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WOMANHOOD AS MALE'S DESIRE: ANGELA CARTER'S SNOW CHILD AND THE SADEIAN COUNT

Leandro Batista Stephan[1*]

Natália Fontes de Oliveira[1**]
[1] Universidade Federal de Viçosa, Viçosa, MG, Brasil

Abstract

The notion that womanhood has been shaped by patriarchal standards is far from new. The concept has been problematized by Monique Wittig's (2002) lesbian feminism and later destabilized by Judith Butler (2006), as they argued that feminism had to move past what patriarchy had set female existence to be. In *The Sadeian Woman* (2001), Angela Carter argues that the ideology of pornography constitutes womanhood as a necessarily submissive term in social representation. This theory will be turned into fiction in her short-story *The Snow Child*, where the tale of Snow White is subverted and the little girl exists as nothing but a representation of the count's sexual desire. The objective of this article is to analyze, using insights from the queer theory, how womanhood is depicted in the text. We will demonstrate how the short-story builds the image of womanhood as created by the predatorial eyes of a male figure, and then, moving beyond the specific narrative, present how Carter defended true love and reciprocal desire as a mode of social subversion.

Keywords: Gender Studies; Angela Carter; Desire; Patriarchy.

* Ph.D. student at Universidade Federal de Viçosa, they hold a master's degree on Languages and Literature and undergraduate degrees in English and Dramatic Arts. Member of the Brazilian Association of Studies on Trans-Homoculture (Associação Brasileira de Estudos da Trans-Homocultura – ABETH), they currently develop studies on Brazilian queer literature, with special emphasis on the literature produced during the military dictatorship. Email: leandrobstephan@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3774-0290.

** She holds a degree in Languages and Literature from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), where she also completed her master's degree and postdoctoral studies. She holds a Ph.D. from Purdue University and completed postdoctoral studies at Stanford University, in the United States. She is a professor in the Department of Languages and Literature at the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV). She currently serves as General Coordinator of Idiomas sem Fronteiras–NucLi/UFV. Her research focuses on Comparative Literature and Literatures in English, with particular emphasis on women's writing, gender studies, travel literature, African American literature, ecofeminism, and dystopian literature. Email: nataliafontes@ufv.br. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0566-1791.

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INTRODUCTION

The prince desires a girl. Therefore, the girl can exist. The girl is dead. The prince fucks the girl, nevertheless…

Angela Carter's "The Snow Child" unfolds as a chilling parable of how desire shapes, distorts, and ultimately destroys the female figure within patriarchal fantasy. The objective of this article is to analyze how womanhood is depicted in Angela Carter's short-story *The Snow Child*. We draw on arguments from the queer theory to demonstrate how Carter presents female existence as a concept derived from male desire. However, the arguments used in this article may be controversial within some gender studies debates, just as Carter herself was often perceived. Thus, we must begin by addressing definitions that are frequently treated as given ontologies, such as the concepts of gender and of woman. The first part of this article reviews theoretical discussion on the ideas of gender and womanhood so that, in the second part, it is possible to analyze the discussion presented in Carter's short-story.

The argument is that the social importance of *The Snow Child* is not that Carter subverts gender norms in the text, but that it portrays how womanhood is constituted in such a crude way that it creates the defamiliarization required by literature. This concept, coined by Shklovsky in 1917, holds that literature does not merely represent reality but interrupts habitual perception. Everyday social structures become invisible because they are constantly repeated. Defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) restores perception by making the familiar appear strange, slowing down the process of recognition and forcing readers to confront what had previously become naturalized.

In this sense, by rewriting Snow White's story using very raw language, Carter defamiliarizes the effects that construct womanhood in a patriarchal reality. In doing that, she is able to fictionalize debates that usually remain in philosophical terms and forces readers to confront how oppressive the building of the idea of womanhood is.

Lastly, we will present a brief discussion on Carter's theory on "true love". Although *The Snow Child* ends tragically, Carter was not an utter pessimist who thought women were doomed to be oppressed in patriarchal terms. In fact, she believed it was possible for two beings to love each other beyond such regimen, under what she named "true love". Therefore, we end this article by opposing the fateful aspects of the short-story here analyzed to other writings. However, it is important to reaffirm the social relevance of presenting a tragic plot that may showcase the system as it is, which is, as we argue, what the author does with her melting girl.

