and the Mirror.” In such changes, the text moves away from philosophical critique of romantic structures, towards the politics of embodied representation.

Carter’s changing titles also exemplify a shifting relationship with inherited cultural artefacts. In those early drafts, the narrator philosophises romantic attachment via examples from art and literature. We see this in the use of ‘Liebestod’ in the second draft, and in paratextual details: the notebook containing ‘Victims’ is decorated with a quotation from 1930’s ‘L’Age d’Or.’ This tendency to understand the world via cultural artefacts is Carter’s own, as when she describes the eve of her one-night stand as a ‘down-beat psycho drama’ in which she feels ‘more and more like Jean Louis Barreat at the conclusion of *Enfants du Paradis*’ (“Letters from Angela Carter”). In both the first and third versions of “Flesh and the Mirror,” the narrator similarly renders herself in relation to popular culture’s doomed lovers. In later versions, however, the process of cultural production itself moves to the fore. By the fourth draft, references to *Wuthering Heights*, Wagner, and French cinema have disappeared. Instead, the narrator understands life in relation to ‘scripts,’ ‘~~projectionists~~,’ ‘cameramen’ and ‘directors’ (“Japan two”). To put it another way, somewhere between the fourth draft

and the publication, Carter developed an interest in the mechanics of production itself, as the labouring forces of the culture industry take on a greater role. This is particularly fitting given the Marxist theory Carter's notes show her to have been reading at the time. Yet this preoccupation takes a distinctly feminist turn in the final draft, as Carter's heroine not only imagines the cultural gatekeepers of romantic ideals but imposes herself into one such role, becoming 'the agent with the cigar, watching another audition' (69). If the text evolves to introduce the means of production, it also reclaims feminist cultural control, rendering the young woman a casting agent, legitimising her own fantasies.

In a letter to Howells in September 1971, Carter speculated that for the Summer Child, she 'must have been something of the beautiful woman walking naked in the wood' ("Letters from Angela Carter"). The line gestures to a perceived vulnerability, carried through into the text's first draft, where the narrator describes 'meeting a woman in tears' as the 'stuff of which masturbatory fantasies are made' ("Japan one"). These early documents paint Carter's self-modelled protagonist as shaped by the powerful forces of the male gaze. Just as Carter writes in her diary 'You have become a man. Look at yourself and know what a man is,' the narrator of the first draft comes to 'define my world entirely in relation to his existence' ("Journal 1973"; "Japan one"). By the final draft, however, male fantasies are not only erased but powerfully reversed. Instead, the male partner is he who becomes 'an object created in the mode of fantasy,' 'created in relation to my self' ("Japan two"). By the time of publication, the text centres the sexually liberated young woman, full of creative power. Carter crosses out a description of how 'desire pulled the strings of we two marionettes' in her first draft, later adding '*No, pulling the strings of my own puppet' ("Japan two"). This subversion of the marionette image further exemplifies the growing importance of female agency, beginning as an evocation of mutually hopeless affection, ending up as an aid to power. Another edit sees the appearance of a handwritten addition, introducing the eventual opening for the first time, as Carter writes: '*It was midnight, ~~inevitably~~. I chose my times & set my scene with I liked to set my scenes for myself, the the precision of the born-masochist, artist' ("Japan two"). Here,

Carter inserts a framing of the entire text through the protagonist's creative power. Not only is she firmly in control, but for the first time explicitly an 'artist.' Across multiple drafts, Carter moves away from the analysis of her own sexual encounters, becoming increasingly preoccupied with the politics of making those encounters into art.

The sum of these changes adds a vital layer of irony to the final text. Throughout, the reader is made to be complicit in judging the 'solipsistic' and 'arrogant' young woman curating her sex life like a film script (68). That judgement is intrinsically gendered, as she rummages in the 'dressing-up box of the heart,' searching for 'histrionic resources' (63). The text can therefore be seen to perform a long-established tendency to condemn the inward-looking girl who vainly imagines herself 'the most romantic spectacle imaginable' (73). It invites us to mock the silly young woman, dreaming that her one-night stand might be rendered art. Yet to do so is to unknowingly mock Carter herself. She too is remoulding embodied experience into a piece of romantic and philosophical literature, 'solipsistic' in rendering her own intimate affairs as the supposed fictions of *Fireworks*. Carter is one step ahead of us. She is both above and within this text, daring us to judge. "Flesh and the Mirror" is not only autofictional but deeply concerned with self-orientated artistic process. If all of life is 'artful,' as the narrator suggests, why shouldn't young women cast themselves in the agent's chair, controlling their own erotic narratives within the context of a creative industry that berates them? Both Carter and the heroine of "Flesh and the Mirror," drawing on their sex lives as the source for philosophical and artistic production, seem to do exactly that.

This reading is not intended to suggest one dominant meaning, but to gesture to new avenues of analysis, in this text and beyond. For one, such a reading centres sex as a vital element of Carter's creative process. Given she lamented the 'silences with which the English compose intimacies,' critical responses to her own archive have been damningly quiet on the matter (161). Very little archival scholarship attends to Carter's frank, funny, and often deeply intellectual use of passionate sexuality. That inattention reflects many of the broader presumptions that fuel Carter's mythologised persona, ironic given her own

commitment to the 'demythologising business' (*The Sadeian Woman* 38). If critics have acknowledged Carter's repeated insistences of her own feminist-materialism, many are not yet willing to suggest that might have extended to her own embodied life. Neglect of Carter's sexuality is further enabled by the 'fairy godmother' reputation she posthumously garnered. Notions of her as the dead doyenne of high school literature curriculums serve to disable the genuinely radical power of her work, much of which derives from frankness on power and sexuality. By drawing attention to the role that sexuality played in Carter's own creative process, this research encourages further interventions in her increasingly diluted public reputation.

If we have located the feeling body in the archive, a locus of political, philosophical, and literary inspiration, how might that body speak back to our work? For one, its existence helps dispel the fiction of the disembodied scholar. Reading her deeply embodied process, an understanding of texts as purely rational or intellectually driven slips away from us in Carter's archive. Archival work itself, scholars such as Carolyn Steedman and Ann Cvetkovich have powerfully suggested, is inseparable from all manner of affective responses and relations. Carter's work can therefore encourage us in the direction of the affective relations and responses often vital to bibliographic work, yet rarely themselves the subject of study. To put it another way, we might think in closer, more embodied terms about that scholar we first imagined at the British Library. We might break with academic convention entirely, and reintroduce that scholar as *I*. That *I* might then be liberated to recall the feelings that swirled around and coloured my initial research for this piece: sitting under the intensely surveilling lights of the Manuscripts Reading Room, surrounded by silent, older academics, clutching my clinical plastic bag, and, most pressingly, with the expectations of an Oxford deadline and supervisory don looming over my every turning of the page. It seems remiss not to gesture to such factors as impactful on the conclusions I have gone on to produce, and to note too the relative absence of institutional or otherwise formal spaces wherein such impacts might be further delved into. In sum, if Carter's creative process collapses a binary that sees knowledge production as either intellectual

or embodied, we would do well to replicate that collapsed framework in our broader bibliographical scholarship, regarding her work and beyond. In that spirit, much work is crying out to be done.

* Editor's note: the use of single quotation marks in this article is a stylistic choice of the author.

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Biography

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