

Round Table:
Postmodern Oedipal Conflicts: The Short Fiction of Angela Carter,
Michèle Roberts, and A.L. Kennedy

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Since the Romantic period, the choice of the child's perspective has proved a particularly fruitful discursive strategy to offer an alternative viewpoint on the adult world by exposing some of its most unpalatable aspects. By focusing on three relatively recent short stories, we concentrated on the divergent ways of representing what is otherwise a common, central theme in the literary representation of the infantile experience: namely, Oedipal conflict. This aspect is a privileged locus around which the child's relationship with the adult world is articulated.

Ana Losada suggested that Angela Carter's "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe", collected in *Black Venus* (1985), is a fictional reconstruction of the writer's birth and death, and most importantly, of the women in his life and their respective 'testaments' to him. Carter's narrative re-imagines Poe's early childhood, a life amidst his parents' theatrical performances, in which "nothing is what it seems" (Carter 1995: 267), truncated by his mother's premature death shortly after his father had deserted the family; a desertion which, in turn, was motivated by the birth of Poe's sister. The three-year-old orphaned Edgar is adopted by Mr. Allan of Virginia who "ushered him into Southern affluence" (265-66) not before receiving his mother's testament of "a few tattered memories" (266): namely, "nourishment ... transformation ... the knowledge that women possess within them a cry, a thing that needs to be extracted ... the awareness of mortality [and] a tragic actor's face" (266-67).

"The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" approaches the writer's life and work from the point of view of family history. In a way reminiscent of Freudian accounts of Poe's work, Carter renders the adult Poe's memory of his mother, Elizabeth Poe, as the origin of his compulsions. The story further presents Poe's longings for his dead mother as that which determined his marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, with whom he fails to have sexual relations and who, just as Poe's mother, dies prematurely of consumption. This speculative reconstruction of Poe's life and death in the light of the dissolution of his family in his early childhood recalls Marie Bonaparte's 1929 *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, in which Bonaparte read Poe's psychic pathologies as an effect of his infantile erotic fixation with the corpse of his mother (7).

Although Bonaparte's psychobiography serves as a starting point in Carter's fictional reconstruction of Poe's life and work, "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" arguably departs from such an interpretation in its account of the formation of Poe's memory of his mother. Carter's use of three-year-old Edgar as initial focaliser of the story enables us to read Poe's maternal fixation anew. Unlike Bonaparte's little Edgar, whose (incestuous necrophiliac) desire for his mother derived from the traumatic sight of his mother's corpse, Carter's little Edgar cannot make sense of what he sees (his mother's decay and final death) and mistakes his mother's death for the death of one of

her characters on stage (268-69). This blurring of reality and theatrical fantasy is presented in the narrative as the starting point of Poe's paranoid construction of the memory of his mother, his choice of wife, and his already-discussed poetics, all of which reproduce a patriarchal pattern of feminine representation whereby women are transfigured into unattainable ideals, their body/materiality being abjected, fragmented, or considered as a site of corruption.

Laura Lojo argued how Michèle Roberts's "Charity", compiled in her first collection of stories entitled *During Mother's Absence* (1994), offers a feminist permutation of the traditional male pattern of maturation –or the Oedipus complex– by exclusively focusing on the mother/daughter relationship. Roberts's discursive strategy is to reject omniscience –or the powerful paternal pattern of familial dominance– and bring to the fore original rewritings of monoparental models of motherhood through references in the text to various icons of the *Madonna* which represent the physical and spiritual communion between mother and child. Lojo suggested that the complex terms of the mother-daughter relationship in Robert's short story also encompass a process of recovery of one's own lost past, through writing: "I was surprised by how everything I wrote went back to maternal loss, maternal absence, and now dares to re-image maternal presence, fullness" (1998: 21).

Significantly, breast-feeding is a major motif in "Charity", which highlights the character's ambivalent feelings towards her mother –whose nominal maternal status is consistently denied throughout the narrative– or what Susan Suleiman has termed "maternal splitting" (1988: 27), the impulse to split the mother figure into "good" and "bad" personae, a way of dealing with the conflicts of the mother-daughter relationship. In literal and metaphorical terms too, Marie "splits up" the mother figure into what Freud diagnosed as the "mother/whore" syndrome (1963: 58) which disassociates tenderness and sexuality in order to preserve the mother's asexual purity. Marie's ongoing process of construing her identity reaches a turning point when she conjugates the two poles of her own split identity as a mother, which is in line with the development of her own adult self. In this sense, the maternal splitting which had characterised her earlier years gives way to the unifying of 'good' and 'bad' objects into one whole representation: "Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Mrs Charity Auntie my young erotic mother" (1993: 62).

The short story by Scottish author A. L. Kennedy titled "A Bad Son", from her 2002 collection *Indelible Acts*, is a cruder, more naturalistic presentation of the Oedipal conflict. The story, told in the third person from the perspective of a boy called Ronald, makes use of italics to reproduce portions of the boy's troubled thoughts whose fragmentariness, repetitiveness and inarticulacy go *in crescendo* as we approach the end of the narrative. It begins with a simple one-sentence, or, rather, one-clause paragraph: "Ronald was holding on" (65). The ultimate meaning of this initial statement is sharply condensed in the story's conclusion: "he'd be a bad son" (87). The story renders the initial stage in a boy's self-appointed task to hold on, to persist in becoming a bad son for a father who brutalises his totally subjugated mother, "the only one who called him Ronald" instead of the more childish diminutive "Ronnie" –an exception to be revealingly extended to a narrator who quite systematically calls him "Ronald" throughout (81). Jorge Sacido maintained how (potentially, at least) the normalising outcome of the standard Oedipal dynamics (boy gives up the mother as the object prohibited by the father with whom he identifies) is frustrated, perpetuating filial rivalry and attachment to the mother. He will grow up to defeat his father.

In this particular context, the acquisition of a new language that truly marks the beginning of Ronald's transformation into a bad son is signalled by Ronald's use of the

word "***Fuck***" (in italics and bold type in the text) in way different from the innocent and playful way in which he and Jim had used it repeatedly before so that it now became "part of his head now, his word, the way it was his father's" (81). Ronald is on the way to be –figuratively and literally– on equal *terms* with him. It is true that in the closing paragraph Ronald concedes that to reach his goal he would have to "wait to get older and stronger" (87), yet the story drops recurrent hints (of which Ronald is only half-aware) that this empowering process rests mainly on the power of words, depends on learning an accent, on the peculiar density of an adult's voice.

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