AND WHAT IS A WOMAN?

The denaturalization of womanhood has been taking place within gender studies for at least seventy-six years, since Simone de Beauvoir published her well-known phrase "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1953, 273), in 1949. In 1990, the publication of Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* marked the formalized beginning of what became known as "queer studies". In the text, Butler argues for a theory of gender performativity, that is, the idea that gender is constructed upon the repetition of actions. That means that there is no fixed gender identity – and therefore no constant ideas of manhood and womanhood, masculinity and femininity –, but rather "a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 14). Such a framework allows us to examine how Carter destabilizes traditional notions of womanhood by exposing their dependence on male fantasy and repetition.

Two questions arise from Butler's ideas: first, that the distinction between sex and gender becomes unsustainable; and second, that the category "woman" may, in fact, be limiting—or even harmful—to feminist politics. Regarding the first point, Butler argues that the sex system itself functions as a tool of gender ideology, used to naturalize an order that depends on binary gender definitions in order to perpetuate itself. In her book *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024), she redevelops this theory by affirming that the "biological sex" is not completely founded in biology, as human bodies only exist in a continuous blending of nature and social, cultural, and historical terms. Hence, the gendering apparatuses create systems of representation that define acceptable and unacceptable norms; that is, the "production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 10).

Thus, womanhood is understood as a cultural construction, whether it be named as a sex or as a gender. Butler argues that the lack of understanding that the concept of woman is, thus, derived from patriarchal terms may lead the feminist struggle into failure. That hypothesis does not only derive from the fact that the idea of "woman" itself is unstable, but from the ways in which womanhood can be represented. If the gendered subject is created by the legal terms that claim to represent it and legality in a patriarchal society derives from the male power, then the possibilities of female existence are subjected to patriarchal concepts.

Moreover, Monique Wittig (2002) argues that the concept woman itself does not precede the oppression feminized bodies suffer. Patriarchic paradigms create womanhood as a subjective system to exist below the masculine parameter. In a heterosexual society, this division does not exist without the sexual submission of women. They are responsible for bearing children, their bodies are doomed to the continuation of the world, and, therefore, they must be desired. Hence, this "phallogocentric mode of signifying the female sex perpetually reproduces phantasms of its own self-amplifying state" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17). This

means that the symbolic order is structured to sustain male dominance, endlessly reinforcing the very assumptions that authorize it.

In recent years, Paul B. Preciado has also discussed many factors regarding sex-gender systems. In his text *Testo Junkie*, he argues that, after the Second World War, necro biopolitical power has invented a new concept of sex that overcomes the bodies. According to him, gender is not an ideology or a performance, but a biopolitical technology. He argues that the way existences are marked by gender is a defining factor to how bodies can simply exist in society. The terms of these existences precede the bodies, but define the regulations for them. Hence, Preciado affirms that

> gender is neither metaphor nor ideology; it can't be reduced to a performance: it is a form of political technoecology. The certainty of being a man or a woman is a somato-political biofiction produced by a collection of body technologies, pharmacologic and audiovisual technologies that determine and define the scope of our somatic potentialities and function like prostheses of subjectification. Gender is an operational program capable of triggering a proliferation of sensory perceptions under the form of affections, desires, actions, beliefs, and identities (117).

Therefore, gender must be understood as the consequence of a system of representations that echo social paradigms back into the bodies and create them. The author also argues that the pornographic industry has created forms of representation in which the power of an individual relies on how sexually sellable one is. This, nonetheless, is not restricted to sex *per se*, but it is rather related to an exploration of bodies, where certain people get to fuck while others are merely fucked. In this way,

> Power is not only located in the ("female", 'childlike', or 'nonwhite') body as a space traditionally imagined as prediscursive and natural, but also in the collection of representations that render it sexual and desirable. In every case it remains a body that is always pharmacopornographic, a technoliving system that is the effect of a widespread cultural mechanism of representation and production (49).

In 1979, the British author Angela Carter published an essay named *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. In this text, the author analyzes the works of Marquis de Sade, with special emphasis on the characters of Justine and Juliette with the objective of demonstrating how masculinity and its desire regulate modes of representation of sex and the sexes. In order to do that, she highlights how pornography can serve as a metonymy to social relations between sexes.

In a moment when most of the feminist critique was strongly arguing against pornography, Carter stated that the problem with such materials was not ontological, but representational. To the author, the issue was that the videos represented a real trait of society, that is, the masculine domination over women.

If no change occurred in the social level, there was no other option for sexual representation but the oppressive one. Thus, it becomes clear why pornography has been unwelcoming to women for so long: its structure is governed by the male gaze, a fact that has led many strands of feminist criticism to stream away from it.

Carter dismantles the false notion of a neutral pornography as she deconstructs gender and sex notions, emphasizing that "our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 9). Pornographic representation would, thus, showcase how men were seen as desiring beings and women as desired objects, in such a way that "the prick is always presented erect, in an alert attitude […]; it points upwards, it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled." (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 4), in such a way that the woman "only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 4). In such configuration, the construction of a male oriented pornography creates the illusion of natural order of the sexes and bodies.

Carter's arguments emphasize Butler's and Wittig's affirmations that women exist socially as a desired object, that may only come alive when penetrated by the male principle. However, this binarity makes women devoid of action and complete existence, as "to be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 76-77). Carter's narrative exposes this logic as both violent and unsustainable, revealing how such constructions ultimately erase the possibility of female autonomy. The idea of gender (and, therefore, womanhood) as a product of representations is central to the understanding of how artistic oeuvres can serve to both reiterate this system of subject-power relation and to subvert it.

WISHING FOR SNOW

Angela Carter is a British author who wrote during the second half of the twentieth century. Her narratives are her most well-known work, although she has written poetry and dramatic pieces as well. Most of her writing regards questions of gendered existences, systems of gendered relations, and possibilities of social subversion. In 1979, Carter published *The Bloody Chamber*, an anthology of short-stories that would be later known as her masterpiece. In the ten stories, she rewrites tales from the Brothers Grimm books and the European folklore.

The fifth short-story is named *The Snow Child*, drawing inspiration from the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *Snow White*. Urbano (2022, 115) highlights how the story begins according to a least well-known version of the tale, in which a Count and a Countess are riding a horse in the woods and the count claims to desire a child with white skin, black hair, and red lips. A child exactly like that is lying on the snow ahead, and the count takes her to the horse and loves her, whilst

the Countess, who hates her, tells the child to fetch the countess' gloves from the snow and manages to have the horses ride away and leave the child alone.

In a psychoanalytical analysis, Bettelheim (1997) argues that the tale of Snow White would be a representation of the Oedipal triangle, in which the girl would desire her father and hate her mother. However, the story does not emphasize the child's desire for her father, but rather the father's desire for his daughter. Carter will play with this Oedipal inversion in her short-story.

The Snow Child starts with "Midwinter – invincible, immaculate." (Carter, *Burning Boats* 193). The use of the phrase immaculate is highly interesting, as it creates the image of an environment associated with purity and moral order. The immaculacy can be associated with the image of Justine, in *The Sadeian Woman*. Carter argues that Justine marks, as the pure virgin, "the start of a kind of self-regarding female masochism, a woman with no place in the world, no status, the core of whose resistance has been eaten away by self-pity" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 57).

The image of Justine is crucial for understanding how Carter portrays a woman who exists solely as an object of desire. According to the author, the Christian morality that surrounds the Occident highlights the importance of female virginity at the same time as it emphasizes the naturalized masculine need for sex and pleasure. This moral creates a paradox, in which the man must be pleased, but the woman must not. Carter argues that this paradox leads into sex being necessarily violent for women: "since she herself denies the violence of her own desires, all her sexual encounters become for her a form of violence" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 49). Therefore, "Justine knows she is good because she does not fuck. When, against her will, she *is* fucked, she knows she remains good because she does not feel pleasure" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 48).

Going back to the short-story, the Count and the Countess ride on mares along the woods. The Countess is an emblem of a successful woman, adorned with furs and jeweled boots. However, as they pass by some snow, a raven's feather and a small puddle of blood, the Count wishes he *had* a girl as white as the snow, as red as the blood, and as black as the feather. The verb *to have* is very important here as it illustrates a relation of possession. At first, however, we are led to believe that his desire for the girl may not be sexual, but for a daughter, like in the Brothers Grimm's tale.

As soon as he finishes his description, a girl appears by the road, exactly how he had described her, and completely naked. The nakedness is interesting not only because of the sexualization of the snow child, but also because it marks a class difference between her and the Countess. The child appears and the Countess hates her. At first, this hatred may seem like a simple representation of the Oedipal triangle. However, as will be demonstrated, it is deeply connected to the impossibility of women being able to perform femininity at a perfect level.[1]

As the Countess tries to get rid of the girl by throwing her gloves on the snow or her diamond brooch on a frozen lake and asking the girl to fetch her stuff, the Count stops the girl from following the orders. As the Count ignores the

Countess' wishes, her clothes start leaving her body and covering the girl. With this transposition, we see the girl being turned into the countess. Two implications emerge from this parallel. First, the Countess was once the object of the Count's desire. Second, the Countess' existence depends on the Count's desire for her. The literal transfer of the Countess' clothes to the child externalizes what normally remains invisible: femininity ceases to appear as an inherent quality and becomes a visible performance transferred according to the Count's desire. Carter therefore renders explicit a process that everyday social life conceals, demonstrating how both female characters' existences are submitted to the Count, which echoes the idea of womanhood deriving from the male desire: she is most perfect if she can be under him.

Lastly, the Countess asks the girl to get her a rose from a bush, which the Count says he cannot deny her. When the snow child takes the flower, it pricks her finger, she bleeds, screams, and dies. If the prick is seen as a phallic symbol, the bleeding of the girl may be understood as the loss of her virginity. However, her existence as the perfect object of desire depended on her purity, on her virginity: she had to be Justine, and Justine is immaculate, like the winter.

As the girl dies, "weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl" (Carter, *Burning Boats* 193). The explicit necrophilic rape shocks precisely because Carter refuses to veil the violence that structures patriarchal desire. Rather than exaggerating reality, the narrative strips away the cultural mechanisms that ordinarily aestheticize or romanticize male domination. The resulting estrangement compels the reader to perceive patriarchal relations in a new light. Once the Count finishes, the girl melts, leaving behind the white snow, a black feather, some blood, and the rose. The melting of the child highlights how the Count's desire was completely sexual and how she only existed to satisfy his wishes. The penetration completes her existence, which echoes Carter's ideas in *The Sadeian Woman*: "she is most immediately and dramatically a woman when she lies beneath a man, and her submission is the apex of his malehood" (7).

The Count's cry is an important image to be analyzed, as a first interpretation might suggest that his raping of the dead girl comes from some disturbed form of love or care. This addition of a cover for the violence is, nevertheless, very important for the permanence of male superiority. In her essay, Carter argues that "violence, the convulsive form of the active, male principle, is a matter for men, whose sex gives them the right to inflict pain as a sign of mastery" (22). However, this obvious violence must be covered, because the understanding "that male political dominance might be less a matter of moral superiority than of crude force […] would remove a degree of glamour from the dominance itself" (23). This suggests that there is an artistry to the continuation of male power, and the Count's cry may be a touch of paint to this tool. By humanizing himself, he erases the dehumanization imposed upon the snow child.

One may claim that the death of the girl stops the Count from achieving his full desire, as if a corpse was not completely a woman under the male gaze.

However, a dead girl is the perfect culmination of a man's desire as it has no real existence but that of an open hole waiting to be filled. This theory not only dims women's existence but reduces the female body to nothing but an object of sexual desire, a sex toy with no subjectivation whatsoever. As harsh as this interpretation may be, we can look at Carter's radio play *Vampirella* (1997) to realize what the author is suggesting. In the play, a conversation is taking place amongst a group of men, when one of them says:

> Corpses don't nag and never want new dresses. They never waste all day at the hairdressers, nor talk for hours to their girl-friend on the telephone. They never complain if you stay out at your club; the dinner won't get cold if it's never been put in the oven. Chaste, thrifty – why, they never spend a penny on themselves! and endlessly accommodating. They never want to come themselves, nor demand of a man any of those beastly sophistications – blowing in the ears, nibbling at the nipples, tickling of the clit – that are so onerous to a man of passion. Doesn't it make your mouths water? Husbands, let me recommend the last word in conjugal bliss – a corpse (24).

Once the girl is gone, the Countess recovers all her clothes: when the man has fulfilled his desire, the Countess may gain back her womanhood. She gets the rose, but drops it and says that it bites. The fact that the girl is gone but the rose can still hurt the Countess illustrates how her sense of identity has been disturbed. She knows she will never be perfect. Nonetheless, she has realized that her existence is submitted to the Count, and the rose, usually associated with love, marks, now, a scar left on her idea of herself.

This brief analysis demonstrates how Carter fictionalizes the idea that the concept of womanhood derives from the male desire. Furthermore, she showcases how such desire is not even connected to a real person, but rather to a body that can serve as a sex toy. Under the class system imposed upon binary gender by patriarchy, women are doomed to be created as an object of desire and pleasure for men, which echoes the aforementioned Wittig's arguments. Lastly, the perfect femininity/femaleness/womanhood is unreachable, and serves as a phantasm that haunts real women and reaffirms their social imperfection and submission.

By reducing the narrative to a sequence of abrupt symbolic actions, Carter eliminates the psychological explanations that usually soften violence in fairy tales. Desire immediately creates the girl; desire dresses her; desire possesses her; and desire destroys her. The condensation of these processes into a few paragraphs defamiliarizes patriarchal womanhood by exposing its internal logic without the comforting mediation of realism. What ordinarily appears natural in everyday social relations becomes disturbingly visible through literary estrangement. When the girl is so explicitly nothing but a sex toy, the reader is led into wondering about how womanhood is represented (and, thus, created) in a real society. Thus, Carter condenses into a single magical event what, in social life, usually appears as a slow and natural process. By transforming female

existence into the immediate consequence of masculine desire, she defamiliarizes the symbolic mechanisms through which womanhood is socially produced.

Carter's rewriting also defamiliarizes the fairy-tale tradition itself. Readers approach *The Snow Child* expecting the familiar narrative of *Snow White*, yet Carter systematically frustrates these expectations by exposing the latent structures of desire and violence that the traditional tale leaves implicit. The familiarity of the fairy tale therefore becomes the very mechanism through which estrangement is produced. If the girl is not kissed in a glass coffin, but rather raped amidst the snow, the necrophilia loses its appeal and is made explicitly cold.

MUST THE SNOW MELT?

The previous analysis may seem quite fatalistic, as it presents womanhood as the symbol of a passive existence under patriarchal regimens, where the female life is worth very little, if nothing. Or at least subjugated to male desires and discarded whenever else. However, as harsh as the end of this tale may be, Carter's analysis moved way beyond the catastrophe. The author acknowledges that the system regulates women as a submissive term and diminishes them as undesiring objects of desire. Nevertheless, *The Sadeian Woman* does not end in such hopeless terms. In fact, Carter was a big advocate of true love and the possibility of reciprocal sexual longing and subversion of systematic terms.

In fact, other texts by the author showcase the possibility of ending such systems. We may think of *The Erlking*, the short-story that precedes *The Snow Child* in *The Bloody Chamber*, where a woman is seduced by the sweetness of a forest God that turns women into his bird pets, but is able to strangle him, free the birds, and leave. Her movie script for *The Magic Toyshop* also showcases the possibility of overcoming male power, as the characters manage to destroy the shop and kill uncle Phil, the male ruler who subjugated all of them to his perspective.

But, if the problem is that desire must not point inwards, then what does Carter present as the solution to this problem? In the last chapter of her essay, the author presents the possibility of true love as the fundamental hope for the end of oppression. By "true love" she means the combination of beings that desire one another, so that none of them is merely the passive object of desire. This would disrupt the idea that, in a sex relation – especially as depicted in pornography –, one fucks while one *is fucked*.

In a reciprocal relation, desire would be pointed towards the other, and demand the existence – the real and humane existence – of the other, in a way that "such partner acts on us as we act on it; both partners are changed by the exchange and, if submission is mutual, then aggression is mutual. Such a partner might prove to the libertine that sexuality is an aspect of being, rather than a crime against being" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 146). This is what Stephan (2025) names "relational androgyny": in a system where masculinity and femininity are measured by the level of oppression the first inflicts upon the latter, androgyny is

reached when the two terms of a relation encounter each other beyond oppressive parameters. In such case, desire would be reciprocal, and so would be pleasure.

This argument is fictionalized in many of Carter's literary works. One may think of the short-story *The Company of Wolves*, in which Little Red is firstly presented as the victim to be eaten, but her desire for the wolf disrupts her fate and makes it possible for them to survive together. In *The Tiger's Bride*, the protagonist's surrender to the tiger allows her to have her skin licked off, so that she can exist beyond the social norms that objectified her from the first line of the text: "my father lost me to The Beast at cards" (Carter, *Burning Boats* 154). Lastly, we may think of *Puss in Boots*, where the mutual desire between the heroes saves the woman from an oppressive marriage and gives them the possibility of experiencing true love.

Of course, while using sexual and pornographic imagery, Carter's postulations are not solely about sex, but they serve as a metonymy to society. In fact, "sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations" (Carter, *Sadeian Woman* 20).

Furthermore, the author, demonstrates how pornographic depictions may be used as a mode of social critique, which is what is done in *The Snow Child*. By sexualizing the girl and demonstrating how the Count rapes her, Carter is – fatefully in this story – showcasing how the sexes are divided in a patriarchal world and how violent the non-mutual desire is. However, she also believed in the possibility of change and of true love as a final resource to end these oppressive paradigms. After all, "it is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and woman themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women" (150). Thus, Carter's story exposes the brutality of patriarchal desire, but her works also propose the revolutionary possibility of surpassing these oppressive paradigms. *The Snow Child* may be a fatalist tale, but it is also important to understand that the terms exposed by it may be overcome and the mutuality of desire must be set as a goal rather than seen as a utopia. If true love is possible, then the child may never melt, for she will never have been brought to existence anyway.

CONCLUSION

Although frequently viewed as an ontology or a biological fact, the concept of womanhood is socially and historically created. Authors such as Judith Butler and Monique Wittig argue that this idea of "woman" derives from a patriarchic viewpoint, in which the male desire creates women as their object. Thus, part of the feminist fight should be directed towards the disruption of womanhood itself.

Angela Carter wrote many works that discussed gender, whether in a theoretical level or in a literary one. In her short-story *The Snow Child*, Carter showcases how a woman is created purely from the male desire and that the man can rape a female corpse if he wants to. She also demonstrates how the

epistemological woman differs from real people and creates a phantasma women can never completely reach. By exposing these social processes in such an explicit and crude manner, Carter defamiliarizes the building of womanhood itself, and leads into possible discussions on how one can exist, or rather, be made into existence. Hence, the process through which the critiques the author raises about the concept of womanhood are not merely philosophical or theoretical. Rather, Carter translates philosophical questions about gender into literary form through aesthetic estrangement.

Although this story may be fatalistic, Carter's theory also proposed true love as a way to disrupt the patriarchy. The author understood that pornography served as a metonymy to social relations, in which the woman must always be under the man. However, the inversion of these genders would not suffice to create a just society. Therefore, reciprocal desire, mutual submission, or, in her words, true love could pose an alternative to this existence, balancing the social differences between the sexes and making it possible for non-oppressive modes of existence to arise.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Does not apply.

End notes

1. This is not the only text in which Angela Carter works with the idea of perfect womanhood being an impossible goal to real women. In her novel The Passion of New Eve, she presents a character named Tristessa who is the perfect woman. However, as the plot develops, we discover Tristessa to possess a penis, so that the only way she was able of becoming perfect was because she personified her own desire, as demonstrated by Stephan (2025). Perfect womanhood is impossible for real women.

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